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ZOETROPE 5:

THE FILMS OF (INGMAR BERGMAN)

May 21:

THE RITUAL (RITEN, The Rite)

(973)

THE TOUCH (BERÖRINGEN)

THE RITUAL:

1969. Director: Ingmar Bergman. Script: Bergman. Photography: Sven Nykvist (black and white for television). Editing: Siv Kanalv. Sound: Lennart Engholm, Bernth Frithiof. Mixing: Olle Jakobsson. Production manager: Lars-Owe Carlberg. Costumes: Mago. Assistant director: Christer Dahl. Production: Svensk Filminäustri/Cinematograph. Running time: 75 minutes. Distributed in the U.S. by Janus Films.

CAST: Ingrid Thulin (Thea Van Ritt-Winkelman--Claudia Monteverdi), Gunnar Bjornstrand (Hans Winkelman), Anders Ek (Sebastian Fisher), Erik Hell (Dr. Abramsson, the magistrate).

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This time his name is Hans Winkelman, but THE RITE is a teleplay which is more closely comparable to The Lie than to the series of films Bergman made in the late sixties. That we can study THE RITE at all is a function of its having been filmed instead of taped and therefore distributed theatrically outside of Sweden. It is a highly useful example of the kind of non-cinematic work Bergman has engaged in recently. Like The Lie, THE RITE is a chamber play for a strictly limited number of players; unlike the theatrical films, these television works seek a specific study and response, are much more abstract, more tightly constructed, and less "realistic." THE RITE can be seen as an elaboration of the impulse which led Bergman to interrupt A Passion with interlude interviews with his actors, and it reveals once again that one of the central metaphors of Bergman's work in the sixties is the rigorous self-doubt of "The Snakeskin." THE RITE sets up for us a simple symbolic structure which is easily interpreted. The dramatic tension is between Dr. Abramsson the inquisitor and the three actors. The film is divided into discrete scenes beginning and ending with a general meeting of the four and including all the permutations of the group as pairs as each of the actors is interviewed by Abramsson. In addition, each actor has one scene with each of the other actors and Abramsson has a scene to himself. This scene is particularly important because it reinforces the mode of religious ritual: it is necessary to confess before the absolution of the sacrifice.

If Abramsson's role seems unclear, if the charges brought against "Les Riens," the group are never specific, please note that Abramsson is representative here of the audience, as the group of actors symbolizes artists. The audience of course, never brings any specific charges against the artists, yet the audience and the artist exist in a mutually antagonistic relationship as Bergman sees it, the audience continually prying, trying to discover the roots of a talent which fascinates it, humiliating the artist who is considerably more sceptical about "art than his patrons. For Bergman, that that art is an organic parallel to the lives of the artists is

obvious from the subject matter of the "obscene" sketch which the actors perform. Bergman is regarded by many of his audience to be a highly symbolic artist. Ironically he deserves that reputation seldom, except in such works as *The RITE* when he is dealing specifically with the relationship between artist and observer. (You want symbols? Here!) "Les Riens" are rich, vulgar, not especially clear about their artistic purposes, contemptuous of the audiences that applaud them for work which they regard as little more than useless, and contemptuous, therefore, of themselves. They will do anything to please; they are whores, inhumanity personified. They are mortifyingly embarrassed, yet shameless; they confront us with their penises and breasts, cold, hard, and belligerent. The catharsis--if it can be called that--is achieved in this rite only when the audience is sacrificed. Then the artist is free: "They paid their fines, gave several interviews, and went away at the end of summer on a holiday."

How ironic that Ingmar Bergman of all contemporary filmmakers not only relatively humble but also certainly one of the most sceptical about his art should suffer the Sisyphusian punishment of being the high priest of contemporary film. It is an irony which Bergman certainly must interpret for himself in terms of Christian myth. *THE RITE*, like *All These Women*, is for all its skill a pathetically futile attempt at a personal exorcism for Bergman. If he tells us that art is a snakeskin full of ants, we applaud him as a priest; if he confesses that his work is tentative and personal, we acclaim him for his "mastery" and universality." Bergman, like many another contemporary artist, is plagued by a mask, a persona of himself that has been thrust on him by his public. Even his "faults" as an artist can be traced to this curious belligerence on the part of his audience: if he is criticized as pretentious, is it not often because observers of his work ascribe to this work pretenses that never existed? If his work seems to many to be obscure or "intellectually difficult" is this not precisely a criticism that reflects more brightly on the observer who insists on ascribing intellectual and analytical intentions to his films that Bergman not only would gainsay but also seems consciously to avoid? *THE RITE* seems to be an unsuccessful exorcism of this, Bergman's own personal devil--but then again, who can say? The catharsis would have been Bergman's--not ours.

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THE TOUCH:

1971. Director: Ingmar Bergman. Script: Bergman (Swedish and English). Photography: Sven Nykvist (Eastmancolor, 1:1.66). Design: P.A. Lundgren. Editing: Siv Kanalv-Lundgren. Sound: Lennart Engholm, Harry Engholm. Mixing: Bernth Frithiof. Music: Jan Jbhansson. Production manager: Lars-Owe Carlberg. Costumes: Mago. Production: BAC Pictures/ Cinematograph. Filmed on location in Sweden and London. Distributed in the U.S. by Cinerama releasing/Films Inc. Running time: 112 minutes. Swedish Premiere: June 26, 1971.

CAST: Bibi Andersson (Karin Vergerus), Max von Sydow (Dr. Andreas Vergerus), Elliott Gould (David Kovac), Barbro Hjort of Ornas (Karin's mother), Staffan Hallerstam (Anders Vergerus), Maria Nolgard (Maria--Agnes Vergerus), Erik Nyhlen (an archaeologist), Margareta Bystrom (Secretary to Dr. Vergerus), Alan Simon (Museum curator), Sheila Reid (Sara Kovac), Ake Lindstrom (Doctor), Mimmi Wahlander (nurse), Elsa Ebbesen (head nurse), Anna von Rosen, Karin Nilsson (neighbors), Per Sjostrand (another curator), Aino Taube (woman at the staircase), Ann-Christen Lohbraten (museum worker), Carol Zavis (BEA air hostess), Dennis Gotobed (British immigration officer), Bengt Ottekil (London bellboy).

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THE TOUCH, obviously, marks a significant new turning in the course of Ingmar Bergman's career--although "turning" might be too strong a word to indicate a shift which is, truthfully, rather subtle if important. The Baro films have been completed. Shortly after *A Passion* was completed, Bergman produced and directed a documentary entitled

"Farö Document which was shown on Swedish television on New Year's day 1970. Bergman insists that this film would have little interest for foreign viewers and consequently there are no plans to release the film outside of Sweden. There is very little information available about the Farö Document but it seems evident that it served as a kind of objective companion piece to the series of films of the 1960s which had Farö as their setting and which drew their essential mood from the island. As such it puts a period to this series of films. In October 1970, according to Vernon Young, Bergman's teleplay The Sanctuary was directed by Jan Molander for Eurovision, although it is not clear when this piece was written. (The Lie, from internal evidence would seem to date from the latter part of 1968, about the same time as the script of Shame, although, again, it is not clear when the play was produced in Sweden.) In any event, Bergman seems to have been aware that the common structure and focus of the seven major films of the sixties were veins that had been worked out and he shifts with THE TOUCH to a broader canvas. Like Smiles of a Summer Night and The Devil's Eye (and possibly Now About All These Women) THE TOUCH marks a shift in Bergman's palette and is at least nominally a comedy, even if to call it such might seem to be stretching the usual province of the word. Nevertheless, THE TOUCH shares with these more obviously humorous works a distanced tone and an objectivity which does not characterize the island films.

The couple is no longer the basis of the film; Bergman reverts to an easier structure, the more common and dramatically resourceful triangle. If the film focused on Andreas Vergerus we would have a work much more in the spirit of Shame or A Passion. That we are more interested here in Karin and David, the ones who control the situation, gives us a sense that THE TOUCH is in a way a relaxation. It is not the humiliation of Andreas or David or Karin that is at the heart of the film, but rather the dilemma--a classic one--that faces Karin. Her life is sketched for us in pleasant melodies of housework and wardrobe--elements of a bourgeois style which drastically separate her from Bergman's women characters of the past ten years. Andreas, too, is quite separate from von Sydow's recent roles for Bergman. He is a doctor, not an artist--he does useful work. He is sensible and fairly balanced (and less interesting as a result). No need to say more. David, it is true, could survive well on Farö -- in fact his room in Stockholm's old city is his own island. He was born in Germany, grew up in the U.S. and Israel, now lives in London, travels much, is totally a displaced person, a fitting inhabitant of Bergman's cinematic island. Yet the pivot of the film is Karin and her viewpoint is not tragic, but rather romantic and slightly comic. The colors of the film alone give us this sense; warm, autumnal, simple, realistic, not neurotically distorted. That a note of optimism is missing from the end of the film is only to Bergman's credit. The characteristic upbeat ending of the fifties never worked, was never really acceptable. THE TOUCH brings us back to the city for a while, and to the rhythms of everyday life which help to hide the sterility of the soul which is so evident on the island. It marks what is really, I think, an important step forward for Bergman in that it attempts to integrate the experience and knowledge of the island films in a more realistic, less abstract setting.

The film has proved to be especially difficult for English-speaking audiences, unaccustomed to hearing Bergman, used only to reading cryptic summaries of his dialogue. He was roundly condemned for lacking this sense of English necessary for true colloquial dialogue but this is a simpleminded criticism. In the original version of the film, verisimilitude is closely maintained as the Swedish characters speak English only when they must. That their English is a bit stiff is not only an acceptable device but one of the main pleasures of the film. As for David Kovac, his checkered background makes his own forced dialogue true and absorbing, especially since it is one of the main tools Bergman uses to limn what is one of his drollest and most demonic characters. The pun which is the title certainly signals that Bergman has at least a strong academic background in the language. He has wisely limited himself to the kind of English-speaking characters he can do well--and he does them well. The greatest limitation of Bergman's art has been its

intervention: Bergman's sin is that he is the personal and private ephiphanies that have been Bergman's highest achievement with a more recognizable world, a more immediate experience.

WHISPERS AND CRIES:

1972. Director: Ingmar Bergman. Script: Bergman. Photography: Sven Nykvist (Eastmancolor, 1:1.66), Sound: Owe Svensson. Design: Marik Vos. Editing: Siv Lundgren. Makeup: Borje Lundh. Mixing: Sven Fahlen, Owe Svensson. Music: Chopin performed by Kabi Laretei, Bach performed by Pierre Fournier. Executive Producer: Lars-Owe Carlberg. Production: Cinematograph. Distributed in the U.S. by New World Pictures. Running time: 94 minutes. Shot on location near Taxinge Nasby, Fall 1971.

CAST: Harriet Andersson (Agnes), Kari Sylwan (Anna), Ingrid Thulin (Karin), Liv Ullmann (Maria), Erland Josephson (Lakaren), Henning Moritzen (Joakim), Georg Arlan (Fredrik), Anders Ek (Isak), Inga Gill (story-teller), Malin Gjorup, Rosanna Mariano, Lena Gergman, Monika Priede, Greta Johanson, Karin Johanson.

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It is not the dream that is most important, it is the memory of the dream when waking, the integration of the dream into active life. If The Touch represents a movement for Bergman away from that dream which the dreamer will be ashamed of and towards the active life this side of it, then WHISPERS AND CRIES is its dialectical opposite: the dream freed of reality. Certainly, it is Bergman's most powerful film, at least as measured by emotional and psychological parameters. Bergman, in the introduction to the published script of the film, describes his intention:

As I turn this project over in my mind it never stands out as a completed whole. What it most resembles is a dark flowing stream: faces, movements, voices, gestures, exclamations, light and shade, moods, dreams, nothing fixed, nothing really tangible other than for the moment, and then only appearing to be. A dream, a longing or perhaps an expectation, a fear, in which that to be feared is never put into words--I could go on indefinitely describing key and color, we shouldn't be any wiser.

The elements Bergman lists --as well as many others -- of "key and color" are handled in WHISPERS AND CRIES with a clear mastery of the medium which has been seldom matched. Yet Bergman avoids the implications. The dream he has designed for us is a perfect object, an exquisite collection of Bergmanian tropes which never tries to justify its existence. Like many recent expressionist films, it impresses greatly with its technique and is never clearly understood intellectually. It reiterates many of Bergman's constant moods and atmospheres, yet it never organizes them so that they can renew and redirect their power. Although any single shot of the film might be demonstrably more effective than any shot of one of the island films, nevertheless the total effect of WHISPERS AND CRIES is more limited, less personal, and less vital than Shame or A Passion or Persona or even The Touch. WHISPERS AND CRIES is a tour de force but the force lacks point and direction. Despite its subject (or maybe because of it,) the film is nothing more nor less than a gorgeous object. It glitters and gleams, whispers seductively and cries with real anguish but it remains hermetic. It is a gorgeous snakeskin full of fascinating ants, a surrender to art.

It would be nice to have something definitive and final to say about Ingmar Bergman at the end of this series but what has been important about his career is that it has never been definitive. He continues to make films with the same attention to detail which characterizes the craftsman. The films illuminate each other but do not progress in the same way as, say Godard's or Fellini's. Each film is a further attempt at redefining the elements of a universe long ago described. Bergman's films are not dialectic or didactic; they are interior voyages which leave much unexplained but

there is never anything in a Bergman film which is not immediately understood at least on some level by the observer. His own personal burden has been that as a filmmaker he works in a world which demands neat meanings which he is not ready--indeed incapable of providing. Vernon Young ends his Cinema Borealis with a passage from George Santayana's The Last Puritan which probably best evokes Bergman's own situation vis-a-vis his audience:

"You idealize him and make him too complex. . . .
To my mind he was perfectly normal, only a little vague and undeveloped. He required a lot of time to mobilize his forces....
You endow him with altogether too much insight. In reality he was simply bewildered. There was a fundamental darkness within him, a long arctic night, as in all Nordics." "But isn't the arctic night very brilliant? And after the aurora borealis isn't there an arctic day no less prolonged?"

It is to be hoped.

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This is the last program of the series. I want to sincerely thank you for your support and patience and I would like especially to thank the following people for their invaluable help: Wally Osterholz, Sreekumar Menon, Clyde Griffin, Susan Schenker, Tad Gast, Lillian Dumont, and Vicki Grossfeld.