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The affirmation of living pain

by Molly Haskell

Critics of Ingmar Bergman's new film, "THE TOUCH"—and audiences too, for all I know—have recoiled from Elliott Gould's strange, and strained, presence as the acute angle of the Judao-Swedish triangle he forms with Bibi Andersson and Max von Sydow. Rude, bushy-haired, and rabbinical, in the unlikely role of an archaeologist in Sweden on a dig, he appears more at a disadvantage in English than either of his co-stars and, in his aggressive violence toward their way of life, he teeters on the edge of insanity. But he, or what he represents, is what raises the film from the relative banality of a housewife's extramarital affair to the doomed and unfathomable passion the film actually chronicles.

Critics have treated it as an aberration, Judith Crist calling it a "Homeric nod" and using it to take an inexplicable dig at auteurists. Bergman, after all, is the auteur for non-auteurists (I seem to remember it was Miss Crist who gave the fireside-chat introductions to his films on television), and if he isn't the author of his films, for heaven's sake, who is! I've blown hot ("Persona," "Hour of the Wolf"), cold ("Shame"), and lukewarm ("The Passion of Anna") on recent Bergman, but I found "The Touch" almost unbearably moving. The Bergman loyalists are deserting this one though, and blaming Elliott Gould and the English language for the sinking ship. Gould's English sounds like the sub-titles on other Bergman films, and I have the feeling the original Swedish was never all that idiomatic; and it is Bergman, after all, who has created the

Gould character, telling us all the big things about him but none of the little things: that he fled Germany at age four with his mother, leaving his father behind to die, lived in New York, was educated in Israel, and has probably been—we discover toward the end of the film—the lover of his sister.

Whereas Bibi Andersson and von Sydow are the concrete accumulations of the meanings and idiosyncrasies Bergman has given them over the years, Gould is largely allegorical. He is the intrusion from the outside world, comparable to the concept of China in "Winter Light," the tv atrocities in "Persona" and "Passion," and particularly the photograph of the little boy in the concentration camp in "Persona." There has always been a horror film dimension in Bergman's attraction and by extension his characters' to the evil beyond understanding and the suffering beyond relief.

David (Gould) first discovers and falls in love with Karin (Bibi Andersson) when she is huddled in a corner of the hospital cloak room, sobbing over her mother's death. She has two beautiful children, a tender husband (Andreas is a doctor in the same hospital), and a life fitted out in permanent pleats from the housewife's catalog. The loss of her mother is the first intimation of her own mortality; the emphasis of Sven Nykvist's color photography, particularly in the beginning and end of the film, is on autumnal colors, gold and scarlet, that are both melancholy and menacing.

The affair takes its shape from Karin's willingness to sacrifice her domestic well-being for the wounding and awakening touch of her neurotic lover. It is about 85

per cent agony and 15 per cent ecstasy and through it Bergman suggests that what we seek is not happiness which (in the Bergman metaphysic, anyway) is the absence of pain, but suffering, which is the presence of feeling. In the apartment which David has abandoned, Karin smashes a glass and presses her hand on the pieces: to feeling living pain rather than endure the numbness of death. In a world without God, suffering has become Bergman's confirmation that he is alive, and, either because he has built up an immunity, or as he comes closer to the end of life, he seems to need more and more of it. I would guess his sympathies are less with Andreas, who says, pleadingly, that suffering *must* have an end, than with David who remarks that the larvae which have infested the Madonna and are eating her image from the inside out, are at least as beautiful as the image.

Although "The Touch" follows a chronology that seems primer simple compared with recent Bergman, there are enough missing links and shifts in tone to keep the cryptologists busy. It is never far from comedy, although there are few laughs, and with typical theatricality, the three main characters live in a social vacuum. Of the gossipy, small-town atmosphere to which they constantly allude, the only evidence is one inhabitant—the woman who sees and presumably informs on Karin and David.

The evolution of Bibi Andersson under Bergman has been nothing short of marvelous: from simple, uncomplicated, and shallow (through the trauma of "Persona" among other things) to simple, uncomplicated, and deep. Her beautiful, once blank face

now mirrors the acquired wisdom of her generous soul, her mental health having become an asset. She is in some ways the most bourgeois and unimaginative of Bergman's women. Here he gently mocks the milk-fed security of their upper-middle-class household and Karin's housewife-ly enthusiasm: charging around gaily, throwing open the shutters, waking the children, running the vacuum like some cinema-publicite heroine. But if she is the simplest and least neurotic, she is also the strongest and most adult. Max von Sydow says she is incapable of making decisions, but she is the only one who does. She is the only one able to live with the unwholeness of life, a life divided between two men.

I don't see how anyone, particularly a woman, could fail to respond to her as she registers the twitches of awakening nerve ends and the blossoming of her love, and libido. Never has Bergman so thoroughly penetrated the depths of her emotions through the changing surfaces of that beautiful, wholesome, inquisitive, sensual face: her quiet astonishment when Gould declares his love; her reflection and then her decision—in mid-sentence, she is about to tell her husband of Gould's interest in her—to have an affair; her seven changes of clothes before going to his apartment, ending up perversely in the first and dowdiest; her inventory, as she lies nude in his bed, of her flaws, and his (resultant?) impotence so that at their next meeting he practically rapes her; her growing obsession alternating with the major and minor obligations of the domestic life she is trying to maintain. Between the beginning and the end of the film she has pitted her ordinary life against his extraordinary one, and they have changed places. It is Andersson who is extraordinary.