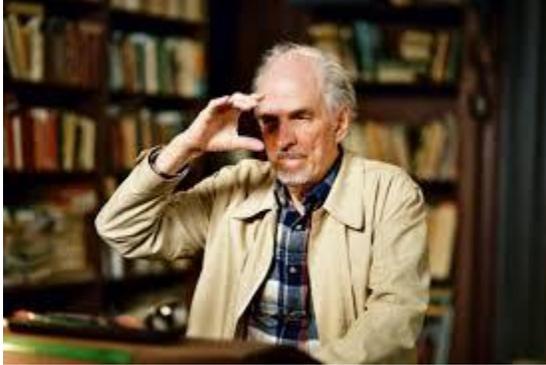


# Obituary of Ingmar Bergman

Published on the Rowman & Littlefield website in August 2007.



Ingmar Bergman passed away on July 30, 2007 at the age of 89. As soon as the sad news got around, the world honored his oeuvre as that of one of the greatest directors in the history of cinema. In Sweden flags were flown half-mast and the nation was aware that it had lost its most famous son. In this context, some Swedish journals could not ignore the fact that the Bergman phenomenon has something uncanny about it: this artist, who exposed themes that are familiar to every Swede, had been "too large" for this small country.

Foreign journals seldom mentioned details about Bergman's cultural context. Explorations into this theme are rare; just as rare as philosophical examinations of Bergman's films, though his films are (as everybody agrees) as profound and metaphysical as the work of, say, French existentialist writers.

The death of this giant produces an uncanny feeling: there is a gap between the explicit concreteness with which Bergman described the relationships between "real" (Swedish) humans, and his abstract way of sticking out from a culture to which he is so strongly linked and at the same time not linked at all. The most uncanny of all questions can thus be formulated like this: is Bergman too big not only for the Swedes but also for everybody else?

Bergman is full of contradictions. Seemingly mainly preoccupied with his own pains and indifferent about "influences," he is at the same time recognized as an integral component of European cinema. When he received the Erasmus Prize for his artistic contribution to European culture he declared, in the official speech that he held, that in his opinion European culture would

simply not exist. This was perhaps, as wrote Vernon Young, the "most sovereign discourtesy publicly committed by any artist in our time" because the Erasmus Prize is explicitly awarded for the "intensification of European spiritual life."

There are more contradictions. Bergman was highly professional though at the same time widely "self-taught;" he was cultivated and profound though he preferred to describe himself modestly as an "entertainer;" his films are vernacularly savage though speaking at the same time the artistic language of an international bourgeoisie; throughout his career Bergman remained internationally influential though he clung at the same time to an outside position from which the world can be observed rather than changed.

If we really want to understand Bergman we should perhaps catch up some basic understanding about the evolutionary process of culture through a dialectical exchange between periphery and centre. First of all, instead of putting Bergman into the mausoleum of great directors we should try to perceive his work through the cultural context established by, for example, Mauritz Stiller (the Finnish-Swedish film director who "discovered" Greta Garbo), Victor Sjöström, or the Dane Carl Dreyer. Then, Bergman can be studied as the perhaps unique case of an artist who not only came from the periphery but who stayed in the periphery without turning the periphery into a center. Bergman influenced the center from the periphery and this is indeed uncanny or perhaps simply Bergmanesque.

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