

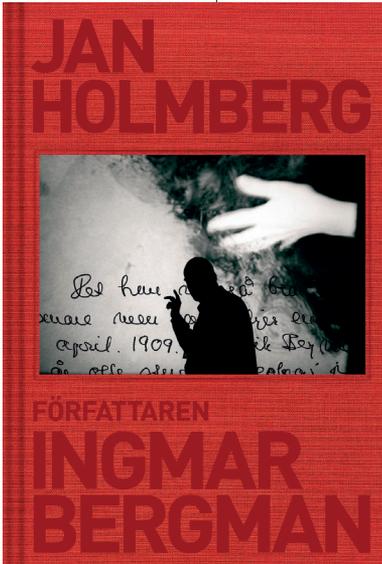
from:

The Writer Ingmar Bergman

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Författaren Ingmar
Bergman.
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from Chapter 3, '**Filmförfattaren**' (Film Author)

Artists figure prominently in Bergman's works. Often they are actors, musicians, directors or translators, in short nearly always someone who *interprets* what someone else has written. It is less frequent for them to be originators of a work and even rarer for them to be literary authors themselves, but there are at least two instances of the latter: Tomas in *Prison* and David in *Through a Glass Darkly*. Of the second character Vilgot Sjöman once said that the scene in which he toils over the manuscript of his book is a distilled account of Bergman's own progress as a writer. In Bergman's words:

David has hunched over the manuscript of his novel, he has paced back and forth, flung open the window to the sea, spent long periods staring out into the unreal drifting twilight. He has smoked incessantly, his eyes are burning, his nerves are shattered and he is fighting mild nausea.

The thick stack of typewritten pages (bearing the red ink of crossings-out and corrections, amendments and additions) is on the desk.

Having fortified himself with a couple of aspirin, he sits down beside 'the heap of typewritten pages scarred in red' and starts work:

David (reading): She came towards him breathless with anticipation, flushed from the rough wind ... (sighs) Oh my god.

He pushes his spectacles up onto his forehead and buries his grey face in his hands. After a few seconds he returns to the task.

David (reading): She came towards him breathless with anticipation ...

He puts a long thin line through the remainder of the sentence, surveys his handiwork and then crosses out the rest.

David: She came running towards him, her face flushed from the rough wind ...

Shaking his head, he leans over the sheet of paper and writes the following in red ink: *She came running towards him.* Then with another sigh and shake of the head he draws a thick line through the words he has just put down and resolutely writes: *They met on the beach.*

Sjöman's analysis takes into account the fact that David, like Bergman, cuts out adjectives and adverbs, eliminates melodrama and pares the language down. Whilst it is true that at this particular time Bergman is committed to what he calls 'reducing', with the result that his manuscripts from the '60s are considerably more sparing in the use of words than the preceding ones, I offer a different explanation. Rather than a commentary on Bergman, the above scenario is a parody, a caricature of the kind of writer he liked to mock. David is a novelist, someone who doesn't have to see 'his readers put the book aside with a yawn', in the words Bergman once used to express his contempt for some of his writer colleagues. Subtler markers of the difference between Bergman and his character are that David smokes and uses a typewriter – attributes, I believe, Bergman readily assigns to 'real authors', like the *Fyrtotalisterna*, or Generation 40, the group of Swedish authors who had their first works published in the 1940s. In addition, David clearly makes a lot of amendments to his texts, something Bergman rarely did – from his handwritten original to the proofs to the printed text, his manuscripts are remarkably clean. Overall this points less to a self-portrait than an exaggerated picture of the kind of writer Bergman did his best not to appear to be. That in fact he is Bergman's direct antithesis is evident from an entry in the workbook from this time, in which David is described as 'definitely more gifted as a person than an artist' (Work Diary, 18 March 1960). Bergman was supremely aware that in his case it was the other way round.

Through a Glass Darkly is often held up as a typical Bergman script, with characteristic themes: man's relationship with God; reality, dissimulation and performance; artist as cannibal – all the usual stuff. Which is of course true. But one doesn't need to read too deeply to discover that the film is also, and more specifically, about writing. Letters, novels, diaries and plays all feature and have great significance. Frequently the genres are pitted one against another, where David's obviously dishonest novels confront more urgent kinds of text. In a bitter remark in the introduction, his son-in-law Martin mentions a letter he wrote concerning his wife Karin's illness. 'But I thought I ought to write. Even if it might disturb your penmanship.' (As if use of the word 'penmanship' were not enough, Bergman gives a direction after this line: 'Martin's tone is somewhat ironic.') Situations like this, in which David's non-committal writing is subject to external pressures, recur throughout the film.

Karin's psychiatric condition is a touchstone for the potential of literature, which is found wanting, indeed profoundly damaging. One such occasion is the pivotal scene where she has crept into her father's study.

She opens the right-hand desk drawer. In it lies a thick black notebook almost completely filled with her father's nervously pedantic handwriting. She sinks down onto the chair and reads slowly, painstakingly, whispering every word.

Karin: Her illness is beyond hope, with occasional temporary improvements. I've suspected it for a long time, but the inevitability is almost unbearable. To my horror, I detect my own curiosity. The urge to record the process, to make concise notes on her gradual collapse. To exploit her.

She lowers the book, places it on the table, closes it, sits and looks out of the window.

Her father's betrayal seems to be the trigger for Karin's subsequent psychosis. This passage is often quoted as a prime example of a recurring figure in Bergman's work: the vampire-like artist. Though the bloodsucker is often conscious of the monstrous fashion in which he practises his profession, as David is here, there is no excuse for his conduct. Quite the contrary. But Bergman's utilitarian credo goes something like this: to exploit his fellow human beings is the artist's privilege and duty, as long as the value of the outcome outweighs the cost to the victims. 'Write your book!' Martin says to David. 'It might give you what you want above all else: a breakthrough as an author. Then you won't have sacrificed your daughter in vain.' A little later David makes a half-hearted attempt to apologise to Karin for 'rushing off' after being told about her illness, 'but I had to finish my book.' She replies with a question: 'Is it any good then?' Whereupon David sets fire to his manuscript; presumably the answer to her question this time is no.

This time. *In principle* neither David nor his creator have any qualms. Art, even if produced for the benefit of people, is more important than the people themselves. At least as long as it has real value, which for Bergman is expressed by a severely strained and in his terminology exceedingly complex word: art must be 'true'. Something David doesn't achieve in his novels.

Martin: Have you written a single true word in your entire life as an author? Answer me if you can.

David: I don't know.

Martin: There you are, you see! But the awful thing is that your half-lies are so sophisticated, they resemble the truth.

David: I do try.

Martin: That may be so. *But you never manage it.*

David: I know.

In fact, on one occasion David *did* manage it in his writing, and with devastating consequences: when Karin read his diary.