

NOT YET PREPARED TO SPEAK: AN UNDECIDEABLE BEAUTY

A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL GIBSON

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9/19/06

We have indeed arrived at that expanse that no longer speaks to us, lies mute, and where the wanderer, if always possessed of the same cry, no longer has anything to “say” but the “lie” of an image. He no longer seeks a place in which to become lost, for he is lost everywhere.¹

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Revelation 8.1

Dostoevsky is often misquoted as saying that “beauty will save the world.” In fact the phrase is a mockery in *The Idiot*: “Is it true, prince, that you once declared that ‘beauty would save the world’? Great Heaven! The prince says that beauty saves the world! And I declare that he only has such playful ideas because he’s in love!” In fact, Prince Myshkin has something rather more ambiguous to say: “Beauty is difficult to judge; I’m not prepared yet. Beauty is a riddle.” Nastasya Filippovna, the great *femme fatale* of *The Idiot*, she is the beautiful – he stutters, “There’s so much suffering...in that face...” Responds another, “Such beauty has power...You can overturn the world with such beauty.” Madness haunts the margins of this page.

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 293.

Beauty is difficult to judge. Beauty is a riddle. We are not yet prepared to speak of it.

Such, I suggest to you, is the vision of Ingmar Bergman – or more precisely, of his cinematic writing (I assume there is no *hors texte*). Somewhere in the space between torture and beauty, somewhere in the space between the *death* of the beloved child and the *gift* of vision, somewhere here stands Bergman's Christ – on the margins of the shock wave irrupting from the death of God, and therefore standing under erasure. A voice falls silent, speaks no more, and is heard only in the void; its witness is left to the speech of the dumb, and the silenced: the mad, the ravaged, the immolated, the transgressive.

Bergman, like Certeau, is a *Wandersmann*, an exile, from a body that no longer lives in the modern world, from the presence that has ceased to speak. Like Certeau, this exile imposes a burden – the burden of a passage, of a departure, a haunting by the absented presence. This haunting takes manifold forms – in his early and middle films, a pictorial and symbolic fissure that cuts through *The Seventh Seal*, *The Virgin Spring*, *Winter Light*, *Wild Strawberries*. In his later films, the absence is refined, abstracted (and made thereby even more poignant), folded into the wastelands of modern subjectivity, relationality, sociality – the church the empty signifier of a distant memory in *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Persona*, *The Hour of the Wolf*. Bergman films in the wake of the loss of God in a secularized modern Sweden – a loss inscribed in his own history as well as that of his country's, as Michael Gibson aptly points out in his paper tonight. But it is Bergman's films (at least those before us tonight) that inhabit another space of loss – a turbulent Sweden reeling in the death throes of paganism, on the one hand (a death that did not go gently into that dark night), and a staring into the horror of the Plague and the wastes of the Crusades, on the other: *The Virgin Spring* and *The Seventh Seal*.

I wish to contest the thesis that Bergman gives us a filmic theodicy. This is, I submit, the last consolation he refuses. The gaze of the *auteur* refuses to flinch in the face of the nothing. It is not a savior that meets us but death: there are no Christ-figures in Bergman. Instead, as in Dostoevsky, Christ is enfolded into his witnesses – those sufferers who stand before the abyss of meaninglessness, the space of his *absence*, the wounded and disappeared body. I want to briefly, on this page, propose that if Christ inhabits the interstices of Bergman’s films, he does so not at the communion table nor in the church – but in the witness and the vision of the absurd suffering of the little ones and in the laugh of the mad. In, therefore, silence.

I propose three tropes to you tonight, three pairs of witnesses that open up a space between the films *The Virgin Spring* and *The Seventh Seal* within which, I propose, Bergman shows us: the gift of vision, and that beauty we are not yet prepared to speak of. For it is the beauty of a loss. It is the caesura between these figures, the chasm that opens in the unsaid of speech, in the interstices that the tension between the films arises.

First: *the ravaged*. Two rapes – the beloved child, all that her mother has, in *The Virgin Spring*, and an anonymous mute peasant girl in *The Seventh Seal*. The princess (the princess of her own imagination) and the subaltern: one rescued, one abandoned – a chiasm. In the former, Karin, the daughter of her mother’s love, is beset by three bandits, brutally raped and bludgeoned to death. Her body lies in a glade with none but the ravens for witness and for burial. Her last act, a long gaze into the camera, a challenge really, an indictment, even as the void enters her eyes, to the male gaze – we ask, “Lord, is it I?” In *The Seventh Seal*, the nameless girl is saved from rapists by the film’s cynic and doubter, Jöns, the squire. But she is saved – for Death, led to Death’s castle by Bloch the knight of faith, the patriarch. In the father’s embrace there is only oblivion.

But the nameless and the mute is witness. This is the second pair: the *speechless*. In *The Seventh Seal*, the speaking of the mute girl is the breaking of the seventh seal, that seal where there is “silence for about half an hour” – when Bloch and his party finally confront Death in Bloch’s castle, the mute and nameless girl speaks, once, the stammering tongue loosed: “It is finished,” she says, as Death’s cloak of darkness falls. A silence that is the witness of heaven to a loss: both the figure on the cross and the finger that points to it. In *The Virgin Spring*, on the other hand, the mute is the *rapist*: his tongue torn from his mouth, the inarticulate rage of chaos, transgression, violation. Karin dies at the hand, in the embrace, in the silence of the demonic. But: the crucified is present here, too – for the camera’s eye rests on this mute rapist’s body slain in the avenging father’s chair, arms spread. The thief on the cross.

And, finally: the *artist*. Another mute voice, the mad, the guilty. In *The Seventh Seal*, it is the family of actors, the holy family, that is the witness and the survivor, as Gibson rightfully illuminates: a pagan family, we should remind ourselves – the father simultaneously the visionary, who sees Virgin and Holy Child, and yet dances the dance of the fool and endures the aspersions of the clergy. Bloch leads Death away from this family, who spend a terrorized night in the forest (the natural world is a far more threatening place, the site of darkness and of terror, for Bergman, than my colleague allows), and who witness the macabre dance of death that leads the knight and his companions away. *It is the artist’s vision, which is the fool’s, that beholds Death and yet continues to speak of his visitation*. In *The Virgin Spring*, on the other hand, it is precisely the artist, the creator, *homo faber*, who is destructured: Tøre, the father, kneels and prays at the site of his daughter’s death – “I will build you a church in this spot,” he vows, in penitence for his avenging wrath. But witness the divine refusal of human representation: in response a spring flows, a virgin spring, unwrought by human hand, from underneath the virgin’s

body. Here, artistic vision, the creation of human hands: is refused, undone, by a gift of life that is prior to all action, that subtends the unfulfilled promise (recall the candles, the work of human hands, that never arrive at the church). There is no site for a church, for the virgin's corpse lies here, just as the battered Christ of Holbein's painting – the counter-icon – stands in the center of the *The Idiot*: “A man could even lose his faith from that painting!” says Myshkin. Atheism is not *dispelled* by the view of the crucified: it is *provoked*. An unbelief that knows it is the wound of an absented belief, the image of Christ becomes the *impossibility* of belief, except for the gift of vision, a vision which only arises in the provenance of the mad.

Thus, finally, we return to Gibson's question: who is Christ here? Let me introduce one more pair, for it is precisely in this final opposition of images that we find another trope, what someone once called the *undecidable*, *l'indécidable*. What is this figure? *The crucified*. I submit it is not Christ on the cross that is decisive for Bergman – or rather, it is not the crucified *Christ* who speaks of the hidden God, but precisely those tropes, those images, who transgress the christic figure, these evoke the death of the beloved child and the *absence* of God – *not* the hiddenness of a mere dialectic. (We think of Ivan Karamazov's protest here: the suffering of one innocent child). Recall the thief on the cross in *The Virgin Spring*: he holds the center of the narrative space opened in the image of the crucified Christ Gibson earlier alluded to; indeed, the point here is that the crucified is *disseminated* – the self-inflicted stigmata of the mother's penance, the crown of thorns on Karin's head in the rapists' glade. And it is again the criminal, the transgressor, the marginal that is the crucified in *The Seventh Seal* – the burning of the witch, erected on a cross, the immolation of the sacrificial victim, the propitiation of the nameless rage of the Plague. The knight looks into her eyes – to see the Devil, for this one at least might bear witness to the absent God. But only terror, only the void, looks back.

So what does this all suggest? Perhaps we are not to look for a theodicy in Bergman; perhaps this is precisely the move the cinematic image refuses: it is not in the suffering of Christ on the cross that the narrative finds meaning; it is rather in the crucifixion of the undecidables that it expresses its work of mourning and its hope for a gift of vision that subtends all human production of meaning. Put differently, it is not the case, I submit, that it is the *father* who is the Christ figure in Bergman; the filmic text is precisely the subversion of this all-too-obvious temptation. Von Sydow's arms are only the foreshadowing of the rapist's embrace; von Sydow's distribution of the elements of the meal is only subverted by the thief crucified on von Sydow's own throne. Von Sydow finally acquiesces in the game with death, but never gazes upon what the fool sees, the vision of God, which for Bergman, is: the vision of unreason.

It is in the interstices, the folds of the narrative, the ambiguated figures of the mad, the fool, the criminal: it is here we find traces and parables of the christic and the crucified in our films – motile and aleatory elements, *les indécidables*. The place where Christ is – or is known – is not the father and the knight, but these mute and transgressive nameless ones, the eye that listens and the ear that speaks. Christ is known in the response to the place where he is not: the dispossession of vision that gazes upon the site of his disappearance – this dispossession is precisely the *gift* of vision. It is the gift that is the riddle of beauty, not the work of art, for we are not yet ready prepared to judge the beauty of this Christ. It is thus not the gift of vision at all, but the *movement* that seeks the vision, the wandering that knows that it does not see – the signifier that plays upon the surface of that space *where God no longer is*: Abraham carries Isaac up the mountain.

I am thus arguing that we are not to look for images of Christ in Bergman – at all. For the play of images in the cinematic text tends precisely to *subvert* this looking. Is this not the quest

of the knight in *The Seventh Seal* – the quest that is never fulfilled, the wandering that never arrives? It is rather this: that the vision of the crucified is disseminated, marked by its closure and its occlusion. It leaves in its wake parables and fragments, echoes in the ruins of churches that no longer speak – or, perhaps, have not yet begun to speak. For we are not yet prepared. Beauty *may* redeem the world – but it overturns it first.