

BERGMAN, ANTONIONI, FELLINI

By Michael Ventura

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“The death of an artist is quite unassailable,” wrote Lawrence Durrell, adding: “One can only smile and bow.” And after one has smiled and bowed? When two master directors, who once shook my life to the core – Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni – died on the same day, July 30, it felt as though something needed doing, some observance needed to be observed. And their deaths brought up another, Federico Fellini’s in 1993. I hadn’t watched their films in a long while, so my observance (and I heartily recommend it) consisted of observing, watching, in no special order: Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* and *8½*; Antonioni’s *The Passenger*, *Blow-Up*, and *L’Avventura*; Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Winter Light*, *Summer Interlude*, *Autumn Sonata* and *Persona* -- experiencing all the while a state that my friend Evann DeMario described last summer, “Great art makes you feel that you’re being interrogated.”

She meant that in a good way.

To have one’s sense of beauty interrogated, as it were, by the extraordinary visual intelligence of these artists. To have one’s spirituality interrogated by down-to-earth souls who struggled with whether spirituality was even possible to an honest person anymore, and who accepted no obvious or whimsical answers. To have one’s vitality, one’s capacity for rich living, interrogated by questioners who refuse to accept irony in place of meaning. To have our era interrogated by another, stripping today’s preoccupations bare, right down to the essence of what we used to call “the human condition.” Beautiful and difficult awakenings await you. You are being asked, “Do you know what you believe? What have you taken for granted lately? Do you know you didn’t believe some things you thought you did? Can you see? What can you see?”

Fellini, Bergman and Antonioni are forceful by their very foreignness, seeing the world as no American could. They were Europeans who charged themselves with recreating not only cinema, but art itself, after the colossal failure of European culture that was World War II. That, and how, in the two decades after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, atomic bombs seemed to make human effort terribly small and temporary -- a factor always present in their films. Remember that until the early Sixties the U.S. and U.S.S.R. tested their bombs very visibly, above ground, and no season passed without fresh footage of the fate that might await us all.

When the now-mute actress Elizabeth in *Persona* sees on television a Vietnamese monk incinerate himself in protest, and when she studies a photo of Jewish children marched out of their homes under Nazi rifles; when Guido, the filmmaker-protagonist of *8½*, can’t bring himself to film a scene in which a rocket-ship takes off with survivors from a stricken earth; when Sandro, the sell-out architect in *L’Avventura*, says there is no point building anything beautiful because in 10 or 20 years it will all be blown away; when in *Winter Light* a fisherman and father of four commits suicide because the Chinese now have the bomb; when the cultured, intellectual Stein in *La Dolce Vita* kills his two beautiful children and himself because he can’t bear the thought of them having to face what the world is becoming -- what do we make of that in the first decade of the 21st Century, 40-50 years after these films were made?

We tend now to be reductive. Such behavior is due to neuroses, psychoses, chemical

imbalances, genetic imperfection. Whether these judgments are put eruditely by scholars or mused into pap on Oprah, the underlying assumption is that if your chemicals are balanced and you “get real” and live right, why, you should be doing just fine. Concentration camps, atom bombs, global warming, genocide, famine, civilization spinning out of control -- balance those chemicals and don't worry your pretty little head, it's got nothing personally to do with you. But Bergman, Antonioni, and Fellini -- they understood the components of horror. They saw that horror *is* horror precisely to the extent that it is impersonal and may sweep you up at any time no matter who you are, how you live, and what you have. They knew that science had increased the force and possibility of horror to the extent that something in China might reach into a Swedish fisherman's life and destroy his soul. Since their greatest films, civilization has had decades more to decline. Ignorance, callousness, greed and the inability of our institutions to manage our collective fate are increasingly taken for granted. Rightly or wrongly, no one expects things to get better anytime soon, even if everyone quits smoking. Bergman, Antonioni, and Fellini portrayed how such a world does corrodes our *personal* lives, our relationships, our families, our very capacity for intimacy. Their characters weren't victims who had no chance; but to be influenced by society's chaos is unavoidable, and in different ways they portrayed the consequences of being unaware that one is influenced in this way. They suggested how an individual might overcome such pernicious influence. Antonioni did this by implication; Fellini and Bergman did it more directly; but they each were concerned that their spectators survive with souls intact. There was an art of *intent*. They offered their films as a stand against disintegration.

In cinema, horror is now merely a genre. The young are so fundamentally terrified that they eat popcorn while witnessing dismemberment in order to accustom themselves to their spiritual (if not their physical) future, while we grown-ups watch crime shows on TV in which the central ritual is autopsy and the central problem is how to stop serial murderers. Death -- not just personal death, but societal death -- is as overwhelming a fear in these “entertainments” as it ever was in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*. But in our genre-entertainments the attitude is passive; the characters we identify with fight for us with tools and abilities we don't have. Watching them, we wait (in fantasy) to be saved. In Bergman especially, but Fellini and Antonioni too, the characters have the same fears we do and have as little to fight them with as we have, so their failures are our cautions and their victories are our possibilities. Thus, watching them, one is involved, not passive. And, in case we seek passivity, Antonioni especially - - but Bergman and Fellini too -- chart passivity's awful cost.

Alas, I've made them appear very glum, haven't I? Bleak? But think of the intense beauty they had to employ in order to make such concerns watchable, much less bearable! No visual artist has surpassed the stunning beauty of their very different styles. Whether in black and white or color; whether you're seeing landscapes or interiors, faces in close-up or figures in long-shot -- the play of hues, textures and forms, is constantly astonishing, breathtaking. Beauty is presented as a constant possibility *no matter what you're looking at*. Whatever is happening on screen, the eye of the beholder -- that is, the camera -- finds it somehow exquisitely beautiful. This is not only a cinematic but a spiritual achievement of the highest order.

Anyway, Fellini is so famously festive that people often overlook the high seriousness,

and the deep sadness, of his subjects. Antonioni, well, granted, but for his beauty he's unflappably bleak. But Bergman gets little credit for his humor, evident even in *The Seventh Seal*, set in the plague-ridden 14th Century, as when the clown is told that in a Passion-play he must be the Human Soul and he quips, "Not a good part."

The poet George Seferis paraphrased Heraclitus, I believe, when he wrote, "and for the soul/ If it is to know itself/ It is into a soul/ That it must look." The great achievement of these directors was to create living souls to look at, that we might know ourselves. Antonioni might demur, but Fellini would surely agree with a Bergman speech in *Autumn Sonata*: "To me, man is a tremendous creation, an inconceivable thought. In man is everything from the highest to the lowest. Man is God's image, and in God there is everything. So human beings are created, but also the demons and the saints, the prophet and artist and iconoclast. Everything exists side by side. It's like huge patterns changing all the time. In the same way, there must be countless realities, not only the reality we perceive with our senses, but a tumult of realities arching above each other, inside and outside. It's just fear and priggishness to believe in limits. There are no limits. Neither to thoughts nor to feelings. It's anxiety that sets limits."

That doesn't solve his characters' problems, but it recognizes their context: possibility without end; beauty, even in places you might rather it not be; questions asked, even without the possibility of an answer -- an art that never accedes to, or collaborates with, disintegration.

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