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WINTER LIGHT

1961-1962

It has been said, not without justice, that the somewhat bombastic end of *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY* is alien to the film's narrative, its clean and clear entirety. Viewed with *WINTER LIGHT*, however, this final sequence becomes explainable, as an introduction to and hint of what B was later to tell. The closing dialogue in *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY* forms the nucleus from which B developed the central theme of *WINTER LIGHT*.

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY ends with a conversation between Minus and the father in the latter's study. Karin has been taken away, and Martin has gone with her. The two, father and son, who remain on the island, look out of the window. Minus is plagued by fear and uncertainty. The answer David gives him is that God is love, and that God is encompassed in love. Their love surrounds Karin, who is on her way to the unknown countries.

It is impossible to rid oneself of the feeling that this end is perhaps too obvious, a too conciliatory indication, a compromise intended to disperse the gloominess of the story. As a last line, Minus says: "Daddy talked to me!" This could be regarded as containing something new, a harmony which, in the future, is to mark the father-son relation. The dramatic fault with these words is that they almost entirely lack basis in what has gone before. The words as such are not justified by the action. The declaration of faith about God and love makes more sense when it is discussed in *WINTER LIGHT*. Since Karin is the dramatic central figure in *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY*, the film actually ends with her being sent away.

The main character in *WINTER LIGHT* is Pastor Tomas Ericsson, a widower of middle age. The part is played, like the father in *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY*, by Gunnar Bjornstrand. But it is not his acting or his person, but the meaning of the story that shows the accord between the two films. Exactly the same words which the father uses to his son in *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY*, Pastor Ericsson is said to have used in his sermons: "God is love and love is God. Love is the proof of God's existence. Love is found as something real in man's world." These words, applied to the father-pastor, achieve a strangely ironic meaning, since neither of these persons seems to live up to his gospel. The doctrine is helpless and crippled, because the proclaimers of the doctrines are themselves weak.

WINTER LIGHT is the shortest feature film B has made. Pastor Tomas Ericsson (Gunnar Bjornstrand) serves a small parish somewhere in central Sweden. The picture opens with a communion service in the medieval church of Mittsunda. Tomas is the officiant. Present are all the persons who play a role in the subsequent action: the school teacher Marta Lundberg (Ingrid Thulin), the fisherman Jonas Persson (Max von Sydow) and his wife Karin (Gunnel Lindblom), Fredrik Blom (Olof Thunberg) Algot Frovik (Allan Edwall), and the sexton Aronsson (Kolbjorn Knudsen). The communion service is told with documentary, immediate sharpness, with a concentration on the human face and on minute details that is almost unique in B's production.

Over the film's introduction hovers an atmosphere of early winter, the November winter as one experiences it in Scandinavia. The first words in the manuscript indicate this: "It is twelve o'clock on a Sunday toward the end of November. Dusk is falling over the plains, and the wind carries a raw dampness from the marshes to the east." The shots of the landscape around the church interpolate the story of the communion. One gets a feeling of cold and of abandonment. Although the communion in a Christian sense is a kind of release and deliverance, there remains through the entire film the same mood of doomsday and death. This is found in the words, but even more in the images, in their blackness, their strangely enigmatic life.

WINTER LIGHT is a film about people whose emotional balance has been jolted. Nothing in the film appears to be in equilibrium. It is a trying, nerve-tingling film. B has himself said of WINTER LIGHT that it is the first film where he does not posture for the audience. Perhaps he means, and we can agree with him, that WINTER LIGHT in some way is closed within itself. It appears to be made without any consideration for the spectator's existence, without any consideration for a public. In this manner the film stands by itself, independently, in B's production.

The scenes after the communion delineate the themes of conflict that move around Tomas, the pastor. He is an unhappy man. One feels, all through the story, what the pastor describes as God's silence. No one is able to reach the clergyman. He has lost the ability to commune with his God. Obviously, this means on the earthly plane that he has lost the ability to talk to other people and to understand their motives. Religiously and humanly, he is sterile, as was the father in THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY on an artistic plane.

Tomas's paralysis is shown in his relationship to Marta Lundberg and fisherman Persson and his wife. After the morning service the Perssons come to Tomas. The wife does the talking. She is expecting

a child. She reveals her husband's worry. He has read in the papers about the Chinese, that they are educated to hate. They will acquire atomic weapons. Perhaps they will also destroy the earth. Tomas asks Jonas Persson to come back later for a private talk. But when Jonas returns, he has to listen to a monologue by the minister, in which he voices his own fear and uncertainty. One gets the impression that Tomas is trying to console himself rather than the fisherman Persson. He has loved his God from selfishness, his God has been a spider god, a monster (a verbal coincidence with THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY). Tomas has not been able to combine reality with his Christianity, as an anecdote about his past permits the spectator to surmise:

"I knew nothing of cruelty or evil. I was like a little child when I was ordained. Then everything came all at once. I became by chance a seamen's chaplain in Lisbon. This was during the Spanish civil war, and we had a front row seat. I refused to see and understand. I refused to accept reality. I and my God lived in a world, a special world, where everything tallied. All around us the bloody real life was in the throes of agony. But I didn't see it. I turned my eyes to my God."

Considering that Jonas Persson has called on the minister for a personal (and general) problem, considering the feeling of alarm that has gripped him, we can understand that the pastor's comments cannot help him. The ministers words and work, like the father's in the preceding film, thereby take on something of parody as well as great irresponsibility and an extreme self-absorption.

A short time passes after the conversation between the two. An old woman (Elsa Ebbesen) who was present at the communion service enters the church and reveals that Jonas Persson has shot himself. It is then a matter of the technique of the film that Perssions's death does not concern the spectator. The suicide seems to have occurred immeasurably far from the present. It is only with the visit the minister later makes to the home of the Perssions, to inform them of the death, that we come to understand the scope of the tragedy, a misfortune that strikes the pastor harder and deeper. For he is partially guilty, a man who wants to help but cannot help.

The complex of emotions connected with Persson's feelings and actions B has earlier interpreted and touched upon. Doomsday has never been far from his characters. As early as THE SEVENTH SEAL we got a picture of the threat of nuclear weapons. Never before, however, has B more clearly revealed the mechanism of psychological terror than he has done here in these chamber plays.

The end is the tragic part. When the church bells have stopped ringing, calling the worshippers to the service, nobody from the con-

gregation has shown up, except Marta. Tomas still decides to officiate, defying the silence and his doubts. He praises his God, although he is shut off from Him. It is possible to imagine that the relationship of Tomas-Marta will continue in the same defiance, without Tomas's comprehending what he has done wrong, why he acts in such a constricted manner.

Of its kind, WINTER LIGHT is the most impressive film B has created. One may also, however, view it from a critical perspective, with respect to both the style and the perceived meaning. The movement of the film, the individual compositions, the essence of its cinematography are the result of great and loving care. But in its narrative style there is a touch of calculation, which prevents the spectator from being surprised. One often meets exactly the images and the attitudes one has been expecting. The spontaneous movement is gone, and has been replaced by a masterly asceticism, which also can become academic. WINTER LIGHT may appear too evenly gray in its character.

The central personality in the film is Tomas. But the one who has the most to give, dramatically is Marta, for whom the problem of belonging is the main thing. If her striving is viewed in isolation, a rather strange circumstance may be observed. As with many other women of B's, she can realize herself only through the man. She is unhappy about the drawn-out dissension with Tomas. Although she appears independent and clear-sighted, it is assumed she lacks the strength for independence and a life of her own. The image she desperately tries to hold on to is that of a woman as a serving and faithful being. It is a philosophy and a way of life which possibly to a great extent is tied up with patriarchal thinking, evident in those of B's films for which he himself has written the manuscript. Comments of this kind make possible the allegation that B's idea of society is antiquated, or builds on the bourgeois moral code of the past. The problem is not that simply, but it is worth noting.

" 'THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY', 'WINTER LIGHT', and 'THE SILENCE' STAND TOGETHER. My basic concern in making them was to dramatize the all-importance of communication, of the capacity for feeling.

They are not concerned- as many critics have theorized - with God or His absence, but with the saving force of love. Each film, you see, has its moment of contact, of human communication. A tiny moment in each film - but the crucial one. What matters most of all in life is being able to make that contact with another human. Otherwise you are dead, as so many people today are dead. But if you can take that first step toward communication, toward understanding, toward love, then no matter how difficult the future may be - and have no illusions, even with all the love in the world, living can be hellishly difficult - then you are saved. That is all that matters."

—INGMAR BERGMAN