Preface

Since this is a book of reflections on Ingmar Bergman’s creativity, it seems fitting to begin with a statement that he himself made about its frequent emergence out of a “seed” in his experience:

Most of my films have grown—from some small incident, a feeling I’ve had about something, an anecdote someone’s told me, perhaps from a gesture or an expression on an actor’s face. It sets off a very special sort of tension in me, immediately recognizable as such to me. On the deepest level, of course, the ideas for my films come out of the pressures of the spirit; and these pressures vary. But most of my films begin with a specific image or feeling around which my imagination begins slowly to build an elaborate detail. I file each one away in my mind. Often I even write them down in note form. This way I have a whole series of handy files in my head. Of course, several years may go by before I get around to transforming these sensations into anything as concrete as
a scenario. . . . My films grow like a snowball, very gradually from a single flake of snow. In the end, I often can’t see the original flake that started it all.¹

Writing about the origin of Cries and Whispers, Bergman describes a persistent but wholly isolated image that kept coming back to him for more than a year without his knowing why: “over and over: the room draped all in red with women clad in white. That’s the way it is: Images obstinately resurface without my knowing what they want with me; then they disappear only to come back, looking exactly the same.”² In several interviews he has said that the creativity in his directing of film or theater relies mainly upon his momentary intuitions rather than any fixed or premeditated reasoning.³

The book you are beginning to read might seem to run counter to that approach. It is written as an investigation by a philosopher into both the meaningfulness and the technical expertise that pervade Bergman’s film production. I do not see any contradiction between my procedure in this and his description of his “intuitions.” They are the spontaneous flourishing of many years of maturation in his art form, many years of trial and error in molding creative possibilities that lend themselves to cinematic treatment. Reason, or even meditation, enters
into that, albeit in the oblique and beneficial manner that art allows and sometimes requires. I view Bergman as a kindred spirit, and as one who is philosophical in the expanded use of this term that I invoke in the general observations that follow.

My book is a kaleidoscope, a shifting conglomeration of insights and speculations that hew closely to my own experience of the forty-odd Bergman movies I discuss. Throughout my text no pretense of completeness exists, and at times my remarks may even seem to lack order or coherence. That is because the themes and motifs that I study often occur as scattered, and greatly diverse, components of Bergman’s films. The structure in my endeavor is not determined by the chronology of the different movies, or any exhaustive account of their individual narratives, or even their detailed relation to Bergman’s personal life as distinct from his aesthetic and cinematic development. As I learned from Proust’s pervasive methodology, the contextual flow of one’s thought can yield a harmonic pattern that may be as important as any systematic assertions one might offer.

Those who want a more conventional kind of introduction to Bergman’s career can easily find it elsewhere. I have tried instead to make a presentation that yields a portrait of the filmmaker as an evolving artist, with the many modulations that involves. The chapters are a
running commentary on the meanings and techniques that have elicited interpretive ideas of mine through which I could respond to them. At the same time, my remarks are not purely subjective or impressionistic. The judgments I formulate, both critical and factual, always lend themselves to confirmation or rebuttal. Eliciting a reaction pro or con is indigenous to the communication I wish to establish.

I have dedicated the finished product to the memory of Charles Fisk, the renowned builder of pipe organs in the baroque style, not only because he shared Bergman’s love of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, but also because I feel that if he had lived long enough he could have appreciated and understood, more fully than most others, its great contribution to the flowering of Bergman’s genius. Among the people who have read early drafts and encouraged me in this work, I single out Richard A. Macksey and Josephine Fisk Singer.

I. S.