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Face to Face

In confronting Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face* (CIC), the first impression has to be one of familiarity. As the title implies, and as can be expected from Bergman's increasing television work, it's an encounter that roams from one close-up to another; where *Cries and Whispers* would pause for frequent formal perspectives and groupings, *Face to Face* avoids theatrical distance in favour of piercing proximity to such an extent that the exact geography of the settings is often difficult to determine. It's a film, you might say, of placeless faces—except that we can place some of them only too well.

So well, indeed, do we know Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson that a mere change of dubbed voice and screen name (to Isaksson and Jacobi, and we've heard *those* before) can't relieve them of the weight of a catalogue of recollections. Not so long ago we shared ten years of their stormy married life, with its punch-ups, divorce, and tranquil reunion; the only surprise in seeing them together again is that they appear, after all, to be back at the starting-gate. Here too is Gunnar Björnstrand, with pained eyes and guillotine mouth, gazing on death as always with a fearful distaste. Inherited from *Cries and Whispers* is Kari Sylwan, baring the same lavish breast; and from the punctuating audience of *Magic Flute* comes the smiling red-headed girl, smiling still. The intervention of Birger Malmsten as the heavy—sheer evil, like something from Victorian melodrama—is so true to form one is tempted to hiss.

And the themes of *Face to Face* have equally recognisable features. Dr. Jenny Isaksson, psychiatrist, is not the first Bergman woman to commit suicide in front of us; thirty years ago, in *Night is My Future*, drops of blood fell like drumbeats from slashed wrists. Nor is she the first to undergo an identity crisis, the subject of *Persona* among many. Suicide and rebirth, a marriage collapsing from inertia, the generation gap, the mournful serenities of old age, the possible advantages of love—Bergman shuffles the well-worn cards and lays them out once more. The images and symbols, the cries and the whispers, follow the same ritual: the woman in black, the needling wife-hater, the hospital bed, the unheralded dream sequence, the melody from Mozart, earth, air, fire, water. If the film is less controlled than *Cries and Whispers*, one could also argue that it is less artificial, that Bergman has allowed himself to be caught off-guard in the choice of events, that this time the cards are following their own game.

While *Face to Face* repeats the experiences of *Hour of the Wolf* and *A Passion* in showing the abrupt chasms that open beneath a seemingly placid surface, its characters are no longer being used to explore the artist's function in society. The only art that concerns Bergman now, it seems, is that of survival, which means leaving society to its own unpleasant devices for a while and concentrating on oneself. So Jenny is a specialist in psychiatric disorders, well qualified to come face to face with her own predicament. It's neatly symbolised by the rooms, empty but for a telephone, of the house she and her husband



'Face to Face': Erland Josephson, Liv Ullmann

have just vacated. Their marriage isn't finished, although one can guess it might well be; they are simply moving house. Devoid of furniture, the rooms echo Jenny's present existence, as we and she come to realise. Like Borg and his son in *Wild Strawberries*, she is emotionally sterile, unable to give herself; like Borg, she undergoes a journey of dreams and memories to clarify the point. Staying with her grandparents until the new house is ready, she brushes away their instinct that something's wrong and settles for brittle small-talk. Visiting a mentally disturbed patient, she disregards the attempts to redefine basic meanings ('brow ... cheek ... eye ... mouth') and tells the woman not to put on an act. Gently courted by an admirer, Dr. Jacobi, she shares an amiable evening only to dismiss his discreet advances with brutal ridicule.

So far, so normal, bar one brief nightmare. Then, tricked into returning to her former home, she is raped and robbed, and the shell of her security is shattered. Staring at us in horizontal close-up, the usual position for Bergman's scenes of confession, she tells Jacobi what the experience was like, allows him to calm her hysteria, goes back to her grandparents' flat, and in due course swallows one handful of pills after another. Her fingers slide down a crack in the wallpaper too narrow to penetrate, and wandering through shades of blackness in red fairy-tale cap and gown Jenny drifts on the edge of death. Her body lies in what was once her nursery, and Bergman uses the motif of the medieval castle, a sunlit painting on the nursery blind, both to parenthesise her suicide and to 'explain' the fantasies that follow. The metaphor is valuable, representing not only her current isolation but also the image of herself which, as we gradually learn, was acquired in her childhood—that of an inviolate princess, sleeping troubled and alone in the whispering dark.

She wakes in hospital; it seems Jacobi got her there in time. And the film switches smoothly between the 'real' and the 'unreal' as Jenny slowly recovers. She struggles through clawing patients, one with hideous disfigurements beneath a bland mask, to find her grandfather hiding from death in a cupboard; she is visited by her husband, tries to cope ('wouldn't you like a chair?'), and has to ask him, harassed and dejected, to go away; she screams at her long-dead parents for their neglect and screams again when they sadly make their escape; she watches herself being nailed in a coffin and burned alive.

And at last, conscious once more, with Jacobi again a silent, sympathetic witness, she balances the first confession with a second, equally passionate psychotherapy session. She was 'surrounded by death as a child': her parents gone, she was disciplined through the strictness of her grandmother, much given to shutting her in the closet for punishment (the identification with Bergman's own much-quoted childhood is completed with this detail), and taught to control, never to trust. Curled foetally on the floor, while Jacobi, who is of course a gynaecologist, offers occasional guidance, Jenny prepares to start life again.

As a case-history, it isn't too unusual. Bergman rests nearly its entire weight on the performance by Liv Ullmann, who pulls all the stops out for what must have been exhausting scenes to play before a camera disinclined to blink, but remains a little too dry-eyed throughout. For those unable to work up much enthusiasm for Miss Ullmann, it's a long haul to the unremarkable explanation that she's like she is because of childhood traumas. But being face to face with Bergman is never comforting, nor wholly predictable, and the story of Jenny has nothing cosy in its conclusion. In a film of shocks, nothing is more chilling than Jacobi's revelation, at the end, that he's going abroad, unlikely to return. In a film of irony, nothing is more ironic than Jenny's meeting, once she has picked herself off the floor, with her own daughter. 'You never did like me,' says the girl, cheerfully, 'I know that. Don't worry, I can manage perfectly well by myself.' Parent and child are parted once more, nothing learned, nothing gained.

Back home, her grandparents continue their dignified decline, providing a similar model of clouded contentment to the parental image at the end of *Wild Strawberries*. They loathe and fear 'that mysterious and awful point when they will have to part,' as Jenny describes it for us in sudden voice-over, but they offer one consolation. 'For a brief moment I understood,' she says, 'that love embraces everything, even death.' After all the images of disquiet in *Face to Face*, it seems too hasty an epithet. Bergman's other language is more eloquent: the church bells, the ticking clocks, the uses of red, the ancient doll, the endless doors that will and will not open, the pictures on the nursery walls, the final, brooding image of a purple, stained-glass flower.

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