

Affective Approach to Selected Ingmar Bergman Films

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Abstract—The paper explores affective potential implicit in Bergman's movies. This is done by the use of affect theory and the concept of affect in terms of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, from both diachronic and synchronic perspective. Since its inception in the early 2000s, affect theory has been applied to a number of academic fields. In Film Studies, it offers new avenues for discovering deeper, hidden layers of a given film. The aim is to show that the form and content of the films by Ingmar Bergman are determined by their inner affects that function independently of the viewer and, to an extent, are autonomous entities that can be analysed in separation from the auteur and actual characters. The paper discovers layers in Ingmar Bergman films and focuses on aspects that are often marginalised or studied from other viewpoints such as the connection between the content and visual side. As a result, a reevaluation of Bergman films is possible that is more consistent with his original interpretations and comments included in his lectures, interviews and autobiography.

Keywords—Affect theory, experimental cinema, Ingmar Bergman, film as autonomous entity.

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

WHILE explaining the scene from *Wild Strawberries* (1957) in which the ageing professor, Isak Berg, looks at the landscape that is a mirror image of his youth, Bergman gives insight into how that scene was actually made. Oddly enough, neither Victor Sjöström who played professor Isak Berg, nor Bergman himself, were in the right mood to shoot it, and the reason that they stayed longer than usual was caused by the fact that on that day lighting was appropriate in the afternoon. Especially Victor Sjöström was constantly complaining about Bergman's intrusion into his daily routine and a greater part of the afternoon was spent on arguments and negotiations¹. When Sjöström finally agreed, he asked Bergman about acting directions. "Victor, you see your parents", Bergman replied. Tired and irritated, Sjöström only expressed his indifference [1]. The scene, probably the most famous of all in Bergman films, was shot in one take. There is no trace of Sjöström's actual mood in it. The close-up of his face reveals both intensity and absence, as if Professor Berg was saying farewell to his life, but perhaps more emphatically to his epoch that ended with the advent of a sound film. At the same time, the scene is Bergman's homage to his native land and the type of cinematography that he would champion in his

productions². One may ask about the feasibility of creating such a powerful image when the principal actor is mentally detached from the scene, the director cares more about the light and shadow interplay, and the camera's vocabulary consists of the elementary long shot/close-up contrast.

A partial answer to the specifications of that process is provided by Bergman in his other film *Persona* (1966), in which the doctor comments on the state of mind of the exhausted actress, Elisabet Vogler, who, for no particular reason, has suddenly refused to speak. "You should go on with this part until it is played out, until it loses interest for you. Then you can leave it, just as you've left your other parts one by one [2]." This remark, in turn, concerns the nature of art in general. Namely, one can conceive of art as an act of 'playing out' emotions, but the reverse is equally plausible: art can only begin when emotions are 'played out' and the artist is finally able to discuss them in their work. By parallel, an actor begins to act only when they feel nothing at all (cf. *persona*, in Latin the actor's mask) because they played their role so many times that it has been virtually all played out. A perhaps paradoxical and seemingly nonsensical observation, that a work of art begins to emanate emotions only when all people involved in its creation are through their emotional stage and finally become indifferent to that work, can possibly be explained by affect theory.

II. CINEMATOGRAPHIC TRADITION

Affect theory, when applied to cinema, is relatively new, dating back to the early 2000s, although affect as a concept and category is already present in the writings of Aristotle (*Rhetoric*) and Plato. It was further elaborated by Baruch Spinoza (aspect of body's reaction to an emotion) and Henri Bergson who studied the correlation between emotions and cognition [3]³. The connection between affects and precepts in an aesthetic perspective was thoroughly explored by Deleuze and Guattari, and their seminal work *What is Philosophy* (1991), part 2, chapter 7, "Percept, Affect and Concept [4]", can be considered as a foundation stone of contemporary approaches to affect in art, including cinematography. In this work, among others, the authors assert the autonomy of cinema and develop the concept of an aesthetics that has no particular object. What is even more important, they see the

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¹ Other than that, Sjöström, who died several months after the movie was released, was deeply involved in the making of the film, to such an extent that Bergman remarked that he was actually the director of *The Wind* who created *Wild Strawberries*.

² The film is saturated with references and allusions to Scandinavian art. Some critics in fact complained that it is too referential and too literary. Some scenes are taken directly from the golden age of silent film in Scandinavian cinema, most prominent of which is Professor Berg's nightmare that is obviously inspired by Sjöström's *Phantom Carriage*.

³ According to Bergson affect is necessary for cognition, hence "there is no perception without affection".

mind as the faculty of sensation. In their view, thought acquires shape in the brain as sensation, while cinema captures it as an image on the screen. Affects, precepts, and concepts relate to the forms of thought: art, science and philosophy, respectively. In this way affect is linked to aesthetics, both being related to art and art theory.

With regard to cinema, the term 'affect theory' has at least two distinct meanings, albeit both deal with feelings and sensations seen as either identical with or correlated with affects [5]⁴. The first is preoccupied with film's emotional impact on the viewer and should be located in the field of psychology or, alternately, reader/viewer response criticism. It is relatively easy to discuss it in terms of how affective or aesthetic qualities are conveyed to evoke emotions in an audience. What distinguishes this approach from the classic viewer response model is the emphasis placed on bodily reactions of the viewer, including body movements and facial expressions. The second poses a bigger challenge since emotions/affects are to be present in a film or, as Bergman would rather say 'picture' alone, and they are treated as independent of the viewer and his/her emotional state. In other words, the 'celluloid body' possesses its own nervous system that is charged with its own emotions and creates its own affects. In Bergman films, an actor is expected to comply with the affective anatomy of the body of the film they play in, and by so doing to gradually lose their own emotions, to such an extent that they become inseparable from that body. The film, then, is a 'living organism' that 'affects' the composition of the surface, its skin.

III. AFFECT

A substantial amount of definitions of affect generally relate to two denotations of the term: in the first affect is understood as a state or effect (e.g. Frederic Jameson) and as intensity/force. In the second, affect is basically non-representational and it precedes experience. Since the line between affect and ensuing thoughts and observations is very thin, affect may be confused with a state/effect, or seen as interlaced with the concepts that originate in it, but are otherwise unrelated in any other way than intensity of experience. In fact, most of the time Gilles Deleuze uses 'affect' and 'intensity' interchangeably. Following this reasoning, though, one will encounter a dilemma. In general, in such a case it is impossible to proceed with an analysis of any work of art since the terms at our disposal are imprecise and can only be defined by the degree of intensity: strong/weak. On that account, it can rather be said that intensity is a quality, a property of the affect, in the same way as intuition is a property of reason.

Affects in Bergman Films

Bergman achieves the effect of 'film animation' (in a sense of bringing a dead object to life) in a number of ways. First, it is done by the use of technical devices, especially the camera

⁴ There is no unanimous consensus as to the relation between feeling (emotion) and affect. In some approaches affect is identical with feeling, while in others affect either precedes or follows feelings.

work. The camera moves at angular tilts, distancing the viewer, but perhaps more importantly the crew and actors, from the scene. Frequent close-ups reveal a tension in the film's body, while the living landscape, usually shown from a distance, corresponds to the characters' state of mind. All this results in a picture that is imbued with a life of its own, life that permeates the inanimate plastic body of celluloid tape.

Another *sine qua non* element is the sound. In Bergman sounds are direct embodiments of affects that create the inner rhythm of a film. It seems that they play a different role and perform a different function than in most other films; sounds do not reflect or reinforce mental states of characters or set the mood, nor do they even correspond to the story. They rather compel the story and characters to develop, i.e. they are the superordinate, primary elements. Apart from natural sounds and those made by characters, Bergman rarely uses film scores, and if so, it is almost exclusively classical music. In some films the music is played at the beginning of a film. Again, it is not meant to set the viewer in the mood of the film they are about to watch in anticipation of the coming story; it rather hints at the type of affects the film is about to radiate with and, possibly, the original source of inspiration for making that film. An interesting example can be Bergman's trilogy (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*). All three thematically deal with absence and silence in human life. *Through a Glass Darkly* opens with a sonata by Johannes Sebastian Bach that continues to the opening scene that starts with images of water. The 'divine' music is then interrupted by ordinary voices of young men and women bathing in the sea. Such a juxtaposition can be seen as a contrast between humans' striving for the spiritual and the metaphysical and the need for simple pleasures that life offers and compels on the young. Yet, soon it turns out that the woman is mentally ill and suffers from depression. Such a combination of what can be called the Apollonian and Dionysian, but perhaps more aptly the spiritual and the ludic, reverberates throughout the film. The entire picture is composed of these two types of affect emanating from it, but remaining in a balance. Hence, *Through a Glass Darkly* does not illuminate in the end, nor does it bring any answer, as neither of the affects is able to 'defeat' the other.

During the opening credits of *Winter Light* the audience is virtually summoned to a sermon by the sound of church bells. Then, the viewer is immediately transferred to a church, where the sermon is being delivered by a pastor whose 'theatrical' voice emphasizes the element of a ritual, but, one may say, also the emptiness of the ritual he conducts. The whole scene anticipates the last one when the doubting pastor who has lost his faith will be preaching just for one member of the congregation, a woman who came due to her love for the minister as a man, not the love of God. In terms of sound, the effects are suppressed, even muted, and the title 'winter light' is paralleled by the distant voice of the pastor that expresses a meaning just for one woman whose advances he rejected. This unfulfillment is present both in the theme and the affect.

Perhaps the most interesting is the way Bergman handles sound at the beginning of *The Silence*. The monotonous,

minimalistic vibrations of a triangle played to the opening credits slowly fuse with the rhythmical clack of a train passing through the grim, monochromatic landscape. However blunt, the sound of the train has more depth than that played in the credits. The overriding affect is that of a silence while the accompanying sounds only intensify it, instead of dispersing.

In all the three films affects are stifled, hollow and muted. They emanate with the sense of lack, absence, emptiness. The viewer can only passively watch three ill bodies of celluloid pictures. The characters in them and the plots are ailing and delirious on account of the fact that the films' bodies are, not vice versa.

Bergman's Approach to Creating Images

A characteristic feature of the 60s avant-garde, particularly in the United States, was following realistic principles and rejecting abstract, distorted images of old avant-garde. A similar procedure can be observed in Bergman, who does not experiment with the visual side of a film, but rather creates novel images through juxtaposition of two realistic images in a new configuration. In Bergman it is always connected with depths of the storyline and psychological introspection of characters. Hence, despite drawing on the surreal, his films should be rather placed within expressionist tradition and thus the play of seemingly unrelated images like e.g. at the beginning of *The Persona* has a deeper metaphysical dimension that anticipates, introduces and also encapsulates the story that will emerge out of them. These images can be deemed as pure effects of the celluloid tape, not so much Bergman's own, as rather a cluster of affective images that will soon be formed into a specific storyline. The principal actress's silence, the austere barren landscapes of the Baltic Sea, and the growing confusion of Alma (Bibi Anderson) regarding her identity can be but the transformed images from the beginning of the film. Bergman's films are made with the eyes closed while the eye of the camera is open.

The difference between affects in Bergman and other directors who exercise 'pure' affects in their cinema (such as American avant-garde directors including Stan Brakhage) seems to lie, among others, in a different cinematographic/artistic tradition. While American and British directors aim at an objectification of perception in accordance with the rules of empiricism – feelings arise from sensations and are experienced by the human subject in a given place and time, in Bergman's art the director/storyteller appears to remain detached from his vision and affects are experienced mainly by the characters, in the tradition of German expressionism⁵. The process does not end here, however. In the end, as mentioned, film alone becomes the carrier of affects, while the character becomes detached.

Natural Affectivity

Early films were 'naturally affective', which was connected

⁵ Perhaps a more precise term in Bergman's case would be 'post-expressionism'. Since all movements with the prefix 'post' feed on residue of the original, they rather 'obscure' than 'enlighten', generate more questions than give any answers. Such was the case with Derrida's deconstruction or the art of Cezanne who led art out of the light to a second age of ignorance.

with the medium and the mode of message conveyance – the lack of sound in a way necessitated more pronounced gestures on the part of an actor - but also with strong film-theatre connections. Before Griffith's *Intolerance* and *Making of a Nation* established superiority of the plot/story over film seen as a procession of affective images, and method acting defined approach to acting as a whole, cinema was mainly affective. This kind of affect can be labelled 'natural affect' since it is steeped in natural approaches to film making rather than being 'artificially' created and purified through intellectual exercising of theory. Not coincidentally, when Bergman names the directors who influenced him the most, he mentions the early films by Victor Sjöström and the silent movies made by Alfred Hitchcock. Both represent two big traditions of affect in art: while Hitchcock worked in the British tradition of showing affects through the actors' interaction within the confines determined by the story (as, for example, in early melodramas or the Elizabethan theatre), in the Scandinavian tradition continued by Sjöström, it is about man and nature, where both the character and landscape emanate with affects that are to an extent independent of the story and human interactions. In other words, the story is but an excuse to show that emanation. In terms of intellect, the image of man in nature signifies the tragedy of existential emptiness. Perhaps for that reason Bergman named 'catastrophe' [7] as the most important and, at the same time, most fearsome element of his art: The catastrophe caused not by the fall of a character, but by the realisation that in fact 'there is nothing there'. And yet, that nothingness assumes various concrete shapes and forms of a something that always lurks out there, in the dark. This realisation, in an even more advanced stage, is the hallmark of Andrey Tarkovsky's films. In the late Tarkovsky any pretences of recreating a story in a film are abandoned and any illusions of interconnections between film reality and outer world are non-existent. We are faced with pure affects that function independently of the storyline, viewer, genre and category. Possibly, that is the reason why Bergman named Tarkovsky as his favourite director of all time.

Detachment and Objectification

The detachment from both the story and the character is not crude, but rather a result of the long process of objectification on the part of the director - his affects are subdued first and finally structured in a film. Furthermore, the same process applies to characters themselves, whose affective side is detached from them, and then objectified in a series of images that 'grow out' of their intensified and condensed emotion, in the end living independently of the original source. Hence, a crucial role is this of the camera operator (Sven Nykvist), who through close-ups and long shots intensifies affects evoked by the characters, which finally become autonomous, i.e. separate from the creator and the story.

'Objectification' is a word that Bergman uses in his explanation of the original reason for making *Cries and Whispers*. In his interviews, he often speaks about the

turbulent relationships he had with his mother⁶. Although he does not name affect, he mentions about his want to objectify this emotionally charged bond. One can notice a pattern here, a certain paradigm emerging from his comments and reminiscences: emotions can only be discussed after they become scrutinised first, then projected on a film character, and finally objectified, i.e. detached from all other elements of a film, besides film alone. Superficially, this creates an impression of indifference, but in fact such a view is misleading: Affects manifest themselves in the film that now acquires an independent life of its own. An inanimate film is therefore a carrier of life.

III. BERGMAN'S UNIVERSAL AFFECTS

Universalism of Bergman films is in the projection of affective images, rather than in the image itself that is charged with affective potential. It is clear that however deep his films are in terms of problems discussed, Bergman does not want them to be approached intellectually in the traditional sense. The same observation is true about reading Bergman films symbolically. No matter how rich in symbolism they may appear to be, the function of those seemingly symbolic images is emotional rather than intellectual. For instance, the colour red in *Cries and Whispers* may implicate many qualities, starting from sin and ending on the mother's womb, but interpreting it in such a way is missing the point since mental images or symbolic significations that follow are only afterimages of its affective discharge.

Secondary Virginité of Bergman's Vision

Stan Brakhage in *Metaphors on Vision* (1963) references to the state when a child sees a meadow for the first time. Brakhage then asks: "How many colours are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green?'". To put it in other words, "How many colours will a child see if he/she does not know any colours [8]?" This observation leads to another question of whether one is able to see colours without knowing (any) language. Merleau-Ponty gives a partial answer in the *Eye and Mind* (1961) claiming that such a gift does not come at once, but it is the result of months of exercising [9]. Drawing upon the qualities of 'pure vision', we can assume that it can only be expressed in terms of metaphor since pure vision lacks technical vocabulary; moreover, so far technical vocabulary for it has not been invented, yet, and whether it can is doubtful. By parallel, the same is true about pure affects since they can only be discussed in terms of their intensity. Discourse fails, however, when intellectual categories are applied to affect since the former are made with the use of mental faculties. With regard to the position of the director, one may ask, though, whether he/she should be like a child

⁶ In *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*, Bergman gives more details on the relationship with his parents [6]. It seems that he was equally detached from both of them, but at the same time what may strike the reader is the intensity of these 'failed' relationships. He claims that his mother's life was a fiasco. Similarly, 'catastrophe' is a word that literally and metaphorically reappears in various contexts. Unsurprisingly, when, at the end of his life, Bergman was asked to name his 'demons', 'catastrophe' was the first and most terrifying one.

and present his/her world as if it was not named yet, through a series of metaphors? Or, is it rather as Merleau-Ponty has seen it, that directors should train their vision for months and in the end exercise control over the palette of colours and sensations affecting all of the five senses as it occurs in synaesthesia? Given such circumstances, to reclaim the virginity of a child appears to be a task that is next to impossible. We would rather need to speak of the secondary virginity that in itself verges on an oxymoron. If Merleau-Ponty is right and reaching the state of oblivion/virginity anew can be exercised, then a true artist is able to consciously express the unconscious, to become unaware as a result of the long process of pushing the limits of awareness. This, however, questions the veracity of human faculties, and if it be true, puts the artist in the other than human sphere.

Let us come back to Merleau-Ponty's question about the possibility of knowing colours without a language to name them, or, more generally, affects that would be independent of both the artist and the viewer. The answer may be found in Bergman films since Bergman seems to achieve the state of secondary virginity at the end of the creative process, instead of attempting to recreate it or start from it. On that account, Bergman's approach seems to be of a different nature than that of many other experimental directors who try to start from a virgin vision like the one experienced by a child and then recreate it on the screen. In Bergman it appears to be the other way around since virginity comes at the end of the artistic process, perhaps even during the editing (Bergman attached special attention to the editing of his films). It is only in the details that emerge – black spots, radiation from within not without – that the viewer may observe how big affective charge and potential of his works is. This is art that has been layer by layer purified of anything else. Such a procedure enables Bergman to show 'pure affect' in conjunction with complexity of the story told by him.

Conveying the virginity of a landscape in a work of art is the task for an artist; studying them from objective perspective, of a scientist. When we finally remove the human factor altogether, the product of their creation begins to acquire the qualities of a living being, becoming independent of its creator. In other words, it is charged with affects but these affects are autonomous and independent of any other outside sources apart from themselves.

Affect and the Plot

Although affects are created in conjunction with the plots of Bergman's films, they are at the same time independent of them. As an example one could select films that are not among his most famous, but which allow for spotting that independence in a more explicit and more natural way.

In *Summer with Monika* (1953), the unusual proliferation of short scenes may, at the first glance, contrast with the relative simplicity of the story that is linear and rather straightforward, even though the film was considered controversial on account of the explicit nudity and Monika's decision to leave her lover and raise their child alone. Affects are present here on at least three planes: in the facial expressions of characters, in the

affective potential of the whole film, and, perhaps most interestingly, in the aforementioned short scenes that seemingly bring little to the development of the plot. These images are in a way imposed on the fabric of the film and apart from natural sounds in the background could be taken from the silent movies era. Already in the first part set in Stockholm random street shots of the less affluent neighbourhoods are interspersed with the story of Monika and Harry. In a similar vein, landscapes of the Baltic Sea in the middle part seem to have little to do with the unfolding events. They could be classified as being painted with camera as a medium and actors as models. After the protagonists' return to Stockholm in the third part, such 'moving stills' continue to be shown.

A question concerning the purpose arises; namely "What are the scenes for, if they slow down and obscure the plot instead of developing it?". One answer could be that, as mentioned, they are Bergman's tribute to the silent film era since they look as if taken from that period. Bergman often acknowledged his debt to the pre-sound cinema and even mentioned his admiration for Alfred Hitchcock's early movies that he considered superior to the later ones. It can be claimed, however, that the purpose of the scenes is different. They create an inner rhythm of the film that becomes an entity independent of the actual story and real-time setting. *Summer with Monika* is charged with affects that are achieved by a skilful combination of the visual with the audial in short scenes and episodes⁷. Although neither the visual side nor the sounds are added 'from the outside' to the fabric (interestingly the only added fragment is a romantic film Monika and Harry watch in the cinema and, 'affectively enough' she cries and he yawns), the film is charged with its own independent affects. It is no coincidence that Bergman rarely used any scores in his film, and if yes, as mentioned, they were mainly pieces of classical music that not so much highlight a theme as point towards Bergman's original 'cluster of sensations' from which the film arose. Actually, the only sound in *Summer with Monika* that comes from outside of the source of sounds produced by nature is a brief gong sound that resembles those found in Kurosawa's films.

Bergman draws upon reality and tells a realistic story, but his films are independent of the actual reality and possess a reality of their own. This can only be achieved on the level of affects and that is actually the crux of his films. As a result, the minutia of the plot are of secondary importance; Bergman moves swiftly between epochs, stories and genres as his films are united by affect, not traditional elements of the plot, or his preference for genres, styles and decorum. However, it would erroneous to claim that Bergman entirely neglects the story as do the directors who aim at achieving pure affect; nor is the story just an excuse to create affects. In fact, on one level his narratives are closer to the traditional view of a story, where

⁷ An insight to how a rhythm is created in a film is provided by Bergman in *Persona*. A series of seemingly unrelated surreal images in the beginning, a montage of documentary footage, Elisabet's distress that she experiences while watching the suffering of the people during the Vietnam War, finally the repetition of the closing dialogue, all of these are the beats that set the rhythm of the film and enable affective discharge of its potential.

all the other elements are subjugated to the plot followed by the character, as in Aristotle's *Poetics*. This allows to have greater control over the creative process that is based on a hierarchy rather than by showing distorted non-hierarchical images like in 'pure' avant-garde films. What seems to be different is the material of the story – instead of logical unfolding of events the viewer 'experiences' an unfolding of sensually charged images. Hence, in Aristotle affect is evoked through the story leading to the final discharge of emotions in catharsis. In Bergman, however, affects are in the projection of particular images that remain independent of the viewer. In other words, affect is in the film rather than vice versa, i.e. a film is created to evoke affects. A parallel can be drawn to post-expressionist paintings in the Scandinavian tradition, Edward Munch in particular. In Munch's *Scream* existential anxiety that underpins the theme could be reflected in shapeless irregular lines, while the affect of the character is in the person standing on the bridge. Yet, the ultimate affect of the painting is in that painting itself and it remains independent of its actual elements even though all of these elements are necessary for that affect to exist.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ingmar Bergman is almost unanimously classified as one of the greatest representatives of *auteur cinema*, which is true but only to an extent. Undoubtedly, he had full control of all elements of his films and the films were his personal creations. On the other hand, it is questionable if they are also his personal visions; perhaps, they can be rather seen as pictures arising from his visions that through the transformative process of objectification on the part of the director become independent of his intentions, plots and characters. The idea that an artist lives in his works or vice versa is quite old, dating back at least to Romanticism with the reverse situation presented in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. What seems to be unique to Bergman is that even the artist disappears from his creation and, as a result, the work itself acquires the qualities of a living being. That is one of the reasons that Bergman saw cinema as the fullest manifestation and expression of his ideal, unlike many other artists who consider this medium as a compromise and see more potential for creating a life in the more abstract literary art. At the same time, few of Bergman films achieve that state in their entirety. Bergman often gives his viewers hints in the opening scenes, music score, sound and motion. Perhaps there was too much of a moralist in him to completely ignore the story and bring out pure affects. Also, he is not able to or does not want to eliminate all external elements and, in a god-like manner, create a new world in all of its parts and dimensions. One may question, too, whether his films are 'alive' enough. For those reasons, he considered Andrey Tarkovsky's art superior to his own since Tarkovsky managed to create an inner reality of a film that not so much transformed the reality as possessed an independent one – his films were not only living tissues or even living organisms, but living universes. As for the 'it's alive' issue, he was moving more and more towards the theatre since only there each performance is a truly 'live act',

finally abandoning film making altogether but still being active on the stage. Yet, another interpretation is equally plausible. However serious and alive his films are, we should remember that they are just films. In the manner of old movies ending with a blink of an eye, be it human or that of the camera, Bergman does not want to be taken entirely seriously, nor does he want his films to be. After all it is just cinema.

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