

# THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY 1961

Ingmar Bergman

## OVERVIEW

Bergman's trilogy of films, on the theme of the presence and absence of God, comprise *Winter Light* (1962), *The Silence* (1963) and the film before us, *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961). Is Bergman seriously pondering 'theological questions' in these films, or is he simply dramatizing modes of the human condition which were of fashionable currency in the culture of his moment? Many literary texts of his post-war period in Europe portrayed the religious setting of man in terms of his historical anxieties, his struggles of conscience, or the ways he lived his doubt; existential analyses with a strong flavor of the perspectives of literature (not film), or philosophy. The shadows of global war, in the recent past, then darkened the skies which for many earlier thinkers—think of Leibniz or Spinoza—were playgrounds of ideas or abstraction. Bergman seems to wrestle, in whatever access he makes to religious issues, in the same arena as Sartre (in *Nausea*, 1930), Camus (in *The Stranger*, 1942), or Heidegger (in *Holzwege*, 1950, where the essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' builds a world view from the visionary poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin).

*Through a Glass Darkly*, it might be said, explores the question of God's existence both through the experiential lens of a mentally ill woman and through the late in the play discussions of the God is love theme. There is hallucinatory material here, and there is simple assertion—about god, but whether we come to feel our createdness is questionable.

## STORY

**Cinema narrative.** To recreate the linear narrative, of a Bergman (or any auteurish) film, is to unfold a history. Is the plot line of a film the same as that of a piece of literature? A literary plot is in essence similar to that of a film. But the army of technicians, some of them so brilliant as to co create the film itself, add to the making of film a density which surpasses the story line itself. In the words of Erwin Panofsky, 'the medium of the movies is physical reality as such,' and therefore the story line of the film's events is not only destined to recall but also to resist linearity, to confront the viewer with all the hyper rich thingliness of the film.

**Camera.** When we start to tell the story, then, of the plot outline of *Through a Glass Darkly*, we have to imagine that outline as a reality itself, a reality overlain with the genius of close ups, the attention to faces and their angles, the subtle overlay of grays and cold whites and iron skies. We need to imagine the interplay of figures in the background, at an angle to the protagonist of the moment, and embodied in this nexus of 'the real thing'; we use the story line as one way to thread our way into the juxtapositions of an account. The story of a novel is not told by a camera, or set of them, but by the verbal imagination inside a head. In the film the eyes in that head are literally reading pictures of the world.

**Discussion.** The thing we agree to call the story, in the case of a film, is thus reality itself happening, direct as things themselves are and happen. We are given—I think now of the beginning of *Through a Glass Darkly*—a scene in action, figures in early morning, gray dawn sky, fanning out into the plot they are and sending their members into actions like preparing breakfast or preparing for an icy morning dive. They joke the cold away, as far as they can, and the next day row their rowboat, letting us see, without effort, the world from within their ongoing discourse, which is full of the information we need to get us deeply into this plot. The meaning of the film develops with the characters themselves, before our eyes, as they adjust to the actual contours of angle, landscape, and facescape, which have been carefully arranged by the craft of a great camera artist, Sven Nykvist.

**The foursome.** From outside what we see is four people with a lot on their minds, and an immediate time frame around them. They find themselves on a remote off shore Swedish island, where four family members are on a 24 hour vacation. As they appear during their 24 hour stay, the four individuals live into us their identities and personal histories, so far as those cohere. The family members include Karin, a young married woman who has just been released from hospital, after treatment for schizophrenia; her 17 year old brother, Minus; their father David, who is currently suffering from writer's block; and Karin's husband, Martin, whom we saw at the beginning, talking gravely with David.

**Schizophrenia.** The film itself is to unfold, like reality, from the real world we are now incorporated in—with all its special equipment—close ups, angle shots, detailed face perusals, trick shots like faces looking directly at, but in fact totally past one another—enabling the auteur to accent every step he takes into his whole perception. The event-centering kernel, of what becomes the meaning of the film, is Karin's schizophrenia.

**Incurable.** The topic of that illness has brought the group together, as has the wish to communicate about how to handle what to David and Martin seems an incurable problem. Karin's condition emerges at every point. She discovers, in her father's working notebook, that he views her condition as incurable, a doom Martin, her husband, considers far less inevitable. Minus, Karin's brother, with whom she is flirtatious from the start, is drawn by her later into what seems to be incestuous play, a skirting of madness which drives this vulnerable 17 year old to his father, for advice and a much longed for good conversation.

**God as spider.** Finally, of course, it is Karin's vision of God as a huge spider, the overmastering center of the whole film, out from which all subsequent plotting follows. By this plotting we see Bergman open the only path from which this awesome encounter with the image of god can move forward. Father and son, bound by the doubts and dreads of Karin's illness, are forced to accept one another—for all of Dad's self-interested sacrifice of persons to art—and to have that 'ultimate talk' Minus longs for. That God is love, David's harvest of interpretation, may seem a pallid residue, of the mind-blowing events surrounding Karin's visions, but that no other formula will have sufficed, to give harmony back to this set of vacationers, seems to be the carefully modulated 'message' Bergman is inviting us to live.

## THEMES

**Psychosis.** The central issue, for this foursome on a 24 hour emergency vacation, on an isolated island, is the diagnosis of schizophrenia for Karin, who has just been released from a mental institution. The question before all the group is whether or not her illness is incurable.

**Exploitation (in art).** Karin takes the opportunity to look through her father's notebooks, and determines that he is dubious about her recovery. She also discovers that he is collecting ideas for his own work from what he is learning about her 'case.' This discovery confirms our sense that David puts his work above other persons.

**God.** God is the notion that Karin takes away, from her hallucinatory experience of a spider emerging from a crack in the attic. Is this the same God as love, whom David and Minus discuss later In the film? Or is Karin's hallucination simply that, and with no relation to the God who created the universe?

**Sexuality.** Karin is from the start flirtatious toward her younger brother, Minus, whom she teases. Her own sexuality drives her to behaviors which do violence both to herself and others: she rejects her husband's sexual overtures, she makes out incestuously with Minus, and she fantasizes that the god-spider is attempting to penetrate her. Sexuality is the living material of Karin's presence.

## CHARACTERS

**Karin** Karin has just been released from a mental institution, where she has been found to suffer from schizophrenia. Her marriage to Martin is complex; we see her spurn his advances, just before she mounts

into the attic of her house, where she hears voices on the other side of the wall paper. God himself is the figure to whom she is most wired, though as her lover she conceives of him chiefly as a huge spider. Incest with her brother is engaging to Karin.

**David.** David, Karin's father, is a writer, suffering from writer's block, who has been absent for a long time in Switzerland, and who announces, to the other three, that he will soon be going away again. (A painful thought for his son, who needs his company.) He comes across cold, as one who avoids his daughter, especially any close relations with her, and who only at the end is able to relate meaningfully to his son. His failed attempt at suicide, when he was in Switzerland, could be transcended only by his discovery of how much he loved his children.

**Martin.** Martin, Karin's husband, is devoted to Karin, and deeply worried about her. He clashes violently with David, over the issue of treatment of Karin, claiming that David is too selfish and self-absorbed to care for his children, and that David is a phony.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### KARIN

**Character** Karin—who might remind us of Elizabeth Vogler, the muted former actress of *Persona*—has been driven into her own reality, a hallucinatory-sexual retreat from daily life. She can be charming and life-affirming, as when she flirts with her brother, or participates in the family dinner—herself good humored until David announces his plans to leave again. She can cross social borderlines without fear—as in making out with her brother—and she can lay herself open to a spider-form god who, she feels, has 'cold and calm' eyes, and who returns into the wall when he has failed to penetrate her. This latter encounter is followed by her return, in a helicopter-ambulance, to the hospital. All we feared, about the incurability of her disease, is confirmed.

### Illustrative moments

**Flirtatious.** Meeting her brother again, at the outset of the film, Karin teases him as a kid brother, which he is. She mocks at him, comments on his gangly height, and touches and hugs him. Later, taking refuge from storm with him, in a boat on the shore, Karin makes unmistakably incestuous moves toward Minus.

**Withdrawn.** On the night of arrival of the island, Karin rejects the sexual advances of her husband, Martin. (Her gestures of rejection and withdrawal reminds us of the behavior of Anna, Fredrik's sexy young wife in *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Karin wants to be loved—by Minus, by God—but not by her husband.

**Hallucinatory.** Karin first acts out, in the film, after rejecting Martin's bedtime advances. The trigger to this behavior is the sound of a foghorn from the ocean. She follows this sound to the attic, and there hears voices from beyond the peeling wall paper. It is not much later that she sees a spider emerge from a crack in the same attic, and recognizes in it the cold face of God.

**Resigned.** By film's end, Karin herself makes the decision that she wants to return to the hospital. The twenty four hours on the island have re immersed her into the darkness of her family background, the coldness of her dad, the complexity of her relation to her husband. Even God has failed to unite with her.