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# The Duality of Seeing “Darkly”: Analyzing Bergman’s Karin in *Through a Glass Darkly*

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WHILE MANY SCHOLARS PRAISE Ingmar Bergman’s film trilogy—*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*—they tend to disregard the contradictory views on gender within these films. However, each of these films explores how men and women interact with one another. Though women play a prominent role in each part of the trilogy, *Through a Glass Darkly* is especially significant because its plot revolves around Karin, a woman who is treated as both powerless and powerful. In fact, the duality of Karin’s existence is the very essence of the film: in the eyes of the men in her family, she is an object used to satisfy male desire; but, in the narrative of the film, she is the autonomous catalyst of male redemption. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Bergman intentionally highlights the duality of woman as both object and autonomous being, an idea which is outlined by Slavoj Žižek in his article “Woman as a Symptom of Man”; by emphasizing Karin’s duality, Bergman reveals how Karin’s ontology is both disregarded by the men in her family and embraced by the narrative of the film. While many scholars have written on Karin, their analyses have been oversimplified and reductive. Analyzing Karin’s duality, however, more clearly captures Bergman’s intent: to highlight the ways in which women function as both subject and object in patriarchal world of his films.

For Bergman, the God’s Silence trilogy presents a male-dominated world in which women are silent, or forced into submission, who find their voices by subverting social norms. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Karin’s subversive visions of God provide her with an escape from misuse at the hands of the men. Similarly, in *Winter Light*, Marta, who is symbolic of Martha, suffers and subverts Thomas’ world by still loving him when he pushes her away. In the Bible, Martha is the sister of Mary and Lazarus, and is the first to meet Jesus when he comes to raise Lazarus from the dead. In all later depictions of Martha, her servitude is emphasized. For example, in John 12:2 and Luke 10:40, Martha serves meals to her community. The most significant passage on Martha, however, is John 11:20–27 which states:

Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house. Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.<sup>1</sup>

Here, Martha's devotion to God is underscored. Her role as the faithful servant is reflected in *Winter Light's* Marta, who attempts to imbue her love interest Thomas, symbolic of doubting Thomas, with the faith he needs to grow in his relationship with God. At the end of the film, Thomas is about to preach a sermon to his congregation, but no one shows up to listen except Marta. Her presence, however, subverts of Thomas' expectations and, as such, distinguishes her voice from those around her. As such, Marta becomes the center of the film and the character around whom hope flourishes.

While there is also a subversive female character, Anna, in *The Silence*, she is not symbolic of hope, but rather of pain. Noticeably, Anna, her sister Ester, and her son Johan, are traveling home when they decide to stop in the fictional town of Timoka. While here, Ester isolates herself in her hotel room while Anna, seeking an escape from her ill sister, goes out and explores the town. Every time she does so, however, she is portrayed as an anomaly—all others she sees are either men or women being objectified by men, as is the case when she sees a couple having sex in the movie theater. Thus Anna, as a single woman, is subverting the town's norms every time she leaves her hotel room.

By highlighting the subversive nature of women in these films, Bergman highlights duality between patriarchy and ontology that women must navigate to reveal the inadequacy of what a patriarchal society demands of women, in his point of view, and how destructive society is when it makes women an object of desire. It also highlights women's attempts to find a place in the masculine world through acts of subversion. Thus, Bergman's *God's Silence* trilogy both emphasizes subversive behavior and subverts film conventions of the time. In particular, Bergman places Karin at the center of *Through a Glass Darkly* to expose the duplicity of the men in her family as well as the attitudes of male viewers of a

specific time and place. For the men, Karin is supposed to exist solely as the object of their desire—a sister/lover, a daughter/subject for a book, a wife/perfect partner—and when she rejects these roles, the men feel that the only way to deal with Karin is to label her insane and place her in an institution.

Feminist critics, however, differ in their view of the women in Bergman's films. Some critics, like Molly Haskell, assert that Bergman's treatment of women is liberatory because his films depict complex female characters who struggle to find meaning within the patriarchy. Haskell notes that Bergman

more than any other director [. . .] took women seriously, looked with curiosity and respect at every facet of their lives, domestic, sexual, reproductive (though honoring some more than others), never thought of them as 'second-class citizens' (the reverse, if anything), and, by not fastening on one single woman as his Galatea, watched over the film-birth and blossoming and development of one extraordinary woman after another. He has provided us with an array of women characters as rich as complex as those of any novelist, male or female.<sup>2</sup>

While Haskell's statement is accurate and highlights many of the ways in which Bergman gives his feminine subject an ontological being, it fails to address how women are treated by men in Bergman's films. More often than not, Bergman's women are portrayed as fighting with the expectations placed upon them by men. This is certainly true in *Through a Glass Darkly* and also plays a prominent role in the depiction of Martha in *Winter Light*. Even in *The Silence*, a film which explores the relationship between two sisters, Anna and Ester, shows Anna reducing herself to an object of male desire in response to her sister's behavior. Thus, Bergman films are not solely liberatory; rather, their depiction of women is highly nuanced to reflect the struggle of establishing a feminine ontological self as in a patriarchal world.

Some critics, however, miss Bergman's liberatory depiction of women entirely and instead see only the women through a patriarchal lens. For example, John Weightman critiques the way in which Bergman conflates femininity with wantonness as a foil to male virtue. In particular, he comments on the films *A Lesson in Love* and *Summer with Monika*, where he claims that "the two young husbands [are] perfect examples of the decent, naive, Scandinavian male who is driven nearly frantic by the vagaries of the female."<sup>3</sup> This view is not only highly problematic in

its conflation of women and evil, but also disregards the ways in which Bergman's women are often victimized at the hands of their male counterparts. Specifically, Bergman's females are often seen as a source of fulfillment—in terms of reproduction and selfish desires—for the men.

One reason critics vary in their perception of the women in Bergman's film is that Bergman's portrayal of women is complex. While the characters themselves are often highly nuanced—they experience a wide spectrum of emotions and desires—the way in which they are presented cinematically is troublesome. For example, Bergman often uses extreme close ups to show women in unflattering positions. One especially notable instance occurs in *Paranoia*, where Bergman uses a number of tight shots to emphasize the conflation of Alma and Elisabeth's identities. Hamish Ford, in his article "The Radical Intimacy of Ingmar Bergman" suggests that the purpose of these close ups is as follows:

The detail of this fine-focus dissection forces us to confront both the inscrutable materiality of the face, and its role as the communicative nerve centre of the individual subject's investments. The camera moves in uncomfortably, almost seeking to go inside—until a giant abstracted face fills the frame, stopping the zoom dead. The viewer is confronted with a close yet also alienating proximity to such a large expanse of human exterior, while we watch our enormous diegetic companion ask of itself 'what' it is, as it faces a very personal void.<sup>4</sup>

The dual nature of the lens, as both the imposter "seeking to go inside" and the object by which a character's existential struggle is brought to light, is representative of the women in Bergman's films. Like the lens, the women in his films must constantly navigate between establishing an autonomous self and being "valuable" in the eyes of men. Thus, Bergman's depiction of women is more subtle than previous scholarship suggests—it cannot be considered either completely liberatory or entirely reductive. Instead, Bergman both valorizes and invalidates his female subjects because, to him, "women are autonomous subjects and yet they are also constructed by the culture in which they live and by the act of representation."<sup>5</sup> As such women cannot be depicted as completely autonomous because to do so would negate their struggle under patriarchy; at the same time, women cannot be portrayed as mere objects because to do so would deny their ontology. Therefore, Bergman's depiction of women is a careful balance of the two—he recognizes women's existence as being independent from men but, at the same time,

acknowledges that female ontology is often negated or subsumed by the patriarchy. By highlighting this place of tension for females, Bergman indicts the men in the film, each of whom objectifies Karin in pursuit of his own selfish desires. He also suggests that women's only escape from oppression is through a symbolic or literal death. *Through a Glass Darkly*, therefore, reveals the duality experienced by women within the patriarchy and reveals how this dualism must, by necessity, result in the literal or figurative death of the female.

While some scholars hint at the duality of the female subject in Bergman's films, their analyses often end up being reductive. For example, Brigitta Steene argues that the women in Bergman's films are projections of his psyche. This argument, however is tautological; in other words, she argues that the women in Bergman's films are simply women as he sees them. Thus, her analysis does not provide greater insight into Bergman's depiction of women and it fails to address how Bergman views women and their duality. Though Bergman may have struggled with his views regarding women—he was known for having many wives and mistresses—attributing Bergman's female characters solely to his psyche suggests that the women are simply objects to be manipulated by men, a view which invalidates feminine autonomy. Steene even suggests that women are not of particular value in Bergman's films, particularly when she notes that "When Bergman leaves the world of women and returns to male protagonists, his form is to become bolder, his questioning deeper. The result is more puzzling and intriguing films."<sup>6</sup> By negating the value of women in Bergman's films, Steene's undermines her own argument. So, while she is one of the first scholars to hint at the duality of the female subject in Bergman, she fails to explore it in a meaningful way. Her conclusions, therefore, reinforce sexist/reductive analyses of Bergman's women in spite of themselves.

Marilyn Johns Blackwell attempts to address the contradictions within Steene's argument by analyzing Bergman's female characters through specific feminist theories—"otherness," feminine discourse, and "gaze theory." In her book *Gender and Representation in the Films of Ingmar Bergman*, she states that "the ambivalence that has marked feminist responses to Bergman is [. . .] not only the result of real disagreements about critical perspective, but also a product of Bergman's own ambivalence to women and to the cultural and ideological circumstances in which they find themselves."<sup>7</sup> Though this analysis provides a strong foundation for the remainder of her work, Blackwell's text largely disregards Bergman's work before 1960 because his earlier films often have male protagonists rather than female protagonists. While analyzing films

with leading female characters is crucial to understanding Bergman's views on women, it also leaves out many films that include strong and highly influential females. In particular, she neglects *Through a Glass Darkly*, which highlights the way in which Bergman's female characters are depicted as simultaneously powerless and powerful. Looking at the interplay of these tensions, particularly in their relation to Karin, and analyzing them through the framework created by Slavoj Žižek in his article "Woman as a Symptom of Man," creates a fuller picture of Karin's struggle for an ontological identity.

In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Karin is defined by her struggles with the men in her family and the God of her visions. Though she constantly attempts to assert her identity by placing herself in a position of power and authority, these acts often go unnoticed by those around her. As a result, Karin is habitually disregarded by her male counterparts because they cannot recognize her ontology; instead, they view her as an object of use. Karin's desire to break free of her objectification leads her on a quest for an ontological self. Thus, Karin undergoes a symbolic death, in the form of a psychotic breakdown, so that she can escape the men's abuse. Most scholars point to this scene as the key to the film because it shows David and Minus rebuilding their relationship through their mutual concern for Karin. Viewing this scene as redemptive, however, is problematic in two significant ways: first, it shows a clear disregard for Karin and second, it suggests that redemption is only possible for men. If that is the case, then the film's title, *Through a Glass Darkly*, has two very distinct meanings: It states that women can only experience relationships "through a glass darkly," but that men will ultimately see one another "face to face."<sup>8</sup>

The title of *Through a Glass Darkly* comes from 1 Corinthians 13:12 which states: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."<sup>9</sup> While the King James translation of this verse describes seeing "through a glass," other translations, including the English Standard Version, American Standard Version, and New Revised Standard Version, all translate the first part of this verse as "looking through a mirror." Thus, looking "through a glass darkly" is a process of self-examination. St. John of the Cross describes looking "through a glass darkly" as a period of time "in which the Spirit secretly does a deep work in the human spirit—a work that is so profound but feels so foreign to the [person's] experience that it is often interpreted as the absence of God."<sup>10</sup> This interpretation matches Bergman's idea of the Silence of God, which he describes as an absence so complete that God is not simply silent but has been lost inside the

monster spider who visits Karin at the end of the film. By making God into a spider in both *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*, Bergman reveals that God is not only absent, but any notion of him that his insightful characters may have is monstrous. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, men experience the spider god as the dark night of the soul. In other words, they feel God's absence but also undergo spiritual transformation. This is particularly true of David, whose sense of abandonment and isolation has driven him to attempt suicide. He comments,

Down there in Switzerland I decided to kill myself. I'd hired a small car and found a precipice [. . .] The car slid a few yards on the loose gravel surface, then hung there with its front wheels over the edge. I dragged myself out, trembling all over [. . . and] I no longer have any façades to keep up. Truth requires no catastrophes. I can see myself.<sup>11</sup>

In this moment, David moves beyond "seeing through a glass darkly" and begins to glimpse his own humanity clearly, making the juxtaposition within Bergman's film complete: on the one hand, Karin cannot see herself in light of the men in her life and in her culture due to their mistreatment of her; at the same time, David is able to see himself in both Minus and Martin, an act which allows him to re-establish his relationship with the divine as well as reconnect with the men in his family.<sup>12</sup> For example, when Minus admits to the incest, David recognizes his own failures toward Karin in Minus' confession, and, as a result, is able to "see [Minus] face to face. David states: "We can't know whether love proves God's existence or whether love itself is God [. . . but] suddenly the emptiness turns into wealth, and hopelessness into life. It's like a pardon, Minus. From sentence of death."<sup>13</sup> With these few words, David and Minus' entire relationship is transformed; the two are able to connect with one another, and thus understand love. Familial love then opens their eyes to the love of God, which before had been so far removed from their lives. Though these two had originally seen each other "through a glass darkly" they now see "face to face."<sup>14</sup>

Karin too comes into focus, but only at the expense of the men's cruelty and inability to see her before they see one another. As a result, the men only see Karin "clearly" after she has already turned inward, using her visions as an escape from the abuses of her family. Bergman's narrative suggests that this is the only way out for Karin, which is demonstrated by the fact that she can only see the world "through a glass darkly." Her worldview is a direct product of her objectification at the hands of

Minus, her brother; David, her father; and Martin, her husband. Though never stated explicitly, Bergman hints that misuse at the hands of God is a possibility for all women and that this experience is distinctly and universally feminine. He states:

A God descends into a human being and settles in her. First he is just an inner voice, a certain knowledge, or commandment. Threatening or pleading. Repulsive yet stimulating. Then he lets himself be more and more known to her, and the human being gets to test the strength of the god, learns to love him, sacrifices for him, and finds herself forced into the utmost devotion and then into complete emptiness. When this emptiness has been accomplished, the god takes possession of this human being and accomplishes his work through her hands. Then he leaves her empty and burned out, without any possibility of continuing to live in this world. That is what happens to Karin.<sup>15</sup>

His analysis clearly demonstrates that Karin does not undergo the same transformation as her male counterparts. Instead, she is disconnected from all community “without any possibility of continuing to live in this world”; in other words, she is forced to undergo either symbolic or literal death after her misuse, which is why she is institutionalized at the end of the film.<sup>16</sup> However, the fact that she, rather than the men, is chosen as God’s instrument complicates this analysis a bit. Though God, like the men, uses her for his own ends, he also makes her the sole instrument through which the men have any chance at redemption. Thus, Karin functions as both object and subject within the film.

A model for understanding Karin’s character can be found in Slavoj Žižek’s article “Women as a Symptom of Man.” In this article, Žižek outlines two views regarding women, both of which were prevalent in the early 1960s when Bergman was writing and producing *Through a Glass Darkly*. The first perspective summarizes the view of Otto Weininger, who viewed women as objects whose existence stems from men: “Weininger’s position is that woman is ontologically nothing but a materialization, an embodiment of man’s sin: in herself, she doesn’t exist, which is why one need not fight her actively to get rid of her. Man need only purify his desire for woman to lose her ontological status and disintegrate.”<sup>17</sup> In film, this philosophy manifests itself when women become plot points, rather than complex characters. Frequently, these characters are “love interests” or “femme fatales” whose existence, and particularly death, calls the male protagonist to action so that the narrative can move forward. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Weininger’s theory is evident in the

ways in which the three men use Karin: Minus, her brother; David, her father; and Martin, her husband.

The first of these relationships, between Karin and Minus, is depicted most clearly in a play Minus has written for his father and that he and Karin perform for him early in the film. In the play, an artist, Minus, is vying for the love of a princess, Karin. To prove his devotion to the princess, the artist agrees to follow her into the "realm of death." Yet, just as he is about to do so, his steely conviction is replaced with a series of excuses: he believes that he can better serve the princess by writing poetry or painting portraits of her—this way she will be remembered forever. Perhaps more comically, the artist also feels it is inappropriate to enter the afterlife with an upset stomach and, using his ailment as an excuse, he allows the princess die alone. Though Minus intends for his artist to be a reflection of David, "the Artist is [. . .] also Minus himself, grappling with the conflicting emotions aroused by his sister Karin."<sup>18</sup>

Frank Gado, the author of *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, argues that Minus and Karin subconsciously view one another as surrogate parents. Minus provides Karin with the love and support she craves from David, and Karin is the mature older woman who watches Minus grow into a man. In the play, Minus revokes his vow to the princess not only to mock David, but also to protect himself from "consummat[ing] his dangerous desires."<sup>19</sup> In real life, however, Minus is not able to walk away from his feelings for Karin—even though it comes in the form of incestuous desires. While Gado claims that Minus' relationship with his sister ends in "Oedipal guilt,"<sup>20</sup> on a more human level, Minus and Karin's sexual relationship exhibits their shared need to be loved. Isolation and human failure has caused Minus and Karin to seek solace in one another, an action which is influenced, but not defined, by their psychological need to experience filial love.

Though their desire to be loved is certainly understandable, Karin and Minus' act of incest is troubling, particularly because both the film and Bergman's critics suggest that it has positive repercussions. For example, Thomas Adler, author of "'Daddy Spoke to Me!': God's lost and Found in 'Long Day's Journey Into Night' and '*Through a Glass Darkly*'" states:

[Karin's] seduction of [Minus] in the womblike hull of the schooner seems to be paired visually with the earlier play-within-the-film acted out in front of an inner stage summerhouse/tomb. The artist in Minus' playlet, it is true, finally chooses life over art by refusing love-in-death with the Princess; this scene, on the other hand, asks that the viewer somehow see the violation of the sexual

taboo as ultimately positive for Minus rather than completely debilitating as it might first appear. The conclusion of Bergman's film implies that the incestuous encounter between Minus and Karin is finally an essential release of tension for the boy.<sup>21</sup>

This interpretation of the incest, however, is extremely disconcerting for three main reasons: it attributes the incest to "Karin's seduction"; it labels the site of the incest as womb-like, imbuing the act with an air of innocence and labeling it as inherently feminine; and it disregards Karin's reaction to the incest. Perhaps the most concerning part of Adler's argument is how his perceptions align with those of Weininger. He also views Karin as "ontologically nothing but a materialization, an embodiment of man's sin" by labeling her as a "seductress".<sup>22</sup> In doing so, Adler strips Karin of her ontological status and instead makes her "man's desire" in tangible form. As a result, Adler misses Bergman's point completely. In his interpretation, Karin is only given value in so far as she satisfies male desire. Once she does so, i.e. the act of incest occurs, she both literally and figuratively disintegrates: she falls into an incurable state of madness and is physically removed from the narrative and permanently placed in a mental facility. Thus, this interpretation of the incest reduces Karin to a plot device used to "redeem" Minus and completely disregards how the event impacts Karin.

Adler's interpretation of this scene is reinforced by many scholars who refer to the site of the incest as "womb-like" because it takes place in the hull of an abandoned ship. While this reading is widely accepted, it once again fails to take Karin the person into account. If the ship is a womb, then it is only a womb for Minus; for Karin, it is a shipwreck from which she will not recover. He is the one who enters the womb, receives nourishment in the form of the incest, and leaves the womb reborn. Karin, on the other hand, is portrayed as an "empty vessel" whose purpose is solely to be "filled up" by men. However, this fulfillment is simply physical and temporal, embodied in the act of sex itself. The kind of fulfillment Karin desires comes from a higher power—the God who speaks to her through her visions. When God reveals himself to be a spider, Karin not only cements her role as the "woman as object," but also becomes a subverted version of the Virgin Mary. Like Mary, Karin receives divine prophesy; but, instead of becoming a "sacred vessel" who is spiritually "filled up" by God to bring the Son of Man into being, she is an empty vessel who is physically used in an act of incest to bring the spider God into being. At this point, Karin recognizes her status as object which is why she envisions that the spider "climbs her thighs and tries to force his way inside."<sup>23</sup>

The spider does not represent the act of incest alone, but also acts as a symbol of Karin's abuse at the hands of the other men in the movie—David and Martin. David's relationship to Karin is particularly tenuous. Rather than loving and supporting her through her illness, David observes Karin from a distance. One reason may be his inability to cope with Karin's illness. A far more prevalent reason, however, is his desire to use Karin's illness as a subject for his next novel. David acknowledges this desire in his diary, where he states: "her illness is hopeless, with occasional improvements. I have long suspected it, but the certainty, even so, is almost unbearable. To my horror, I note my own curiosity. The impulse to register its course, to note concisely her gradual dissolution. To make use of her."<sup>24</sup> When Karin reads these words, she recognizes, once again, her role as object. The similarity between David and Minus' behavior is demonstrated by the spider God, whose "attempts to penetrate her and suck her being into itself for nourishment is also a nightmare version of the cold author recording his study of his daughter in his notebook."<sup>25</sup>

In a similar way, Martin views Karin as a source of nourishment; in particular, he wants relational fulfillment, which is revealed by his desire for sexual intimacy, and a child, which is emphasized by his desire to be a father. As a result, he pretends to view Karin as a loving addition to his life, but, in reality, he resents his obligation to her and the fact that she refuses to be the object through which he can fulfill his erotic desires. In fact, when "Martin accuses David of trying to fill his emptiness with Karin's extinction, David intuits that his son-in-law has selfishly wished his wife's death. Each recognizes himself in the other."<sup>26</sup> For both men, Karin's death signifies a release from obligation: Martin would no longer feel beholden to his ailing wife and David would no longer feel the guilt of his failure to love Karin. Martin, however, differs from the other male characters in one significant way: outwardly, he treats Karin well. When Martin and Karin interact, however, their body language suggests that, under his kind exterior, Martin is abusive. Torborg Lundell and Anthony Mulac come to a similar conclusion in their article "Husbands and Wives in Bergman Films: A Close Analysis Based on Empirical Data." They note that

In the beginning of the scene [Karin] dominates the dialogue and also exhibits much more physical activity by moving around the room while her husband only sits up in bed fumbling for his glasses and watch. As their interaction changes to her greater verbal dominance, she almost ceases moving. She turns almost limp in his arms while he moves her body into a sitting position, turns her face toward him, and caresses her face.<sup>27</sup>

Martin's manipulation of Karin's body not only demonstrates physical dominance, but also alludes to relational dominance as well. Martin portrays what Bergman views as stereotypical male behavior—he is calm, rational, and in control. Karin, on the other hand, is often disheveled and emotional, giving her the appearance of being out of control or unable to think for herself. These dynamics reinforce the patriarchal “woman as object” narrative by suggesting that Karin's desires are merely the whims of an unstable woman and that she is “lucky” to have a stable, logical man to keep her in check. Recognizing the flaws with this perspective, Karin retreats into the world of her visions.

Karin's visions, while reflecting her use at the hands of men, also provide her with freedom from misuse. One reason her visions are so liberating is that they allow Karin to actively, rather than passively, interact with God's kingdom. As a result, Karin's visions reveal that she is not an object devoid of ontological status; rather, she is the sole connection between humanity, as depicted by the men, and the divine. Zizek makes space for this interpretation by reversing the “woman as object” concept. He notes:

If [. . .] we conceive the symptom as Lacan did in his last writings and seminars [. . .] ‘woman as a symptom of man’ means that man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom: his very ontological consistency depends on, is ‘externalized’ in, his symptom. In other words, man literally ex-ists: his entire being lies ‘out there,’ in woman. Woman, on the other hand, does not exist, she insists, which is why she does not come to be through man only [. . .] Woman is therefore no longer conceived as fundamentally ‘passive’ in contrast to male activity: the act as such, in its most fundamental dimension, becomes ‘feminine.’<sup>28</sup>

According to this definition, the men in the film receive their existence through woman, particularly through Karin. Thus, Karin's interactions with each of the men defines their identity—David's work revolves around Karin, Minus' desire is centered on Karin, and Martin's obligation is solely to Karin. Karin even fits Zizek's description of the “big Other” who appears to be ‘pulling the strings’ regarding large life events.<sup>29</sup> The most significant way Karin determines the fate of the men is by acting as the catalyst for their redemptive acts.

After the incest, for example, Karin opens up to Minus about her visions. She tells him about her despair with their everyday life and her hopes for a better future with the God that lives behind the wall. By doing

so, Karin invites Minus to participate in her vision of a better world—one in which love, rather than disappointment, is the *modus operandi*. She even undergoes two forms of symbolic death—in the play and through her mental illness—in an effort to bring about a new world. Though Minus, while acting in the play, promises that his love will follow Karin into death, the film reveals that this is not the case. Instead, he uses Karin's vision to reconnect with David rather than to reconcile with Karin. Thus, Minus receives his essence from Karin, particularly in the form of his redemption, but fails to recognize it because he, like the others, believes Karin's connection to God is merely the result of a mental illness.

David also fails to acknowledge Karin's role in his life. The most prominent example occurs when he is discussing his failures as a father with Karin. He explains his behavior as follows: "We draw a magic circle and shut out everything that doesn't agree with our secret games. Each time life breaks the circle, the games turn grey and ridiculous. Then we draw a new circle and build a new defense." Here, David admits the foolishness of his own behavior and becomes like the artist in Minus' play: when faced with a traumatic incident, such as the death of his love, he refuses to act nobly and, instead, creates a new reality in which his selfish desires supersede virtue. Karin, who sees the foolishness of David's behavior, responds by calling David "poor little daddy"<sup>30</sup> and, in doing so, emphasizes that he, rather than she, is the one with a flawed worldview. Her statement serves as a call to action; she emphasizes that David needs to stop ignoring reality and instead embrace it. While this statement may appear contradictory, particularly because Karin also creates visions to escape from reality, there is a clear distinction between their two actions: David ignores reality in an effort to escape difficulties while Karin acknowledges reality's flaws. Karin's visions are therefore a desire for a better world; one which she seeks to bring about through her actions with her family. When she realizes that her family will never make her a part of their redemption, particularly because of her gender and psychological condition, she decides to permanently escape to the world of her visions. Her act is the last resort of an abused woman whereas David's act is that of a selfish man. When Karin brings his selfishness to light, David decides to change his ways but, like Minus, he refuses to acknowledge Karin's hand in it.

Similarly, Karin forces Martin to acknowledge their flawed marriage relationship. Specifically, she refuses to sleep with her husband and, in doing so, rebels against Martin's control over her body. While Karin does not explicitly reveal her reasons for withholding sex from her husband, the film suggests that it is due to Martin's inability to feel love or com-

passion. Because he is so rooted in logic, he is unable to understand or relate to his wife's emotions and, as a result, they cannot form a meaningful relationship. Karin's attempts to share her feelings ultimately fail because her thoughts are deemed to be caprices of a mentally ill woman. Thus, Karin decides to communicate her dissatisfaction through physical means: her body. Since body language is so crucial to Martin and Karin's relationship, Karin's rejection can be viewed as a direct response to Martin's bodily dominance. When Martin fails to achieve the level of control that he desires, he confesses to David that he views the marriage as an obligation. Though extremely negative in content, Martin's confession causes the two men to bond, and, as with Minus and David, allows the two men to forgive one another for their treatment of Karin. As a result, the confession, inspired by Martin's feelings toward Karin, becomes the means of Martin's redemption. Once again, Karin's role in the redemptive act is not recognized, and she is left to find her own means of redemption.

To do so, Karin escapes to the world of her visions. Though her hallucinations ultimately fail to protect her from reality, Karin still prefers the imaginary world to a world of "nuclear weapons and unhappiness, mass destruction and cruelty."<sup>31</sup> As a result, Karin succumbs to her visions and allows herself to be lost in the construct she has created. These visions are not simply hallucinations of a mad woman; rather, they are her hopes for a life full of love and fulfillment. Like Bergman, Karin attempts to change her visions into reality. Bergman explains his views through a metaphor of the cathedral. He states: "I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain [. . .] it is the sense of satisfaction that counts. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral."<sup>32</sup> Here, Bergman denies the importance of a specific set of beliefs and instead focuses upon three main ideas: community, creation, and artistic expression. In the metaphor, the appearance of the completed cathedral is irrelevant; rather, fulfillment is achieved through the process of communal innovation which leads to beautiful creation. In a similar way, Karin desires a world in which individual beliefs are subsumed into a yearning for community and love. In particular, Karin wants her family to come together and reconnect with the divine.

When her actions fail to bring the family together, Karin succumbs to her visions entirely, leaving David, Minus, Martin, and their abuse behind. At this point she engages in "symbolic suicide"; she kills the part of her that exists in the patriarchal world. Zizek describes this act as one in which

[T]he subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not); that is, the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, aphanisis, of the subject. Which is why every act worthy of the name is 'mad' in its radical unaccountability. By means of the act, I put everything at risk, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a 'crime,' a 'transgression,' namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong. The act is defined by this irreducible risk: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always negative; that is, an act of annihilation. It is not simply that we do not know what will come of it; rather it is that its final outcome is ultimately insignificant, strictly secondary in relation to the 'No!' of the pure act.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, Karin's decision to live solely in the world of her visions is a clear and distinct "No!" to living in a patriarchal world. While this decision may seem "mad" to those around her, it is also her one chance at liberation. By making this declaration, Karin rejects her family's view that she lacks ontological status and instead recognizes the problems inherent within patriarchy. Her actions, however, are not acknowledged by the men whose participation in Karin's oppression makes them blind to the meaning of her behavior. Thus, they interpret Karin's act as madness rather than deliverance. Karin, on the other hand, "perceive[s] this fissure of the symbolic 'substance' insofar as she occupies the position of a stranger, i.e. insofar as her gaze is external."<sup>34</sup> In other words, Karin recognizes the flaws within the patriarchal world specifically because she is female and because the system does not benefit her. Thus, Karin's supposed weakness, her womanhood, becomes a strength by which she is able to acknowledge and circumvent the failings of men.

*Through a Glass Darkly*, therefore, highlights both Karin's misuse at the hands of men and her role as the catalyst of their redemption. In doing so, the film demonstrates the duality of perception: the traditional patriarchal view that women are objects of use and the more progressive view that men find their existence in woman because they are born from her. The first narrative results in the complete destruction of the female, particularly because her ontological being only exists as long as she is of use to men. This is the view of Minus, David, and Martin. The second narrative, however, nuances the first. In particular, it recognizes that the patriarchal worldview exists, but suggests that woman, as the source of existence, provides man with his ontological being. Both of these narratives are working together simultaneously in Bergman's films: he recognizes women as having ontological being and therefore depicts women as complex autonomous subjects; but, at the same time,

he is aware that a woman's ontology is always in tension with patriarchy and therefore highlights how women are misused at the hands of men.

Not only is this evident in *Through a Glass Darkly*, it also plays a significant role in the other films in Bergman's God's Silence Trilogy. In *Winter Light*, Marta is very obviously an object of use for Thomas. Though he is physically repelled by a rash that has marred her outward appearance, he often plays upon her love for his own selfish ends. For example, when Thomas needs to vent his frustrations, he takes them out on Marta. In the same way, when Thomas needs someone to care for him when he's sick, he relies upon Marta. Thus, in his eyes, Marta is an object of use. At the same time, Marta is the catalyst for Thomas' transformation and, through the earnestness of her love for both Thomas and God, establishes an ontological self separate from Thomas. Consequently, Marta must carefully navigate the area of tension between patriarchy and ontology. Similarly, Anna, in *The Silence*, allows herself to become an object of use for both Ester, her ailing sister, and the waiter, the man with whom she has sex. In both of these relationships, Anna is a source of satisfaction for selfish desires, whether psychological or sexual. Meanwhile, Anna creates a separate identity for herself, one that no longer emulates her sister. In doing so Anna, like Karin and Marta, struggles to establish an independent identity in lieu of the familial and patriarchal pressures surrounding her.

Therefore, all the films in the God's Silence trilogy, and particularly *Through a Glass Darkly*, highlight the tension between ontology and patriarchy. By stressing the duality of women in this way, Bergman indicts viewers and critics for being complicit in Karin's abuse. Specifically, he accuses his audience of viewing women as "objects of use," an act which is not only accepted but lauded in patriarchal society. He then reveals women to be ontologically complex beings and, in doing so, attempts to bring women to a place where they will not be relegated to seeing "through a glass darkly," but, instead will be recognized as having ontological being, a fact which will allow them to see "face to face."<sup>35</sup> This end, however, can only be reached when the empowerment of women is not solely relegated to film, but also is sanctioned in reality.

## NOTES

1. John 11:20–27. All biblical quotations are taken from *King James Bible*, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973), 315.

3. John Weightman, "Putting on a Show: The European Art Movie," *Sight and Sound* (1994), quoted in Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema Face to Face with Hollywood*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 135.

4. Hamish Ford, "The Radical Intimacy of Bergman," *Senses of Cinema* 23 (2002), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/bergman/>.
5. Marilyn Johns Blackwell, *Gender and Representation in the Films of Ingmar Bergman* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), 4.
6. Brigitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 60.
7. Blackwell, *Gender and Representation in the Films of Ingmar Bergman*, 4.
8. 1 Cor. 13:12.
9. Ibid.
10. John H. Coe, "Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28.4 (2000): 293–307.
11. *Through a Glass Darkly*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (Janus Films, 1961), DVD.
12. 1 Cor. 13:12.
13. *Through a Glass Darkly*.
14. 1 Cor. 13:12.
15. Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film*, Trans. Marianne Ruuth (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), 252.
16. Ibid.
17. Slavoj Žizek. "Rossellini: Woman as a Symptom of Man," *October* 54 (Autumn 1990): 21.
18. Frank Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 273.
19. Ibid., 274.
20. Ibid., 247.
21. Thomas P. Adler. "Daddy Spoke to Me!: Gods Lost and Found in Long Day's Journey Into Night and Through a Glass Darkly," *Comparative Drama* 20.4 (1986): 345.
22. Žizek, "Rossellini: Woman as a Symptom of Man," 21.
23. Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, 247.
24. *Through a Glass Darkly*.
25. Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, 247.
26. Ibid., 269.
27. Torborg Lundell and Anthony Mulac, "Husbands and Wives in Bergman Films: A Close Analysis Based on Empirical Data," *Journal of the University Film Association* 33.1 (1981): 31.
28. Žizek. "Rossellini: Woman as a Symptom of Man," 21.
29. Ibid., 30.
30. *Through a Glass Darkly*.
31. Jörn Donner, *The Personal Vision of Ingmar Bergman* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 214.
32. G.D. Phillips. "Ingmar Bergman and God." *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism* Eds. Stuart M. Kaminsky and Joseph F. Hill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 54.
33. Žizek, "Rossellini: Woman as a Symptom of Man," 35.
34. Ibid., 41.
35. 1 Cor. 13:12.