

Review: Irving Singer (2007) *Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher: Reflections on his Creativity*. Cambridge, MASS: MIT Press.

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Irving Singer endeavours to provide ‘a panoramic approach to Bergman’s films in terms of recurrent themes and motifs that express his particular perspective on the world’ (3). The result is indeed a picturesque journey into the world of Ingmar Bergman that will probably be found engaging by those who maintain a general interest in Bergman, but might disappoint those who expected to encounter some ‘hard philosophy’ in a book whose title announces that it will view Bergman as a cinematic philosopher.

The author teaches philosophy at the MIT and is known for his numerous writings on the philosophy of love and sexuality of which the trilogy *The Philosophy of Love* (Chicago University Press, 1984-87) is the most famous output. Singer has also written extensively on cinema, most of the time by linking it to philosophical thought. The book *Three Philosophical Filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, Renoir* (2004) and the most recent *Cinematic Mythmaking: Philosophy in Film* (2008)¹ are clear attempts to that effect. Singer has two more book titles to his credit that operate in the area of ‘philosophical film studies.’

Though Singer is working in an analytical environment, he is not a resolutely analytical philosopher. He instead defines himself as a ‘modern-day existentialist or pragmatist humanist and pluralist’ (Singer 2009: 5). It is safe to assume that Singer has suffered in the past from analytical criticism that found his choice of subjects such as sexuality, love and films provocative and incompatible with rigorous science. In the preface to the

¹ [Reviewed in this issue of Film-Philosophy – Ed.]

recent edition of *Philosophy of Love*, Singer reports that this book ‘cut me loose from the mainstream of American philosophical analysis’ (Singer 2009: xvi).

Dropping the analytical scheme, however, does not automatically entail a research schedule that could be identified as ‘continental.’ There are no continental household names like that of Bazin, Ayfre, Astruc, Deleuze, Bergson, Münsterberg, Merleau-Ponty, Della Volpe, Cohen-Séat, Mitry, Cavell, Metz, Duhamel, Schefer, Agamben or Žižek to be found in Singer’s book. The bibliography shows that the author consulted eight interviews with Bergman and five autobiographical or ‘Conversation with...’ books by Ingmar Bergman. As secondary literature Singer used two books by Kalin and Gervais, plus three relatively old works by Robin Wood, Steene and Cowie.

Of course, no author is obliged to submit to the dogmas of phenomenology, deconstruction, semiology, cognitive science, feminist studies or any other ‘fashionable’ current; any author is free to invent his personal, alternative approach as long as it can be identified as such. There is no obligatory reading list and a good analysis can be based on the careful viewing of the films that Singer has obviously undertaken. When it comes to a ‘philosophical’ understanding of a director, however, the theoretical input should necessarily be more ambitious. A minimum requirement for a study that aims to establish a film director as a philosopher should be that its approach can be spelled out in terms of a few central questions that will be consistently pushed ahead and developed throughout the work.

The problem is that Singer’s book provides no theoretical angle at all, but seems to meander back and forth through Bergman’s films providing anecdotes, personal and poetic reflections, mythologies, transversal comparisons with a random selection of films, explanations through biographical facts (‘the relationship between Bergman and his cleric father’), as well as occasional mentions of vague philosophical parallelisms that most often evolve around the search for God and the ‘mysterious immensities that surround us’ (188).

Like all good artists, Bergman touches upon metaphysical themes like God and the mystery of existence, but in order to let these thoughts appear as philosophy one would need to view it through a more or less rigorous philosophical or theological study. Many of Singer's thoughts would be interesting as a starting point for a more systematic reflection, but in the book they appear in the form of random statements unconnected to a more general philosophical agenda. Singer has some thematic strongholds that can be subsumed under the headings: What is art? What is creativity? What is God? Given that these questions are not very original in themselves, the answers are often no more than commonplace. Great art has the ability 'to attain an expressive and purely aesthetic truthfulness about the world' (3). The subject is discussed under subheadings such as 'can one truly pour authentic emotion into the creation of performance of musical compositions without impairing one's ability to retain it for intimates one may also want to love in some sense or other?' (73) Bergman's 'creativity resembles the inventiveness of Picasso or, more particularly, Monet' (14). Finally, Bergman's ideas about God are over and again reinstated through the director's affirmation 'I believe in God but not in the church' (188) or by reminding the reader that Bergman's movies are not pessimistic inasmuch as he 'insists that his atheism has brought him a type of mental health' (116).

Philosophical topics like existentialism are limited to general remarks (Bergman's 'philosophical glass through which he is seeking truth about our existence' [124]). A theme like nothingness is merely mentioned saying that '*The Serpent's Egg* deals with characters who are unable to face up to the nothingness of their lives as imposed upon them by contemporary society' (130). One has the strange impression of dealing with Scandinavian literary criticism of the 1960s.

Conclusions appear to be spontaneous. Mentioning Sartre, Singer claims that *From the Life of the Marionettes* shows how much 'being emotionally illiterate is hell on earth' (188). Silence is recognised as a 'metaphysical void, an emptiness that instigates horror at the absence of meaningful sounds to which we are accustomed' (64) and Singer finds that 'much of the greatness of *The Seventh Seal* derives from the alternation of

sound and silence, the steadfast and rhythmic tessitura in this unified relation' (65). Things stay there and allusions to *Silence*, 'the coffin sequence,' and *The Serpent's Egg* do not add anything new to the metaphysical dimension of silence.

Most of the book's points appear in the form of concrete observations interpreted in a general fashion. About Bergman's use of music, Singer writes for example: 'the art to which he usually aligns himself is [...] music, and, above all, the music of Bach' (60) and 'since so much of Bach's work functions as religious music to be heard in church, one might say that Bergman's fascination with it is related to his father being a pastor and strict adherent to the dogmas of Christianity. Bergman was surely aware of that' (62).

Another example is the meaning of symbolisation and dreams where Singer explains that 'despite their differences, Bergman resembles Welles in denying that symbolization plays a significant part in what each of these two provides as a filmmaker' (31). Singer reiterates Bergman's famous statement that 'there are no symbols in my pictures' and 'the famous sequence at the beginning of *Wild Strawberries* in which Isak Borg depicts the frightening dream he has had' (32). One constantly has the impression that all this has been said already and a long time ago. Singer reports that Bergman changed the script of *The Magic Flute* 'to suit his personal conception' (17) and that Schikander incorporated an enlightened Eighteenth Century acceptance of the Judeo-Christian mandate to love one's neighbor as oneself (81). Singer cannot be the first researcher to reveal that 'the fundamental mythology of *Wild Strawberries*, as in several of Bergman's films, is vividly incorporated in the ambiguity within Borg's initial dream' (35). A similar déjà vu effect occurs when Singer explains that the plot of *Wild Strawberries* 'involves the ability of a spectator to enter literally into the dreamworld being presented on the screen in addition to the imagined capacity of a fictional character to enter conversely into the world of the spectator' (39). Singer goes on comparing *Wild Strawberries* with Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* and Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*. *Wild Strawberries* alters the motif by 'having the dreamer who has been watching

his own dream both interact with it and then introduce what he has been observing into his waking life thereafter' (39). This leads to the discovery that 'Bergman's dreams and his conscious experience jointly contribut[e] to the finding of truths about himself that have been obscured by his routinely "pedantic existence"' (40).

Singer acknowledges that *Persona* has been subjected to postmodernist attempts to 'deconstruct' the pretensions of realistic narration. He then proclaims that 'there may be some truth in this, but I think it must be seen in the context of Bergman's more extensive views about our reality as well as the nature of his art form' (171). Experimental as *Persona* is, one does not need to be a postmodernist to find something intrinsically deconstructive in this film. Instead, Singer claims that 'the concept of merging is a fundamental component of Western philosophy' and points to Aristophanes and Plato (164). Singer's treatment of *Persona* is characteristic for the whole book's tendency when he writes: 'in the nineteenth century ideology that saturated the culture Bergman inherited, the notion of Romantic love presupposed the absolute ideality of merging.' Bergman's approach is thus linked to 'our species' relationship with the cosmos and its creator' (165).

Meta-philosophical reflections on the nature of cinema do not fare much better. Once Singer argues that 'it is the magical effect of flickering images on a screen or monitor which makes a film not only inherently mythical in itself but also a conveyor of significant myths that have mattered greatly to many people' (34). Or he discovers that the fact that 'dreams in a movie contain dazzling symbols that we experience while asleep falsifies the uniqueness of a cinematic production' (33). These are not serious contributions to contemporary discussions of the nature of cinema. Likewise, his conclusions often do nothing more than state the obvious: 'In the real world we cannot converse with persons as they were in the past, but neither can we stand by at the edges of their prior being and spy upon them as they once existed' (38).

Comparisons with other films are often strange and are in need of further justification. In order to illustrate 'the actual dimensions of Bergman's imagination,' Singer compares his films with Jeunet's *Amélie*. He

then states that ‘*Amélie* does not force us to think about mythic themes’ (87). Equally random are some comparisons to the ever-recurring Hitchcock who ‘generally avoids the persistent probing that Bergman undertakes’ (40). Comparing the psychiatrist’s speech at the beginning of *Persona* with the speech of the psychiatrist at the end of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, Bergman finds that the latter’s speech is cumbersome and annoying while Bergman’s is inspired (174). In general, Bergman uses an explicitly violent and sexual

imagery that Hitchcock could not have used. We may ask whether this kind of recent freedom makes movies better. When I was younger, I thought that it did not, and still I find myself repelled by images of violence or contrived sexual performance. I have always enjoyed the sight of naked female bodies if they are handsome. That is an aesthetic criterion, and nowadays I am convinced that a related one can possibly justify the violence of overt sexuality that a sensitive filmmaker employs in his art. (22)

Singer’s book definitely helps us to delve into the world of Ingmar Bergman. The author has observed many details and is able to establish discursive links between films that are sometimes interesting. However, the piety with which he focuses Nineteenth Century themes such as Bergman’s attitude towards religion or Lutheranism is too prominent and not mitigated by ‘harder’ and more contemporary theory.

Bibliography

Singer, Irving (1984-1987/2009) *The Philosophy of Love*. Chicago University Press; reprinted as *The Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing Up*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.