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Movies

Bergman's Agonized Look at Sex

by Judith Crist

It's bad enough when the Transit Authority has to close down a Times Square subway arcade because of the influx of petty criminals and degenerates. But when you start dishing out Ingmar Bergman to the 42d Street and Broadway boys, whose cinematic diet has consisted primarily of things like "My Bare Lady" and "Tease for Two"—well, it's really time to start O-ing the tempora and the mores.

"The Silence," the new Ingmar Bergman film which in a dual booking with an East Side theater has changed the status of the Rialto Theater from nudie-house to art house (and an enhancement of West Side movie going that is!), evokes per se a pondering of times and customs, regardless of its housing. For this is a film that has reportedly shocked any number of the usually unshockable Swedes—and yet breezed by our local censors with an ease that is remarkable in itself and as a comment on our changing standards.

The film as shown here runs 36 seconds shorter than it did in Sweden, the local distributor reports, noting that these "trims" from three sex scenes were made prior to import. No total scene has been deleted. In its passage through Customs and past the New York State Regents, he says, there was boggling only over one scene in which Gunnel Lindblom, stripped to the waist, washes her upper body at the bathroom sink. But the view of a bare breast was apparently approved.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this film contains more overt sexuality than we have seen on screen. The fascinating question is, however, how much of it is communicated to the viewer and how much of it offends. Certainly the prudish and even the modest may be repelled by the several scenes of sexual gratification in which the two sisters indulge, but even they would be hard put to argue that these exemplify gratuitous eroticism on Bergman's part or are irrelevant to the probing character studies he has set for himself. It is, strangely, the non-overt sexuality, the inescapably Freudian symbols crammed into the vacuum in which his characters move, that ultimately offend.

Where in "Winter Light" Bergman was concerned with the loss of love, equated with the loss of faith and the silence of God, he is now concerned with the solitude of the human agony, the despair within the silence that defies communication. We are transients, our origin and destination unknown, turning and churning in desperate search of satisfaction or surcease. And it is this state of mind, actually, that Bergman is depicting in "The Silence," much more a "happening" tinged with the grotesque and the macabre than a story or even an incident that he is recounting: Two sisters, Ester and Anna, and Johan, Anna's son, break a train journey because of Ester's illness. They stay a day and a night in a hotel in a nameless city in an unknown country and the next day Anna and Johan resume their trip, leaving Ester behind.

Ester, a classically beautiful woman whose eyes burn with anguish, is tormented by self-knowledge, finding fleeting refuge in auto-eroticism, in alcoholism, in a ritual of professional intellectual work. For Anna, frozen in a sensuous agony, the retreat is into animal pleasures, self-anointment, a flaunting of the body, a satisfaction of the appetite of the moment. Locked in an eternal duel, each is the torturer and each the victim.

Little is happening between them, we suspect, that has not happened before—and that will not happen again. Slowly their relationship has been revealed. Ester's past domination of and burning involvement with her sister, her "humiliation, not jealousy" over Anna's love affairs, her refuge in an intellectual life, emerge in counterpoint to Anna's sense of inferiority, her trancelike sensual domination of her child, her growing awareness that she is using her promiscuity to taunt and wound her sister. And the awareness is dramatized as she permits—nay, assists—her sister to find her in the arms of her latest pick-up. But in the venomous tirade Anna releases and in Ester's head-averted half-whispered replies, nothing is communicated.

The three travelers are walled within their own futile language; only a siren's wail or the rattle of a tank in the street penetrates the stillness of the ornate hotel whose only other guests seem to be a troupe of Spanish-speaking dwarfs, the only attendant an elderly waiter. Anna's lover and the waiter, who cares for Ester in her illness, do not understand the sisters—and these are the people to whom they reveal themselves with confidence.

The ravenous lust that seethes beneath her skin is inherent in Anna's every gesture (and how far more sensual are the lovers' frenzied embrace in a hotel corridor or the writhing of another couple in a theater loge than the actual "bed" scenes!); but sexual ecstacy itself is horrifyingly paralleled as Ester gasps for life in a strangulating seizure of her illness. Ester's final verbalization of the lonely futility of her rejection of heterosexuality has been touchingly preceded by her watching her sleeping sister and nephew, the boy curled in near-foetal position near his mother, and by the boy's refusal to let any one but his mother touch him.

The disturbingly "unhealthy" sexual aspects of the Bergman film are apparent in the side details, as the boy prowls the rococo corridors of the hotel. The elderly waiter lunching with grotesque concentration, the dwarfs dressing the boy as a girl before performing for him, the boy's urinating in the corridor, the long guns on the rumbling tanks, our ultimate realization that nowhere in the film has Bergman depicted a male as a complete person—these are the questionable aspects of the film. As symbols they are obvious to the point of naivete besides being arty and pretentious, and their use turns the film to cinema for its own sake. The throbbing brilliance and humanity of Ingrid Thulin's Ester, however, make these flaws secondary.

That our censors are willing to accept the suggestion or even depiction of masturbation or lesbianism or promiscuity as an essential of a work of art is, though it should not be, noteworthy. With "The Silence" they are wise: the sensation seeker is going to have to sit through an awful lot of eggheady stuff for a minimum of sensation—and, in fact, those who have not been forewarned and are not on the alert are going to miss the goodies as they go by. But the unalerted, I suspect, will be far better able to concentrate on this most demanding and complex of Bergman's films.

What does emerge in "The Silence" is a portrait of despair, embodied in a woman who has discovered that "even to discuss loneliness is a waste of time." And Bergman's apparent conclusion is that not all the games of mind and flesh can ease the sorrow of the solitary. An odd message for the oldtime patrons of the old-look Rialto.

Ingrid Thulin, alone in her hotel room, looks out at her bleak life through an alcoholic haze.