Document Citation

Title	**The passion of Anna**
Author(s)	Richard Schickel Penelope Gilliatt
Source	*Publisher name not available*
Date	
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	163-172
No. of Pages	6
Subjects	
Film Subjects	En passion (The passion of Anna), Bergman, Ingmar, 1969

THE PASSION OF ANNA

Bergman

PENELOPE GILLIATT

Ingmar Bergman's *The Passion of Anna*, which is a masterpiece, is one of the most specifically modern films I have ever seen, yet there is barely a modern object in sight. No traffic, no frozen food, no push-button sophisticated speech. It is the characters' plight that seems so modern. The people in the film live on an island off the Swedish coast. Bergman presents their world as theologically created, but the Theos is mute about what to do next. Blunders have the weight of heresy; idle errors have barbarous consequences.

I am not religious, but I can see how much our atheist epoch may have impoverished Western art by formulating no substitute order of good and evil. The flower children are about the only people poetic enough to have tried. The reign of black comedy, satanic comedy, has diminished literature, on the whole; it is very easy to write about evil, very hard to write about good and evil. The reason why so many rollicking antiwar films are nothing very much, the reason why they offer no convincing account of the diabolical, is that they present war as a given and uncontrollable condition outside any system of cause and effect, and therefore morally as banal as awful weather. They show within that condition no one who makes you suppose that he and his like might have created it. The lack of religion in a nontheistic sense—of a bond between a man and his scruples he led lately in many

rather absurd attempts to manufacture a plastic sort of heresy instead. We have had, for instance, our glum orgies of blue films, which represent a supremely comic effort to blaspheme, considering that the effort is instantly scuttled by its own liberal argument that there is nothing blasphemous about pornography. And in the amoral world of our new, "liberated," but really rather line-toeing wacky comedies that specialize in the far-out, where nothing in the presented world remotely works but where anything goes, one simply misses somewhere to put one's feet; it seems that there is no floor, only falling.

The Passion of Anna is Bergman's second feature film in color. We see Max von Sydow at the start as a withdrawn, droll-looking hermit called Andreas Winkelman, with reddish hair and beard. He is mending a roof. The sunlight comes and goes. He has few friends. There are brief reprieves, but his soul lives mostly in the cold. We hear that he is divorced, "in a way." Much later, when he is living with someone, he has a terrified daydream about an unidentified woman. The image mixes up lovemaking and hospitals, and he comes out of the daydream to say that he was thinking of cancer. So did he leave his wife when she was deathly ill? Is that a part of his own mortal unease? His ex-wife's pottery barn, where we then see him twirling the potter's wheel and getting as drunk as he can, is "left exactly as it always was," except that he is now boozed out of his mind in it. On sacrilege, he and Bergman's film are experts.

As time goes on, Andreas gets to know two women. One of them is Eva (Bibi Andersson), married to a bilious architect called Elis. She has a brief and pretty melancholy affair with Andreas. The other is Anna (Liv Ullman), lame after a car accident that occurred when she was driving and that killed both her child and her husband, who was also called Andreas. Anna and the visible Andreas start living together, more or less happily. "There was violent dissension," she later says of this period, "but we never infected each other with cruelty or suspicion." She says the same thing of her first marriage, and we believe every word of it for a while. In a technically amazing monologue at a dinner party, she turns her head swiftly to the offscreen Elis, Andreas, and Eva, and the camera, unlooked at, presses in on her, close up, like the stare of conscience, as she talks about her marriage and about "living in the truth." She looks transparently honest but she is really lying in her teeth, for her marriage was a bad one and she half-consciously meant to kill the husband and child whose deaths now genuinely make her suffer so much—just as she means, later on, to try to kill the present Andreas in the same accidental way.

The film has partly to do with the malign hold that the past can have. The people in it wreck the present by too much re-enacting. They can't escape. The past has a grip on their feet, like mud in dreams. They can't make a move, and past behavior consumes the possibility of present action, just as the old, unseen Andreas begins so to requisition the present Andreas that there is a moment when von Sydow actually goes out into the garden and shouts his name to himself to call back his swallowed soul. And the two women—Anna, an angel-faced liar who at first seems really anxious for the truth, and Eva, a girl who thinks herself shabby-natured but who talks miserably well of sorts of puniness that are beyond the first one's comprehension—actually fit together like the halves of a walnut. They are described as inseparables, and their personalities flow in and out of each other, like the psychic exchangings of the two women in *The Silence* and *Persona*. So do the temperaments of every other pair in the picture, which is sexually geometric. (It even emerges, when the architect is talking to Andreas, that Eva, the architect's wife, also slept with the Andreas whom Anna killed.) There are extraordinary close-up two-shots—again like the ones in *The Silence* and *Persona*—in which two faces will move across each other in talk and sometimes slightly hide each other. (The cameraman, as always, is Sven Nykvist.) The composition is a little like a Picasso Cubist painting, one face often in full front view and one in profile; it is also entirely theatrical—an image of power in flux between one person and another, like the theme of Strindberg's *The Stronger*, in which a silent woman slowly takes over the authority from a prattler. One of the more trite questions of modern art is whether one can be two different people at the same time. Bergman is more interested in the opposite: Can two people melt into one? And, if so, what about the simultaneous deadly combat to remain separated? He has made, again and again, films that are about people's terror of being eaten alive spiritually and about their mesmerized longing to risk it, all the same. In the old days, he often went into that notion in stories full of charades,

magic shows, apparitions, and the occult. Now he does it simply. Alma, in *Hour of the Wolf*, typically pointed out that old people who have lived together all their lives begin to look like each other. In *Persona*, in the scene when the two women are picking over mushrooms and their sun hats tip across each other, the characters quietly hum tunes pitted against each other in contradiction of the merging image. Bergman makes films that are about girls half formed until they are with other, stronger women, about men's abiding terror that the women loved in their maturity are going to eat them up and return them to the immurement known before birth. In this film, Andreas tells us that he has claustrophobia and that he used to dream of falling down potholes.

Andreas has no perceptible job. Now and again, he writes at a desk. The hero of *Hour of the Wolf* was a painter, the hero of *Shame* a musician; like Andreas, both were not working and seemed obscurely stalemated. People sometimes assume that because Bergman so often makes films about artists he is being autobiographical and self-important about creativity, but I think the artists are there because they are the most natural examples of men who work on their own and who can easily hit rock, in a way that moves and interests Bergman about people in general. The universe in his films is God-made, the invention of a Being who keeps His own counsel about how to live in it, and the inmates are hard-pressed by that silence. It rings in their ears. There are moments of conviviality that break up the isolation. Friendship. Love (never very erotic, and always tinctured with some dread of departure). Great tenderness (Andreas gently looks after a puppy that some madman loose on the island has horribly strung up by the neck from a tree). But such warmth of the sun is fast gone, and Bergman's people are again left to cope for themselves on a loftily conceived planet where they feel perpetually humiliated. Lately, his heroes have often spoken of that—of a humiliation that he sees as the companion of modern humanity, and hard to bear. Our social system is based on it, he says: the law, the carrying out of sentences, the kind of education we have, the Christian religion. Andreas feels himself stifled and spat upon, but without an alternative. He has a police record, the punishment for minimal crimes of rebellion. "I am a whipped cur," he says quite proudly, rage his only weapon. Does he bite? We'll see. The God whom Bergman's

characters now rather prefer not to believe in is implacable and unexplanatory, much like an artist who declines to interpret his work. This Creator will not be His own exegete, and there are no footnotes. He remains entirely mute, without the ghost of a smile. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of His order stumble around in it, aware that there are rules, damned for breaking them, and sometimes powerfully longing to be out of the game. Evald, in *Wild Strawberries*, said, "My need is to be dead. Absolutely, totally dead."

In this supreme new work, Anna is the character who has been closest to death, and who is therefore—as people are—the least enlightening about it to anyone else. She talks of the car crash distantly. She remembers herself walking away, and her child's head in "a funny position." She speaks of thinking, "What a ghastly accident," and of wondering "why someone wasn't coming to help those poor people," including herself. The alienation is complete and rather frightening. And then we see a dream of hers, in black and white, starting off in a boat that is like the boat in *Shame*. She runs up a road, longing greatly for company and knowing somehow that it has gone forever. There is nowhere to go. A woman on the road is hurrying; she might be someone to befriend, but she turns aside and says, "I've changed all the locks." Then Anna sees another woman, sitting dead silent with a face of stone. Someone says that the woman's son is going to be executed. Anna falls on her knees in front of her and says, out of nowhere, "Forgive me. Forgive me." One remembers then that she was at the wheel of the car that killed her own child, and remembers having been told that this dream "troubled her at Easter." The word "*Passion*" in Bergman's title is certainly theological as well as vernacular. Bergman has always been one of the most Christian of film makers, but his old and rather affected apparatus of symbolism has now been replaced by pure human behavior, both more direct and more truly mysterious. He is also pulling farther and farther away from orthodoxy. There can seldom have been a Christian artist who held out less hope of an afterlife. It is as though he felt that if people can already be so troubled and so barbarous when they are in the temporal world, eternity must be unthinkable. ("For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" St. Luke wrote. Bergman makes one dredge up verses from the

Gospels that one didn't know one remembered.) The un-Christian possibility of suicide also comes up, when the four main actors jump out of character and speak directly to the camera about what they think of the people they are playing. Bibi Andersson says that she thinks Eva might try to kill herself. "I hope they'll manage to save her," she says, and adds that she hopes Eva will look at her own old ego with affection. This is one of the warmths in Bergman —his wish for people to extend charity to themselves. He does something amazing at the end of the sequence, just after Bibi Andersson speaks about Eva's possibly someday becoming a teacher and feeling blessed: on the word "blessed" Bergman changes the exposure and floods the screen with light. There are other halcyon seconds in the film that make you catch your breath. In the middle of violence and carnage—sheep killed by the madman, a gentle peasant called Johan committing suicide because he can't bear being accused of the outbreak of animal slaughter on the island—Andreas and Anna suddenly look after a dying bird that threw itself with a thud against their window while they were watching war news on TV. The island is racked with "physical and psychical acts of violence": we keep seeing the words tapped out on a typewriter, part of a letter left by the first Andreas, which reveals a good deal of prescience and also a dangerous degree of truth about the marriage that his widow has coaxed herself into thinking ideal. Bergman now seems free of the dank respect for passivity and the gluttony for suffering that clung to his earlier films. We hear in this film, after a stable has been set on fire, of "a horse that ran around blazing" and "damned well wouldn't die." There is another line, spoken by Andreas, in the same spirit of admiration for mute refusal to give up in extremity: "Has it ever occurred to you that the worse off people are, the less they complain? At last, they are quite silent." Silence. Bergman's obdurate theme for many pictures now.

The Passion of Anna (called *A Passion* in Swedish) is a wonderful piece of work, even better than *The Silence* and *Persona*. Again and again, Bergman effortlessly tops some amazing piece of invention. The material is complex, but everything seems simple and lucid. The human details are often strange but always convincing, in a slightly shattering way. Andreas, for instance, lets out a terrific wordless roar when he is lying alone on a bed after the insufficient, saddened Eva has left his place to take the ferry. "It's

not enough," the roar says. "None of it's enough." Andreas and Anna don't love each other enough; Eva is out of reach.

Eva talks hopelessly about her cynic architect husband, who is building a culture center in Italy. "Building a mausoleum over the meaninglessness of Milan," he has said earlier, at their dinner all together. The scene seems improvised. The actors look a little flushed with wine and with the fire behind them. Bergman is one of the very great directors of acting. When the commentary here suddenly goes into the present tense and talks about Andreas as feeling "a rush of affection for these people," the affection is really there—even for Elis, the alien. Eva's husband is a pagan in Bergman's world of unwilling agnostics, and a further element in the film's scheme of the devouring and the devoured: Eva talks about herself as "nothing but a small part of his sarcasm." (When she is alone with Andreas, playing some rather horrible old dance music, she suddenly says, "What is to become of us?" Of all of them, she seems to mean.) Her husband, more buoyant, cheerfully collects photographs of people in the midst of violent emotion, which is his study. He arranges the pictures neatly in indexed boxes. The subject disagreeably fascinates him. "You can't read people with any certainty. Not even physical pain gives a reaction," he says, showing Andreas a picture of Eva looking beautiful. "She was just starting a migraine," he goes on—this eerie esthete of pain, one of the jaded, the out-of-heart, dead from the neck up and trying to quicken himself with snapshots of other people's intensity.

The whole movie is pitched very high, and made by a man technically at the top of his powers. He catches people in fibs that ricochet: in a tiny stinginess about pretending to have asked a telephone operator what a call cost on someone else's phone, in a lie about not having had an affair, in a lie that everything is fine. The method of the film forces the characters into absolute clarity of intention. It is as if they were pressed up against some invisible wall, with the camera unremittingly on their faces. Few films can have had so many close-ups. Instead of flashbacks, people describe things; Bergman is loosening the traditional film links between sound track and image. The moments when the actors slip out of their parts to talk about their characters are not modish, not neo-Godard, but brilliantly necessary. They have much the same effect as the showing of film-stock breaking in *Persona*—it is as though

the dramatic medium itself had for the moment snapped under stress. Like the work of Renoir, Beckett, Buñuel, and Satyajit Ray, Bergman's new film is religious in the sense that it restores a lost weight to the human act, and an essential existence to its characters that is more significant than their existence in the eyes of the people they are addressing. There is agony in the material, but the attentiveness and the talent of the film maker are altogether reviving.

Bergman at His Bleak Best

RICHARD SCHICKEL

With *The Passion of Anna* the art of Ingmar Bergman reaches its pinnacle. Though it is in color, it is in every important way his most austere and elliptical work. A thing of silences and enigmas, it nevertheless makes very clear the tragic vision of life that possesses its author.

Gone at last are all traces of the baroque symbolism that marked —and often marred—his early work. Gone, too, is the yearning for evidence of the presence of God in the world. Bergman has, I think, accepted His death and, indeed, seems to find that event no longer worthy of comment. His absence is now simply one of the terms of our existence. Darkness is now settling over the island to which Bergman has now retreated for four consecutive films, a darkness relieved by only the bleakest of winter lights.

That island is, of course, a psychological landscape as well as a physical one and Bergman has gone to that stark, spare place in the same spirit that his characters have—out of revulsion at the meaningless cruelty of the world. There is no escape from it here, as *The Passion of Anna* makes abundantly clear, but it is at least somewhat reduced to a manageable, noninstitutional, human scale. Or so they permit themselves to hope.

This time those gathered here to await the end include: the lady of the title, who yearns for a perfect, transcendent love and probably, before the film began, accidentally-on-purpose killed her husband and child for failing to provide same; a financial failure, once jailed for forgery, who takes up with Anna mostly because she is

there and may assuage the terrible emptiness he feels; an architect, whose distinguished career seems a mockery to him and who takes (and endlessly catalogues) pictures which, one imagines, he intends to be a complete record of our increasing inhumanity; his wife, who has apparently not found even the transitory rewards that the others have savored in life.

Not a great deal "happens" to these people. The failure has a roll in the sack with the architect's wife, a year-long "relationship" with Anna that always remains distant and cool. The architect (possibly a surrogate for Bergman) watches; his wife simply slips out of focus entirely. A madman, who might be any of the above (except the failure) or none, runs loose on the island slaughtering animals. A man who has been accused, perhaps falsely, of this crime commits suicide. Anna tries to kill her lover, fails and drives off, and we are left with an image of him, an image that grows increasingly grainy until it looks like yet another modern horror photographed off a TV screen, running first this way, then that, in an agony of indecision. Should he follow her or not?

We do not care. It is not important. Any action will, we know, turn out to be without resolving meaning. It will end only in the passage of more time. It is, in its quiet way, a shattering ending, brilliant in both its economy and its clarity. Bergman has, in that concluding sequence, as well as in the rest of the picture, stripped his art bare of all that is nonessential, all that is potentially confusing, all that offers any promise of warmth. Such hope as he offers stands outside the frame of the film. Periodically, we see a clapstick with the name of one of the actors on it, after which he or she faces the camera and discusses (in what only seems an improvised manner) the motives, the possible future of his or her character. Actorlike, they entertain some optimism for them, implying art may be impossible without at least a shred of hope.

Maybe so. In any case, this art is of the highest order. The controlled brilliance of Bergman's favorite actors—Max von Sydow, Liv Ullmann, Bibi Andersson—must be mentioned. So must the psychological depth with which they—and Bergman—invest these people. They are never abstractions. They are, God help us, our brethren. To spend a couple of hours with them is to be in the presence of genius at its ripest, most mature moment. We may leave *The Passion of Anna* more dubious than ever about man's

fate, but we leave with our faith in the possibilities of screen art—much tested in recent months—miraculously restored.

ZABRISKIE POINT

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.

In his last three films, Michelangelo Antonioni has been preoccupied with the violation of personality by technology in industrial society. His attitude toward technology has been somewhat equivocal: While his mind has stressed the threat to individuality, his eye has discovered beauty in the new industrial structures. This inner ambivalence, no doubt, accounts for the diversity of solutions he has suggested to the conflict between man and the machine.

Thus in *Red Desert*, a much underrated movie, the setting was Italy and, in the end, the intrusion of technology was evaded by inducing in his heroine a mood of lyrical resignation. The birds of Ravenna, we were told in the concluding shot, could survive the contaminated yellow smoke of the factories by learning how to fly through it—a lesson for humans. In *Blow-Up*, the setting was England. Here technology was transcended by making the hero a photographer, i.e., a technologist himself but in a marginal technology; the machine became his instrument rather than his master, and in a marginal land survival was possible. In *Zabriskie Point*, the setting is America where technological society is horribly triumphant. Here, as Antonioni appears to see it, technology cannot be evaded or transcended. It can only be destroyed.

The film opens with a meeting of student radicals in Los Angeles planning a demonstration. There is trouble with the police; the students go on strike; a cop is killed. The boy who drew his gun to kill the policeman escapes, steals a plane, and lands near Death Valley, California, where he meets a young secretary who has temporarily abandoned her job in search of spiritual salvation in the desert. They make love at Zabriskie Point. The boy takes the plane back; policemen waiting at the airfield shoot him down. The girl,

going on to rejoin her employer (and lover?) at a business conference in a luxurious, overstocked desert house, hears the news. Devastated, she drives away; then looks back and in her mind sees the house and its goods exploding into flames, again and again and again.

Like other directors making their first American films, Antonioni is fascinated by the iconography of the American scene and perceives a sinister loveliness in the American landscape. But his brilliant visual feeling for American images is dominated and used by his fear of American impulses. His vision of America is of a land of nightmare. Nature, though beautiful, is dead, "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/And the dead tree gives no shelter. . . ." Everyone living is a victim or a monster. Even little children are so deformed by the corrupt society that, when nine-year-old kids encounter the heroine, their first thought is rape.

Symbolism has always been Antonioni's weakness. This time it is his disaster. It may be all right, for example, to blow up the desert mansion as a metaphor for revolution; repeating the explosion eight or ten times may even add to its emotional force. But the sight of the artifacts of American capitalism, including canned goods, suspended in the air for long moments of arrested motion drives the point home a little too simplistically. The spell is broken; one whispers to one's neighbor, "This is the film that should have been called *Blow-Up*." Then, believe it or not, Antonioni follows the explosion by showing the sun on the horizon. The dawn of a new day, perhaps? This is back to agitprop.

His use of billboards to provide "ironic" underlining of the action is equally heavy-handed. When the cops attack the students, Antonioni gives us a sign on a college building: "Liberal Arts." After the shooting, the hero sees a placard advertising a mortuary; when he is hungry, he is assailed by food billboards; when he is trying to escape, United Air Lines tells him, "Let's get away from it all."

As anger has eroded Antonioni's subtlety, it has also eroded his originality. The scene when a plane buzzes a person in an empty field was better done by Alfred Hitchcock in *North by Northwest*. It was faintly plausible in *Easy Rider* that two Southerners might gun down a couple of gentle hippies on a lonely country road. But, when Antonioni repeats the scene in *Zabriskie Point*, it is a good deal less plausible. Here policemen, under the eyes of the press,