

¶ Marilyn Johns Blackwell, *Gender and Representation in the Films of Ingmar Bergman* [Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture, eds. George C. Schoolfield and Robert E. Bjork], Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997, 231 pp. ISBN 1-57113-094-2.

It is hardly big news to state that women take a prominent place in Ingmar Bergman's films or that their central position has contributed to his international fame. As early as in the 1950s French critics spoke of Bergman's "unique understanding of the female psyche."

When Bergman in the following decennia created memorable female characters for actresses like Ingrid Thulin, Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann, even those who took a critical attitude of his films had to admit that he allowed his female characters an existential concern until then largely reserved for the male sex.

In view of this, Bergman's films ought to be *gefundenes Fressen*, one would assume, for a feministically oriented discourse. To some extent this has also been the case, although Swedish critics have remained less alert in this area than their foreign colleagues.

With the breakthrough of intellectual feminism in the 1970s the interest in Bergman's portrayal of women was reawakened, especially in the United States. Although much of what was written in this period is still valid, the terminology has often proved problematic. Thus concepts like 'female role' and 'role model' have often, implicitly, resulted in a demand for realism and recognizability. Female spectators have been supposed to identify themselves with the female characters in the films. We must therefore be thankful to Marilyn Johns Blackwell for providing a more comprehensive picture of the subject in her new Bergman book. Theoretically, she goes beyond early feminist film criticism with its simplified concept of the female role in her discussion of how gender specific subjects are construed in patriarchal discourses.

The book consists of a number of close examinations of films considered representative for Bergman's work as a whole which, in Blackwell's view, is one huge project aimed at cultural criticism. Mirroring a crisis in Western culture, the various films can be seen as stories of loss or 'elegies' on a toppled patriarchy. Such stories she finds in religiously colored films like *The Seventh Seal*, to which she devotes a whole chapter. Although the film is ambivalent in its gender perspective, it reveals the value system of a patriarchal society by focusing on God's silence, on His "absent presence."

Blackwell especially emphasizes Gunnel Lindblom's role as the mute,

observing servant girl in the film, often disregarded by the critics although her part becomes crucial toward the end. With her silent presence, she becomes a female antithesis of the film's protagonist, the intellectual, verbalized Antonius Block who, far from being a mouth piece for the director, monomaniacally communicates with his God rather than with his fellow creatures. The servant girl's silence is not, Blackwell finds, a sign of submission. It contains a subversive potential in a film which examines the relationship between language and silence.

The presentation of the body in the films Blackwell connects with the theatrical role-playing - a frequent theme with Bergman - as well as with cross-dressing and explicit homo-eroticism. Four films from as many decennia are analyzed in this context. Thus in *The Magician*, Ingrid Thulin appears in the male-female role of Aman/Manda. In *The Silence*, pre-puberty Johan tries out different gender roles. And in *Fanny and Alexander*, the enigmatic Ishmael represents, as it were, a third sex.

In *The Silence*, little Johan is a navigator in an unsurveyable world, a world in which the grown-ups have been fixed in their (gender) roles, whereas the boy, still in a playful state of becoming, is not yet 'ready.' He is a border creature beyond the film's charged males and females. As a result he becomes, in Blackwell's view, the focus of the film's questioning of gender relations. This is a view that gains in credibility when compared to the fact that the whole of Bergman's *oeuvre* is devoted to the constitution and construction of human subjectivity, a subjectivity oscillating between the poles of masculinity and femininity.

Such a gender transcendence concerns not only Bergman's characters. It affects also the narrative aspects - as Blackwell demonstrates with regard to the films of the 1960s, especially *Persona*, where Bergman abstains from conventional, linear narration. In *Persona* the narrative openness, Blackwell argues, coincides with an ideological one, since it formally challenges the relationship between the spectator and the (film) text, thereby undermining the male point of view that characterizes conventional linear narration.

Sharing Laura Mulvey's well-known view about the male gaze, Blackwell's ideas are to a great extent based on the so-called gaze theory. Gaze theorists have in the last decennia studied how narration and camera work in films often promote gender-bound perspectives. Here one could

criticize Blackwell for not problematizing sufficiently feminist film theory which by her is more or less equated with gaze theory. As a result, she does not question the explicit or implicit consequences that an unreflecting acceptance of such a theory brings about with regard to, for example, concepts like 'male point of view,' 'identification,' or passive, 'posited spectator' - concepts which have been much debated in recent years within film theory in general and feminist film theory in particular.

Despite this lacuna, Blackwell's book is paradoxically urgent, partly because it illuminates hitherto barely visible and often disregarded aspects of Bergman's films, partly because her book with its so to speak built-in retardation constitutes a necessary in-between step on the way to further research in this area.

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