

FILM

Bergman sees self through lens, darkly

By Pat Aufderheide

Autumn Sonata is the latest in a sadly predictable series of explorations into Ingmar Bergman's psychological dilemmas, graced with the stylistic tricks we have come to expect from his recent films. As he works out on-screen his inner agonies, they become a case in point that insight does not necessarily mean a cure.

Liv Ullmann is the repressed daughter who invites her dashing and successful mother (Ingrid Bergman) to visit her after the death of her mother's lover. Mother discovers on arrival that her other daughter (Lena Nyman), crippled with a degenerative disease, is also living there.

Mother faces her own disgust at one daughter's physical deformities and chats with her other daughter's husband (Halvar Bjork) about their emotionally stunted marriage. She then stays up all night with the married daughter, being castigated for dominating their household and thwarting her children's development.

Mother leaves, shaken but still baffled. Daughter fears she has thrown away all hope of communicating with her mother, but insists she will go on trying to make contact, whispering in the last scene, "I'm going to persist."

Alienation is back, as the symptom. Husband and wife fear love and cannot tell each other anything directly. Mother and daughter also cannot communicate, but they mask hatred with their indirectness. The problem is familiar to Bergman films, too: the characters cannot express or feel emotions. Ullmann describes the world her drowned son now inhabits as a "world of liberated emotions."

Autumn Sonata is distinguished among Bergman films for naming the cause of this emotional constipation so plainly. He points the finger without wasting time: the cause is childhood trauma. Mother—herself a neglected child, whose parents "never touched" her—was a dominating but negligent parent. A famous pianist, she paid attention to her children when her schedule permitted, and overwhelmed them when she did. "You had taken charge of all the words in our house," shouts a furious, petulant Ullmann at the shocked, lovely Ingrid Bergman.

This may serve as a description of a family pathology, and the actresses, especially Bergman in a magnificent performance, go a long way toward creating a believable relationship between the two women. But the film has unsurpassable problems. Neither actress can overcome a script that tells too much and shows too little.

Like other Bergman films, *Autumn Sonata* depends on the written word, in extended recital or in anecdote. Bergman tries to compensate for the tediousness of verbal exposition by presenting it boldly and trying to turn it into a stylistic virtue. The husband, for instance, turns to the camera to voice his marital questions; his wife reads a letter start-to-finish to him; he says to her mother, "I'll explain how I view my wife," and he then explains.

It's not that the screenplay is talky. After all, a very talky screenplay, *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, made for a wonderful film. And we will stand for exposition



Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann as mother and daughter (above); Ullman and Ingmar Bergman (below, right).

when it is efficient. But much of this exposition explains that people can't really explain what is wrong because they do not understand or cannot identify it. Consider this statement: "One must learn to live. I practice every day. One of my biggest obstacles is that I don't know who I am." Do you want to sit in the dark listening to that person go on talking?

Childhood anger.

Bergman has also stacked the deck against the mother in this drama, demonstrating in the process his own inability to budge from the viewpoint of the wronged child. Although he fails to make us feel fully the hurt of the mother's mistakes, he does make clear how angry he feels about his own childhood. His anger, unfortunately, comes out as cheap tricks.

Gauche symbols underline the broken-wing tragedy of mismanaged family relations. The marks are bold: one child crippled, one child drowned. He contrasts several times the fact that the flamboyant mother is wearing a bright red flowing dress and her mousey daughter is wearing a pea-green shift with a Peter Pan collar.

He creates a melodramatic moment of crisis, so grotesque that the scene fails. While one daughter screams at her for early sorrows, the mother responds, "Help me! Help me!" and the other crippled daughter wriggles hideously to the stairs on her stomach, drooling and calling out, "Mama! Come!" This triple demonstration of desperate need appals us, but it doesn't synopsise the problem. It only caricatures it.

Some moments do come through with an awful intensity. The daughter climaxes her denunciation with the statement, "People like you are a menace—You should be put away!" At this moment, you realize there is an ocean of regret, spite and petulance behind the writing in this screenplay, and that Bergman sees the writing and filming as a kind of exorcism.

He has said so before. When he finished the screenplay for *Face to Face*, for instance, he announced to his cast that his "torment, formerly diffuse, has acquired a name and address...has been deprived of its nimbus and alarm." But two movies later, he writhes in the same torment, although it has never been so specifically directed and so accusatory. Bergman stakes his usual claim

in this film to probing existential pain, to describing the human condition. When a character says, "There is only one truth, one lie and no forgiveness," it is supposed to mean something. The characters are not only mothers and daughters, but symbols of the failure to feel, to give and to share.

As he gets closer in this film than in earlier films to naming what actually bothers him, though, it becomes clearer that the problem Bergman describes is not an existential but a particular and a socially-formed one. The neurotic personality that his films describe is a character of our time.

God and self.

In film after film, Bergman has searched for a reason to live, not in the process of living with people, but as a given from which to order an individual life. Social context and institutions are secondary, for him, to the crisis of identity. He has no confidence in social arrangements to change or help his or our problems, as he once confessed in interview:

"I've a strong impression our world is about to go under. Our political systems are deeply compromised and have no further uses. Our social behavior patterns—interior and exterior—have proved a fiasco... Just around the corner an insect world is waiting for us—and one day it's going to roll in over our ultra-individualized existence. Otherwise, I'm a respectable social democrat."

Having rejected social institutions, Bergman is left with the personal and the cosmic. He looks not just for the ability to express emotions, but for the millennium: for the unquestioning and total love that St. Paul promises in his letters to the Corinthians.

St. Paul wrote, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." St. Paul held out a promise of salvation through belief. But Bergman has always been a doubter on a big scale—he spent the first part of his career looking for God on-screen—and he finds St. Paul's assured promise a hopeless, longed-for vision.

Over time, he has abandoned his search for the cosmic in favor of his search for identity. Whether by probing psychic disorientation in *Face to Face*, or by an

apocalyptic projection of anxiety on history in *The Serpent's Egg*, he searches for himself and celebrates his very failures. In *Autumn Sonata*, a woman blindly tries to communicate not just with her mother but with her own past. She is at once ardently hopeful and bitter with despair.

Bergman searches in the same extremist way, posing grand unanswerable questions. The answers he does find only reinforce the illness he re-enacts. The emotionally-stunted daughter ends this movie with a dewy-eyed stare

into the camera and the words, "I'm going to persist..." Bergman will, too. But he'll never settle his accounts, never really go home, although he's been trying—like the old man in *Wild Strawberries*—to do so for a long time.

And the closer he comes to realizing that his search is a social and a historical one, as the canvas on which the drama is painted shrinks and becomes more specific, the more his films take on a mean-minded and desperate tone, as well.

Bergman & women



If Bergman is thrashing about for a reason to live in his movies, why does he always use women to symbolize his own search?

Women offer Bergman a high contrast between biological and intellectual reasons to live. He credits women with—and envies in them—a natural superiority in emotional expression. He lauds and loves women for their literal and figurative receptivity. Indeed, Jenny's crisis of identity in *Face to Face* is triggered when she finds she was "too tight" for a rapist to enter her. Bergman's most simply positive characters are women who least challenge their social fate, and those who have immediate care-and-tending tasks. Think of the maid in *Cries and Whispers*, or the grandmother in *Face to Face*.

The woman who confronts individual responsibility, who makes choices, puts Bergman's own problems in their most acute form. The working mother of *Autumn Sonata* has channeled her life energy away from expressing emotion and love directly, and into music. Like the dying sister in *Cries and Whispers*, or the actress in *Persona* or the psychiatrist in *Face to Face*, she has talents and a public role that in some ways con-

flict with the direct expression of female (especially motherly) love.

That conflict, for Bergman, is not a fact of social life, but an existential drama. Bergman's women are never flesh and blood. They are less—testimony to animal warmth; and more—incarnations of a great engulfing mother. They thus stand outside time and history. It is in some ways, of course, a safe stance. If a woman moviegoer complains that she cannot find anyone like herself among a film's women, then possibly it's her fault—she flunks femininity.

As *Autumn Sonata* stresses in a petty way, however, people have both love and hate for such powerful female images, which are so often images of Mother. When Bergman was asked why he chose a certain red as one of the three basic colors of *Cries and Whispers*, which heavily featured color symbolism, he said that it was the color he imagined the inside of the womb to look like. But Bergman appears to have served his time as a womb-worshipper. These days he offers instead horror and anger, the other side of that reverence.

—Pat Aufderheide



Gov. Jerry Brown talks to journalists James Ridgeway (center) and Alexander Cockburn (right).

Rocking the Solar Dreamboat

Journalists Cockburn and Ridgeway talk about their satirical novel, anti-nuke activists, and liberal columnists.

By Steve Chapple

FROM HIS SOMEWHAT STRANGE position as house-Marxist at New York's *Village Voice*, Alexander Cockburn has in the five years since he arrived from Britain inveighed with such a combination of journalistic joy and investigative viciousness that he may have done more than any American to remind us that our newspaper writing was not always such a grey mass of corporate blandness and ever-liberal pomposity. His "Press Clips" and "The Moving Target," a column written with partner James Ridgeway, have put some of the muckraking guts back into American journalism.

Now Cockburn and Ridgeway have tossed off a short sliver of a political novel: *Smoke: Another Jimmy Carter Adventure* (New York: Times Books). *Smoke* burns some familiar targets to readers of the columns: Tom Hayden, Jerry Brown, and, of course, Jimmy Carter.

It is 1980 in the novel and "the nation," Cockburn and Ridgeway write, "lies comatose and gloomy in the post-Christmas hangover. Sleet falls, prices rise, and the year ahead seems pregnant with not great promise." It is 11 months until the election and Carter and his bumptious advisers are already counting the months. How best to straddle safely the tackiest issue of the time, cancerous but profitable nuclear power? Monstrous James Schlesinger is for turning up the birdsong soundtrack on his office tweeter and flying with Bechtel and General Electric, but Carter knows that Guru-venor Jerry Brown is already dreaming Eastward to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And Jerry Brown's Zen history of riding the ass to search for the ass may just allow him to straddle constituencies more adroitly, gathering up the naive support of the vast anti-nuke movement, without alienating corporate nuke-heads.

The solution is to tweak the latent patriotism of the URF (Union of Rich Folk), funders to the more activist rabble, and where necessary to buy the movement's spokesmen with solar grants. It is a wise solution but one that almost goes

up in smoke when four days before the election the anti-nuclear neophytes (led by Julie: "deep-bosomed and big-brained" and Jack: "a vortex of violence and vitamins") take over a massive reactor near Valley Forge. Not to worry, explains Pat Cadell, the *Mayaguez* was a high point in the polls for Jerry Ford. Eco-terrorism has its bright side. And so it does. Until the last chapter.

The plot roars as quickly as Jerry Brown perched on the back of Jacques Barzhagi's motorcycle. And it's very funny stuff. In their crisp, elegant prose Cockburn and Ridgeway do to nuclear power what Evelyn Waugh did for cemeteries in *The Loved One*.

If there is anything disturbing in the book to a good anti-nuclear American, it is not the authors' righteous cynicism toward the Browns, the Haydens, and the Carters. Rather it is their sad skepticism toward what they see as a pathetically inadequate environmental movement.

Start with little fishes.

Alex Cockburn is splayed across the chair in his *Village Voice* office like the shrewd road manager for a British New Wave band caught, somehow, in an interview with a reporter from *Sing Out*, the nostalgic folk music magazine. How can he phrase it to me gently? His English belled pants are propped on top of his typewriter, and a framed headline from the *National Enquirer* screams down: "Amy Carter's Killer Nanny Talks."

"You can't hardly say," says Cockburn with understatement, "that the history of the anti-nuclear movement has been a story of unmitigated victory." He swings his feet to the floor and taps the tape-recorder. "There have been victories from place to place, yes, but in general the energy corporations have had a pretty good time of it."

Jim Ridgeway says things more analytically. Present for discussion on a tie-line from Washington, he explains:

"The problem with the environmental movement has always been that for some reason it has been unable or unwilling to confront the fact that you are dealing with a centralized economy that is dominated by major corporations in combination

with the government. The environmental movement has always ended up with this solar dreamboat stuff, which is nothing more than *laissez faire*, small business competition. It comes from the public interest movement and nostalgic memories."

Cockburn pipes up. "One of the themes of our book has been the mystification of the solar power movement. There is a right-wing nature to a lot of this so-called left-wing thought. They talk about localism, how solar power will not be in the grip of the big companies, how economies of scale do not make sense with solar power, and so on. Well, the big companies *are* getting into solar power, Gruman for instance. Secondly, it's extremely dubious how effective solar power could be in the short term, given the enormous natural gas glut. All's you have to do is read the cover of *Business Week*, something small left-wing groups don't do."

Ridgeway wants to make clear why the position of alternative energy supporters makes so little sense at this time, at least to him. "Since the '60s we have been faced with what seems to be a glut of fossil fuels, and at the same time an attempt by the companies in oil to move into other areas, such as uranium, nuclear power—and particularly coal, which was always looked at as backup. The writing was on the wall even before OPEC and it led to exploration by these companies.

"You got a glut and it works out in this way. It's bad in the short term for nuclear power because industrial customers will turn from oil to coal, but not to nuclear power, and surely not to alternative energies. The price of natural gas will be so close to what solar will cost, that in the near future solar will not make sense. This is shown in Santa Clara, Calif., where the municipal utility offers solar-powered pool heaters. It costs almost the same to do it with natural gas. The forces at work here are just not auspicious for either nuclear energy or solar power, and this serves industry people well because it allows them to move into solar research and development and take their time."

Well, I want to know, what sort of advice would you give to an unromantic anti-nuclear activist?

Ridgeway keeps pumping the sentences out of the phone from Washington. "You have to start where the little fishes are, and they're few and far between. I would start with TVA, with giving people cheap energy. The Bonneville power administration is another place. You have these vestiges of public power. You've got to come to grips with the fact that this is a powerful centralized economy," he repeats. "Masses of people have no jobs. They live in Harlem, in the South Bronx. To them this alternative energy business is a joke."

90 percent form, 10 percent content.

Ridgeway reminds me of a college friend who never needed to write first drafts. He just sat down, organized his thoughts for three minutes, and then typed out a ten-page paper. I think my friend is now hoeing organic potatoes somewhere in British Columbia, but the thought makes me curious. How do Ridgeway and Cockburn put it together every week?

By easy joint committee, it seems. "We sit down at the typewriter and talk it through." They do not work up separate drafts as did John and Ring Lardner Jr. when they wrote screen plays. The words fly together in the air, and one of them just types them up. "We were in the same room for *Smoke*. When we do the column, I'm there on the phone."

"Journalism is 90 percent form and only 10 percent content," Cockburn laughs. It's a strong, high laugh. "This is a position that would be regarded as immoral by the left. But if I've got some hippie cab driver with five minutes to read, it's an important project to get his eyes from the top left to the bottom right. I mean, what could be more boring than the deregulation of natural gas? The very words crash sideways. So we try to use techniques left journalism doesn't normally use: jokes, inside stuff."

In the past few years the *Voice* has ionized. There was an attempt by ownership to remove the editor. The *Voice* is, as Cockburn says, "catholic: it is certain-

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