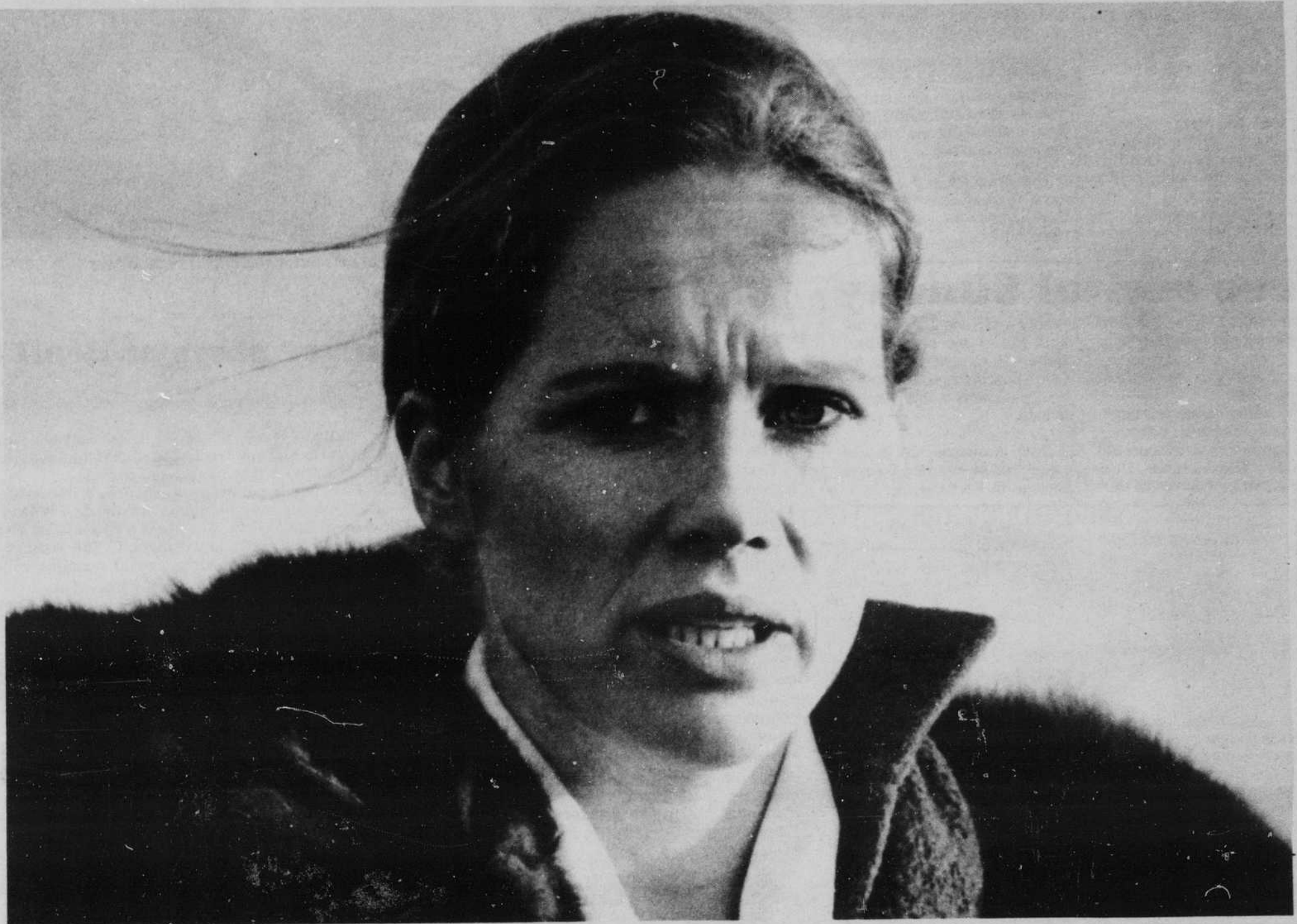


Surface and Symbol

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Bergman, Ullmann provide masterful acting — economical editing leaves doubt about denouement

By Kristi Turnquist

Placid water rippled by undercurrents; cut to Liv Ullmann's face, composed yet anxious.

Ingmar Bergman's newest film, *Face to Face*, now playing at the Waco Cinema I, opens up this close-up of Ullmann. It's fitting. Bergman provides solid backgrounds for her, but the drama takes place largely in the theater of Ullmann's face and body.

In a masterly performance, she guides us through a woman's breakdown, inspired by Bergman's customary genius with actors and his newer, spare technique.

Only later, when released from Ullmann's spell, do certain facets of *Face to Face* become troubling.

Ullmann plays Dr. Jenny Isaksson: moderate, intelligent and always dressed in beige. By most standards, she is a fulfilled woman; she is committed to her psychiatric work (no pun intended), has a loose, convenient marriage, and a self-sufficient 14-year old daughter.

We meet her preparing to move into a new house while her family is away. She moves in temporarily with her grandparents, in the house where she was raised.

Bergman's at his best here, handling the mundane homecoming with deli-

cacy. He illuminates not only Jenny's past and present states, but those of her grandparents as well.

Surrounded by childhood possessions, Jenny's repression is sketched with deft strokes.

In one instance Grandma makes a fuss over Jenny's old things, and her girlhood insistence on a hard pillow.

Rather than say, "I don't care for these anymore and like a softer pillow now," Jenny only smiles. Unseen by Grandma, she grimaces at the room and discards the rock-hard pillow.

At the clinic, Jenny's scheduled to fill in for a vacationing colleague. In what at first appears to be a 10-ton weight labeled *Theme*, the other doctor tells her psychiatry is a sham; if patients recover at all, it's by accident. Jenny politely disagrees.

At a party given by the doctor's ex-wife (to "unveil her new lover"—a homosexual), Jenny shares a quiet moment with her. Humbling confessing gratitude at ending the conflict between herself and her emotions, the garrulous lady briefly betrays middle-aged desperation.

Disturbed, Jenny accepts a dinner invitation from another guest, a gynecologist named Jacobi (solidly played by Erland Josephson). Despite initial suspicion, the two become friends, not lovers.

Jenny's turning-point comes in her

empty new house. She is surprised by two men who bring her missing patient there and one attempts to rape her.

She later tells Jacobi of the attack and her involuntary wish it had succeeded. Half-asleep, her defenses fall and she collapses into choking hysterical laughter (bravura acting by Ullmann here).

Slipping into delusions (her recurring vision is of an old woman, blind in one eye), Jenny calmly yet promptly decides to kill herself. She swallows sleeping pills (shown, for once, as the laborious process it must be).

Dr. Jacobi's concern saves her however, and she awakens from fevered dreams in the hospital.

Bergman shows us little treatment, as if underscoring earlier statements about psychiatry's ineffectuality. Jenny recovers under therapy consisting mainly of talking to Jacobi (not a psychiatrist, remember) and re-living childhood sources of anxiety.

The question arises: What makes a mind break, and what makes it mend? Bergman apparently sees it, in Jenny's case at any rate (her patients are worse off), as illness running its course.

In the delicate recovery period, Jenny withstands her daughter's rejection, her husband's coolness, and Jacobi's sudden departure for Jamaica. Where does her strength come from? Perhaps these are harsh confirmations of what she's

known all along, and reassuring in their blatancy. But it's impossible to know.

Bergman ends the film abruptly. Jenny, re-installed at her grandparents', realizes the old people's love "embraces all — even death." She calls the clinic and reports she'll be in next morning, "as usual."

We can't help but reject the patness of this conclusion. These are the same old folks Jenny blamed for many traumas. With all she's gone through (shown too clearly in dream sequences which seem remnants of Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* period), surely she must have learned no easy answers exist. "Love Conquers All" hardly applies to her own emotionally arid life.

Bergman is externally following a course common to artists' development: Economy of Means. He's stripped his work of expressionist baggage and relies on essentials, carefully controlled.

Despite Bergman's purely filmic skill, however, *Face to Face* requires a second viewing to allow recognition of its depths; and this is a failing. Serious problems exist in the content — is the theme really simple as *Psychiatry is bad and love is good?* Senses tell us no, but are unable to find other concrete ideas to flush out these.

Is it gluttonous to ask an artist who supplies so much to give just a little bit more?