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Strindberg's Mark on Ingmar Bergman

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Abstract

From an early age Bergman began reading Strindberg voraciously and showed his veneration for him by directing many of his plays, always returning to him, revising his productions or creating new ones, such as in the case of *Fröken Julie* and *Ett drömspel*, which he mentions at the end of *Fanny och Alexander* and is a gravitational force in *Efter repetitionen*, where Enland Josephson plays the role of a theatre director who is one of Bergman's alter egos. However, along with returning to him in theatre and explicitly referring to him in some of his films, Bergman drew on Strindberg to build his film dramas as an exploration of human pain, the unrest of love and sexual relations, the dead turned into ghosts that pursue the living, and the uncertain boundaries between reality and dreams, among other issues. This is how Strindberg's mark on Bergman's film production will be explored, with the idea that he not only created under the playwright's influence but that, to some extent, he continued his work.

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At the end of *Fanny and Alexander*, both in the original TV version and in the abridged film version, Emilie (played by Ewa Fröling), who had married the late Oscar Ekhdal and is the mother of Fanny and Alexander, has come back to the house of the Ekhdals after her tortuous marriage with the tyrannical Bishop Vergerus, a kind of extreme double of the father of the Swedish filmmaker, Pastor Henrik Bergman. Vergerus, who died in a fire that we are invited to imagine was provoked by the desire of Alexander's dark side, embodies the repression that denies imagination, fiction as a liberating lie or lie as a liberating fiction: theatre. As we can deduce from reading *The Magic Lantern*, Ingmar Bergman's book of memoirs and perhaps also of fantasy, he freed himself mentally from paternal repression through imagination, lie and theatre. The truth is that, upon returning to the Ehdals' home, a family who owes their wealth to the hospitality business, Emilie wants to return to theatre, which she left when she married Vergerus. In fact, the Ekhdals themselves had also left it, the owners of a theatre where the spectators of *Fanny and Alexander* have seen the performance of a Christmas play and *Hamlet*, a character we recognised in Alexander, whose father, once dead, appears to him as a ghost and asks his son not to forget him. Theatre, in fact, portrays the real profound life. Emile has the complicity of her mother-in-law, Helena Ekhdal (Günn Wallgram), an actress who, after having left the stage, is encouraged by her daughter-in-law to return with a play, precisely, by Strindberg: *Ett drömspel* (*A Dream Play*). Helena snorts saying "This dirty misogynist Strindberg," but she takes the book and this is how, with her grandson Alexander on her lap after having seen the ghost of Bishop Vergerus who threatens to always pursue him, reads an excerpt of the famous preface to *Ett drömspel*, also referred to as a footnote: "Everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns." Here ends the quotation, to which I will add, for the moment, the immediately subsequent words in the preface: "A medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations."

While arguing from the very beginning that the playwright has tried in this dream play, as in his previous play, *The Road to Damascus*, to imitate the incoherent yet seemingly logical form of dreams, Strindberg wishes to introduce the spectator (or the reader) to an imaginary world in which the so-called Daughter of Indra, a deity, descends from the heavens to become a woman (Agnes) and find out what causes the pain of humans in the hope of remedying it. The Daughter of Indra, who acts as a link between diverse unnamed characters that embody humanity, reaches a place on Earth where time and space do not exist. Opening up paths to theatre modernity, as did other plays from his later years written in the early 20th century, before his death in 1912, Strindberg breaks with theatre conventions and certainties: neither time nor space nor a dramatic objective are defined. However, if we look at the mark on Ingmar Bergman separately from the plot and the dramatic elements, what is fundamental is the weaving of imagination based on a reality – which perhaps is not so marginal in the case of the filmmaker – without this putting limits on what can happen and therefore is possible and plausible: we only need to refer to the fascinating sequence in which the Jew Isak manages to get Fanny and Alexander to escape from Bishop Vergerus' house in a trunk. As in others of his films, Bergman drew on his memories and experiences to create *Fanny and Alexander*, so that, if we keep in mind what he tells and perhaps invents of his childhood in *The Magic Lantern*, it becomes clear to think of Alexander as an alter ego of the child Ingmar Bergman. However, the experiences and memories are transformed into mere inventions, absurdities and improvisations. In the guise of a classic novel, let's say Dickensian to mention a clear reference in the film *Fanny and Alexander*, which Bergman himself considered the compendium and culmination of his cinema, it seems to be a realistic account, with defined localisation and temporality. Yet without completely abandoning this impression, he gradually breaks it apart, so that what has been experienced and what has been dreamt, the real and the fantastic, mix, as do the living and the dead. A coexistence that we can see in other Bergman films, such as *Wild Strawberries*, *The Seventh Seal, The Magician, Through a Glass Darkly* or *Cries and Whispers*.

The truth is that citing the preface to *Ett drömspel*, almost like a code, in *Fanny and Alexander* can be like a certain declaration of principles. We can even imagine that the contents of the rest of the preface is implicit, which continues arguing that "the characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify." In affinity with Nietzsche, his epistolary friend, Strindberg thus expresses the modern awareness of the crisis of the individual; in other words, that he cannot be conceived as a fixed and indivisible identity but rather as torn apart, uncertain and shifting. We only need to refer to *Persona* as a paradigmatic example of how Bergman assumes this conception of the individual.

In any case, apart from the pertinence of citing the preface to *Ett drömspel*, we can suppose that Bergman wanted to explicitly refer to Strindberg in *Fanny and Alexander* with a declaration of love for theatre that is not far removed from the autobiographical dimension of the film: theatre is inseparable

from Bergman's life, an art that he never gave up even if he also worked in cinema. In fact, theatre is contained in his films. Therefore, Strindberg had to be present in them, and he directed eleven productions of his plays in the theatre, some more than once: he put on four productions of *The Ghost Sonata* and *A Dream Play*; three of *Miss Julie*, *The Pelican* and *Playing with Fire*; and two of *The Tempest* that, as in the case of *A Dream Play*, he also adapted for television. However, in addition, Strindberg, who he began reading when he was a teenager, accompanied him throughout his life. He said it himself, adding: "I have loved him, hated him and thrown his books at the wall, but rid of him, I cannot get." In *The Magic Lantern*, Strindberg is the name with most references in the index. Bergman invokes him in relation to some of the theatre productions he put on of his plays and, perhaps even more, to reflect the significance of the playwright in his life. He even explains that reading Strindberg was almost his sole consolation in adolescence in which he was desperate because he could not help masturbating, with a strong feeling of guilt that he related to sickness. In another excerpt, which is wonderful, he explains that he had the impression that Strindberg bothered him to show him that he was upset. This is because, when he was rehearsing *The Dance of Death*, the police came to arrest him, which, he says, without mentioning it then, was related to the accusation of tax evasion which took him to exile in Germany. Let's continue: when he was about to direct the same play, the actor Anders Ek fell seriously ill; when he was rehearsing *A Dream Play* in Munich, the actor who had to play the Lawyer went mad; similarly, in Germany he was working on a production of *Miss Julie* and the actress also went insane; when he was planning to direct the same play in Stockholm, the actress playing Julie became pregnant; in 1986, when beginning the preparation for a production of *A Dream Play* at the Dramaten, the set designer fell into a depression because his lover had left him; the Daughter of Indra (Lena Olin) got pregnant and Bergman himself suffered a mysterious infection, along with intestinal problems and diarrhoeas that always embittered him. Bergman argues that so many disasters could not be coincidental and states: "For some reason, Strindberg did not want me. The idea saddened me, for I love him." The best, however, comes immediately after, when he says casually that one night Strindberg called him and they met in Karlavägen, an esplanade in the centre of Stockholm: "I was jittery and deferential, but remembered how to pronounce his name properly: 'Agust'. He was friendly, almost cordial. He had seen *A Dream Play* at the Small Stage [of the Dramaten], but he made no reference to my affectionate parody of Fingal's cave." The story goes on: "The day after I realised that, when you deal with Strindberg, you have to expect periods of misfortune, but this time the misunderstanding had been clarified." And the final consideration: "I explain all this as an amusing story, although it is true that, deep into my childish mood, I don't consider this story funny at all. Ghosts, demons and other nameless beings without a homeland have surrounded me since I was a child." And this is how, as in one of his films, everything is part of the same story: what has been experienced and what has been dreamt, the real and the fantastic, the living and the dead.

Ingmar Bergman published *The Magic Lantern* in 1987. One year earlier, he had directed *A Dream Play* for the fourth time. This was at the Small Stage of the Dramaten in Stockholm, where he had returned. With the experience still recent, Bergman devotes around fifteen enthralling pages of his memoirs to it. He explains the "love" depression of the set designer; he acknowledges that he was not satisfied with the previous productions and that the TV versions had got entangled with technical disasters; he explains that he wanted to use the text without changes exactly as the playwright had written it, and translate the complicated stage directions into beautiful and technically feasible solutions: to make the audience smell the stink of the inner courtyard of the Lawyer's office; the icy beauty of the snowy landscape of Fagervik, the old theatre behind the theatre corridor. He evoked the personal circumstances of Strindberg when he wrote *A Dream Play* and imagined that his stormy relationship with Harriet Bosse and the pain he felt when she left him when feeling imprisoned inspired a more tolerant viewpoint towards humanity in specific parts of the play, like the scene in the Lawyer's house, which he considers the embodiment in a few minutes after the beginning of the disillusionment and failure of a married couple, an undoubtedly Bergmanian issue, as I will comment on later. He notes the high points of the play but also the lows, and the fact that, when the Daughter of Indra takes the Poet to Fingal's cave, beautiful verses are enchained with others of very low quality: the most horrible and the most beautiful grow attached to each other. He recalled how the rehearsals began and, rereading his work notes, that he felt low and grumpy because his right hip hurt and he had stomach upset. He explains that Lena Olin, the Daughter of Indra, told him that she was pregnant and that, therefore, she could only perform a short season. He relives his disappointment when the play is rehearsed for the first time. He remembers a talk with Erland Josephson in which they recall that, faced with the death of his wife and two of his sons, Johann Sebastian Bach had written in his diary: "Dear Lord, may my joy not leave me"; because Bergman felt he was losing it completely. He does not forget the mysterious infection that had given him a very high temperature for ten days and the opportunity he had of leaving the production; and that, once recovered, he saw how his worst fears motivated by the first complete rehearsal were confirmed. He describes his doubts about doing theatre, and the feeling of getting obsessed with the direction of a play while the world is collapsing and Olof Palme has been assassinated: "How should we behave in our confusion? Should we cancel the rehearsal? Let's abandon *A Dream Play* for ever. One can't put on a play about someone going round, preaching that 'it isn't easy to be a human being.' An unendurably out-of-date artistic product, perhaps dead." However, Bergman explains, an actress told him that Palme's assassin wanted chaos and they had to rehearse to avoid falling into it; and this is how, Bergman goes on remembering, *A Dream Play* gradually became a production while he could not sleep and wondered where the basic error lay, and ventured that perhaps it lay in the text itself and, therefore, in the rupture between genial inspiration and redemptive attitude, bitter beauty and sweetened chatter. He recalled the feeling that the production would be inadequate, but

also the sensation of tenderness after the final general rehearsal towards all those who participated in it and the conversation he had on *The Conductor*, the film by Andrezj Wajda, who argues that it is not possible to make music without love. This made them agree that, in fact, it is not possible to make theatre without love, but that then it is not alive, it does not breathe. Finally, he acknowledges that, after the premiere, for the first time in his professional life he felt afflicted for over 48 hours by failure, and he points out: "Usually one could console oneself with full houses. The attendance at the Small Stage's forty performances was not bad but insufficient. So much effort, pain, anxiety, tedium, hope, all to no avail." Certainly, but, was everything useless?

In 1984, two years before beginning the last production of *A Dream Play*, Ingmar Bergman directed *Efter repetitionen* (After the Rehearsal), the first of his TV films he made after giving up cinema, as he himself said, with *Fanny and Alexander*, directed in 1982. I always hope that this film does not end and I regret never seeing how Helene and Emilie perform *A Dream Play*, which the former starts to read wearing a grey shawl that recalls the one that the Daughter of Indra borrows from the Caretaker because she wants to understand humans and find out whether life is as harsh as they say. The thread that is not unravelled in *Fanny and Alexander* is resumed in *After the Rehearsal*, where we do not attend the performance of *A Dream Play* but a reflection on theatre that involves this play and the relationships established between directors and actors – particularly with actresses – bearing in mind, moreover, that Bergman was the lover of some of those with whom he worked and also became creative subjects of the plays, as we can see in so many films in which he enjoyed the talent of Bibi Andersson, Harriet Andersson, Ingrid Thulin and Liv Ullmann, among others. The whole dramatic action of this film is set on a theatre stage and starts significantly with the director asleep, with his head leaning on his work table, while, with the pretext of finding a chain, the actress enters who, as we will find out shortly, plays the Daughter of Indra. Is everything a dream? Or close to a dream? It seems clear that this director is an alter ego of Bergman himself played by Erland Josephson, an actor who, from *Scenes from a Marriage* to *Sarabande*, embodied characters on which somehow their creator is projected. The actress chosen for the Daughter of Indra is played by Lena Olin, the same one who was pregnant during the fourth theatre production of *A Dream Play*, as if life imitates fiction because, as those who have seen *After the Rehearsal* know, Anna Ergman, the name of the character, tells the director that she is pregnant, although in this case she tells him that she has had an abortion, although there is a crack that invites us to doubt that everything she says is true. The director is called Henrik Vogler, a surname that Bergman often used: Max Von Sydow, in *The Magician*, is Albert Emmanuel Vogler, who leads a group of actors specialised in magic tricks; Liv Ullmann is Elizabeth Vogler, the actress who lost her voice in *Persona*. Actors, magicians, swindlers, mediums who travel to a concealed, invisible, obscure reality. The truth is that, very soon, Henrik Vogler tells Anna Ergman that at his age, suddenly, his head is in another reality: the dead are no longer dead, the living seem like ghosts, what was evident one moment ago becomes impenetrable. Vogler says that, like Bergman, he has directed *A Dream Play*

on several occasions and we can suppose has also directed *The Ghost Sonata*, where the dead are no longer dead and the living seem like ghosts. Next, he asks Anna to listen to the silence of the stage and to imagine the spiritual energy concentrated there. Bergman speaks through Henrik Vogler/Erland Josephson when he invokes the real and pretended feelings he has embodied: "They all remain here. Enclosed. Living a secret life. Sometimes I hear them. Demons, angels, ghosts. Common people dealing with their lives. Sometimes I talk to them, casually, briefly." Then they speak of Anna's dead mother, who was also an actress, who was the lover of the director and who, later, will appear embodied in Ingrid Thulin in that way in which ghosts coexist with the living in Bergman's films and Strindberg's ghost sonatas.

Anna Ergman asks the director why he has chosen her to play the Daughter of Indra. Because of her talent. He saw her in a play and in a bad film, but her presence made him want to direct *A Dream Play* again. And this is how he recalls the first time he saw the play. He was only twelve, the same age that Bergman began reading Strindberg. In fact, he saw it many times on the same stage where they are now and where he was taken by a musician who played the organ. Vogler remembers: "Night after night, hidden in the proscenium tower, I witnessed the marriage scene between the Lawyer and the Daughter of Indra. It was the first time I experienced the magic of acting." Then, the director portrays the moment when the Lawyer tells the Officer about a hairpin: "There are two tips, but one hairpin. Two and, yet, one. If I extend it, it is a single entity. If I twist it, there are two but still one. But if I break it, then, there are two." Vogler says that there was not any hairpin, but that he saw it, just as Erland Josephson made the audience see it. And he states: "Everything began here. I was there, squatting, between two beams of light and a thunder clap." Then, in the image, Bertil Guve appears characterised as the child Alexander, so that a play of mirrors is established: the embodiment of the child Henrik Vogler corresponds to the infantile alter ego of Ingmar Bergman in *Fanny and Alexander*. Apart from this, it is significant that the director, and with him Bergman, refers to the scene of the marriage between the Lawyer and the Daughter of Indra. The marriage takes place with a desire for happiness that is frustrated. In fact the hairpin, which finally breaks, symbolises the rupture and comes after the Lawyer and the Daughter of Indra have realised their irreconcilable differences that Strindberg sets out through the domestic conflicts that emerge with living together. He cannot stand her lack of order, and she hates his dirtiness. Neither do they share food tastes: she hates the cabbage he likes; and he does not want fish, which she likes. The conciliation may only seem apparent, because one of them has to give up, to sacrifice, and hatred would become inevitable. The Lawyer says: "A life of common suffering, then! One's pleasure, the other one's pain." And Agnes, the Daughter of Indra, resumes her mantra: "Men are to be pitied!" Let's recall that in the passage of *The Magic Lantern* in which he explains the vicissitudes of his fourth production of *A Dream Play* and reflections on the play, Bergman says that Strindberg depicts in a few minutes, through the Lawyer and the Daughter of Indra, the beginning, the disillusionment and the failure of a married couple. If we also think of *The*

Dance of Death, which Bergman, of course, also directed, and the cul-de-sac in which a retired actress and a frustrated military man find themselves, it is possible to deduce that Strindberg's mark on Bergman's films is present in so many scenes where marriage has become a hell, an accumulation of misunderstandings, a failure made of lies, social representations, tedium, pain, infidelities and revenges. As is known, Strindberg is supposed to have been inspired by his own matrimonial failures and torments. As he himself acknowledged and explained, Bergman drew on his own cheating and infidelities to construct the disagreements and ruptures of his fictional marriages. Also by the bad relationship of his parents, as he revealed in the scripts of the films *The Best Intentions*, directed by Bille August, and *Private Confessions*, directed by Liv Ullmann, who also brought to film another script by Bergman, *Infidel*, quite an explicit title for a film evoking an adulterous relationship marked by guilt, possession, jealousy and lies. And yet it seems that, in the final days of his life, he achieved matrimonial joy with Ingrid von Rossen, who died twelve years before the director, and he always missed.

Henrik Vogler and Anna Bergman, establishing a play of seduction with which he does not engage because he is aware that he is getting old, continue to talk about theatre and Strindberg. However, I leave them to deal with another mark. There is also unease in the marriage of Elizabeth Vogler, the actress who, by losing her voice in a performance of *Persona*, is looked after by a nurse, Alma (Bibi Andersson), during convalescence on the island of Fårö, where Bergman retired at the end of his life. Elizabeth and Alma, like the two sides of a single person in a play of splits, of seduction, love, hatred and vampirisation. Everything occurs in an uncertain way between reality and dream, between what has been experienced and what has been imagined. They are characters who wear a mask, aware that they are performing roles, such in *The Ghost Sonata*. One, Alma, speaks. The other remains silent, making silence a choice, given that medical advice is against speaking. And therefore it is impossible not to think of *The Stronger*, where there are two actresses: one speaks, Mrs. X, and the other does not, Miss. Y. And, just like Alma (whose blood Elizabeth eventually sucks) can hear, Miss X believes that, when she was listening to her quietly sitting, Miss. Y sucked her thoughts. Moreover, in Elizabeth's behaviour, is there the awareness that language is a trap, a mask, "an invented code that conceals secrets," as Hummel says in *The Ghost Sonata*? Does language not necessarily communicate, as the characters of *The Silence* feel through the evidence of a foreign language? Neither are these issues alien to Strindberg. Does Elisabeth Vogler, in any case, choose silence because words lie? Is the person who remains silent more honest than the one who speaks? Bergman himself felt tempted by silence: not to speak in public, no to grant interviews, not to encourage chatter. However, he also realised that silence is, at the same time, a kind of mask and the assumption of a role.

There would be other elements, sometimes details, to be considered on Strindberg's marks on Bergman, such as the fact that he conceived many of his films as "chamber cinema" in the guise of the playwright's "intimate theatre" and chamber pieces. Or also, bearing in mind chamber music, the fact

that just as Strindberg structured *The Ghost Sonata* as a sonata, Bergman did something similar in *Autumn Sonata*, which he had considered calling *Sonata for Two Women* given that in it he dramatised the ferocious confrontation between a mother piano player and her daughter. Egil Törvquist, professor of Literature who has studied Bergman and the Nordic playwrights, has examined many details, such as the fact that both the Young Lady of *The Ghost Sonata*, and Agnes of *Cries and Whispers*, suffer from cancer surrounded by deception and falsehood, or that the two most modest characters of the two plays are the most decent and altruistic: the Milkmaid of *The Ghost Sonata* and the maid who looks after Agnes in *Cries and Whispers*.

To end, however, I will return to the preface to *A Dream Play* to comment on a pending issue or rather suggest a reflection that I suppose interminable on Bergman's attitude as a creator/narrator in relation to Strindberg. After arguing that the characters split, multiply, vanish, solidify, the playwright adds that, above them, there is an awareness, that of a dreamer: "But one consciousness reigns above them all, that of the dreamer; and before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws. There is neither judgment nor exoneration, but merely narration." Perhaps, as Bergman stated, Strindberg's pain, abandoned by Harriet Bosse, caused an air of compassionate melancholy to permeate the gaze of the characters in *A Dream*, who represent humanity incapable of feeling happiness and doomed to grief. In fact, Strindberg was generally relentless with humans, and especially with women, given his misogyny, which, by the way, I don't think left much of a mark on Bergman; but one must not only speak of misogyny but, in fact, of a misanthropy that led him to a negative view of human beings imbued with fatalism: as if humans were destined to be radically wrong, and also to an unhappiness that, in the end, opens the door to compassion. Bergman's creatures, almost always mistaken, do not seem much happier than Strindberg's. It remains, however, to think about Bergman's position with respect to his characters. Is he the dreamer, the storyteller, with a consciousness that flies over the characters? Is there something in his attitude that suggests he neither condemns nor acquits, but that he is above them? When the Daughter of Indra bids farewell to the Poet (one of Strindberg's self-representations or projections, as are the Lawyer and the Officer) she says to him: "And now farewell, thou dreaming child of man, / Thou singer, who alone knows how to live! / When from thy winged flight above the earth / At times thou sweepest downward to the dust, / It is to touch it only, not to stay!" Certainly, Bergman's gaze has been spoken of as if it were flying over the world, approaching it without being trapped in it, to provide a relentless mirror: as if he paradoxically arrived at a radical humanism based on not being at all condescending to humans and rejecting any sentimentality. However, I have always felt that Bergman's critical view is not free of self-criticism, as is perhaps also the case with Strindberg, and that for this reason he is not above the characters but, in some way, at their side. That the fact of portraying himself without self-indulgence means that, unlike other current filmmakers of cruelty who look at their characters from above, as if judging and despising humanity through them as if he were alien to them, we have the feeling that

Bergman is with the characters in his films, among them. I don't assert this. It is an impression made into an idea without being conclusive and to keep thinking about. Be that as it may, I have tried to reflect on Strindberg's marks on Bergman bearing in mind what has been said about Dreyer in relation to the painter Hammershoi: that he was not merely influenced by him, but in a way he was his successor. And this is how, through theatre, Bergman was the successor to Strindberg, exploring cinema as a world close to dreams.

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