Dear Members of the Class on Agnostic Existentialism in the films of Ingmar Begman,

We have had a wonderful 7 sessions watching and discussing the challenging and beautiful films of Ingmar Bergman. It has been a pleasure to present to you my take on Agnostic Existentialism in his films, and to hear your response to the difficult issues presented such as meaning in life and how to achieve it, God’s existence, facing death, evil in human nature, the will to become and the love of life. While there is never a conclusion to such discussions, I had hoped that we would reach some sort of resolution at least as regards the films of Bergman we had seen after watching the concluding two parts of Fanny and Alexander during our eighth session, but that was not to be. The Corona Virus Pandemic arrived instead. Whether we will be allowed to see the concluding sections of “Fanny and Alexander” at Olli appears unlikely. I have already been approached by classmates who asked me when we will have a showing, but the Olli administration has said no. Class members who want to try to suggest a venue and a time that the administrators might accept are welcome to try. What the Olli administrators have allowed us teachers to do is to leave some parting words on this course upload, which you will find below.

Again, I thoroughly enjoyed leading our class and I hope you enjoyed participating as well.

B’Shalom,

Norm

When we left off watching the TV six hour version of ***Fanny and Alexander***, the two children and their mother were being introduced to their prospective new father’s, the Bishop Vergerus’s, family. Once married, Fanny’s and Alexander’s mother soon realizes into what a terrible situation she has placed her children. The Bishop is physically abusive to the Alexander and forces both children into the virtual prison of their barren bedroom while their mother is away visiting her former mother-in-law. She is caught in a marriage which, if she escapes through divorce, her husband will end up legally with the children. Only a miracle can save her and them, and it does, through the intervention of the Jewish friend of the family, Isak, whom we met in the opening segment. He is the former lover and continued friend of Helena Ekdahl, the mother-in-law of Emelie Ekdahl, and the grandmother of Fanny and Alexander. Helena’s maiden name, as presented in the Bergman screenplay, is Mandelbaum, so she do is probably Jewish by birth, and a well-known actress in her time, as is Emelie.

So here we have a film which Bergman considered his career capstone that represents a Jew as the heroic figure, and presents a representative of the Lutheran hierarchy as the arch demon. Thus this film is a clear statement of Bergman’s distaste for the authoritarian Swedish Lutheran Church in which he was raised, as well as wonderful apotheosis of his positive attitude towards Jews and Judaism, which turns out, in the end, despite his teenage during the 30’s and 40’s with Nazism and the Hitler cult, to be remarkably positive. He even includes in the concluding part of the film a bedtime story told by Isak to the children after he rescues them which is remarkably similar in form to the spiritually symbolic traveler’s tales by the great Hasidic Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav.

When we explore the range of belief in the film, we see once again the range presented by Bergman’s characters, from the rigid Bishop, to the comfortably Jewish Isak, who is willing to celebrate Christmas dinner (definitely not Jewish) with the Ekdahl clan, all the while wearing his yarmulka. In rebellion against God is Alexander, the Bergmanesque character, who childishly recites curse words as he marches in his father’s funeral procession as an expression of both his anger at his father’s death and his daring to see whether there is God who cares at all.

The search for existential authenticity is most clearly displayed not by Alexander, who is, surprisingly for someone accused by the bishop of lying, actually remarkably straightforward and honest in his responses, despite his fantasies and visions; rather it is his mother Emelie. We have seen her reject her acting and directing career as artificial role playing, only to become mired in her marriage to the authoritarian Bishop. Only when she realizes the truth of her artistic vocation, and in the end chooses once again to take charge of the family theater, and plan to act in Strindberg’s “A Dream Play” with her mother-in-law Helena, as she does at the end of the film, does she become a realized, authentic, existential protagonist.

I would just like to wrap up this little conclusory statement with a suggestion of further avenues of Bergman study. First there are his troop of actors. I will put 2 biographies of the many regular Bergman stars in the website references from Wikipedia below. Also I will include biographies of August Strindberg and E.T.A. Hoffmann, two writers, one Swedish, one German, who heavily influenced his thinking regarding the intermixing of dream and reality, the natural and the supernatural. Finally, a biography of Nachman of Bratslav, with an address to his tales, will help you see the sensitivity to Jewish thinking (such as, perhaps, aspects of Kabbalah) evident in this, Fanny and Alexander, his last feature film.

Again, it has been my pleasure to lead you through some of Bergman’s wonderful films that demonstrate his serious grappling with the themes of existentialism, and God’s existence.

B’Shalom,

Norm

Jan Malmsjo, the actor who plays Bishop Edvard Vergerus

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Malmsj%C3%B6>

Max von Sydow, who was first offered and refused the role of Bishop, and who died very recently.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_von_Sydow>

August Strindberg, whom Ingmar Bergman felt so close too he referred to him as August. He directed Strindberg’s “A Dream Play” four times.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_Strindberg>

E..T.A. Hoffmann, early nineteenth century German Romantic writer upon whom Bergman appeared to have modeled his sense that the real world is infused with magic, and the dead continue to communicate with the living.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._T._A._Hoffmann>

The Hasidic Rebbe famous for storytelling, and one of many who depicted in his stories the theme of man in search of God. A possible antecendent to the character of Isak in “Fanny and Alexander”.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nachman_of_Breslov>

A website through which you can access examples of Nachman of Bratslav’s stories.

<http://www.shuvubonim.org/ravn.html>