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Movies

Autumn Interiors

Vernon Young

IF, without knowing anything whatever about the work of either director, one had seen Woody Allen's *Interiors* and Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* in the order of their respective debuts in New York City, one might have easily concluded that the Swedish film-maker had attempted to imitate the American: the same photographic and cutting style, the same concentration on a handful of overwrought characters, and the very same subject—namely, maternal domination. Of course, the reverse sequence is the correct one: Woody Allen, since 1971, if no farther back, had thirsted to make what he thought of as a "European" film, preferably in the monastic style of Ingmar Bergman. Finally he has made it, and contingently it resembles (at least in outline) the particular Bergman number which arrived almost at the same hour of release. Since our view of the film Allen made depends to a great extent on the model he employed (the quintessential Bergman movie), we would do well to ask ourselves—once more—of what that model consists, before judging the carbon copy.

Among the many obsessions of Ingmar Bergman which American critics have failed to note, or failed to question closely, is his pervasive

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resentment of the achieved man—doctor, lawyer, professor, business executive. From the evidence of his several films, Bergman hates every professional man except the artist. Predictably, since he is a puritan, his defense of the artist as somehow sacrosanct has engendered a feedback of guilt: periodically, having enshrined the creative personality in one context or another, he seems driven to follow up with a thumping self-accusation of the artist as charlatan or as detached and inhuman. You may be sure that Bergman in his heart does not believe this, but he needs to hear an answering echo that absolves him from the accusation.

Autumn Sonata is characterized by the same kind of ambivalence which undermined the veracity of *Wild Strawberries*. In the earlier film, Bergman's portrait of an old professor whose egoistic frigidity lost him an idyllic sweetheart and produced an impotent son was at odds with the visibly sympathetic performance of Victor Sjostrom. Just as he was reluctant in *Wild Strawberries* to follow the implications of his own scenario by destroying the professor-figure entirely, so in *Autumn Sonata* he sets up Ingrid Bergman as a concert-pianist mother who is supposed to have crippled her two daughters (one being insufficient for the force of his accusation), then becomes so enamored of the personality he has given her that he is hard put to convince us she could possibly be either as indifferent or as ruthless as her articulate daughter maintains.

To synopsize this film accurately for anyone who has not seen it is almost impossible, since what takes place in it beyond the severely limited action is wholly a matter of individual interpretation. Every statement made by the characters is open to question, and the whole moral issue on which the film hinges is never depicted. The damaging relationship of which this daughter-mother confrontation is supposed to be the climax is not visualized in flashbacks, so that the spectator can judge for himself; it is, rather, wholly resumed in the daughter's accusing retrospect.

At the beginning, Eva (Liv Ullman) reading her diary while she awaits the visit of her celebrated mother, seems pretty clearly, in her spinsterish appearance and manner, a manic-depressive type, melancholy and retentive. We glimpse her husband hovering in the background, from which he scarcely emerges during the subsequent encounter; we learn that since her son, aged fourteen, drowned some years ago, Eva has kept his room as it was when he died and moons over photographs of him. This morbid devotion to the irretrievable contradicts the leading statement she reads from her diary: "One must learn how to live. I work at it every day." We further learn that she had once lived with a doctor, before her marriage, and that she had had tuberculosis. Not until later in the film are we aware that she is looking after her bedridden sister, who suffers from a degenerative disease that has affected her speech and movements, and whom her mother believes to be in a nursing home.

When mother arrives at this outpost of Ibsenism (the setting is, for a change, among Norwegian fjords), it is not too surprising that Eva, after the first affectionate exchanges are over, while listening obediently to her mother's necessarily self-absorbed chatting (she has come, after all, from the world of European capitals and professional music) is all the while regarding her parent with mingled amusement and suspicion. In no time at all, suspicion has become hostility; step by step she rebukes her mother's self-anchored authority in a crescendo of bitter reproaches which mounts steadily into the realm of hysteria, making the distressed elder responsible for all the ills of her life and blaming her, besides, for the condition of the drooling sister upstairs whose presence in the house is an unwelcome shock to the fastidious visitor.

Following a long sequence of passionate denunciation by her daughter, which she stems only at momentary intervals, the mother, inwardly shaken but outwardly collected, leaves to fulfill another engagement. Eva, after a few solicitous suggestions from her husband—he has remained passively on the sidelines of this internecine struggle being waged under his roof—writes a letter to the departed woman in which she retracts the burden of the accusation she had hurled and makes a pathetic bid for love. This letter is in part read over the image of the mother, traveling south for her next concert.

Critics have generally received this film as if it were indeed a straightforward accusation by the neglected daughter of a selfish parent, which means they accept at face value the allegations of the girl and pay no attention either to the personality or to the remonstrance of the mother. In fact we have only the daughter's word that her mother's inattention drove her into a messy relationship with that "doctor" who is briefly mentioned. What part any of this played in her contracting TB is never clarified. How satisfactory or unsatisfactory her present marriage is, one is left to infer. Whether her mother had an affair with someone named Marten without telling her husband, Josef, depends on which of the two women you believe, and what bearing this has on anything else is unclarified. One is also left to decide whether or not the mother's absence at a crucial hour was the impelling cause of the sister's condition.

It is possible to take the other view, that Bergman intended the Liv Ullman character to reveal herself unmistakably as a self-pitying neurotic, whose charges are patently canceled by the clearly delineated superiority of the mother. (One of the most telling moments in the film is Ingrid Bergman's correction, at the piano, of her daughter's playing of a certain Chopin sonata: if the girl is to give the piece an authentic interpretation, she must avoid sentimentality and understand that it expresses *"pain, not reverie."*) However, even this view of Bergman's strategy may be ingenuous; it is much more in his line to establish an impeccably distinguished persona, poised against an unattractive married-spinster, in order to make the accusations appear at first unlikely, then the more convincing, precisely

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because the accused has the more sovereign air. (The mechanism was invented by Strindberg in *The Stronger.*)

In truth, near the end of the film, Bergman loses confidence in his own gambit; he cuts, in the most excruciatingly obvious way, from the sick daughter, writhing helplessly on the floor, to the entrained mother coolly informing her agent that her visit home had been "most unpleasant"; she shrugs it off. Unless we are to suppose she is acting, this is outrageously unbelievable; it totally contradicts the character of the woman we have witnessed, in merciless close-up, for the preceding hour. Evasive or hesitant she may have been when justifying a given response or action recounted by the vindictive Eva, but never for a moment did one feel that she was radically false. Equally unacceptable, as the film ends, is the abrupt change of heart that dictates Eva's remorse for the vehemence with which she has been arraigning her mother—thereby canceling, at the last minute, the substance of the film's unrelenting inquisition.

CRITICS in this country consistently underrate Bergman's Swedish inability to commit himself to the terms of a moral choice he has ostensibly initiated—unless he knows for certain that he has a target to which *no one* will object. There is small point in trying to weight truth in the antithesis he has contrived for *Autumn Sonata.* At *any* latter-day Bergman movie, one cannot be sure whether he is unaware of the dramatic incongruities he creates by poor motivation or whether he doesn't really care. He seems indifferent to plot because plot is an action consistent with the revealed nature of its characters, and Bergman seems unable to perceive consistency; his characters say what he wants them to say, to an end he has exclusively chosen. (He used to be a master of comedy, for in comedy you can give full rein to the improbable.)

With this in mind, we should not expect the mundane inventions of *Autumn Sonata* to have objective credibility; the motives are flimsily explored, the actualities are not dramatized but reported after the fact. If Eva knew so much about her mother's devices of evasion, and about her own victimization, she would have long since ceased to be a victim—or at the least she would have remedied those absurd outer signs thrust upon her by Bergman and his wardrobe department: the old-maid provincial hair bun and the disfiguring eyeglasses. Women's faces, preferably under stress, are what Bergman likes to photograph; objective coherence he no longer cares to cultivate. Like many other films in his canon, *Autumn Sonata* is a private tribunal. Bergman himself is confessor, prosecutor, plaintiff, and as neutral a judge as he can risk being.

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