



Bergman Island

Director: Mia Hansen-Løve

Country: France/Sweden

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A review by A O Scott for *The New York Times*:

“This is your landscape, Bergman. It corresponds to your innermost imaginings of forms, proportions, colors, horizons, sounds, silences, lights and reflections.” That is Ingmar Bergman, in his memoir “The Magic Lantern,” rhapsodizing on his “secret love,” the island of Faro in the Baltic Sea. Starting in 1960 with “Through a Glass Darkly,” he shot many of his films on Faro and died there in 2007.



In “Bergman Island,” Mia Hansen-Løve’s slippery and enchanting new movie, Faro, an austere and forbidding presence in much of Bergman’s work, is revealed as a pilgrimage spot for cinephiles and an appealing seaside destination for less obsessive travelers. Visitors can browse in the gift shop and the library, watch movies in Bergman’s personal screening room, or pile into a bus for the guided “Bergman Safari” (an actual annual event). They can also swim, drink, play Ludo and shop for sheepskins.

Chris (Vicky Krieps) and Tony (Tim Roth) do some of those things, but they’ve come to Faro mostly to work. Filmmakers with screenplays at various stages of completion, they install themselves in the cottage where some of “Scenes From a Marriage” was filmed. The caretaker who shows them around cheerfully describes it as “the movie that caused millions of people to divorce.” (I wonder if the recent HBO remake will have the same impact.)

An unmarried couple with a young daughter (she is staying with a grandmother while her parents are in Sweden), Chris and Tony have perhaps unwittingly arrived at a crisis in their relationship. They are affectionate and easy with each other, but the combination of Chris’s restlessness and Tony’s complacency suggests that things are not quite right between them.

In Bergman’s films, love is a volatile element, as often as not a catalyst for emotional anguish and psychological disintegration. A man and a woman in a movie with his name on it are unlikely to find much peace. But Hansen-Løve, though she is interested in the gloomy Swede and his legacy, is hardly in his thrall, and Chris and Tony don’t live in anything like the state of metaphysical extremity that so often afflicts Bergman characters.



Chris is a passionate movie lover who is nonetheless skeptical of the power of the medium, and “Bergman Island” explores her ambivalence in a playful, critical spirit. She is bothered by the fact that Bergman, the father of nine children with six women, pursued his art at the expense of his family obligations. No woman would have been able to get away with that, she says, a complaint that is met with the usual shrugs, jokes and condescension from Tony and their dinner companions.

She acknowledges the difference between art and life, but nonetheless wishes for a measure of “coherence” between them. The possibility of such a thing becomes more than just a theoretical question in the second half of “Bergman Island,” when the as-yet-unmade film that Chris is still struggling to write takes over the screen.

That movie-within-the-movie, also set on Faro, involves a young woman — also a filmmaker — named Amy (Mia Wasikowska), who travels to the island for the wedding of a friend and encounters Joseph (Anders Danielsen Lie), the great love of her life. The two of them met as teenagers and all these years later, even though they are committed to other people, find that they just can't quit each other.



Their passionate, guilty romance — and Amy's blondness — tilt the story closer to Bergman territory than Chris and Tony's passive-aggressive courtesies, but the more obvious cinematic reference lies closer to home. Chris's film is in effect a sequel to Hansen-Love's "Goodbye First Love," which followed adolescent lovers into young adulthood.

The connection between the movie Chris dreams up and the one she's in seems both elusive and obvious, as do the possible

autobiographical implications of "Bergman Island." Can it be entirely coincidental that Amy is a near-anagram of Mia, the name shared by Wasikowska and Hansen-Love? Is Tony a stand-in for Olivier Assayas, the French filmmaker with whom Hansen-Love has a child? Are we approaching Bergman's landscape of doubling and collapsing identities from a different angle?

But there are also intriguing hints that Chris and Tony's story may itself be a kind of film-within-the-film, this one conjured out of Tony's imagination. When Chris asks about his project, he answers that it's about the unspoken meanings that circulate through the daily life of a couple, a description that fits the first half of "Bergman Island" almost too neatly. He also explains, during a Q.-and-A. session after a screening of one of his movies, that he tends to identify with his female characters. Does this make Chris his alter ego?

To her credit, Hansen-Love doesn't turn "Bergman Island" into a self-conscious philosophical puzzle. It unspools with an easy, fresh-air naturalism against a picturesque backdrop that doesn't necessarily conform to anyone's innermost imaginings. The mood, underscored by Robin Williamson's sprightly music, is mainly comical, and the artists — Tony and Chris, at least — seem more playful than tormented, even at difficult moments.

That may be because they both understand the paradox that "Bergman Island" so brilliantly enacts. It's a movie that isn't quite sure whether it wants to be one, or which one it wants to be. Which makes it feel like more than just a movie.

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