

The ghost in the machine: *Saraband*

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In December 2003, the Swedish Public Service corporation Sveriges Television (SVT) screened *Saraband*, Ingmar Bergman's last film, with a cast that included Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson. This production may be regarded as a summary of Bergman's experiences as an author and director. By way of names, allusions, and direct quotations, the film is also connected to several other works in the Bergman universe, such as *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, 1957), *The Magician* (*Ansiktet*, 1958), *Persona* (1966), *Cries and Whispers* (*Viskningar och rop*, 1972), and *Scenes from a Marriage* (*Scener ur ett äktenskap*, 1973).

Saraband has the structure of a chamber play, with a small group of characters meeting in diverse combinations, with only two of them in each scene. This mathematical structure reminds us, as Jan Holmberg has pointed out, of the art of Johann Sebastian Bach, a constant point of reference for Bergman.¹ The dramatis personae visible on the screen are represented by a mere five actors: Johan (Erland Josephson) is an old retired professor, living in the countryside in splendid isolation; Marianne (Liv Ullmann) is his former wife, a lawyer by profession, who visits him in his remote home; Henrik (Börje Ahlstedt), Johan's son from his first marriage, is visiting Johan, staying in a small guest cottage along with his own daughter, Karin (Julia Dufvenius); and Karin is a young musician who, aided by her father, is preparing her application to study at the Academy of Music.

The fifth character is only present in one brief sequence in the epilogue. This is one of the daughters of Johan and Marianne, Martha (Gunnel Fred), a long-time patient in a nursing home. There

1 Jan Holmberg, *Författaren Ingmar Bergman* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2018), p. 253.

are in fact some other characters, but they are never visible on screen: the woman who helps Johan with cooking and cleaning has vital functions in the film, but most important of all is Anna, the wife of Henrik and the mother of Karin. Anna is dead, but she is constantly referred to; a letter of hers is quoted, and her portrait is visible on a couple of occasions.

The plot is organized into ten scenes, framed by a prologue as well as an epilogue. They are both presented by Marianne, who addresses the audience directly. In the prologue, she sits in front of a big table covered with black-and-white photographs. She tells us about her divorced husband Johan, saying that he retired from his work at the university as he inherited a lot of money. He now lives in a remote place in the countryside. Marianne goes on to tell us that she has very little contact with their two daughters: Sara, who is happily married to a lawyer and lives in Australia, and Martha, who is isolated in a nursing home owing to some kind of mental illness. And Marianne has herself had no contact with Johan for many years. The prologue is quite dreamlike, with an abundance of photographs spread out on the table in front of Marianne.

In the first scene, Marianne is reunited with Johan. This expository scene confirms the circumstances supplied in the prologue. Johan tells us more about his son Henrik and granddaughter Karin, who are staying with him at the moment. In the second scene Marianne and Karin meet, and Karin reveals her problematic relationship with her father, who wants her to be a great musician. Marianne contributes a description of her unhappy marriage to Johan. Karin also speaks about an incident in the morning when she did not want to rehearse with her father and they began to quarrel, the row ending with her running away from him. In the next scene, Karin returns to her father. After a brief conversation, she goes to bed (it is obvious that father and daughter sleep in the same bed). Henrik follows her and tells his daughter about his marriage to Anna, in which he felt subordinated and feared that his wife would leave him. Henrik returns in the fourth scene, visiting his father, trying to ask him for a loan in order to buy a cello for Karin. Johan is in his library, reading Søren Kierkegaard and taking notes. After a long discussion in which they humiliate each other, Johan eventually promises to think it over, but provokes his son to an outburst in the course of which Henrik sweeps a lamp from the table. In the fifth scene, entitled 'Bach', Marianne meets Henrik by chance in a country church she is visiting, where Henrik is practising on the organ. He opens his heart to her, talking about his love for Karin

and his longing for his dead wife, his hatred of his father Johan, and his thoughts of death. One moment he is amiable and gentle towards Marianne, and the next moment he is full of contempt and scorn. She seems quite shocked. He leaves her and she stays in the church, staring at the altarpiece.

In the following scene, Karin in turn visits Johan, who tells her that a famous Russian conductor wants to help her with her career—in order to save her from her mediocre father. The conductor invites her to St Petersburg. Karin supplies an answer to this offer in next scene, the seventh, where she once again meets Marianne. She explains that she cannot leave her father; he needs her. She lets Marianne read a letter that Anna, her mother, wrote to Henrik a few days before she died. In the letter she utters a warning to Henrik, afraid that he will keep Karin so close to him that he will suffocate her.

The eighth scene contains the final dialogue between Karin and her father. This scene has often been discussed by critics and film scholars. Henrik is enthusiastic and wants Karin to rehearse the cello suites by Bach with him for a concert he has planned, but after a while he realizes that something is wrong. Karin shows Henrik the letter from Anna that she has read, and he feels betrayed. Karin is very tender towards him at first; they even kiss, but then she pushes him away and tells him that she has other plans. She explains that she does not want to be a solo artist and that she has changed her mind about the Academy of Music. Instead she plans to go to Germany with some friends and join a programme for young musicians. Karin says:

Father! I don't want to. Really. I don't look upon myself as a solo artist. I want to play in an orchestra. I want to live enclosed in the body of sound, in an enormous, common effort. Not sit alone on a stage, lonely and vulnerable. I don't want others to tell me I'm not good enough. I want to decide my own future. I want to live a simple, ordinary life. I want to feel that I belong. And live an ordinary life. Not as a bad substitute for my mother. Which you repay with vague utterances about something that I am not and do not have. It must end. And now it has come to an end.²

Karin is in tears. Henrik asks her once again to play Bach's *Sarabande* to him, which she does.

2 This English translation from the film as well as the ensuing ones were made by the author.

The ninth scene implies that some time has passed. Karin is on her way to Germany. Johan and Marianne learn that Henrik has tried to commit suicide, and they reproach each other. The last scene is at night. Marianne tries to sleep, and Johan visits her bedroom. He tells her that he suffers from great anxiety and is afraid of death. They both undress, and she allows him to get into her bed.

In the epilogue we meet Marianne, who addresses the audience for the last time and explains that the relationship between her and Johan faded out after the related episodes. Marianne then remembers a visit she made to her daughter Martha, saying, 'I thought about the enigmatic fact that I, for the first time in our shared existence, realized, *sensed*, that I am touching my daughter, *my child*.'

As is clear from this summary, *Saraband* offers a field day for all Bergman interpreters. It invites associations to all the dysfunctional families whose members are unable to communicate with one another—here are the harsh fathers, acting as judges, and the forgiving mothers; here are the allusions to music and musical composition; and, most notably, here is the fear of death and the fear of life. Some key scenes that are easy to relate to other Bergman films are the final scene between Henrik and Karin and the meeting between Marianne and Martha. In *Autumn Sonata* (*Höstsonaten*, 1978), Liv Ullmann played the daughter of a very dominant mother, a famous concert pianist. Besides the Ullmann character, there was also a disabled sister whom the mother did not want to see. The alienated or even aborted child is a recurrent figure in the Bergman universe, for example in *Persona*. What happens in *Saraband*, however, is that communication is in fact established—or re-established—between mother and daughter. Marianne's final words are reminiscent of what the boy Minus says in *Through a Glass Darkly* (*Såsom i en spegel*, 1961): 'Daddy spoke to me!' A new line for this minimalistic dialogue is thus delivered more than four decades later in *Saraband*.

The war between the generations is another important motif in Bergman's work. Most notably, ever since *Frenzy* (*Hets*, 1945), many of the protagonists have been young people struggling with a hard and unsympathetic world of adults. When Karin in *Saraband* escapes the suffocating love of her father, a full circle is concluded. And her words about her desire to be an ordinary human being, working together with others, echoes the famous essay about the snakeskin that Bergman wrote in the 1960s, where he claimed that

he wanted to be an anonymous builder of a cathedral, along with other anonymous workers.³

Here the intertextual relations to other works by Bergman are mixed with allusions to works by a number of other artists, most of them old acquaintances in the Bergman universe. Since music is an important topic in *Saraband*, names of composers—including Paul Hindemith, Anton Bruckner, and Zoltán Kodály—are mentioned; but the most important one is Bach.

Strindberg is another recurrent intertext in the films of Ingmar Bergman, and although the allusions are never explicit in *Saraband*, there are some notable connections. The chamber-play formula and the discussion of guilt and forgiveness that we recognize from the later stages of Strindberg's oeuvre are apparent. A more subtle reference to Strindberg is the interior design of Johan's home. The design is a blend of bourgeois fin-de-siècle and a rural style, a blend which we can recognize from several stage productions of Strindberg from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. The kitchen, a crucial meeting point for the characters in this drama, is old-fashioned, and there is a pantry door that is taken directly from Strindberg's drama *Dreamplay*; also, the ventilation hole in the shape of a four-leaf clover is one of Bergman's ways of establishing contact with his mentor. The name August Strindberg is never mentioned, however. The only authors named are Freud—Johan has quit smoking to avoid developing cancer like Sigmund Freud—and Kierkegaard. The latter is not mentioned in the dialogue; but his name is highlighted in that Johan reads one of his works, *Either—Or* (*Enten—Eller* in the original Danish), in the scene where Henrik asks for a loan. We are allowed to see a close-up of the title of the book and the name of the author.

A vital reference that is explicit in the published script, but is not articulated in the actual film, is Swedish mystic and scholar Emanuel Swedenborg. In the first scene of the film, Johan tells Marianne that he sometimes thinks he is already dead, living in hell (a similar thought is formulated by Henrik in his conversation with Marianne in the church). In the published script, Johan refers to Swedenborg and his vision of how we reside in the world of spirits after death. Johan says, 'most of them do not notice the difference and cannot see that they are in hell. They are in fact quite happy

3 Ingmar Bergman, 'Ormskinnet', first published in *Expressen*, 1 August 1965. There is an English translation by Keith Bradfield, 'The Snakeskin', www.ingmarbergman.se/en/production/snakeskin (accessed 1 October 2018).

with their existence. Some of them live deep down among their own excrements, eating them, sleeping among them.’

The theology of Emanuel Swedenborg offers one way of entering into the cinema of Ingmar Bergman, at least when it comes to the Swedenborg vision of spirits and the world as a transitional space where we humans wander before entering the real world, whether it is heaven or hell. Here, Bergman joins the Strindberg of *Inferno* and *The Blue Book*, as well as an impressive line of artists and thinkers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, Jorge Luis Borges, and Czesław Miłosz. Like his predecessors, Bergman does not follow the Swedenborg theological system in any detail. It is the fascinating thought of unclear borders between life and death that invites an interpretation influenced by Swedenborg, as does the idea of correspondences (something which also fascinated Baudelaire, for example). A well-known hymn by Swedish hymnologist Johan Olof Wallin—‘Where Is the Friend I Seek?’—was quoted in extenso in *Wild Strawberries*, in the scene where Isak Borg rests at a wayfarers’ inn during his peregrination towards Lund for his jubilee-doctor ceremony; and in *Saraband*, Johan quotes some of these lines again. Bergman said in a late interview that this hymn is ‘Swedenborgian’, since it deals with correspondences—i.e. the idea that the world we see has to be deciphered.⁴ Beyond the material world is the true home of God, heaven. The hymn enquires into the correspondence between the beauty that we see and the beauty that awaits us when we reach God. The hymn is in fact also present in the fifth scene of the film, where Marianne visits the country church. A board on the wall announces the hymns for today’s service. There is only one number this time, No. 305, which is the number of this particular hymn in the Swedish hymnal.

When Johan reflects upon the world as being inhabited by the dead, or when his son Henrik tells us about his own feeling of being dead already, they witness a stage of liminality. They are not the only ones to have such an experience, and the liminalities that are developed through the film are diverse. Johan is reflecting upon his age and the fact that he is walking towards death, and Henrik seeks his own death through suicide, though he fails. They are the living who walk towards death; but we also have a dead individual walking towards life, though she can never break through the wall completely:

4 The documentary ‘I Bergmans regi’ (‘As Directed by Bergman’) (2003), by Arne Carlsson and Marie Nyrreröd, part of the DVD edition of *Saraband*, Sveriges Television.

I am thinking of Anna, who is constantly referred to as the one who knows the other characters best and whose picture is visible on some occasions. One might even say that the protagonists of *Saraband* try to raise Anna from death, to make her live again, giving vivid descriptions of her, quoting her words—for example from the letter to Henrik that Karin has read. Anna's vital role has been thoroughly discussed by Maaret Koskinen and Anna Sofia Rossholm.⁵ Johan's remote estate is in fact a kind of transitional space for movements, not only between the spheres of life and death but across other borders as well. The war between generations and the lack of communication are challenged by Johan's understanding of Karin, and maybe even more intriguingly by the way Marianne feels that she can finally communicate with her daughter Martha. These experiences may be said to transcend the fate of parents, losing contact with their children, that recurs throughout Bergman's oeuvre. Another instance of transcendence, or rather transgression, is Henrik's implicit attempt to break the taboo of incest—we know that he sleeps in the same bed as his daughter and that he kisses her, and she herself describes her relation to him as that of a substitute for Anna, his dead wife. Karin manages to break out of this relationship; and like Marianne, she evades the seemingly set relationships in this dysfunctional family. But the breaking of the incest taboo reminds us that a state of liminality is not necessarily free or liberating in itself; it may also be a state bordering on violent desire and abuse.

One of the basic elements of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the idea of life as a succession of stages—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—and all of the characters in *Saraband* may be seen as aiming or waiting for transgression and thus looking to attain a new stage in life, even if it is not necessarily possible to trace these aims back to the Kierkegaard matrix. As was pointed out above, the Kierkegaard book that Johan reads in the film is *Enten—Eller*, whose very title constitutes an interpretation of a liminal situation: 'Either or'.

The main character in the film, and to a certain extent the narrator of the story it presents, is Marianne. In the prologue, she introduces herself and talks to us, the audience, speaking in the present tense.

5 Maaret Koskinen, "Ett förtvivlans kanske" – Om gudars skändlighet och människans helighet hos Ingmar Bergman', in Tomas Axelson and Ola Sigurdson (eds), *Film och religion: Livstolkning på vita duken* (Örebro: Cordia, 2005), pp. 151–174; Anna Sofia Rossholm, *Ingmar Bergman och den lekfulla skriften* (Gothenburg and Stockholm: Makadam, 2017), pp. 71–75.

Then, in the first scene, she is in Johan's living room, unseen by him but seen by us, and she talks to us again, giggling over the situation as if it is some kind of joke. She transgresses a taboo when entering into Johan's house, interacting with the audience as well as with the cinematographic apparatus. A door is suddenly closed as if by an invisible hand, like the magic enacted in the attic in *The Magician*; a wall clock chimes; there are traces of a machine, something that makes the world go round. She looks around, but nobody is there.

On the spur of the moment, Marianne decides to visit Johan after many years, and suddenly things start to happen. When the narration of the film ends, Karin has left her father, Henrik has tried to kill himself, Johan has momentarily been awakened from his misanthropic existence, and Johan and Marianne have broken the long silence that has existed between them. And Marianne has the feeling of being in touch with her silent child, Martha, after all those years. But Marianne is not omniscient; she cannot make things move without interaction with the apparatus: the camera and the projection. And there are areas about which the camera knows more than she does.

When Marianne visits the country church where Henrik plays the organ, she visits another transitory space, a sacred room which in itself encloses liminalities of all sorts, but mainly the transition between life and death, which is underscored by the conversation with Henrik: Henrik says that he thinks of death all the time, and that he feels that he is already dead, as he can sometimes see his dead beloved Anna so clearly. He then offends Marianne, and in a way transgresses the line between sanity and insanity. Suddenly he becomes paranoid, asking if she 'fucks the old man' and if she is there to get his money. When he leaves, Marianne walks slowly towards the altar, and non-diegetic music is played, a cello suite. She looks at the altarpiece and the picture of Christ, and a ray of light is projected from the church window. She looks intensely at the Christ figure and then closes her eyes, as if in prayer. She then looks up, and even smiles slightly, and the scene fades to black. The intervention of the non-diegetic music and the light from the window emanate from the same source as the closing of doors in the first scene, *by an invisible hand*—that is: the camera, the light, the montage, the cinematographic apparatus, the vehicle of language in whatever form, and all correspondences between Man and God in the film. There would be no world at all in *Saraband* if there was no camera. That is a truism, to be sure; but the trivial truth becomes meaningful

with the small hints that Bergman gives us about the different levels of narration and consciousness. It is not as ostentatious as in *Persona*, but with a subtlety that comes from an old master, well aware of his own liminalities.

An ironic comment is made in the ninth scene, where Marianne and Johan learn that Henrik has tried to commit suicide. Marianne tells Johan that a woman found Henrik lying naked in the cottage, covered in blood, having tried to cut his throat. A photographic still of Henrik is inserted, as a reminder of the presence of the apparatus. In the conversation between Marianne and Johan, they reproach each other, and she says to him: 'Sometimes I think that you behave like a character in some old, forgotten movie. A very silly movie. You are in fact not a real person. ...' And she is right, of course; Johan is not a real person, he is a construction of light and sound in a movie, conditioned by the technology of film.

In the epilogue, Marianne asks us, the viewers, if we want to know how everything turned out. She shows us a black-and-white photograph of her and Johan in her bed, a frozen still from their last night together. This picture once again marks the non-diegetic presence of the apparatus. She tells the story of how her relationship with Johan faded out, and how the silence between them returned. She then talks about Anna and meditates upon her, before she tells us about her meeting with Martha. In a flashback, we see the interiors of the nursing home, bleak and grey, like in a much older film. Marianne touches Martha and removes her spectacles. All of a sudden, their eyes meet and the same cello music is heard as in the scene before the altarpiece. The last words of the film are 'My child'.

The machine is still working.

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