

# The Films of Ingmar Bergman

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## 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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

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."

## 1. 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 bird<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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





a



b

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

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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

if our condition is to be portrayed truly. To see only emptiness and torment, as Bergman's characters often do in the midst of their tortures, is to be confined in moral vision and blinded to a larger picture. Abandonment and its ensuing torment is more than suffering alone; it is a passion, like Christ's, that ends in resurrection – or more appropriately, like that of the thieves crucified with Him, one of whom is saved and the other not. Thus, though suffering may be a spiritual desert that seems endless, it is always bounded on its far side by another land, a place of rebirth in which the soul may be nourished again.

This “resurrection” is never suffering's justification, the good that excuses it and gives it a meaning. There is no theodicy in Bergman, and such torment can only be regarded as evil. Rather, healing and nourishment are what suffering **needs**, and they exist as real possibilities in the world, however difficult they may be to reach or to bring about. This is the meaning of describing suffering as a **passion**. If suffering is only suffering and there are no other possibilities, then once we are abandoned, this becomes the whole picture and all that our existence could now be. This would be a truly despairing view of the world. But for Bergman there is something else, and to image suffering as a passion is to keep this possibility open.

#### 4. Turning

The scene of Frost and Alma from *Naked Night* is one of the most remarkable sequences in all cinema. It portrays Frost's abandonment and passion. Alma has been enticed to do a striptease before a group of soldiers, and Frost is taunted and jeered as he tries to cover his wife's nakedness and carry her away. For Bergman, their ordeal is a version of Christ's own Passion, and the image of Frost struggling up the rocky hillside, surrounded by the mob of spectators, is also a picture of Christ carrying His cross toward Golgotha [see Fig. 3b]. Here the cross is Alma and their marriage, and as the two blend and reverse positions so that it is finally Alma supporting Frost, Bergman's image suggests we are both cross and savior to each other, both burden and helpmate. The scene offers no other resources – it is barren of vegetation and shelter; all that it gives people is each other. The ambiguity of this truth is reinforced by the sun overhead – on the one hand a burning heat that exhausts and overpowers, finally effacing them in its searing light, yet on the other, a divine halo signaling a special grace.

Here Frost and Alma revolve around an axis of embrace as the holder becomes the held, each desperately turned toward the other, trying in this

moment to be their support and protection. Our need is for each other, to turn toward another and for him or her to turn toward us. Of course, this need itself arises out of another turning, also encoded in this image – that of abandonment, when we have been turned away from and in response turn further away ourselves. Thus, this **axis of turning** defines “geographically” the nature of human relationships for Bergman: On it we perpetually move, turning toward or away, unable to escape our mutual need and involvement. This fundamental image comes to dominate his work in the 1960s and 1970s in an even more reduced form, that of two faces close together, even overlapped, usually looking in different directions [Fig. 2]. So pervasive are such “portraits,” they are signatures of Bergman’s compositional style.

This concept of turning, and the repeated images of faces in motion toward and away, is the spine of the moral skeleton that Bergman’s reduction reveals. It gives shape to Auden’s assertion that “we must love each other, or die” or that of Tomas in *Winter Light*, who sees that “the only condition under which men can live” is “to live together” – though he cannot appropriate this knowledge himself, either for Jonas, whom he is unable to comfort, or for Märta, whose love he cannot accept. Such “betrayals” are “why we’re so poverty-stricken, joyless and full of fear.”<sup>11</sup>

Turning toward another, embracing and supporting him or her, is possible for Bergman, but it is always difficult and has no guarantee of permanence, nor even of acceptance. Why is love so hard? Why do Bergman’s characters most often turn away even when turned toward? There are at least three reasons. First, they must respond from a condition of abandonment and hence with a special kind of love and turning toward the other, a love that indelibly bears the mark of the abandonment that precedes it, that remembers yet moves beyond it, that has no illusions about itself, a love “after the fall.” This is the moral need to which all of Bergman’s drama is addressed and is the spiritual location for this central question of turning. It is a rough, frightening terrain. Romance and young love belong to a different time, to a kind of childhood. That love is sweet and passionate and seems simply to happen, spontaneous and natural (like that of Henrik and Maj in *Waiting Women*). But it is also clear that it will

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Figure 2 (*facing*). The axis of turning. a. *The Magician*: Albert and Manda. b. *Persona*: Elisabet and Alma. c. *Through a Glass*: David and Karin. d. *Winter Light*: Tomas, Jonas, and Karin. e. *The Silence*: Anna, Johan, and Ester. f. *Face to Face*: Jenny and her grandmother. g. *Shame*: Jan and Eva. h. *Marionettes*: Peter and Katarina (wife).





a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h

stumble, fail, and be betrayed. Then a different love, one much more difficult and honest, will be necessary, a love for the time we no longer believe in love.

Second, the individuals who make this gesture are ugly and repulsive – sometimes physically, like Märta with her skin disease and bandages; always spiritually. These are people who have failed and caused us harm, who have been self-centered, mean-spirited, cold, who have used us or others. Throughout the trilogy, the outrageousness of this appeal is stressed. Each film includes scenes of accusation in which long-smoldering contempt, disgust, and even hatred for the other is expressed – understandably, justifiably.<sup>12</sup> In turning toward us and asking for our love, these others in addition ask us to overlook not only what they have been but also our own hurt and anger, to be different to them than they have been to us, and to accept them with their regret and new intentions as yet essentially the same people – weak and pitiable. Seeing them as they are exposes them as disgusting and repulsive. How can we live with such creatures?

Third, we see in those turning toward us images of ourselves. They are mirrors that confront us with pictures we do not want to see or face, and in this confrontation it is now ourselves that most repulses and frightens. In Bergman's reduction, we are given no way to distinguish ourselves from others. We are identical in nature and in our need for each other, interdependent, almost one person (captured in Bergman's startling images of two faces as one).<sup>13</sup> As persons, we are fundamentally all the same; therefore, to see others openly in their neediness and dependence asks us to recognize and accept this same fact about ourselves – to expose ourselves too.

These three reasons make any honest response to even feeble and stunted gestures of a genuine turning toward difficult at best. To do so is to return willingly to the condition that betrayed us. It is to put ourselves in the hands of another, to depend again, to be vulnerable where nothing will ever take this vulnerability away. It is not surprising that people refuse and turn away again.<sup>14</sup>

The trilogy makes clear that the result is, if not a deeper despair that leads closer and closer to suicide, then, as already noted, a life that is impersonal. The vulnerability inherent in our dependence on others is avoided or hidden if they are made only “partial” persons, persons who, because their individuality has been given no importance, cannot turn away. They are simply a recurring type. Thus, Martin in *Through a Glass Darkly* has his patients, allowing him to lose himself in his medical practice

even though there is no personal involvement or commitment to their lives. Tomas has done much the same with the members of his parish, to whom he now ministers abstractly and out of duty (or desperation) rather than from love or any personal concern. Sensing this, his congregation has dwindled, and he is alone in spite of his efforts. Anna in *The Silence* deals with the silence through a sexual hedonism in which she turns toward other men only in their capacity to provide her with sexual pleasure and diversion. All these protagonists continue to refuse to turn toward others in any fuller sense, and their lives are smothered as a result. In each of these cases, impersonalness is only a minimal affirmation of the world that shuts out any nourishment in return.

We are always placed at this point of turning, always in process, always dependent on others. From early on this is represented in Bergman's films through images of traveling, culminating in the silhouettes of the caravan at the beginning and end of *Naked Night* [Fig. 3a]. In Bergman's reduction, we are essentially itinerant and rootless, tied to neither land nor country for identity or sustenance. Life is arduous, filled with a repetition of the same ordinary things – both good and bad – over and over again. The self-contained mobility of each wagon emphasizes both our mutual dependence and our isolation – our condition of being alone together. They are traveling islands to which we are confined and from which there is no escape. The only resource we have is what we carry with us – our own capacities to love and comfort.

This figure is repeated throughout Bergman's films in many different forms: in *Wild Strawberries* it becomes, of course, Isak's car, whereas in *The Silence* it is the train compartment at the beginning and end of the film. In *Shame*, it is the boat in which they are adrift at the end [Fig. 3f]; in *Waiting Women*, the elevator in which Karin and Fredrik are trapped.

In these vehicles, people are moving either toward or away from each other, and this process is thematized through the various places to which they travel (*The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*) or stop to visit (*Naked Night*). These locations take on importance as sites of the various spiritual moments in life to which everyone is vulnerable or even as stages moving from childhood to old age. Here, the temporal image of the journeying caravan becomes spatialized as a set of essential places we inhabit. In *Cries and Whispers* vehicles are abandoned, and we are given a single house with different chambers; in *Fanny and Alexander* it is four interconnected buildings – the family residence (with its summer house), the theater, the bishop's apartments, and Isak's shop. Each of these sites is a portrait of the human soul, with its essential possibilities of abandonment

and turning toward always present. Some people are like this, some like that, some living their lives out in this room or place, some in that. But they can also move from one to another; here the axis of turning has been mapped onto the structures of dwelling themselves.

These two similar images of spiritual life – a house with different rooms in and out of which one may move and a set of dwellings that one might progress through – are combined in *Waiting Women* (Bergman’s most neglected important film). Physically everything takes place in a large summer house on an island, but the drama in this film unfolds by returning in memory and story to other times and places that mark essential stages of life and reveal its possibilities for love and meaning. What is emphasized here, as in *Smiles of a Summer Night*, is not just that there are many places for the soul to dwell but that life itself has rhythms, that it is framed by the great events of birth, marriage, and death, and that it progresses through stages of growth and understanding, even as people must continually confront the truth of their own lives and their relationships to each other.

Taking these two summary images of “caravan” and “house” together, Bergman portrays our lives as journeys through a landscape of the essential places of the soul. This is our geography. Bergman’s metaphysical reduction reveals the axis of turning toward and away as our fundamental spiritual posture within it. Here, abandonment and all its consequent suffering are forms of turning from, and love and its attendant nourishment and flourishing are forms of turning toward. The terms of life and death and the criteria by which we shall each be judged in our apocalyptic moment have been set. Have we loved or not? Do we still remain turned away even though we continue to live, loveless, alone, spiritually dead? Whenever scenes with this axial structure occur in Bergman’s films, these questions are at hand, and the choice of turning and exactly how is at issue.

## 5. Shame

In this apocalyptic moment where we are confronted both by others and by ourselves, what could enable us to turn ourselves significantly around, see our suffering as a passion, and begin to transform it into something else?

There are two essential moments in this reversal of direction: a deep repugnance at our own complicity in such spiritual devastation and the vision of something better. Repugnance is a moral feeling in which a person begins to recognize something as not the way it ought to be through



Figure 3. Life as a journey. a. *Naked Night*: the caravan. b. *Naked Night*: Frost carrying Alma. c. *Wild Strawberries*. d. *Winter Light*. e. *Shame*: escaping the island. f. *Shame*: adrift in the poisoned sea.

the disgust and revulsion it causes. We recoil, draw back, want to be elsewhere. With other people's ugliness this is easy enough to do: We can escape by turning further away and into ourselves. But when we see ourselves as like them, ugly too, equally repulsive, there is no escape, no other place to go; we can only repress this knowledge, lash out at ourselves and others in hatred of what we are, or become ashamed, acknowledge ourselves as responsible, and begin to change.

Repugnance transforms itself into **shame** when it is coupled with the recognition of our own failure. To be ashamed of ourselves is to see that we have behaved poorly and to wish that we had done better. Although we often interchange shame and guilt, and they are closely intertwined in Bergman's films, there is a subtle difference between them.

Guilt is commonly focused on wrongdoing and violation of the law, and insofar as the moral law is chiefly formulated negatively, it arises from doing something forbidden. Moral standing is restored by accepting punishment (and perhaps restitution) and then by not doing what has been prohibited. Understood this way, guilt carries with it the idea of being correct as long as one avoids violation of the law. But this is only a negative picture of the moral – thou shalt not lie, for instance, rather than you must tell the truth as fully as you can – and thus a picture of what we should not do but not yet of anything more.

Shame, by contrast, provides this something more. It is grounded not just in guilt but failure and a sense of being significantly less than we could or should be. Shame moves beyond obligation and law to value, and it includes implicit reference to a standard unattained, a better kind of person. The point, now, is not only not to harm our neighbor but to do something better to help him. Shame thus projects an ideal of what should be, of something to be sought and achieved because it is recognizably better and needed, something always beyond any list of prohibitions. Inherent in shame is a comparison between ourselves now and some picture of ourselves as we ought to be, the positive of guilt's negative picture of what we ought not to do.

For Bergman, guilt and shame are more intimately connected than this account would suggest, and this is because there is no neutral ground (as there is between harming and helping, for example – i.e., neither harming nor helping). The two are sides of the same coin, and the guilt of turning away points to the shame of not turning toward. In the end, the deepest guilt will be the deepest shame, the absence of shame itself.

What is shameful – for us – is not that we have been abandoned but that we have abandoned those who most need us and have not turned toward them. This sense that our behavior is shameful because we treat each other so poorly pervades Bergman's films, and it is just this awareness that compels Marianne in *Wild Strawberries* to expel the spiteful and bickering Almans from the car “for the sake of the children” traveling with them. It is also the reason she finally decides to keep her own child even though it means separating from her husband: The denial of life that she sees all around her must end somewhere. Such death cannot be allowed to con-

tinue, and she must do what she can to stop it. Seeing the failure of life as in some way one's own failure awakens one again to those one really cares for and loves. This is what happens to Isak in the film as well.

Although shame can and should function this way, however, such reversals become, after the 1950s, more and more difficult to achieve. In the trilogy, for instance, shame seems to underlie everything and to be everywhere, and it is coupled with love and at least the gestures toward something better.<sup>15</sup> But in the end Tomas remains alone (*Winter Light*), Ester is left dying in a strange hotel (*The Silence*), and the moment of touch between David and his son, Minus (*Through a Glass*), seems forced by Bergman and artificial.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there is an additional element in these films that makes shame both more palpable and oppressive than before, and more difficult. What is shameful now is not just domestic relations and our own behavior but life itself. This is the effect of the spectacle of Karin's mental deterioration, cringing before her spider-god or seducing her brother (*Through a Glass*), of Märta's skin lesions and bloody sores (*Winter Light*), of Ester's self-pity and terror as she spits up blood, dying of tuberculosis. The ugliness in these conditions is not just our own but the world's, and what arises is no longer shame but humiliation.

Humiliation is a theme that has always concerned Bergman, beginning with his first film script, for Sjöberg's *Torment* in 1944. Indeed, its depiction and exploration is characteristic of his films, adding further evidence to the claim that he takes a particularly morbid and pessimistic view of human nature. But his interest is more than clinical, for humiliation undermines shame's power to reorient and transform, and makes it even more difficult for a person to turn out of themselves and toward others. Humiliation, like shame, is an awareness of one's defects and failures, and thus a condition of self-reproach, but it is also a feeling of being cornered and helpless. Here, we feel our shame as coming from outside, as being caused by other forces and imposed on us, making us victims. It is not our fault. Exposed in our failings, we are despised and hated, even ridiculed and taunted. Our desire is to hide in some way, simply to endure, finally to escape however we can.

As humiliation grows, it focuses more and more on one thing: negating itself, making the humiliation go away. We come to strike back at anyone who seems responsible, anyone who can see or judge us, in an attempt to stop what is happening – their looking at us and laughing. This is what Albert does in the circus ring in *Naked Night*. In this sense, unlike shame, humiliation has no orientation toward a new future, points to no better condition, draws one toward no ideal. Its only direction is away from it-

self, to get this ordeal over with as soon as possible. Its danger is to send us back deeper into ourselves, turned further away from others and life.

As a consequence, humiliation presents special temptations for Bergman's characters. Even when shame is grounded in an awareness of our own failings, our impulse is to hide and not expose ourselves. It is easier to suffer the private shame of continuing to fail than risk the public humiliation of another's rejection.<sup>17</sup> And when we do try to do better yet still fail, it is tempting to focus on the humiliation that may result rather than on what we might further do; for the other's rejection of our turning toward him or her is something that someone *else* has done, not a failing of our own, and it is now the *other* who has caused our exposure, not ourselves. Focusing on humiliation makes it easier to stop trying and even gives us an excuse for anger and hate. Indeed, it is often more bearable to be openly humiliated than to be openly ashamed; it requires no more than endurance and allows us to continue on essentially as we are. There is thus a delicate balance in Bergman's films between shame and humiliation, and his characters often oscillate between them.

However, as already suggested, there is a second concern, a growing worry in Bergman that existence itself, and not just our behavior as men and women, may be shameful and thus intrinsically humiliating. If so, what failings could we acknowledge or toward what vision of a future could we turn? Disease and its physical and spiritual deformities become central images for this fear in the films of the 1960s and 1970s. Time and again characters speak of their humiliation at its hands and how their bodies have betrayed them.<sup>18</sup> And along with disease, Bergman adds a growing number of references to a mad and uncontrollable political situation, which becomes the focus of *Shame* and *The Serpent's Egg*.<sup>19</sup> Now God appears not silent but monstrous and malicious, no different than the cancer or nuclear weapons He allows.

Such real helplessness, if we do give into it, removes all hope and deprives our physical existence and suffering of any intelligibility, even that of a passion. There is only our humiliation. It is perhaps this feeling that drives Jonas in *Winter Light* to suicide as the only escape as he trembles before the certain but inexplicable fact that the Chinese will soon bring about the world's destruction with their atomic bombs.

Nevertheless, for Bergman it remains necessary to resist the defeat and despair these conditions counsel. Within this helplessness we must find something to offer each other, if only our shared humiliation and the comfort of not being alone. In such desperate conditions it is still possible to be ashamed of how we treat others and to be moved by the [CONT.]