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Bergman's Glum, Hypnotic 'Silence'

By STANLEY EICHELBAUM

In "The Silence," which opened yesterday at the Metro, Ingmar Bergman sets off a chain reaction of mute torment, as a final, pessimistic report on his private conflict with God for making man so imperfect.

It is the last and most mesmerizing film in a trilogy devoted to the Swedish director's search for religious faith, through a dissection of his own doubt and other men's moral agony.

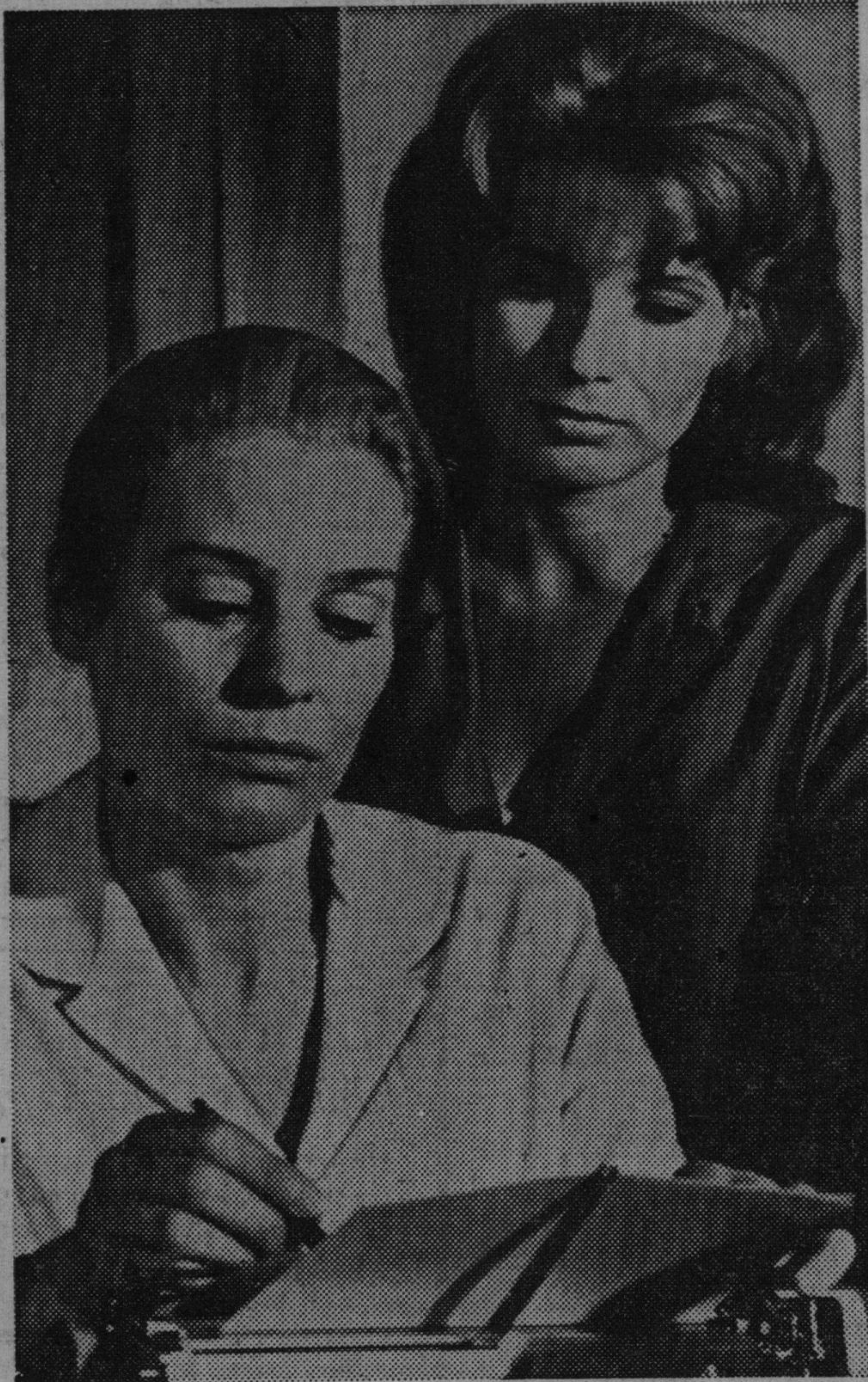
God existed as love in "Through a Glass Darkly," the first movie of the cycle, and in "Winter Light," it was God's silence that preoccupied a despairing clergyman.

But now, Bergman has created a suffocating inferno of pain, hate, vice, fear, perversion and misunderstanding—a harrowing, nearly soundless world of suffering and abnormality, from which, love, speech and conscience have been banished. Without faith and human communication, Bergman seems to be saying, there is no hope and no sign of God.

MOST DEPRESSING

Not only is "The Silence" as cheerless a film as Sweden's celebrated writer-director of gloom has as yet conceived, but it is, without a doubt, the most depressing and startlingly immodest movie I have ever seen.

And since Bergman is here more introvertedly in-



INGRID THULIN (LEFT) AND GUNNEL LINDBLOM
Poignant and penetrating performances in "The Silence"

involved with elusive symbolism than usual, the film is an especially difficult one to unscramble.

I was nonetheless extraordinarily gripped by the movie, despite its ambiguities and its wincingly unpleasant subject matter. Bergman's genius with mood, suspense and hyp-

notic details (like the ominous rattling of a glass against a water pitcher) has never been projected with more brilliance or intrigue.

FRANKNESS

Ironically, the film's most easily-comprehended scenes are bluntly sexual. And there are indeed some

"THE SILENCE," Swedish film; written and directed by Ingmar Bergman; photography by Sven Nykvist. With Ingrid Thulin (Ester), Gunnel Lindblom (Anna), Jorgen Lindstrom (Johan), Bifger Malmsten (waiter), Hakan Jahnberg (hotel servant). At the Metro.

uncomfortably frank moments. The film therefore runs the risk of attracting sensation-seekers, and of being misconstrued as pornography, as it has been, oddly enough, in seemingly unshockable Sweden.

Eroticism was obviously not Bergman's purpose. He authorized trimming the more explicit (and already notorious) sequences for the version released in this country. What remains is still unusually graphic. But since vice—in its most emotionally-barren form—logically illuminates Bergman's glum statement about the blotting out of faith, the graphic episodes are strangely justified.

HIS HELL

Bergman's hell on earth is a joyless, steamingly hot, claustrophobic foreign realm called Tomika, which is visited by two sisters, Anna and Ester, and Anna's small son, Johan. The locale is radically different from Bergman's customary, bleak, frozen North.

The plot is slow, obscure and not especially eventful; the dialogue is sparse, and the principal setting is a luxury hotel, not unlike the one in "Last Year at Marienbad."

Ester (played by Ingrid Thulin) is a Lesbian who is critically ill and who harbors an unnatural affection for her younger sister (Gunnel Lindblom), a restless, sensual girl who taunts Ester with her promiscuity—in this case, a waiter she has picked up in a bar.

AN INNOCENT

Johan (Jorgen Lindstrom) is an inquisitive innocent on the verge of corruption and undoubtedly a symbol of Bergman himself. The boy's loneliness is diverted by a group of performing dwarves and then by a kindly old hotel porter, who entertains the lad with photographs of his dead wife lying in state in her coffin.

Bizarrely, fascinatingly and almost silently, the

drama spins itself out. Anna scrubs herself (of her guilt, perhaps?) and then saunters off in search of a man. When she is in bed with him, she tells him sullenly, "How nice that we don't understand each other."

Ester's activities are no less peculiar, as she drowns her solitude in alcohol; in work (curiously, she is a translator), and quite shockingly, in auto-erotism.

Eventually, Anna and Johan depart, leaving Ester behind in a coma, presumably to die.

THE PERFORMANCES

As always in Bergman's films, the performers are awesomely affecting. Miss

Thulin and Miss Lindblom particularly, give poignant and penetrating meaning to their shadowy roles.

And however clouded or negative the picture may appear to be, it is still an exceptionally engrossing account of the one man's viewpoint on human suffering, self-inflicted pain and alienation. Its baffling symbolism will in all likelihood be discussed for months.