

REVIEW

Review of Mia Hansen-Løve's *Bergman Island*

2021, CG Cinéma/Scope/Arte France Cinéma, 113 min

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In Mia Hansen-Løve's *Bergman Island* (2021), a filmmaking couple, Chris (Vicky Krieps) and Tony (Tim Roth), spend three weeks in Fårö, the Swedish island famous as the residence and source of inspiration of the great Ingmar Bergman. Quickly, however, despite their efforts to channel Bergman, a creative tension arises between the couple, resulting in a significant disconnect. In a telling dinner conversation with the island staff, Chris and Tony express key differences in life philosophies. In regard to the life of an artist, Chris believes that they should be present in their relationships and helpful in their family if they have one – supportive, even if it hurts their body of work's output. Tony disagrees: for him, art takes the ultimate priority since it transcends life itself, and great art is the ultimate form of selflessness, inspiring and helping others; so, the creator is justified if they themselves are not the best people because their deeds belong to a higher and nobler order. The audience continues to see major distinctions between the two: Chris represents a more innocent beauty, where Tony finds such value in the worldly and grotesque.

As the two settle on the island, Tony soon begins work on a new project, and Chris remains stuck. Yet, as the days lengthen and the two become more involved with their surroundings, Chris outlines a new screenplay and pitches it to Tony. On a walk through Fårö, Chris shares her screenplay idea; and, as she tells the story, it is shown on-screen, acted out, which creates, for the couple, a shared experience where the lines between reality and fiction begin to blur. When Tony steps away for a moment or is preoccupied by something (like a phone call), Chris stops. Her story halts and the audience returns to reality from this alternate world. Each time Tony leaves, the storytelling pauses – an act of deferral, as if the story itself is tethered to his presence. Yet, when he returns, it resumes, revealing the characters, the landscape, the drama, and the intricacies of the narrative. At first, Tony's presence feels essential, the catalyst for Chris' storytelling. Eventually, however, the pattern breaks when Tony leaves and the story continues without him. Back in reality, the audience watches as Chris, now untethered, finds a new sense of independence. When Tony returns, Chris, too, has changed. Her story exists beyond him. She summarizes the events for him, but something is missing: the vivid, visual storytelling the audience has just witnessed. What remains is a cold, clinical recount, stripped of its visual, descriptive intimacy. This shift is deliberate. This alteration in what the audience has grown used to serves as a visual representation of Chris's realization that Tony does not deserve to see the intimacy between the two fictionalized characters. His tone-deaf reactions to moments of emotional openness have left her unwilling to share this deeper layer of herself with him. Instead, she keeps the intimacy of her fictional characters for herself, shielding them from Tony's indifferent gaze.

As Chris's storytelling progresses, her fictional recounting overrides the prior narrative of the original film's story to the point where the audience is submerged in this new plot and characters, born from the earlier, forgotten experiences of Chris and Tony. These core moments between the two are now forgotten, or at least subconsciously shelved, resulting in a merge between the real and the fictional. When Tony leaves for a few days to work on pre-production for a new film, Chris's fictional characters meld with her reality – or at least their fictional actors do. Chris interacts with them – touring houses on the island, playing board games, talking over dinner in a blue night. These characters, once figments of her imagination, now inhabit her world, offering companionship and solace. Still, not even this illusion will last. All is fictional: the fake actors for fake roles leave for fake homes on fake schedules. Their presence is merely temporary, fleeting. And once again, Chris is left alone. This time, his solitude feels very different. No longer is it a void to be filled by Tony or anyone else. It's a space where her story, her characters, and ultimately, her self-reliance, have taken root. In losing the need for Tony's immediacy, Chris has reclaimed her narrative, not grounded in a realistic fantasy, but present, independent, validated by herself.

When Tony returns from his trip with their shared daughter, the family reunites in warmth, filled with life, together, as if for the first time. It is teased through scenes of tension throughout the film (as seen the examples above) that Chris and Tony will split up or have a relationship-threatening argument or fight. But, spoiler alert, this never happens. Hansen-Løve shows that, in difference, love can still exist. That despite altercations, love remains. This idea is synonymous with French philosopher Alain Badiou's idea of love: that love is a construction, and does not remain in an encounter. In his *In Praise of Love*, Badiou writes that "Love invents a different way of lasting in life. That everyone's existence, when tested by love, confronts a new way of experiencing time." And so, for him, and here in this film, life is unable to be experienced differently without these tests or differences. They are a necessary aspect if true love is to exist. When Tony returns to Chris, the audience sees this mixing of persons to create something greater. As Rimbaud wrote in *A Season in Hell*: "It is recovered! / What? Eternity. / It is the sea / Mixed with the sun." By the combination of differences when two come together, putting such contrasts in work with the other toward a non-conventional or non-publicized beauty, there we find eternity.

In *Bergman Island*, Mia Hansen-Løve demonstrates how this is possible, employing an unconventional portrayal of a relationship to establish beauty within difference. To experience life anew, again and again, with another imperfect other.