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BERGMAN'S HEEL

'The Devil's Eye' Shows a Weakness in Ingmar

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

PSYCHOANALYZING Ingmar Bergman through the contents of his films has become an inevitably futile, but increasingly popular, parlor game. Students and lovers of highbrow movies are accompanying their coffee and beer with breakdowns of Mr. Bergman's pictures and probes of his strange morality. The artist himself has contributed some deep-domed rationalizations of his films, and the whole enterprise of discovery has been whipped into a big and challenging thing.

Why not? It's plain that Mr. Bergman has a fascinating, complicated mind, which is more than can be said for many persons who are making motion pictures today. And there is reason to suspect that he is probably intellectually and spiritually confused (as who isn't in this unusually brutal and baffling age?). This is certainly the conclusion a prober has to draw from his next-to-last-made film, "The Devil's Eye," which opened at the Beekman the other day.

Although it is put down as a trifle, an intellectual joke—or "rondo capriccio"—that Mr. Bergman tossed off while "relaxing" between his hugely moralistic (and vicious) "The Virgin Spring" and his grand opus, "Through a Glass Darkly," which opened in Stockholm the other week, it reveals some darting glints of its author that are not very favorable to him. And it betrays some aspects of the artist that leave one a little miffed.

Don Juan Fable

"The Devil's Eye" is presented as a fable in which Don Juan is sent up from Hell by the Devil to seduce a Swedish maiden who has remained chaste until her wedding eve. This is regarded as a triumph for the powers of goodness that cannot be endured.

When Don Juan reaches earth with his servant, Pablo, both in modern dress and apt disguise, he discovers the young woman is an exceedingly attractive, but aggravating, sort. She unhesitatingly flirts with him, exposes herself to the temptation of being seduced,

but resists him with an arrogant affirmation of her purity and her love for her fiancé.

At the same time, her mother, the wife of a vicar, is resisting Pablo, hot with a passion that has gone unquenched for 300 years. The delicate woman is secretly avid for a lover, but she is timid and afraid.

Then Don Juan, still unrecognized by the ladies, tells the sad story of Don Juan as an example of the torment of a man forced to endure frustration because of a too great hunger for love. Pablo makes a similar appeal to the mother. And that night both women agree to submit to their seducers out of pity and sympathy.

Now this is indeed a peculiar demonstration of a moral paradox—two women ready to sacrifice their virtue out of pity, not affection, for men. But Mr. Bergman caps it with an even more baffling paradox. He has his two ardent suitors become chastened by this generosity. He has Don Juan return to Hell confounded, leaving the young lady untouched.

Meek Males

One of our readers has suggested that this is clearly the extension of "a skein of personal confusion and self-conscious (acknowledgement of the) inadequacy of the male" that has run through and been apparent in most of Mr. Bergman's films. While this is putting it strongly, there is no question that here again the great director and moralist is confronting us with a puzzling instance of the paralysis of a man, rendered the more bewildering because that man is the classic symbol of sex.

What Mr. Bergman is proclaiming is neither clever nor clear, and this is where the shortcoming of the artist is woefully revealed. Although he has the service of one of his nimble casts—Bibi Anderson as the maiden, Jarl Kulle as Don Juan, Sture Lagerwoll as Pablo, Gertrud Fridh as the vicar's wife—the communication of the idea is achieved pretty much in talk, with few of his usually most effective cinematic images. And the talk is heavy and elusive, particularly when it has to be read from difficult English subtitles that are the death of any possible verbal wit.

Mr. Bergman has failed us this time and in doing so he has exposed what may be the shadowy contours of an Achilles heel. Though playing with an idea, he has fluffed it, whether from carelessness or confusion we cannot say. But either weakness is dangerous in an artist as exalted as he.