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CURSED BE MY TRIBE

A SECOND LOOK AT THE TOUCH

James Paul Gay

In August 1970, Ingmar Bergman changed the course of his career by announcing that for the first time he would be making a film in English, for an American film company. A further surprise came with the selection of comedian Elliott Gould as the star of this maiden venture.

Aside from Gould, Bergman was working with his regular troupe: Bibi Andersson and Max von Sydow co-star, and the photography is by Sven Nykvist. Nevertheless, from the title sequence onward, *The Touch* looks different from anything else Bergman has ever done. It opened in summer 1971 to generally mediocre Swedish reviews, with most critics commenting on the shallowness of the plot, Bergman's discomfort with the English dialogue, and Gould's laboured acting. In general, the film was dismissed as a minor lapse in a great career (about on the same level as *Now About These Women*), an interlude from which Bergman would recover as soon as his next film was released.

However, far from being dissociated from the main body of his work, *The Touch* explores and develops some of Bergman's oldest and most important themes. What is jarring about the film is not the initial false impression one gets of Bergman shooting off in trivial directions: it is rather the enormous disparity between the thematic development and the deliberately banal style. Bergman's art has been developed through the conflict and ambiguity that he feels toward God and Religion; even if he leaves this preoccupation for a time (as with *Persona* or *The Shame*), he returns to it again as he has done here. *The Touch* is a film about religion. It differs from Bergman's other religious films only in that it is the first to deal explicitly with the conflict between Judaism and Christianity, or more precisely with the threat of Judaism to Christianity.

The memory of the Nazi holocaust has muted the consciousness of this conflict, but to one obsessed, as Bergman is, with the disintegration of the Christian universe, the question cannot be entirely suppressed. Bergman has long had a strange fascination with Judaism. He is given to illustrating his

interviews with old Yiddish stories and Jewish jokes, and his continual re-examination of Christian symbology (especially crucifixion) leads him to Jewish symbols as well. Bergman has touched upon Jewish artifacts before—one thinks of the famous photograph from the Warsaw Ghetto in *Persona*—but recently the Jews seem to have occupied a more prominent place in his thoughts. Last spring, Bergman directed a new play by Lars Forsell, called *Show*, about the Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce. And now with *The Touch* he makes a Jew the central character in his own drama.

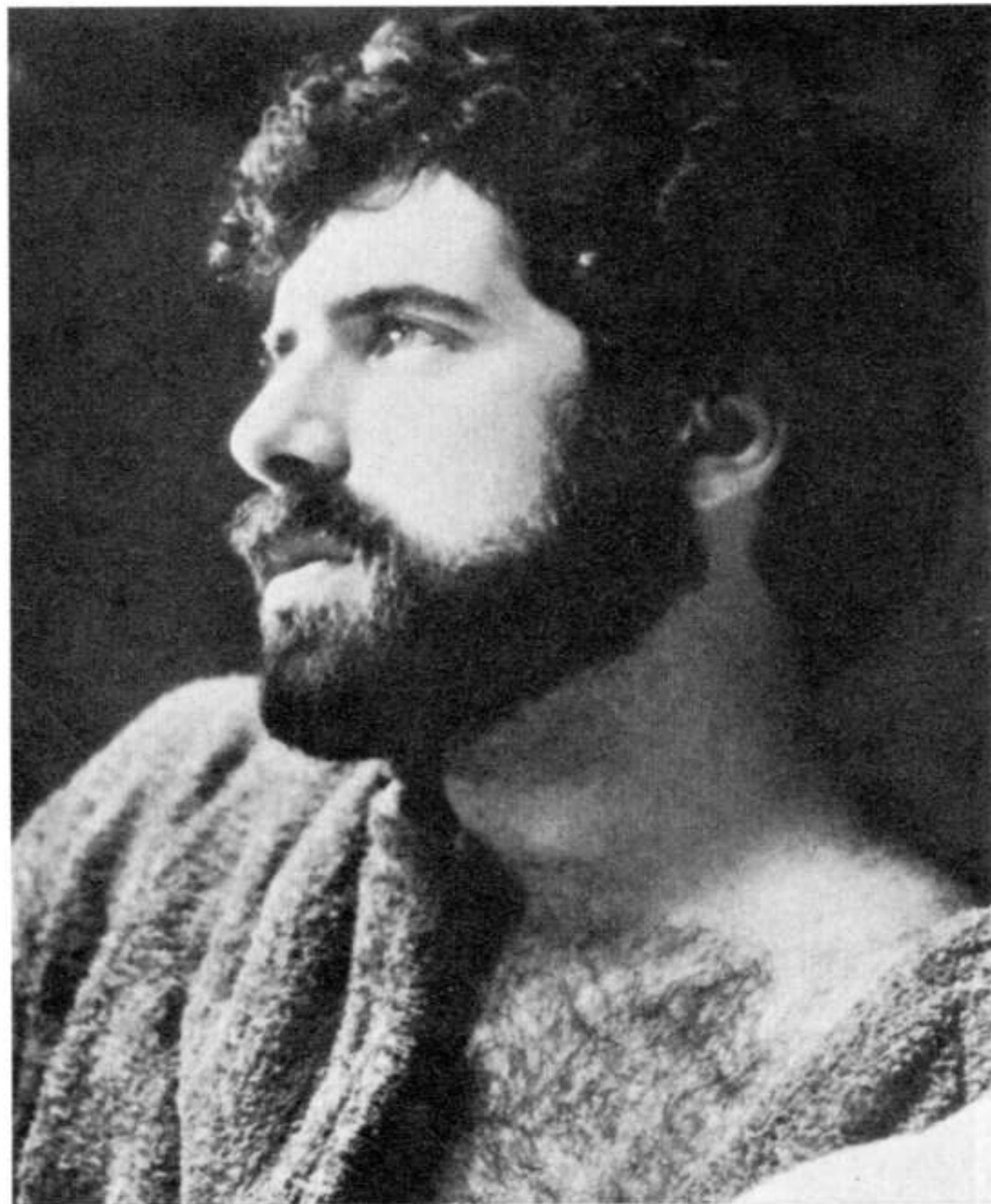
The conflict between thematic continuity and stylistic capriciousness is so marked that it effectively misleads the viewer in his appraisal of the film. During the first twenty minutes one is simply tempted to dismiss it as inept. *The Touch*—ostensibly a very simple story about a bitter-sweet love affair between a Swedish doctor's wife and a visiting American archaeologist—is poorly constructed and sketchily drawn. The camera set-ups, the lighting, the editing and most of all the sound are slickly and superficially executed. Close-ups abound of car

headlights being turned off, vacuum cleaners being pushed up to the camera, telephones being racked into focus just as they are about to ring; scenes end by having people walk into the lens, blacking out the screen. There is a montage of Bibi Andersson trying on various dresses before a mirror as she prepares to meet her lover that is reminiscent of Rouben Mamoulian at his worst—not of the creator of *Wild Strawberries* and *The Silence*.

This simply doesn't make sense. One can imagine Bergman stumbling over plot or characterisation (although not to the extent that he does here), but he is after all one of the greatest craftsmen ever to look through a lens. Regardless of anything else, Bergman cannot be charged with incompetence.

Most critics and the public have taken the film at face value—when it opened in Stockholm, one of the Swedish newspaper reviewers called it 'Bergman's *Love Story*'. I believe that this view misses the point; the film only begins to make sense if one looks behind the obvious plot and the musak on the soundtrack. What then remains is Bergman's examination of a special frightened, tortured and confused anti-semitism.

Elliott Gould (David) is an archaeologist who is digging up an old church on the Island of Gotland. Karin (Bibi Andersson) falls in love with David. She is married to a surgeon; her husband (Max von Sydow) is a man of great humanity and warmth. They have two children, both bright, spontaneous and loving. Their life together in an idyllic country house surrounded by gardens is bourgeois, but it is bourgeois at its best: secure, tender, stimulating, and (one is made to feel very strongly) fun. From the moment that David and Karin first encounter one another, in an abrupt



and ugly scene at a hospital right after her mother has died, their relationship is one of strangeness, tension and hostility. It is not at all a question of Gould as a bohemian, violent and unpredictable antithesis to Bibi Andersson's married life. It is rather that Bergman establishes an environment in which there is no motivation for Karin wanting to drink a cup of tea together with David, let alone carry on a passionate affair of two years duration. Their relationship is not that of a woman drawn to a man, but rather of love, security, order and tenderness drawn to its antithesis. This antithesis, in the perspective of the film, seems to be symbolised by David's Judaism.

Bergman makes us see that David is not what he purports to be: a tortured intellectual whose family has been exterminated in the concentration camps (we later find out that this is at least partly a lie: his sister is living in London). David is quite simply nefarious: a non-person whose face shines with the malevolence of a gargoyle, who crouches like a simian and whose gait is that of a brain-injured child. And here I think can be found the answer to a central riddle of the film: why Bergman chose Gould. David is not a character: he is a symbol, or more precisely, an icon. He is a catalyst for the other characters, the propulsive force toward iniquity. For this Bergman broke away from his tradition of ensemble acting and relied instead (much as Eisenstein did) on type-casting. A certain figure was needed to convey David's awful inarticulateness, his blind and random destructiveness. Bergman found this type in an alien actor: it would not do to have a Shylock who bleeds.

Karin and David begin their affair in the church David is excavating—interesting in itself since Bergman imposes religious objects continually throughout the film, and many of the most important shots end with the camera moving away from the actors

and on to a gargoyle or a saint or a Christ. David shows Karin an ancient wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, still partially entombed within the church wall. He shines a flashlight on the statue and we see how similar she looks to Karin. Later on, when David's and Karin's affair is disintegrating, Bergman returns to this church for the central scene in the film. David shows Karin the now fully excavated statue and explains that insect larvae have been discovered lying within the wood. They have lain dormant for five hundred years; now that the statue has been brought to light again the larvae are hatching and eating the Virgin away from within. Aside from the cheapness of this parable, it refers to two parallel things: David's relationship with Karin, and the Jews' relationship to Christianity. The larvae have lain dormant for five hundred years—roughly the time that the Jews of Europe were ghettoised—and now they are beginning their work again. If one posits a universal world order of Christianity, the menace of the Jews to that order becomes obvious: they can neither be assimilated nor exterminated. Like insects, they survive because they hide in dark places, they go where no one is looking and they work from within. The underground (and hence insect-like) existence of Jews within Christian society has been a staple of Jewish literature since Kafka.

When David was making love to Karin, he suddenly began screaming in an incomprehensible language: the English that he spoke in everyday situations was merely a cultural appendage that David affected in order to be able to move among the alien outside world. At the unguarded moment of orgasm, he reverts back to his own unique, incomprehensible and sinister-sounding tongue. David's English is like every other visible characteristic: camouflage. What exists at the core is a man who is not a part of any society, nation, language or

culture except his own.

David materialises from nowhere and he disappears just as suddenly. Karin, distraught, drives her open hand into broken glass, making a stigmata on her palm. She then goes off to London in search of him, even though she knows it means the end of her marriage and life as she had known it. She traces him to his flat and finds not David, but his sister, a deformed woman named Sarah (Sarah was the code name given by the Germans to all Jewish women as part of the identity-stripping process). Who is this woman? Where does she come from? We do not know. Unlike the Swedes of Karin's world, all of whom have a clear place in society and a clear relationship with the people around them, Sarah and David exist in a vacuum.

This historical refusal of the Jews to surrender their identity, to join in a larger chorus of angels, is something that one feels the film sees as frightening. The Jews are without roots; they live in a geographical and historical void and hence, for *The Touch*, perhaps in a type of spiritual void as well.

The horrors of the last generation have tended to institutionalise our thinking about anti-semites (and Jews as well). One's mind is forced immediately to think of the mass rallies, the ghettos, the window smashings and finally, Auschwitz. This has hidden a far older, far more traditional fear of the Jews. The guilt felt about Dachau has served only to mask this fear, to drive it further inward, to sublimate it into other forms. But, like Bergman's insects, it survives in the dark. Bergman has worked within the genre of a simple love story to play out a drama that is far from simple and even farther from love. ■

Left to right above: Ingmar Bergman, Max von Sydow and Bibi Andersson, Sheila Reid (Sarah), Elliott Gould.