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Gender and Creativity in Ingmar Bergman's *Det sjunde inseglet* and *Fanny och Alexander*

The interplay between gender and creativity is an important aspect of Bergman's perception of his own creative endeavor. In an American article he is quoted as saying: "I am very much aware of my own double self. The well-known one is very much under control; everything is planned and very secure. The unknown one can be very unpleasant. I think this side is responsible for all the creative work - he is in touch with the child. He is not rational, he is impulsive and extremely emotional. Perhaps it is not even a "he," but a "she"."¹ Creativity, then, in Bergman's view, would seem, provisionally, to be aligned with the female. Since Bergman consistently depicts creativity through mental event, vision sequences, a consideration of the visions of the artist surrogates in his films can illuminate the relationship between gender and creativity in his work. *Det sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* and *Fanny och Alexander/Fanny and Alexander* are paradigmatic in this respect; spanning a twenty-five year period in his production and certainly very different films, they nonetheless present strikingly similar conceptions of the relationship between gender and creativity.

The apocalyptic choral music and the reading from Revelations that open *Det sjunde inseglet* immediately establish a connection between God and destruction. Accordingly, the film represents the Knight's vision of Death as a construct of the religious patriarchy. The binary coloration of the

¹ Kakutani (1983), p. 28.

Death figure and the dissolve in the first sequence from the geometrically exact patterns of the chessboard to the plastic, asymmetrical surface of the sea suggest the divine patriarchy's imposition of hierarchy upon an amorphous reality, as does the dissolve to a rocky shore with a grey and desolate sky occupying fully two-thirds of the frame. For this film about God, males, and patriarchal authority questions the benevolence, the "rightness" of that authority (it is, of course, his belief in God that has so completely debilitated Block), even as the nature shots indicate how that authority, like one of William Blake's malevolent skygods, has rendered nature itself hostile, and the dissolves establish that authority as all-pervasive. But, while Bergman posits God-based male authority as, ironically enough, causing the "fall," corrupting and infecting reality, he also undermines it, robbing, through a variety of camera techniques, even the figure of Death of the awesome force one might expect him to wield.

While the Knight's imaginative vision is of Death and a hostile God, male in all its parameters, Jof, whom Bergman calls a visionary ("en andeskådare"), has a vision of life, fecundity, and faith constructed around female values. His first vision is of the Virgin Mary teaching the baby Jesus to walk, an image that is literally iconized. But we note that in this holy family the father is absent. Given the malevolence of the father in Bergman's work, a functional family almost seems to require the absence of the father. We notice, then, that while the father is powerfully, palpably absent, a figure of simultaneous fear and longing for reconciliation, the mother is the stereotypical source of self-abnegation, blessing, joy, and connection, values represented in the film by Mia.

But Jof's final vision of the dance of death recoups him for the male forces of the film. Although consistently associated with Mia and the traditionally female forces she embodies, with the simple, joyous belief in natural good, Jof for Bergman must still be aligned with the Father. Thus, his final vision resembles the Knight's vision of Death in terms of coloration (both are rendered in stark black and white), composition (nature is represented in strong diagonals), subject matter (both are, of course, a visualization of death), and ideology (both portray the destructive power of patriarchal religion). Jof shares, then, with Block an insight into the debilitating legacy of father. This represents one of the earliest

examples in Bergman's production of consciousness mergence, a strategy of disjunction that disrupts the androcentric notion of fixed, immutable subjectivity. Finally *Det sjunde inseglet* is ambiguous: while the female is idealized as a creative and generative force, authority and agency are still located in the patriarchy. Jof's final vision of the dance of death sequence, an act of creative imagination, is rendered as a conflation of male and female values, but the conflation is self-contradictory since the imagination for Bergman seems to require the rejection of male values and ideology.

Not surprisingly, the last acts of creative imagining that Bergman enscreens in his career also center on the family. In *Fanny och Alexander*, Bergman returns to a fantasy of the failings of the father, of his desertion of the male child, and of the destructiveness that is his legacy, even as the film also centers on an equation between the maternal and an empowering creative force, a force that protects, redeems, and allows the male child access to a creative and loving supernatural. Much of the film takes place in the grandmother's apartment, a replica of Bergman's own grandmother's residence in Uppsala where he was so happy as a child, a place that he furthermore associates with "trygghet och magi".² The magic lantern, the iron stove in the hallway, the lame servant Maj, Uncle Carl, and the Esmeralda story are all part of Bergman's personal history³ (and all indicate the extent to which this film is an attempt to come to terms with childhood and the family and the relationship of creativity thereto).

In the film, Alexander, who clearly is a budding artist to judge from his play with the toy theater and the magic lantern, has fully six visions--one of the statue whose arm moves, three of his dead father, one of the death of Elsa and the Bishop, and finally another of the ghost of the Bishop at the end of the film. Like Jof, Alexander is, Bergman says, a visionary, and he goes on to claim "Jof och Alexander är i sin tur släkt med barnet Bergman".⁴

Alexander's creative visions are nurtured and fostered by three people in his life--his grandmother, Uncle Isak, and the mysterious Ishmael.

² Bergman (1987), p. 26.

³ Bergman (1987), pp. 17, 21, 26, 27, 34.

⁴ Bergman (1990), p. 238.

Significantly his stepfather the Bishop strives violently to suppress these visions for he, as God's literal representative in the Christian hierarchy, is associated with the brutality of the patriarchy. It is in the apartment belonging to Helena, the benevolent loving matriarch associated with the arts, that Alexander has his vision of the statue and twice sees his dead father. Her home and her rule provide a safe place for family members, a place where all aberrations of behavior are tolerated, from Gustaf's philandering and Carl's financial irresponsibility to Alexander's precocious artistic visions. She provides a space of nurture, creativity, and love.

The film's first imaginative act occurs when Alexander stares at the statue and sees its arm move, a detail from Bergman's childhood. In the second he sees his dead father at the piano. But significantly, just before this, he has been engaged in projecting images with his magic lantern; the visualization of his father's ghost is directly linked to Alexander's incipient artistry because he creates through the projection of images. Alexander also sees his father at the wedding but the progress of his visions is, at this point in the film, interrupted by two other visions that do not derive from the boy's consciousness.

First, Helena sees Oscar's ghost and she proceeds to engage him in easy, everyday conversation. The fact that she shares Alexander's ability to project images (and specifically an image of Oscar) strengthens an already strong association between grandmother and grandson and foreshadows Alexander's merger with her at the end of the film.

Secondly, the scene in which Isak rescues the children from the Bishop's house also presents a consciousness of diegetic events that does not emanate from Alexander's consciousness. Here Bergman confuses the spectator: are the children in the chest Isak takes away, or are they on the nursery floor? "Isak's magic foils Vergerus' self-righteousness and faith in the absolute power of a Christian God, replacing it with a reality manipulable by desire and imagination--divinity's human form", as Bundtzen puts it.⁵ Isak's magical power, to which Alexander has access through Helena and the female, is stronger than the Bishop's; the matriarchy's allusive, imaginative supernatural is more powerful than the

⁵ Bundtzen (1987), p. 91.

patriarchy's destructive religious hierarchy. The mergence of fantasy and "reality" and the interjection of fantasy events that do not derive from the consciousness of the male protagonist join with the uninterpretability of events of this scene to disrupt binarism and monolithic male authority and to problematize the narrative and the mergence of spectator and spectacle. Alexander's last vision of his father occurs in Isak's shop, when he spies Oscar across a mistily lit, dusty room. This phantom brings two important messages: there is no God (or if there is, not even the dead have seen him) and the boy-artist "måste vara rädd om människor".⁶ Alexander upbraids Oscar for leaving them, a sentiment that is linked with his subsequent claim that if there is a God, he is "en skit, och piss, Gud."⁷ and with his equation between God and the illusory power of the huge puppets. Creative vision asserts the malevolent present absence of God.

Oscar is but one instance of what one might call the feminized father in Bergman's work, a patriarch who, like Jof, is aligned with feminine values. In both cases, the father is gentle and loving, devoted to his children but also totally ineffectual, powerless, having relinquished his control of the family to the mother. Bergman in his depiction of these men seems to allow only two possibilities for fatherhood: love and impotence or cruelty and potency. Indeed, throughout his production Bergman never relinquishes his binaristic conception of the father.

Unlike Edvard, Isak, in whose home Alexander has two of his visions, has magical powers and is a source of male authority located outside and in opposition to the Lutheran patriarchy. Aron's description indicates that his uncle is part of the cabalistic Jewish tradition, far removed, in Bergman's view, from the repressive patriarchy of Christian ideology. But Isak is also feminized; he is closely associated with Helena, who, as her maiden name indicates, may also be Jewish, and one suspects that Bergman in his portrait of him may be reinscribing the false stereotype of the "feminine" Jewish male. Thus, it is appropriate in Bergman's scheme of things that it should be Isak, the female-identified male and the adversary of the Christian patriarchy, who should save the children. It may be precisely because he

⁶ Bergman (1982), p. 192; Bergman (1983), p. 184.

⁷ Bergman (1982), p. 201; Bergman (1983), p. 195.

stands outside the Christian patriarchal framework that Bergman imbues him with so much more power than the female-centered males (and especially fathers) in the rest of his production.

But Alexander's most important vision is facilitated by Ishmael, a character played by an actress who wears "male" clothing and has a male name. Significantly the credits for the film do not indicate who plays what role; thus the viewer is even further hindered in his or her attempt to ascertain the sex of the actor. Ishmael is referred to by Aron as "min bror," and yet s/he speaks with a higher register, female voice. The verbal text of the film consistently refers to Ishmael as male, and yet the visual and aural evidence posit this person as female. Thus, the viewer is left with an impression of uncanny dual-genderedness, the "third sex" and "savage free things" that Sandra Gilbert locates in female modernist texts. Significantly too, as spectators we are deprived of the "view behind", according to which we would know this character's "true" gender and thus be able to locate him/her in the patriarchal hierarchy.

The identification process between Alexander and Ishmael is documented visually with a variety of techniques. Reverse close-ups of each of them give way to a shot of a table in the center of the frame flanked by half of Alexander's body at the left and half of Ishmael's on the right. In tandem they move toward the center and seat themselves at the table where Ishmael asks the boy to write his own name. After he has done so, Ishmael instructs him to read it, and the boy discovers that he has written not his own name but Ishmael's. That he has done so unconsciously is evident from the fact that he stumbles over the pronunciation of the last name. This identity mergence is made explicit when Ishmael says, "Kanske är vi samma person; kanske har vi inga gränser; kanske flyter vi genom varandra, strömmar genom varandra obegränsat och storartat."

As the scene continues, Ishmael begins to read Alexander's thoughts "Du bär på förfärliga tankar. Du bär på en människas död." and, as the camera moves into a close-up on Ishmael's face next to Alexander's ear, his/her voice recounts what the boy is thinking. As Ishmael reads Alexander's mind and as the visions stored there are articulated and released, the editing accelerates with rapidly intercut images from the

bishop's home, images that will culminate in the evil stepfather's death. To quote Jacqueline Rose, "The uncertain sexual identity muddles the plane of the image so that the spectator does not know where he or she stands in relationship to the picture. A confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it a disturbance of the visual field".⁸

Uninterpretability and identity mergence are, then, associated with femaleness and gender amorphism and literally undercut patriarchal authority. Alexander, like Gilbert's male modernist protagonists, seems to need the experience of androgyny or gender amorphism in order to achieve full subjectivity at the same time that the ending of the film indicates that the "mastery" he achieves is aligned not with patriarchal but with female values.

But the film also suggests that non-genderedness and/or androgyny pose a serious threat to a society for which gender is all. Thus, Ishmael's room is a kind of prison; there are locks on both the doors and an iron gate just inside, and the windows are boarded up. This confined space speaks to society's fear of this person. It is no matter of happenstance that Aron's sibling is named Ishmael, for like his/her biblical predecessor, Ishmael has been exiled. The reference to the biblical Ishmael also includes the quote describing him as a "wild man," whose "hand" will be against every man's hand, yet the only violence this character seems capable of is that of compelling others toward self-awareness, a capability threatening enough to a society dedicated to the preservation of false gender dichotomies.

But Ishmael is more than a representation of the androgynous self; s/he is also a key figure in Alexander's artistic apprenticeship. For, in Bergman's view, society is as hostile to the artist as it is to the androgyne, since art and androgyny are linked in their implicit affirmation of the mutability of the human subject. Society, then, needs to shut away both so as to quiet the voice and obscure the visions. Thus, the 'wildness' of Ishmael's character is, in the Bible, linked to his illegitimacy. So too does the screenplay describe Alexander's mother as having been unfaithful to Oscar, intimating that Alexander is not Oscar's son at all. While this information is deleted from the film, it nonetheless suggests an ambiguity about the mother's

⁸ Rose (1986), p. 226.

sexual behavior. While Emilie, by marrying the Bishop, is responsible for the children's suffering, she also provides them with a model of rebellion against the patriarchy. Both Emilie and Helena are represented as unfaithful wives whose defiance of and refusal to obey male strictures on women's bodies enrich them and those around them. That these women are/were both actresses suggests again the complicity between creativity and a rejection of the patriarchy. Thus Bergman's emphasis on illegitimacy is primarily intended to portray the artist as outside the mainstream of society, as someone who threatens social convention. This interpretation is supported by Ishmael's statement, "Jag anses farlig. Därför är jag inlåst", and when asked why s/he is dangerous, Ishmael replies that s/he has "obekväma talanger"

Alexander is thus empowered by his mergence with this strange androgynous being to kill his tormentor and to learn the lesson of the potency of the creative imagination. Because Ishmael is androgynous, s/he is an embodiment of the transgression of male-female gender boundaries, and Alexander's mergence with him/her not only liberates him from the repressive patriarchy but also, because this mergence is represented as an act of the imaginative projection of images, suggests that sexual ambiguity empowers the artistic enterprise. There is a sense in which the voice-over of this sexually ambiguous being creates the images that lie latent in Alexander's mind; gender amorphism in this film is the site of creative and artistic authority.

Isak, Helena, and Ishmael are, then, all aligned with the female but also share a notion of fluid and mutable subjectivity that the film as a whole privileges. Emilie speaks to this vitalizing power of consciousness merging when she tells the bishop: "Min Gud är annorlunda, Edvard. Han är som jag själv, flytande och gränslös och ogripbar [...]. Min Gud bär tusen masker, han har aldrig visat mig sitt rätta ansikte liksom jag är oförmögen att visa dig eller Gud mitt rätta ansikte".⁹ By contrast, Edvard, aligned with patriarchal authority, claims, "Du påstod en gång att du byter mask oavbrutet, så att du slutligen inte visste vem du var. Jag har bara en enda mask. Den sitter fastbränd i mitt kött." Although Emilie's and Alexander's

⁹ Bergman (1983), p. 101.

experiences of the fluidity of the self are tortured and difficult, they are also somehow more authentic than the bishop's rigid patriarchal concept of human identity. Their depth and richness of experience, the mutability of their subjectivities, is juxtaposed in the strongest possible terms with the bishop's spiritual, emotional, and psychological atrophy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the conclusion of the film charts the emergence of a kind of matriarchy: Oscar and the Bishop are dead, the philandering Gustaf has been taken in hand, and Emilie and Helena are now in charge of the theater and of Alexander's life. The boy's final vision, in which the ghost of the Bishop knocks him to the floor and promises he will forever pursue him, is a reminder of the omnipresence and continuing legacy of the destructive patriarchy, but this image is overshadowed by the shot of Alexander with his head in his grandmother's lap, listening to her read the prologue to *Ett drömspel*: "Allt kan ske, allt är möjligt och sannolikt. Tid och rum existera icke; på en obetydlig verklighetsgrund spinner inbillningen ut och väver nya mönster".¹⁰ But if Helena had continued on in Strindberg's text, she would have read: "Personerna klyvas, fördubblas, dubbleras, dunsta av, förtätas, flyta ut, samlas".¹¹ This vision of the mutability of human identity reflects a view of reality implicit in Aron's earlier statement to Alexander: "Farbror Isak, han påstår att vi är omgivna av verkligheter, den ena utanför den andra. Han säger att det vimlar av vålnader, andar och spöken, själar och gengångare, änglar och djävlar," and both these statements are contrasted with the Bishop's rigid view of an immutable human reality, grounded in the destructive patriarchy to which he has dedicated his life. Instead, Isak's mystical, cabalistic reality and Helena's Strindberg-inspired vision of the multiplicity of human subjectivity prevail.

The maternal has displaced the father, and Alexander, as clear-cut a directorial alter ego as one can find in the cinema, is finally unified with the good mother, the mother whose emotive powers nourish his creativity, for this powerful matriarchy embodies the realm of imagination and fantasy. At the same time, Strindberg's authoritative aural presence—a presence that

¹⁰ Strindberg (1988), p. 7.

¹¹ Strindberg (1988), p. 7.

reflects the immense shadow he, as the “father” of modern drama and certainly the most important figure in Swedish literature, casts over Bergman’s entire artistic enterprise--suggests that Alexander, like Jof, must be realigned with the paternal, with the masculine symbolic order. Strindberg becomes here the good father, absent (as he must be in Bergman in order to be good) and aligned like Helena with creativity. Creativity is, then, for Bergman, an enactment of reconciliation with issues of family and childhood that both challenges and reifies the position of the subject within patriarchal structures.

Bergman, then, associates the creativity of the male with both nurturing maternal figures and gender amorphism. For Bergman, positive women are almost always nurturers, the embodiment of both the maternal and the generative creative force that inspires the artist. But Bergman has moved beyond his earlier film. While *Det sjunde inseglet* may present a binaristic vision with female values redeeming the harshness of a patriarchal world, in *Fanny och Alexander* Bergman, in a much more nuanced and multivalent way, expands that vision to suggest the connection between a breakdown of gender categories and an open, fluid consciousness and to posit this connection as vital to the creative development of the artist

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