

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY:
A NOTE ON BERGMAN'S CLASSICISM

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Ingmar Bergman was an actor and director in the theater long before he made films: he fell in love with the stage when he was five years old after being taken to his first play; he created a toy theater under a table in his playroom at the age of nine (cf. *Fanny and Alexander*, 1982), and throughout his career he would return, at regular intervals, to this first love, usually as director. This love of theater often informs his films, as we can see in a particularly clear, instructive instance in *Through A Glass Darkly* (1961), a film that derives, at least in its formal elements and structure, from classic Greek tragedy.

There are, first of all, the unities of time, place, and action. The film begins on one evening and ends the next. It takes place in one setting (a seaside vacation spot), and centers on a single action: the mental breakdown of a young woman. In addition, as in fully-developed Greek tragedy, there are four characters, including the tragic protagonist and the Chorus.

Just as the young woman, the tragic protagonist, transcends the limits of ordinary experience—is larger than life by virtue of the extreme nature of her condition (madness) and by the fact that she alone, in the drama, moves (quite literally) beyond the ordinary world—just so does the father, as Chorus (participant *and* observor), move between two worlds. He is brought to his agony by the fact of his daughter's incurable disease, yet he is also so fascinated by it—so *outside* it—that he intends to study it for the purposes of art. Then, too, when his daughter, her husband, and her son put on a play, the father, like us, *observes* it. He does not—by his nature *can* not—participate fully in the action.

The play that the three characters perform for the father calls further attention to the movie's formal elements. This play-within-the-play, wherein the young woman asks her brother to join her behind the door—to enter her strange, mysterious, and dangerous world—is, in intent and fact, a microcosm of the film itself. For the brother, discretion becomes the better part of valor: he refuses to enter his sister's world, and couches his refusal in comic terms. In the rest of the film, the father is witness to the daughter's acting out in her actual life the play she has invented for him in her staged imaginings, an acting out that takes her deeper *into* her world of fantasy. But if the play she performs for him is, at the time, comic, her actions,

alas, are tragic. The comic nature of the play she has invented only serves to accentuate this for us, and so our attention is directed not to the way in which art imitates life, but to the way in which life (experience) imitates art (fantasy).

We discover early on in the play that the young woman's condition is incurable, and this reminds us rather directly of the Greek notion of Fate, and of a Fate that is--inevitably, always--tragic. In this instance the psychiatrist assumes the role played in Greek tragedy by the Delphic Oracle, and our story makes the essential point: that there can be no avoidance of Fate: the young woman cannot alter her fate, though she can, by the way in which she deals with it, create consequences, good or evil, for those affected *by* her condition. Moreover, this condition—her madness—is reminiscent of the madness that often besets protagonists of Greek tragedy: the daughter is, in a most literal way, driven by Furies over which she has no control—Furies that drive her, inexorably, to her final madness, crisis, and death.

There is also this: afflicted with a literal madness that makes her capable of both good and evil, she has much in common with Greek forebears: e.g., Oedipus, Electra, Philoctetes. She tempts her brother, for example, to journey from his world to hers by seducing him, yet once she has done this, and once she has emerged from her crisis, she, like other tragic heroes, sacrifices her life so that her family may live on in peace. She is gone, but the family—the worldly order of things—is restored.

She gives to her family, however, more than mere relief and peace. By her sacrifice (compare her departure in the helicopter to the *deus ex machinae* endings--dragons, chariots—in, for example, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Medea*), she brings her brother and father together. Although her own illness manifests itself in her fear of creating life, the implication is that her act of love has freed the creative energies of those she has left behind.

“Papa spoke to me,” the son says at the film's end—an intimation of optimism, of a sense that life *will* now go on. And we have also, by this point, seen the various ways in which love binds our characters to one another—father-son, father-daughter, brother-sister, father-son-in-law, husband-wife—while at the same time we are made acutely aware of love's capacity for both destruction and creation. And we are also left, as in Greek (and Shakespearean) tragedy, with a sense that the price we pay for the recreation of order within the family is the life (and death) of the protagonist. But until this happens—until things can be put back in order, or into a new order—our pity and fear have been elicited: for although we may know from the start that the deterioration of the daughter's mind (and life) is inevitable, still, like the father, we are compelled, and with anxious anticipa-

tion, to witness the way in which this deterioration occurs.

Thus, when the daughter goes off into the sky, taken by helicopter to an institution and thereby removed from the “real” world, we look through the father’s window at the sea and recall the film’s opening scene: the four characters coming toward the shore at evening, their hands touching, their voices full of laughter. The setting is the same, but now the four are separated—isolated from one another: the father is alone in his room; the son is running along the shore; the husband is in a hotel in town; the girl is in the air—*nowhere*—and will soon be in an asylum for the mad. The separation is painful, but it seems the price that must be paid, our fable suggests, if the world is to be born again.

By using classical elements of Greek tragedy, what Bergman does is to *formalize* the world (and his story) for us, providing a familiar structure within which we can consider the ordinary chaos of life. He has us look at the world from a distance—the distance that these classical elements set between the natural world of the drama and the actual world of the audience, and he works on our capacities for pity and fear by moving us back and forth between detached (classical) observation and felt (naturalistic) participation. And all the while he is organizing—formalizing—the world *we* live in by the use of such classical elements, he is rendering its greatest horrors: incest, insanity, death. And also, it would seem, its frail and ever-present hope: love.