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# north west passage

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## Preface

This issue of “North-West Passage”, edited by Fabio Pezzetti Tonion, is largely dedicated to the Proceedings of the Conference “Dietro lo specchio. Studi bergmaniani in memoria di Sergio Sablich”, held in Turin (3-4 March 2010) under the patronage of The Centre for Northern Performing Arts Studies, CRUT, Centro Regionale Universitario per il Cinema e l’Audiovisivo “Mario Soldati” and Scuola di Dottorato in Discipline Artistiche, Musicali e dello Spettacolo of the University of Turin, Regione Piemonte, Fondazione CRT, Museo Nazionale del Cinema.

F. P.

*Luciano De Giusti*

**Notes on Young Bergman's  
Narrative Form: *Kris***

Some of the most celebrated filmmakers in the history of cinema have acquired the label and the charismatic aura of the “auteur” from their very first film. They have entered history displaying from the beginning their own identity and the particular traits that their artistic maturity has later confirmed and reinforced. Ingmar Bergman belongs in contrast to the ranks of those who become and reveal themselves only little by little, progressively, film after film, gradually developing their style and poetics.

His beginnings oscillate in a seesaw fashion and follow quite different tendencies, a rather clear sign of a still hesitating filmmaker in search of his own path. He was not allowed to choose the themes of his first films, which were mainly taken from theatre plays, literary texts, novels or stories, but on which he attempted to leave the imprint of his strong and determined personality.

Such were the circumstances even for the very first film that he was offered to make, *Kris* (*Crisis*, 1946). Being fully committed to the aesthetic result, Bergman seemed to take into consideration, above all, the problem of narrating: in other words, the problem of the form and the structure to be given to the story. This is a quest that was to characterize all his work. But it is mainly in the first stages, up to *Fängelse* (*Prison*, 1949), that the figure of the young filmmaker seeking a narrative style that he cannot yet master is most evident. As opposed to his work for theatre, where he felt sure of his narrative style, Bergman knew that he lacked a style of his own in cinema. He therefore proceeded by trial and error, making attempts and adjustments. The question of the *foyer* – the origin of the story and its characteristics – seems to be at the centre of his attention. He tried several methods, and his own thinking process often literally rose to the film’s surface. There are frequent mock-up characters with the



specific role of stating, narrating or depicting. And the *mise en scène* trick of introducing the storyteller appears in different ways: in *Kris* through the use of a traditional voice-over, whereas in *Det regnar på vår kärlek* (*It rains on our love*, 1946) through the figure of an internal omniscient narrator – which, although not new in the cinema of those years, performs such a manifold role and with such a narrative weight that it can only be compared to the *meneur du jeu* later to be seen in Max Ophuls' *La ronde*. Both *Kris* and *Det regnar på vår kärlek* are thus framed by a doorway towards the world of fiction; they also contain some form of play within the play, although the representation within the representation was to reach its full dialectic meaning in *Fängelset*: not so much with the short film of early cinema found in the attic – a rather odd fictional tool – as with the fact that the whole story is framed by the making of a film, which gives a prologue and an epilogue to the real film, that is, to Birgitta's painful story.

All these methods, like gripping the audience's attention, physically producing a narrator or creating a metalinguistic dialogue, are rather frequent in Bergman's early creations. They are the tracks left by an author longing for his own public and for the contact with it. They seem to provide the young filmmaker in search of his own path with a support, a stand, a prop; sometimes they even act as a canvas frame on which to stretch the narration.

Bergman was unwilling to talk about his first films; he would shy away from this topic, almost as if he had repudiated them somehow or, at least, to some extent. Yet, as Olivier Assayas told him during their famous conversation, we still find those films absolutely thrilling<sup>1</sup>. Analyzing the way in which a novice author tries, even unsuccessfully, to formalize his first stories, is not less interesting than analyzing his masterpieces. Historians and scholars alike might have many reasons for such an interest: they can spot the influence of the classics, the points in common with the cinema of the same period, the first glimpses of the themes and stylistic devices of his later work, not to mention the biographical aspects, or the author's way of dealing with the genres, etc. In the pages that follow, as already said, I will examine his first film from one single point of view: the way of formalizing the story.

Bergman was so desperate to make his first film that he accepted the proposal to adapt a theatre play, a melodrama by the Danish author Leck Fisher: *Moderdyret* (*The Maternal Instinct*)<sup>2</sup>. Being commissioned to write the screen-

<sup>1</sup> See O. Assayas, S. Björkman, *Conversation avec Bergman*, Paris, Editions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du Cinéma, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> The filmmaker remembers: "Jag hade redan före inspelningen av *Hets* bombarderat Carl Anders Dymling med böner om att få göra en egen film, men blivit avvisad.

play, Bergman took the opportunity to leave his mark since that very first stage and strove to turn the adaptation into a personal text. He thus introduced from scratch a mercurial character named Jack: a self-destructive seducer with a strong narcissistic personality<sup>3</sup>.

Jack is inserted like a sort of wedge that splits open the women's triangle of the original text, a triangle composed of a daughter, a mother and a stepmother (or foster mother), that is to say: Nelly, Jenny and Ingeborg. Such an insertion cannot but dramatically transform the story's plot. In terms of genre, it stresses the melodrama's pitch and tones, and it does so precisely through the use of a dissolute libertine, a sort of gigolo, who will first seduce the mother and then the daughter.

The creation of this character – whose life is pure performance – allows Bergman to introduce the theme of “the mask” and, along with it, the theme of life as an acting performance; life is seen as a show, in which every human being is a prisoner of the role assigned to her/him, as if she/he was a puppet. “Marionettes” is the exact word used by Jack to define the adults, the older people listening to chamber music in the film; leading a team of young people, he disturbs and even interrupts their party to launch an improvised jam session. It is a kind of generational conflict and cultural protest, the merit of which he claims for himself: “Have you seen those silly marionettes? Who stirred them? Me”. This young man's attitude relates the film to a rather common practice in the Swedish cinema of that period<sup>4</sup>.

Plötsligt skickade han mig en dansk pjäs. Den hette *Moderdyret* och var skriven av Leck Fischer. Dympling lovade mig att jag skulle få regissera om jag kunde skriva ett bra manuscript på detta storslagna pekorall. Jag var vild av lycka och skrev på nätterna ett scenario i rasande fart. Jag tvangs sedan bearbeta manuskriptet ett par gånger innan det bestämdes att jag på sommaren 1945 skulle få göra filmen. Efter framgången med *Hets* döptes den till *Kris*. Det visade sig vara ett passande namn. Den första inspelningsdagen minns jag fortfarande som en ofattbar fasa”. I. Bergman, *Bilder*, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1991, pp. 122-123. [“Even before the filming of *Torment*, I had bombarded Carl Anders Dympling with pleas asking to be allowed to make my own film but had been turned down. Then one day he sent me a Danish play. Its title was *Moderdyret* (*The Maternal Instinct*), its author Leck Fischer. Dympling promised me that I would be allowed to direct the film if I could manage to write a good script from this grandiose drivel. Wildly happy, I spent my nights writing the scenario, at breakneck speed. After presenting it, I was forced to do two or three rewrites before it was decided that I could make the film during the summer of 1945. Inspired by the success of *Torment*, I christened it *Crisis*. It turned out to be an apt title. I still recall the first day of shooting as a complete and unadulterated horror” (I. Bergman, *Images. My Life in Film*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 1990, pp. 122-123)].

<sup>3</sup> It is he himself, in the sequence in which he takes Ingeborg to the station, who says in confidence to her: “I only love myself”.

<sup>4</sup> See B. Steene, *Bergman e il cinema svedese del dopoguerra*, in F. Bono (ed.), *Il giovane Bergman*, Roma, Officina Edizioni, 1992, pp. 9-18.

By means of this “little devil”, as he significantly calls him<sup>5</sup>, Bergman brings up the topic of theatre at its broadest, in other words, the relationship between truth and fiction, between life and the representation of life, between reality and image. Being an out-of-work actor, Jack performs on the real world’s stage and plays a fictitious “self”, to the point of dying on the street, in front of a theatre, as in a last representation of himself: “He turns his own death into a public show”<sup>6</sup>. Bergman strongly wanted that scene, and so much so that, not finding a street to his liking for it in Stockholm, he had a whole street built from scratch in the studios. It is the only scene that, with time, he would redeem in a film which he did not appreciate: “filmen är dålig. Den är alltigenom dålig. [...] Dett finns ett avsnitt i den som fungerade och det är skönhetsalongen. Det är ungefär tvåhundra meter”<sup>7</sup>.

But before we analyse that scene, let us see how the topic of theatre, apart from being brought forth by the way in which Jack’s character narrates reality, is also treated and exploited by the filmmaker through the way in which he gives form to the story<sup>8</sup>.

When he began directing films, Bergman tended to strictly follow the solid genre conventions of fictional representation – in this case, those of melodrama. In a similar manner, he adopted a well-established trick, the narrating voice-over, in order to introduce the story and to subsequently underline the phases of its development. An omniscient narrator’s voice accompanies and completes the visual information of the very first shots (which introduce the space context, the town and some of its inhabitants to us), carefully guiding the spectators into the diegetic universe that is going to unfold before their eyes. The voice announces that the woman on the screen, a stranger who has unexpectedly arrived in the quiet town disturbing its peacefulness, is Jenny: after 18 years, she is here to retrieve her daughter Nelly, who has been raised by a foster mother, Ingeborg. And now “the play can start”, adds the voice, making us cross the threshold into fiction. But it goes on as if not taking itself

<sup>5</sup> According to Jacques Aumont, the character can be understood as an alter ego of the filmmaker. Cf. J. Aumont, *Ingmar Bergman, “Mes films sont l’explication de mes images”*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 2003, pp. 54-56.

<sup>6</sup> J. Marty, *Ingmar Bergman. Une poétique du désir*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> [“The film’s lousy, through and through. [...] There’s one sequence in it which went well, and that’s the bit in the beauty salon. About 200 metres.”] S. Björkman, T. Manns, J. Sima (eds.), *Bergman om Bergman*, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1970, pp. 23-24 [Eng. tr. *Bergman on Bergman*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1973, p. 22]

<sup>8</sup> The theme of theatre, treated in these two sequences, is also brought to light in F. Netto, *Ingmar Bergman. Il volto e la maschera*, Roma, Edizioni Fondazione dello Spettacolo, 2008, pp. 35-36.



*Kris*.

too seriously, keeping its distance, being cautious: “I would not claim it to be a great and exciting drama. It is nothing more than a piece of everyday life, almost a comedy. Let us allow the curtain to rise”. On these last words, Malin, Ingeborg’s maid, pulls up the window curtain – a metaphor for the theatre one – so that the play can really start. The narrating eye, to which the narrating voice has given way, slowly enters Ingeborg’s house with a camera movement that starts revealing the universe hidden inside.

The omniscient narrator’s voice-over was a widely used means in the cinema of the Thirties and Forties; Bergman, aware of not mastering the narrative tools of cinema as finely as those of theatre, may have resorted to it as a perfectly safe anchorage, or even as a strong springboard from which to jump and spread his wings. In the same manner, introducing the spectator to the narrated world through a real window frame had been a conventional solution for a long time, right from the time of silent movies. So none of these choices would be particularly original if taken separately, but the thing is that they are combined. As a matter of fact, when considered together, they do acquire a strong significance; first, because they are an artistic touch and characterize Bergman’s career – a theatre director engaging in filmmaking; secondly, because they pre-

figure many more ways of introducing a narrator into the story, something that was to become especially varied and elaborate in his later years' work. But this is not all: such formal tricks, which are somehow external to the diegesis, show up again during the very first sequence that the movie camera presents, as we enter Ingebord's house. The woman is blaming little Kalle, one of the children to whom she gives piano lessons to earn her living, because he does not put enough passion into it. She admonishes the boy: "You cannot learn to play well if you do not put your soul into you playing".

Bergman certainly pours his soul into his work; suffice it to note how much his own life nourishes his films, including the first ones. As this particular sequence is the first— after the prologue — in the first film of a director that has to "learn to play", it is easy to see in the admonition an autobiographical clue, aside from its value as an implicit statement of poetics.

Having noticed these conjunctions between the metanarrative frame and a particular element of the depiction, we can now face the sequence that leads to Jack's suicide in the film's first concluding scene — when he is unmasked as the mother's lover in the presence of Nelly, the previously seduced daughter. During his walk with Nelly by the riverside, he had declared: "One day I shall abandon this puppet theatre for the realms of gloom". Similarly, to the foster mother of this girl "so real that she makes me unreal", this girl whom he needs as "a sort of anchor to reality", he had said: "I wonder why I keep on living this ghost life". Now the time has come and he announces his purpose: "I will now kill myself. But it is only theatre".

Bergman not only puts this a statement on Jack's lips through the screenplay, he also acts accordingly and makes it come true in the *mise en scène*; he constructs a stage, which he has clearly envisioned since the film's inception. He explains it with his own words in *Laterna magica*:

Detta var svårt men svårt skulle bli värre. I filmen förekommer en skönhetssalong, enligt manus gränsar den till en revyteater. På kvällen hör man music och skratt från teatern. Jag yrkade på att gatan skulle byggas, eftersom jag inte fann någon lämplig plats i Stockholm. Det skulle bli ett dyrbart bygge, det begrep jag trots mitt förryckta tillstånd. Men jag hade en vision av Jacks blodiga huvud under tidningen, den blinkande teaterskylten, skönhetssalongens upplysta fönster med de stela vaxansiktena under konstfulla peruker, den regnspolade asflaten, tegelmuren i fonden. Jag skulle ha mina gatstump<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> ["That was hard enough, but what was to come was much worse. There was a

Bergman organizes the sequence with three interconnected spaces. One of them, the theatre building, remains off-screen throughout and is only perceived through the sounds that come from its interior. The two visible spaces are the beauty parlour and the street where the theatre is located, a street that is conceived as a theatrical space itself, in which Jack commits suicide. Even though it is outdoors, it is a closed space. There is a high brick wall and the street seems to end against it as a cul-de-sac; the wall acts like a backdrop that limits space and builds up a sort of stage on which Jack carries out his purpose. His deed closes a scene that actually takes place mainly in an adjacent space: Jenny's beauty parlour, where Nelly works. The physical contiguity between the beauty parlour and the theatre was sought deliberately and tenaciously: both of them are realms of some sort of *mise en scène*, they are both house rituals that have to do with the dialectics between reality and appearance. Even a beauty parlour, with its cult of appearance, pretension and makeup, is indeed a temple of *mise en scène*.

Bergman makes a point of showing the intricate relationship between these two worlds through the means and the language of cinema, that is, using sound and light. The beauty parlour is in complete silence except for the faint sound of music which – Nelly reminds Jack – “comes from the theatre next-door, as you know”. During Jenny's long following monologue in front of the mirror, the audience's laughter can be heard in the background, amplifying the pathetic contrast between the variety show and the bleak misery on her face.

The interdependence between the two places is even more significant from a visual point of view. A strong pulsating light comes into the parlour through its front window: it is the glow of the theatre's neon sign, out there, together with the light of the street lamps; and it is so strong that it has made Maaret Koskinen interpret the window's bright rectangle as a mock cinema screen<sup>10</sup>. As a matter of fact, the shop window casts beams of light on to the interior's dark gloom, indeed like a screen. But it becomes rather a stage proscenium

beauty salon in the film, situated, according to the script, next door to a music hall. Music and laughter were to be heard from the theatre in the evening. I insisted on the set of a street being built, as I could not find a suitable place in Stockholm. It would be an expensive business, I realized that, despite my insane state of mind. But I had a vision of Jack's bloody head under the newspaper, the winking light of the theatre signs, the beauty salon's illuminated window with the rigid wax faces beneath elaborate wings, the rain-washed asphalt, the brick walls in the background. I was going to have my little stretch of street”.] I. Bergman, *Laterna magica*, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1987, p. 85-86. [Eng. transl. I. Bergman, *The Magic Lantern*, New York, Penguin Books, 1988, pp. 70-71].

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M. Koskinen, *Al di là della finzione. Alle origini dell'estetica di Bergman*, in Bono (ed.), *Il giovane Bergman*, cit.





*Kris.*

again as Nelly draws its curtain open and thus uncovers a mysterious male figure, where Jacques Aumont sees the first image of death in Bergman's cinema<sup>11</sup>. This French critic does not prove nor explain his interpretation, but I tend to reasonably agree with this plausible intuition, and I would even underline an audiovisual coincidence. The disquieting character dressed in black stops at the shop window and stares inside through it; almost at the same time, someone knocks (off-screen) at the door, and Jack appears through it; introduced by this death omen, he comes onstage for the last time. In other words, when "death" becomes be *seen*, Jack becomes *heard* – knocking at the door.

Mirroring symmetrically the initial camera movement and creating (even despite the distance) a sort of chiasmus, the narrating eye goes now from the inside to the outside. It follows the two women: they have heard the shots and rush out to the street. The link between the last interior frame and the first exterior frame is none other than the mysterious black character, around whom the camera pivots like a hinge; absolutely still, he has always been out there, waiting for Jack's fate of death to be fulfilled. And now Jack has killed himself

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Aumont, *Ingmar Bergman*, cit., p. 121.

in front of the theatre and in front of its audience – who are going away at the end of the show, leaving the street and the windows from which they have overlooked the scene.

The two shots that Jack has fired against himself resound off-screen, together with the music from the theatre that continues to permeate the beauty parlour. Meanwhile, the narrating eye focuses on Jenny's face in front of the mirror, a framing that was to inspire dozens of future images of women at the mirror.

The suicide, a theatrical issue in every sense, comes in fact after a long take of approximately 90 seconds. It is a kind of "sequence long shot" and is all the more significant as it takes place before and inside a mirror, that is: a basic self-representation device, the first theatre of life, the primeval place of the individual's own creation, revelation and knowledge. Before the mirror, treated as a topos of revealed truth, Jenny utters a monologue, makes a confession, scrutinizes and touches herself. She draws the balance of her own life: abandoned by everyone, she is alone and has to face herself, her failure and the merciless passage of time – which leaves its prints on her withering body. She finds some consolation for her disenchantment by comparing herself to Ingeborg, who is the same age, but she knows that her relative beauty is only appearance anyway. Bergman stages all this inside a mirror, which is placed in a beauty parlour, which is nextdoor to a playhouse, which is located in the world's theatre, which is the final object of Bergman's gaze<sup>12</sup>.

This significant excess, this semantic overload is certainly a typical feature of melodrama. In this case, nevertheless, we are in the presence of a superabundance that is clearly controlled and purposely merged into the film's organism.

*Kris* is not a balanced film at all, but it does contain some scattered flashes of brilliance, like those that emanate from this sequence, a sequence that even its creator liked very much; the only one that he would save.

<sup>12</sup> On this topic cf. E. Törnqvist, *Il teatro mundi di Bergman*, in L. De Giusti (ed.), *Oltre il commiato. L'opera multiforme di Bergman (1982-2003)*, Milano, Il Castoro, 2005, pp. 113-125.