

The Masks of Performance: Art's Aesthetic and Social Representation in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1983)

Sarah W. Gilmartin, Buffalo State College

“When I show a film I am guilty of deceit. I employ an apparatus constructed on a physical imperfection of man, an apparatus with which I cause in my public powerful shifts of emotion like the swinging of a pendulum. I can make them laugh, scream with terror, smile, believe in legends, become indignant, shocked, seduced, or yawn with boredom. I am, then, either a deceiver, or—when the public is aware of the deception—a performer of tricks.” (*Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* 69)

The presence of magical realism within a work of art suggests the creator's concern with the nature of reality, and how it is represented. Throughout the course of this study, I would like to primarily focus upon the ways in which Ingmar Bergman visually depicts culture, community, and the use of magical realism as a means of critiquing and displacing accepted practices and social mores. Film, like other visual languages and mediums, seeks to, as authors Kostelnick and Hassett assert, “define the social behavior among designers and readers that shapes, stabilizes, and transforms it and that normalizes it as conventional codes” (*Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions* 3), and within the work of Ingmar Bergman, specifically within the film *Fanny och Alexander* (or *Fanny and Alexander*) (1983), the magical realist genre is revisited and reworked as a means of exploring and transgressing artistic and social boundaries not removed from culture, but, rather, immersed within a cultural context; for Bergman, film is the medium through which conventions, ritual, and traditional cultural values can be explored by juxtaposing, and the play with, mask, spectacle, and theatrics.

Ingmar Bergman's grand bildungsroman, *Fanny and Alexander* (1983), was initially intended to be his final film, and he once remarked that the film reflected “the sum total of my life as filmmaker” (*Ingmar Bergman: Film and Stage* 165). In many ways Bergman's assertion about the film *Fanny and Alexander* is absolutely correct, particularly because it contains all of the major themes, character types, as well as narrative and visual devices which Bergman pathologically employs and reworks throughout his oeuvre; familiar themes of Christianity, humiliation, narcissism, death, reconciliation, the supernatural, miracles, and,

perhaps most importantly, the triumph of imagination are all utilized here and reflect the inner dialogue of the film, which is then mirrored by Bergman's direction and use of mise-en-scène. The story is set in early twentieth century Sweden, and centers primarily upon Alexander Ekdahl (played by Bertil Grube) and the Ekdahl family. Alexander's mother and father—Oskar (Allan Edwall) and Emelie (Ewa Froling)—are actors and heavily involved in the theatre until his father's sudden and untimely death. Soon after, Emelie remarries and removes the children from the creative, warm, and loving Ekdahl household, thus moving the center of the film to the Bishop Edvard Vergerus's household which is characterized by its stark and minimalist interior. The Bishop Vergerus's (Jan Malmsjö) strict asceticism becomes too much for Alexander to bear, as he exhibits a tendency to indulge his imagination. For instance, and upon their introduction, the Bishop sternly reprimands Alexander for having told his classmates that his mother intends to sell him to the circus, and it becomes immediately clear that the Bishop views Alexander's propensity towards these childish flights of the imagination as a waste of a precious gift and cautions that "imagination is something splendid, a mighty force, a gift from God. It is held in trust for us by the great artists, writers, and musicians" (*Fanny and Alexander* 92). This incident foreshadows what is to come later in the film, and as the seasons pass the rift between Alexander and the Bishop visibly deepens. Even Emelie becomes conscious of the terrible mistake she has made in her haste to remarry so soon after her husband's death, which is only exacerbated by the discovery of her pregnancy.

At this point I would like to address here, albeit briefly, the presence of several intertextual references which are made in the film, as I feel that they are important in helping to construct another level of meaning and understanding within Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*; the recurring references to August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602, 1603) also help to foreshadow the fluctuating nature of Alexander's reality. Further upon this matter, in the text *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* (1982) by Paisley Livingston's, the author states that:

Bergman frequently stages a play within a play, or frames a film or a play within a film. These are never self-reflexive gestures meant merely to remind us that the film or the play is “only an illusion”; the illusion is taken seriously, for it sometimes proves to be the most efficacious reality. Rather, in this manner Bergman is able to illuminate the context of artistic performances by studying the interplay of aesthetic form and social interaction. Thus he devotes his attention not to aesthetic values but to the space where they may appear—or fail to appear. (25)

For instance, as noted in the text *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession* (1993) by Hubert Cohen, the film begins with:

...Opens with the camera panning down past the inscription, “Ei Blot Til Lyst” (Not Only for Pleasure), above the proscenium of the cardboard theatre of Bergman’s young alter ego. When the camera reaches the candle-footlights, the curtain and the rear flat rise magically—Alex does not operate them—to reveal ten-year old Alexander Ekdahl dreamily contemplating his cutout characters and scenery (Later, the Ekdahl’s real theatre will be constructed with precisely the same camera, curtain, and flat movements)...It also announces that what follows will be transformed by imagination and art, viewed through the proscenium of the memory of the puppeteer Bergman. (394)

This is very important to note here, as Bergman immediately informs the viewer, through his use of *mise-en-scène*, that what follows will be “transformed by imagination and art” as the story unfolds, and this is indeed evidenced by the presence of the supernatural and seemingly magical occurrences which happen all throughout *Fanny and Alexander*. However, the scene that I would really like to focus on takes place later in the film and involves the Jewish moneylender/antiques dealer, Isak Jacobi (Erland Jospelson).

In this particular scene, referred to as either “*The Demons*” or “*The Rescue*”, Isak unexpectedly arrives at the Bishop Vergerus’s home in order to purchase a large wooden chest from the Bishop, to whom Isak had been lending money. After a brief exchange, the Bishop retires to his study in order to further examine the bill of sale and money, and while he is disposed Isak reveals a set of skeleton keys before rushing upstairs and unlocking Fanny (Pernilla Allwin) and Alexander’s room. The children are alone in their room, where the viewer has witnessed them being kept there as virtual prisoners for some time, and Isak hurries them downstairs where he hides them in the large wooden chest. First, he covers them with a small black cloth, and when the Bishop Vergerus returns he opens the lid for the suspicious man’s inspection and states “I presume Your Grace wants to make sure that I am

not taking away anything that is not my due. Please have a look” (*Fanny and Alexander* 163). However, a few moments later the Bishop, who still suspects that the Jewish moneylender is trying to trick him, suddenly turns violent, and begins to shriek “you damned Jewish swine” (*Fanny and Alexander* 164) while violently shaking Isak by the lapels of his coat. Henrietta (Kerstin Tidelius), the Bishop’s sister, intervenes and then she and her brother dash upstairs to check on the children. Rising to his knees, the outraged Isak raises his clenched fists heavenwards and screams. Immediately the viewer hears the sound of a cello and sees a blinding flash of white light, as the Bishop and his sister open the door to the children’s bedroom where they appear to be laying on the floor asleep. When the Bishop bends to touch the seemingly quiescent children, Emelie, who is standing nearby, orders him not to touch them and then insists that “if you touch them, I will kill you” (*Fanny and Alexander* 165). As Isak leaves the Bishop’s house with the children safely hidden away in the wooden chest, he exchanges a knowing smile with Emelie.

But why is this significant, and what does this line of discourse mean? How does it impact the way in which the viewer reads the film? It is my assertion that despite the definite presence of supernatural forces that have been made manifest throughout the film up until this point, Bergman very clearly breaks with the conventions of realism by including this scene of magic—Isak has apparently performed a miracle through God’s intercession—as a means of exploring artistic and social boundaries. The illusion of realism in film *is* a kind of *mise-en-scène* that makes the viewer believe that the images are of an everyday world—one that we know and are familiar with—but with Bergman, and specifically in *Fanny and Alexander*, the viewer is forced to suspend this, particularly at this point in the film. One of the tasks of film criticism is to expose a film’s complicity with or deconstruction of a dominant ideology, and furthermore, as David Blakesley asserts in the essay “*Defining Film Rhetoric*” contained within the text *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (2004), that:

In the realm of the textual or the visual, the ideological apparatus has a determinative influence in what is read or seen at the moment of perception. What we read, as well as what we see, is a product of what we know or want to believe, as much as it is a product of the formal properties of the system

observed. The reader/viewer is implicated in the effects and meaning propagated by the visual (and semiotic) system. (115)

Magical realism, therefore, is the genre which allows Bergman to dismantle the constraints of realism in film with the intention of displacing the viewer in order to force them to confront the nature of reality, and the social and moral constraints of culture. Furthermore, employing magical realism in a work of art facilitates the coexistence of possible worlds, spaces and systems that would otherwise be irreconcilable, and I would assert that recognizing the possibility of alternate realities allows for a further understanding of Bergman's work. In the introduction to the text *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), by Zamora and Faris, the authors state that:

Magical realism's assault on these basic structures of rationalism and realism has inevitable ideological impact... Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to ontological, political and cultural structures... Hallucinatory scenes and events, fantastic/phantasmagoric characters are used in several of the magical realist works discussed here to indict recent political and cultural perversions. History is inscribed, often in detail, but in such a way that actual events and existing institutions are not always privileged and are certainly not limiting: historical narrative is no longer chronicle but clairvoyance... Implied in this formulation are other subversions and repositionings: of the Cartesian identification of truth with human consciousness; of rationalist notions of the probable and the predictable relations of cause and effect; of the reader's relation to the text and the text's relation to the world. (6)

Due to the very nature of film, there is an implied and inherent magic that exists on the screen. I would like to touch upon that here, as I believe that it is necessary to be cognizant of this matter when discussing Bergman's work because it also impacts the way that we—the viewer—read his work. Returning for a moment to Livingston's text *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* (1982), the author writes:

The magic of the image and the spectator's enthrallment can not be dismissed as a marginal aspect of the film, for it can be traced from the very origins of the cinema. The Lumière brothers won fame by displaying shots of banal, everyday reality—a train leaving the station... Contrary to a long-standing cliché of film theory, this was not the beginning of a realistic or documentary tradition. Only a minimum of motion differentiated these earliest film spectacles from the familiar representations of still photography, but this motion was nonetheless quite spectacular and exercised an almost magical influence on the first cinema audiences, who were at once terrified and delighted by what they saw. (29)

Interestingly, the concept of the magic lantern, which is a simple slide projector, becomes a recurring motif for Bergman—Alexander is seen using the magic lantern in the children’s nursery on the eve of his father’s death, and as a phrase became the title of Bergman’s 1987 autobiography. For Bergman, nothing is accidental and Alexander’s use of the magic lantern serves to remind the viewer that this is yet another layer of magic within the film.

Also contributing to those surreal occurrences which exist within Bergman’s films is the auteur’s employment of key elements taken from the stage, such as mask and spectacle. Many of Bergman’s films center around central characters who are artists—dancers, musicians, painters, circus performers, magicians, etc.—and they all wear a variety of masks. While at times it would seem difficult to imagine that there is an essential connection between films, there is indeed a unity to be found here. For example, Livingston asserts that:

... Bergman often directs a harsh light on the actor, a light that brilliantly illuminates one facet of his role, temporarily casting shadows on the other side. Displaying, as a result, contrasting features, the artist appears as a protean figure whose identity is impossible to grasp.

Yet we might recall that the myth also stipulates that if Proteus is held he must speak the truth. As Bergman highlights each of the contradictory aspects of the artist’s masks, a coherent whole is formed. Like the characters’ names that Bergman repeatedly employs, the different roles of the artist appear and reappear throughout his films, thereby finding a place within a comprehensive scenario. The artists varied positions are determined by an underlying pattern, and the nature of his status emerges from the rift between the diverse masks and the face. (23)

Within Livingston’s argument it becomes once again clear that Bergman is demonstrating his concern over the nature of reality, as well as his need to illuminate the role of the artist in defining art’s aesthetic and social function within society; Bergman’s continued reworking and revisiting of these themes link what could be considered otherwise dissimilar characters. For instance, Bergman’s use of repetition can be evidenced by examining some of the similarities which exist between *Fanny and Alexander* (1983) and the earlier film titled *Ansiktet* (*The Magician* or *The Face*) (1958).

In the film *Ansiktet*, which is set in mid-19th century Sweden, a traveling mesmerist/magician named Albert Vogler (Max von Sydow) and his troupe—known as

Doctor Vogler's Magnetic Health Theatre, and includes Manda Vogler (alias Mr. Aman) (Ingrid Thulin), Vogler's grandmother (Naima Wifstrand), Tubal (Ake Fridell), etc.—are requested to perform at the Consul Egerman's (Erland Josephson) home. Vogler, thinking that they are performing for solely the Egerman's, is surprised to learn that the house is full of government officials who have turned up to watch the troupe's act, and one of the guests, in particular, is a local health official named Vergerus (Gunnar Bjornstrand). Immediately it becomes apparent that not only is Vergerus extremely suspicious of the troupe, but he plans to unmask Vogler using scientific means. Very quickly things devolve, and seem to spin out of control— i.e.: Vogler and Vergerus engage in a scuffle after Vergerus unmasks Manda/Aman; Johan Spegel (Bengt Ekerot), one of the members of the troupe who is currently posing as Vogler, dies while in the magician's coffin; Spegel's ghost appears before the valet and coachman.

However, shortly after this descent into chaos, and not having realized that Spegel is lying dead in the performer's coffin, Vogler begins the performance. Vogler hypnotizes the police chief's wife who then begins insulting her husband, as well as placing invisible chains on the coachman Antonsson (Oscar Ljung). Once Antonsson liberates himself, he forcefully knocks Vogler to the ground and Vergerus quickly establishes that he is dead. Intending to do an autopsy immediately, Vergerus has the body brought to the attic, and while performing the autopsy he sees Vogler's reflection in a mirror—Vogler is unmasked. Terror grips Vergerus and he rushes from the room, as he realizes that he has just performed the autopsy on the dead actor Spegel. The police are then called in and Manda and Vogler are brought back to the Egerman's home, where the police chief announces that His Majesty the King wishes to see their performance.

In the earlier film *Askitet* (1958), Bergman clearly depicts the artist's triumph over the bourgeoisie, and their social constructs through the use of magic. The viewer will come to see this echo throughout Bergman's later works as well, particularly in *Fanny and Alexander*; in both films—*Fanny and Alexander* and *Asiktet*—there are common names, character types, themes, supernatural occurrences, etc. employed, and they become symbolic of Bergman's

quest to (re-)define the role of the artist in society. When writing the text *Images: My Life in Film* (1994), Bergman once wrote that “Vogler (and his troupe) represent for Vergerus, that which cannot be explained (magic, the supernatural), which is what he despises most in the world” (167). This statement refers back to the subversive nature of magical realism’s presence within a story, as presented in the Zamora and Faris text *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Again, magical realism demands the reader/viewer suspend all notions of time and space, but to do so in a way that is plausible. Upon the realm of fictional spaces, in the essay titled “*The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism*” (1995) by Rawdon Wilson, as it appears in the Zamora and Faris text, he writes:

How in reading or viewing a fictional world, is space (the sense of direction and distance, the sheer up and downness and back and forthness, the scale) to be imagined? Magical realism makes the problem extremely interesting. The copresence of oddities, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary, the doubleness of conceptual codes, the irreducibly hybrid nature of experience strikes the mind’s eye. (210)

Furthermore, it is also my assertion that all of the recurring themes and iconic images from Bergman’s prolific oeuvre are generated from the auteur’s desire to fashion a clear statement about the role of the artist, and the disparity which exists between this perception and that of bourgeois society. Authors Jonas Frykman and Orvar Lofgren trace the growth of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois culture in Sweden from the late-18th century through 1910 in their text *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life* (1979), and in the introduction the authors state that:

The developing bourgeois culture of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was formed in both dependence on and opposition to the old elite, the aristocracy. To understand the cultural profile of the bourgeoisie in this early era, we have to remember that its quest for power and standing in society was a battle waged on two fronts. The new class had to define itself not only vis-à-vis the old gentry but also vis-à-vis the common people, the peasants. (8)

Incidentally, both of the Bergman films which have been discussed here are set during the period of time which authors Frykman and Orvar make reference to in their discussion of the Swedish middle-class.

For Bergman only the artist, and the actor in particular, has the power to critique the flaws within society, the flaws within ourselves. That is because the artist serves as a mirror, and again within Bergman's films they often "appear as a protean figure whose identity is impossible to grasp. Yet we might recall that the myth also stipulates that if Proteus is held he must speak the truth" (*Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* 23). However, Bergman raises these questions about the artist's aesthetic and social representation through film, which has a quality of magic inherent to the medium. Bergman achieves this through his use of repetition—in themes and images—as well as exploring, and often transgressing, the boundaries of reality through his use of magical realism. The concept of magic dominates much of Bergman's work, as can be evidenced in both *Ansiktet* (1958) and *Fanny och Alexander* (1983). In close, Bergman wrote in his autobiography titled *The Magic Lantern* (1988) that remembrances, similar to filmmaking, are:

...like bits of film, short or long, with no point, shot at random. This is the prerogative of childhood: to move in complete freedom between magic and oatmeal porridge, between boundless terror and joy that threatens to burst within you. There were no limits except forbidden things and rules, which were like shadows, mostly unfathomable. (381)

Works Cited

- Bergman, Ingmar. *Fanny and Alexander*. Trans. Alan Blair. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- . *Images: My Life in Film*. Trans. Marianne Ruuth. New York: Arcade Publishing, Inc., 1994.
- . *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*. Trans. Joan Tate. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1988.
- Cohen, Hubert I. *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- Charles A. Hill, and Marguerite Helmers, eds. *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004.
- Frykman, Jonas, and Orvar Lofgren. *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life*. Trans. Alan Crozier. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979.

Kostelnick, Charles, and Michael Hassett. *Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

Livingston, Paisley. *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Long, Robert Emmet. *Ingmar Bergman: Film and Stage*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.