

I

Introduction: The Geography of the Soul

Bergman describes the theme of his early 1960s film trilogy as “a ‘reduction’ – in the metaphysical sense of the word.”¹ In the classical conception, a metaphysics was a fundamental examination of all being at its most elemental level, yielding lists of the most basic kinds of thing and of the principles that governed them through change and motion, an ontology that displayed the true structure of the world. These elements were arrived at by stripping away everything that was inessential and thereby reducing the great variety and lushness of creation to its skeleton. It was not that this detail and particularity was worthless or insignificant, but rather that its nature and meaning depended on these deeper elements, which both gave it form and direction and set its limitations. Only if these could be articulated and understood could their filled-out appearances also be comprehended.

Bergman’s subject is not being as such but the moral world – ourselves as human beings in the twentieth century: what is deepest and most true and essential about us, and what meaning we can find for our lives in the face of this truth. His goal is an essential portrait, an image of human being with its heart exposed and beating, a picture of what we each look like without our protective illusions, evasions, and lies. Such reduction to essentials provides a mirror in which we can see ourselves as we truly are, face to face.

This essential portrait, however, must show not just what we may be now at this particular moment or in this particular situation but also what we have failed to be and might yet still become. Thus the trilogy, whose announced themes are certainty, doubt, and God’s silence,² focuses on only part of a more developed and detailed whole. To consider these moments of failure and despair alone is to miss something crucial: It is to

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place out of sight and thus make inaccessible the joy and nourishment that is equally possible and true of the world.

In this book, I put together an account of Bergman's whole picture in the form of what may be termed a "geography of the soul." Here, *geography* combines the idea of spiritual places and spiritual journey with the more literal sense of physical places and travel between them. Such a fusion of the literal and spiritual is directly suggested by Bergman himself. From his first pictures on, the character of the places in which his subjects and their stories are set is always significant and conveys in its physical features a representation of important elements of their spiritual struggles. What Bergman shows us throughout his films are landscapes in which the moral and the visual are fused into one representation – both something that film does best and the key to the specifically filmic in Bergman's art. What we are given in this new metaphysics is an elemental set of filmic images and places that, when woven into one composite picture, captures the rudiments for understanding who we are.

What, then, is this place that is the human condition? What does this moral landscape look and feel like, what are its most basic features and laws? Bergman's "reduction" reveals our lives as moral and spiritual beings to be constituted by six fundamental kinds of experience and their interrelationships. These occur throughout Bergman's films in many variations and combinations. Sometimes all are present, sometimes only a few. They are the seminal moments of **judgment, abandonment, passion, turning, shame, and vision**. Together they delineate the kind of journey life is and the kind of road it must travel. They are the "plot points" through which all of Bergman's stories develop, and they provide the framework for understanding Bergman's films and his achievement as artist and "filmic metaphysician."

I. Judgment

This notion of a metaphysical or moral reduction also, for Bergman, characterizes a central experience that individuals can have when their whole life stands before them as a question and they are judged with respect to its final worth. In biblical terms, it is as though one were before God awaiting final sentence. Indeed, Bergman uses this figure throughout his films. *The Seventh Seal* opens with a white sea bird³ hovering high in the sky as a chorus sings the foreboding "Dies irae, dies illa" from the Mass for the Dead. A voice reads from the Revelation of St. John the Divine, that is, the Apocalypse. In the world of the film, the "Four Horsemen"

of Hunger, War, Disease, and Death in fact ride the land. It is the time of tribulation and last judgment, the “day of wrath, that day . . . when the Judge shall come to try all things truly.”

In John’s vision this is the time of the final battle between God and Satan fought on the plain of Armageddon. The Book of Life will then be opened, and those whose names are not written within will be cast into the fiery lake with the Devil and Death, to be tortured forever. But for those who have been faithful to Christ, there will be a new Heaven and a new earth. Time will come to an end with the marriage of the Lamb and His bride, those saints who have been saved and whose names are inscribed in the book. They will be united in a marriage feast in a new Jerusalem flowing with the water of life and nourished by the fruit of the tree of life.

As a time of crisis and final **judgment**, the biblical apocalypse is also a time of revelation (literally, of “uncovering” in the original Greek). The truth is necessary, and it is found by removing what hides it. All that is unnecessary is taken away and a person’s innermost nature revealed, ready to be seen and judged for what it really is. Indeed, at this point, uncovering the truth and being judged are the same:

Before we saw ourselves as through a glass darkly,
 But now, as we are – face to face.⁴

Our illusions are stripped away, and we stand naked before ourselves in an uncompromising mirror. God’s probing eye is replaced by our own, and all that remains is for us to acknowledge the verdict. This is the kind of “apocalypse” Bergman is concerned to explore in his films and the moment of judgment we all have to face.

This state of finding oneself judged (and condemned) can occur at any time, but because it confronts us most of all with our failures and limitations (that is, our sins, which we would like to keep hidden), it will be excruciating and a torment in its own right that we will avoid until it is forced upon us. Thus, in Bergman, this crisis is most typically precipitated by an encounter with our own mortality (represented literally by the figure of Death in the *Seventh Seal*, one of Bergman’s most famous images, and by Isak’s first dream in *Wild Strawberries*). Then, with our lives seemingly complete and thus our future gone, we can stand outside ourselves and see in a more objective fashion, from a viewpoint independent of our own concerns and manipulations [Fig. 1]. In facing our death, we are given the opportunity to look honestly at ourselves, in a clear and unfor-giving light, and see who we really are.

What we see with this new sight is not just that we have failed at our lives but that in this failure we are already dead: Life has somehow left us long ago, and we have continued with its motions – self-satisfied perhaps but secretly alone and empty – on the edge of loathing and despair. For Bergman, there are two deaths, and the true revelation (and despair) is of the first, the death of the spirit. This is the judgment about ourselves that we must comprehend and accept.

However, its sentence is not final. In Christian theology, one can absolve one's sins through sincere repentance even on one's deathbed; in Bergman's films, actual death is almost always postponed, and one is usually given back one's future.⁵ At this moment of judgment, our life as a *kind* of life with its own sense and meaning has been revealed. We see where it is going, how it will be if we continue on as before, and how it *might* be if we act differently. Unlike St. John's revelations, the writing in this book of life has not been completed. We still have a chance, the opportunity to become someone else, someone better. What we now do as a result of this reprieve will determine who we shall finally be when Death returns. And we may never have a "second" second chance.

This time of judgment is often signaled in Bergman's films by the tolling of clocks and the ticking of watches, as well as by images indicating changes in sight, such as mirrors, spectacles, and particularly dreams and visions. Bergman's apocalypses involve removing scales from the eyes of the soul so that its consciousness can change and a true sight be achieved. This change is like waking from a dream or being struck by an epiphany.

Though Bergman draws heavily upon imagery of terror and death in constructing the experience of apocalyptic judgment in his films, this crisis is not an end but a beginning. And it is this possibility of surviving and becoming renewed that underlies the process of self-examination so central to Bergman's films; without it, such self-confrontation would be pointless. What this new life might be and how it might come about we shall see shortly. But there are never any guarantees, and the hope that is present even at the time of judgment is always just that of something better being possible.

2. Abandonment and Our First Death

That one will die is not in itself a source of despair for Bergman, nor is one's mortality the source of inner death. Both of these are grounded in something else – **abandonment**. This experience of having been betrayed and left alone, of having what one relied on taken away or failing, shatters

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Figure 1. The moment of judgment. a. *The Seventh Seal*: confronting Death.
b. *Cries and Whispers*: confronting oneself – Karin and Anna.

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the security of the world, rendering its given verities remote and untrustworthy. These sources of security – other people, God, or even social institutions such as religion, medicine, the family, or art – are now revealed as inadequate. The love and faith placed in them has been misplaced, and one is left on one’s own with only oneself to rely on.

One might call the effect of this abandonment the “destruction of the transcendental.” The phrase is particularly appropriate to Bergman’s meditations on the eclipse and death of God, where meaning seemed grounded in something beyond this world.⁶ But in all cases, it is **that beyond oneself** that collapses, whether it is God, lover, or parent, or even the world itself (as has happened to Jonas in *Winter Light*). Beyond the self there is no longer anything reliable, and meaning in life, our sense of value and purpose, even our delight in being alive, are lost to grief, anger, disappointment, loneliness, hurt. Before, meaning was simply there; now, what we had seems forever irretrievable, we are thrown into despair, and our spirit dies.

As a result, the world becomes silent and the landscape like a desert. In Bergman’s films this spiritual starkness is often heightened by the black-and-white cinematography, while the settings themselves often encode its isolation and sense of inner barrenness. *Through a Glass Darkly* takes place on an island surrounded by a sea that blends into the sky, and *Winter Light* occurs at the beginning of winter when everything is gray and about to be surrounded by the snow, which will form a white void. In *The Silence*, the setting is no longer an actual island or one created by the weather, yet it comes to the same thing, for the film takes place for the most part in a train coach or hotel in a foreign country with unknown customs, ominous military activities in the streets, a curfew that enforces inactivity for large parts of the day, and an undeciphered language.

Similar landscapes occur throughout Bergman’s films. An island and rocky shore are the settings for *Persona*, *Shame*, and *Hour of the Wolf*, as well as *The Seventh Seal*, which begins and ends there as it travels through a land devastated by plague. Much of *Wild Strawberries* takes place within the confines of an automobile, and virtually all of *Cries and Whispers* occurs within the several chambers of a single house. Even when the set seems opened up, as in *Waiting Women*, which moves between Paris and Stockholm, events are often narrated from a confined space, here as recollections from a single living room in a summer house itself on an island. Abandonment shrinks the world and constricts one’s horizons to what is centered in oneself. Life can go on in such quarters, but it cannot flourish; it loses its pleasure and now must be endured or even suffered.

At its heart, this “destruction of the transcendental” is abandonment by other persons – their failure to love and be faithful, their failure to comfort, protect, support. This may be actual infidelity, where a husband, wife, or lover turns to another person (Isak in *Wild Strawberries*), or something more common, where one is left alone because another is inadequate and unable to give what is needed (Block’s wife Karin in *The Seventh Seal*, each of the women in *Waiting Women*). Occasionally, it is life itself that lets us down – a lover dies in a swimming accident (*Illicit Interlude*) or a father is taken by disease, a daughter by madness (Ester’s father in *The Silence*, Karin in *Through a Glass Darkly*).

Here one is betrayed by an adult, but one can also be abandoned by a parent. This may simply be a matter of early death (*Fanny and Alexander*) or the problem of a parent having to care for a child without the resources, or wisdom, or even interest to do so – the father in *Through a Glass Darkly*, the mother in *Persona*, Maria and Karin’s mother in *Cries and Whispers*. Abandoned children are in fact everywhere in Bergman’s films – from Berit as early as *Port of Call* to Henrik in *Smiles of a Summer Night* to the boy in *The Silence* and *Persona*, Maria in *Face to Face*, and Eva in *Autumn Sonata*. This kind of abandonment is perhaps the most destructive of all and the hardest to overcome. Turning away from a child is denying them the very possibility of nourishment, and they can hardly escape undamaged.

Even abandonment by God and the concomitant experiences of religious doubt and loss of faith are analyzed by Bergman as the failure of a person. Tomas in *Winter Light* cannot understand how God could allow the death of his wife. How can this be love by a God who is love, he asks? Such a person can only be a “spider god – a monster” who can neither be loved nor forgiven and hence cannot be believed in. Because He does not care, such a God “does not exist anymore.”⁷ Töre in *The Virgin Spring* must undergo a similar abandonment when his daughter is raped and murdered on her way to church with candles for the Holy Virgin. There are no justifying reasons for such deaths and the torture they bring, nothing God can say to excuse them. They leave us in a world that is cold, barren, without comfort or meaning. Something in us dies, and we are left to suffer.

3. Passion

We will be abandoned, our worlds will collapse, and then we will suffer. This will happen to each of us, and one can hardly remember a Bergman

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character who has escaped this fate. Indeed, one might think of Bergman's films as almost systematic explorations of such suffering, from the catastrophes of first love in *Illicit Interlude*, to the tortures of marriage in *Wild Strawberries* and *Scenes from a Marriage*, to the terrors of being alone in *The Silence* and of dying in *Cries and Whispers*.

In these depictions Bergman shows himself as the moral psychologist, the pathologist of the soul relentlessly probing its pain, a vivisectionist perhaps too fascinated with the throbbing of the raw nerves of life he has now exposed (a figure not unlike Alman in *Wild Strawberries*, whose examination of Isak is also a dissection). What he reveals is that our suffering does not cease with our initial hurt, humiliation, and loneliness but continues as these transform themselves into new, more general but now enduring and self-perpetuating emotions – into bitterness and spite, sensualism, vanity, and egotism. His almost obsessive focus on these dark times of the soul and their intricate psychology, and the fact that no one seems able to escape their taint, creates a powerful current of pessimism (or even cynicism) in his work, and many have taken this depiction of human relations to be the hallmark of a Bergman film.

Indeed we are like this. It is hard to say that we are ever free of these feelings and emotions and the preoccupation with the self they subtend. But their sense changes when seen as responses to abandonment and the destruction of the transcendental in our lives, and when they are located in the fuller picture that Bergman goes on to draw. For Bergman, this fundamental selfishness with which we must all struggle is much more a response to the abandonment that has befallen us than some innate and fatalistic force of human nature.

Abandonment does not just happen and then pass out of our lives, healing like a fever or cut. Such a deep spiritual wound requires a response not just to its particular cause but to the nature of our lives and the world itself. Thus for some, anger and feelings of injustice turn outward as spite and hatefulness. What has let us down – others, God, ultimately the world – is despicable; the denier of love is itself odious. We hate back and hurt those who have hurt us (as Karin does to her husband, Isak, in *Wild Strawberries*, or Ingeri to the knight's daughter in *The Virgin Spring*) or even take jealous delight in harming the innocent (like Charlotte in *Smiles of a Summer Night*). To strike back, to wound as one was wounded, however, brings little reward and no peace. One sees in these deeds one's own ugliness and inadequacy and so retreats further into self-loathing and a lonely, empty life.

Alternatively, having been abandoned and left alone, we try to fill the silence with distraction – with the sensualism of sex and one-night stands and affairs, for instance (like Anna in *The Silence* or Frans in *Naked Night*). Such promiscuity keeps life going, while the distance kept from others ensures that one is safe from another abandonment. It is this distance that is important, life without contact. This is what David's career as a writer is to him in *Through a Glass Darkly* – a life somewhere else with words and publishers that substitutes for trying to live with a “hopeless” wife and daughter. In these examples, intimacy is deflected, and one becomes preoccupied with something, almost anything, in order to avoid confronting any further the emptiness and loneliness into which one has been plunged.⁸

Perhaps the easiest response, the most normal looking, is to try to turn abandonment on its head and take seriously, as it were, one's independence – to be self-sufficient and to live wrapped up in oneself. This can vary from the prideful self-control of Agda in *Naked Night* to the more pompous, somewhat vain self-satisfaction of Fredrik in *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Such self-centeredness denies any real need for others and keeps human relations again impersonal – matters of business, of use and display, or perhaps dominance and mastery; others are simply parts of one's life, never anything themselves on their own. (Thus Fredrik's view of his young wife in *Smiles* is little different than the more blatant chauvinism of Carl-Magnus, who considers Charlotte and Desirée, his wife and mistress, as kinds of property and ornament.)

That these ways of suffering abandonment are also projects of deceit and flight from oneself suggests that even in daily life people are engaged in a form of theater in which they live through a facade or mask of their real self. This form of theatricality is grounded in the self-estrangement that often ensues from abandonment – the attempt to mask one's loneliness and emptiness by assuming another persona, by acting out a different life, even by pretending that everything is normal. But as a hiding, that face is someone else's, and one is trying to be what one is not – another person. In not being able to be oneself in what one is doing, however ordinary that might otherwise be, a person becomes a theatrical fiction and one's life, rather than being one's own and a genuine expression of self, becomes a performance, an imitation. Such imitation life can continue along smoothly enough, its foreignness put aside, forgotten in habit. But its theatricality remains, and sometimes it breaks through, plunging a person into a gap between who they are and cannot face and who they are

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not but must appear to be. This is what happens to Elisabet Vogler in *Persona*: She stops in the middle of her performance onstage, unable to go on or even move, broken down, caught in the gap between being herself and being someone else.⁹

This gap between face and mask is a fundamental feature of Bergman's moral universe, and if there is to be any self-knowledge, any possibility of true judgment and meeting oneself face to face, such facades must be seen through and recognized for what they are. As a result, Bergman's characters are frequently placed before a mirror, searching for (or sometimes hiding) their true faces, or confronted by another's gaze (verbal as well as visual) probing for what is behind their appearance. Without this knowledge, there can be no second chance and no change.

Filmically, this moral theatricality and the need for the uncovering of the truth of who we really are grounds Bergman's most characteristic stylistic feature – a frame filled by only a face, or a pair of faces, against an empty, minimal background. Both individually and filmically, the face above all is the arena where the human drama is played out and the key for the presentation of ourselves to ourselves. For Bergman's audiences, the film itself is just that mirror in which their own faces appear and are scrutinized for their underlying truth.

These three central responses of rage, distraction, and self-sufficiency, and the theatricality they encourage are, of course, not mutually exclusive. In whatever way they are assumed and lived through, the original loneliness of abandonment remains, perhaps hidden, perhaps not. The maintenance of such deceit is exhausting, and often the facade cracks, the anguish returns, grows, and the soul seeks escape.

While physical death is usually natural and its inevitability morally neutral, suicide is neither. It is a moral failure, at least in the contexts that Bergman explores, because it renders suffering as only that, as unremitting and without cancellation, and it takes as permanent the deathliness of spirit that settles in after abandonment. To be at the point of suicide is to have moved from the immediacy of one's abandonment and hurt to suffer in a new way. It is to see before one only emptiness and loneliness, only the continuation of spiritual death. There seems no difference between now and real death, except real death is bearable and a relief. So one acts to make true in fact what is true in feeling. In the prolonged despair of abandonment, one is led to kill oneself.¹⁰

Bergman, however, intervenes and, as noted before, almost always refuses success. Death, spiritual or actual, is not the only future to which our abandonment can lead, and therefore there must be a second chance