

# Modes of Representation in Ingmar Bergman's *Gycklarnas afton*

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ABSTRACT: Ingmar Bergman's 1953 *Gycklarnas afton* [*Sawdust and Tinsel*] is a film that has received little attention, despite major critics' agreement that it is a masterpiece, Bergman's first classic. To ascertain why it warrants the critical acclaim of most serious film scholars, this article uses a close-reading methodology to examine four different aspects of the work: the frequent occurrence of metafilmic moments, the radically experimental Frost and Alma sequence, the film's extensive and complex use of mirrors, and the unusual editing and shot compositions that mark the beginning and end of the film. These strategies document a self-reflexive aesthetic, a thorough-going preoccupation with the notion of performance both within and outside theatrical institutions, presenting a tacit argument for the impossibility of authentic subjectivity, the importance of the mask. Ultimately the film presages precisely those elements of Bergman's later production that have made him one of the most important figures in twentieth-century film.

RÉSUMÉ: Le film de 1953 *Gycklarnas afton* [*La nuit des forains*] d'Ingmar Bergman a reçu peu d'attention, même si les critiques s'entendent pour dire qu'il s'agit d'un chef d'œuvre et du premier classique de Bergman. Afin de déterminer ce qui lui vaut de tels éloges de la part des plus grands spécialistes, cet article propose une explication de texte afin d'examiner cette oeuvre selon quatre aspects différents: l'occurrence fréquente de moments métafilmiques, la séquence radicalement expérimentale de Frost et Alma, l'utilisation extensive et complexe des miroirs ainsi que le montage inhabituel et la composition des scènes qui marquent le début et la fin du film. Ils confirment une esthétique auto-réfléchie, un souci minutieux de la notion de performance à la fois à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des institutions théâtrales, présentant un argument tacite quant à l'impossibilité d'une subjectivité authentique et l'importance du masque. En fin de compte, le film laisse précisément présager les éléments caractéristiques des productions plus récentes de Bergman qui ont fait de lui l'une des personnalités les plus importantes du vingtième siècle.

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**I**ngmar Bergman's *Gycklarnas afton* [*Sawdust and Tinsel* or, per the American title that has been all but abandoned by critics on both sides of the Atlantic, *The Naked Night*] from 1953 is not an easy film: it is bleak, grim, raw, and occasionally histrionic, qualities that no doubt contributed to the movie's distinctly mixed reviews.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore it features a male protagonist with whom few audience members can be expected to identify. At the same time, this important film engages with issues that will be central to Bergman's later production. It concentrates on the experience of being an artist but also addresses the issue of what constitutes spectatorship. It is about no less than the conditions of creating, performing, and receiving art, issues that recur (albeit in varying degrees) in virtually every Bergman film after it.

As so often when Bergman engages with this topic, one of the correlates of this exploration is that his images, certainly after 1960 and arguably before as well, always have greater truth value than does language. Language is subordinate to the intensity of the visual. Words often deceive, injure, threaten, and dissemble, but images tell the truth or rather what truth there is to tell. The primacy of the image in his work is borne out, of course, by Bergman's well-known reputation as the master of the close-up.

It is precisely this sense of the overwhelming power of the image that one finds for the first time in *Gycklarnas afton* and not surprisingly for this film warrants our attention not only because it is Bergman's most significant film to date<sup>2</sup> but also because it is the first to problematize art and the artist (Koskinen 1993 178; 2001 33) and because it functions as a precursor to the sophisticated treatment of film and spectatorship that we find in works like *Tystnaden* [*The Silence*] and *Persona*. One tends not to think of Bergman's pre-1960 work as especially self-conscious, but *Gycklarnas afton* is just that. It investigates the issue as to what film in its very essence is and how that intersects with human subjectivity, as we see in (1) a variety of metafilmic moments throughout the film, (2) the Frost and Alma sequence which reveals the machinery behind the film and sets up its major trope, (3) the extremely sophisticated use of mirrors to explore the conditions of cinematic production and spectatorship, and (4) a contrast between the opening and closing image shot compositions of the two protagonists.

## 1. Metafilmic Moments

The first indication that *Gycklarnas afton* will be a metafilmic enterprise occurs already in the film's subtitle "Ett skillingtryck på film" [A pennyprint on film]. The designation "pennyprint" clearly suggests that this is a work that resembles an earlier art form—the popular nineteenth century broadsheet. Thus the term also intimates that the film will allude to the kind of melodramatic material

contained in those broadsheets, to a melodramatic “romance-gone-wrong” kind of narrative, and, in its very broadest sense, that is of course the plot outline of the film. Following the title and subtitle, the credit sequence runs, during which we see simple drawings of idealized circus life—a ringmaster, a bareback rider, and a wagon with the words “Cirkus Alberti” painted on the side (later we will see a wagon that looks just like this in diagetic “reality”). Immediately after the credits, an extreme long shot of a line of circus wagons on the horizon cuts to an upside-down image of them in a stream and then the camera pans up to show the wagons in “reality.” These first images of the film itself, privileged precisely because they are the first images, conflate reality and reflection. They foreground the notion of vision, remind us that we are spectators, and put us on notice that this will be a film that problematizes the intersection of reality and artifice. But the film is rife with metafilmic devices. Shortly into the film, Albert and Anne, the protagonists, are on their way to the local theatre and Anne points at the camera upon which she and Albert turn and walk towards us so that their bodies eventually encompass our entire field of vision.<sup>3</sup> A dissolve then shows them walking away from us. Then too we note the play being produced at this theatre is entitled *Förräderiet* [*The Betrayal*] and betrayal is, of course, precisely the central narrative issue in the film. Bergman continues this propensity for the metafilmic when, at the conclusion of the first major mirror scene at the theatre, Anne opens a parasol directly into the camera thereby filling the spectator’s visual field. Too there are frequent instances of direct address in which the actor looks straight into the camera. And lastly there are, by my count, no fewer than five plays-within-plays in the film. These moments appear throughout the film from beginning to end and, together with the more extended self-reflexive scenes and tropes enumerated below contribute to making *Gycklarnas afton* Bergman’s first classic.

Self-reflexive moments resonate throughout Bergman’s later, better-known films. A metafilmic opening moment appears in both *Det sjunde inseglet* [*The Seventh Seal*] when we hear a choir chanting a loud and ominous “Dies Irae” and in *Fanny och Alexander* [*Fanny and Alexander*] as the film opens on the little boy playing with his toy theatre which we first see as a real theatre. Indeed many, many of Bergman’s protagonists are performers or one kind or another: *Till glädje* [*To Joy*], *Sommarlek* [*Summer Interlude*], *Sommarnattens leenden* [*Smiles of a Summer Night*], *Det sjunde inseglet*, *För att inte tala om alla dessa kvinnor* [*All these Women*], *Såsom i en spegel* [*Through a Glass Darkly*], *Nattvardsgästerna* [*Winter Light*], *Persona*, *Riten* [*The Rite*], *Fanny och Alexander*, *Efter repetitionen* [*After the Rehearsal*], and *Larmar och gör sig till* [*In the Presence of a Clown*], to name but some of them. It is only to be expected, then, that these films should be rife with plays-within-plays and with visual framing devices that emphasize the extent to which these characters are playing roles. To take but two examples among literally dozens, we note that in *Sommarnattens leenden* Fredrik stands outside in a dark hallway as he observes his

young wife and son (her soon-to-be-paramour) inside a room, the two spaces separated by curtained proscenium-type stage opening and, thirty years later, we watch Alexander in the opening sequence of his film walk parallel with the tracking camera through room after room as he calls for various people in his life, a bit of blocking that is distinctly theatrical. Direct address also occurs in, among other films, *Sommaren med Monika* [*Summer with Monika*], *Smultronstället* [*Wild Strawberries*], *Nattvardsgästerna*, *Tystnaden*, *Persona*, *Vargtimmen* [*Hour of the Wolf*], *Viskningar och rop* [*Cries and Whispers*], *Ur marionetternas liv* [*From the Life of the Marionettes*], and *Sarabande*. Too, the centrality of mirrors as metaphors for spectator subjectivity, a subject to which we shall turn shortly, recurs in *Ansiktet* [*The Magician*], *Såsom i en spegel*, *Tystnaden*, and *Persona*, to name but four films. And the confounding of spectator vision recurs in *Ansiktet* and, most notably, in Bergman's later films: the second half of *Persona* and the last few scenes of *Fanny och Alexander* when the children seem to be in a chest and on the nursery floor at the same time, when we are presented with an ancient mummy that both glows and moves, and when, with the help of an ambiguously gendered character named Ishmael, Alexander is able to effect the death of the Bishop solely through the power of his creative imagination. So *Gycklarnas afton* truly does articulate an aesthetic that will pervade the rest of Bergman's entire career.

## 2. The Frost and Alma Sequence

Almost inarguably the most prominent metafilmic sequence in the film, and indeed perhaps the most powerful scene altogether, is the Frost and Alma sequence, based on a dream Bergman had had (Björkman et al. 1970a 49, 1970b 44). Everything else, he says, is a series of variations (Björkman et al. 1970a 96, 1970b 86). This sequence establishes the central trope of the film, betrayal and humiliation in a shocking and devastating scene initiated by the public infidelity of a spouse.<sup>4</sup> Gado concurs in his claim that the scene introduces "in parvo, the themes, imagery, and general scheme of the central drama" (164).

The *extreme* quality of the sequence is established first by the plot, by the utter degradation of Frost who must strip to his underwear in order to retrieve his wife Alma from the sea where she has been bathing naked with soldiers, while the regiment and his own circus colleagues laugh uproariously at his predicament. That a little boy hides their clothes so that they must walk a gauntlet of shame back to the circus furthers the impression that these people revel in Frost's and Alma's humiliation.<sup>5</sup>

Bergman emphasizes here the fact that this shame, this stripping away of the mask of control occurs at the hands of an audience that is gleefully watching. This act of observation and shaming is associated, by extension, with the cinematic spectator. The fact that the subject examining him- or herself is being observed

by someone else is of central importance throughout Bergman's production for, as Paisley Livingston has pointed out:

In Bergman's films, identity is never established in isolation, but is the product of a basic, inescapable reciprocity... [For Bergman] identity is never simple or immediate and... does not reside in a static equivalence of self to self. The boundaries of self are open and fluid; its unity is not rigid, but evolves through contact with others.  
(51f.)

Bergman himself says largely the same thing several times. Specifically, in *Laterna magica* [*The Magic Lantern*], he remarks, "Utan ett du, inget jag, som någon klok person formulerat saken" [With no you, no I, as a wise person once put it] (1987 52; 1988 41). That the "audience" for this play-within-a-play derives such pleasure from Frost's humiliation suggests already Bergman's notion of spectatorship as cruelty. Interestingly he has observed,

Att förödmjuka och att vara förödmjukad tycker jag är en vital beståndsdel av hela vår samhällskonstruktion—här ömmar jag inte speciellt för konstnärer. Jag vet bara var förödmjukelser sitter för en konstnär. Jag upplever vår byråkrati som i hög grad byggd på förödmjukelser och jag tror att detta är ett av de otäckaste och farligaste gift som existerar.  
(Björkman et al. 1970a 86)

[To humiliate and be humiliated, I think is a crucial element in our whole social structure. It's not only the artist I'm sorry for. It's just that I know exactly where he feels humiliated. Our bureaucracy, for instance. I regard it as in a high degree built up on humiliation, one of the nastiest and most dangerous of all poisons.]  
(Björkman et al. 1970b 81)

But the pitch of raw emotion in this sequence is enhanced by the technical sophistication with which it is presented. The vacillation we see here between close-ups and long shots is typical of Bergman's work and functions both to depict character (someone like the Knight in *Det sjunde inseglet* who is both self-absorbed and lost in the world) and, especially if the vacillation occurs rapidly, to disorient the viewer, as is clearly the case here. The sequence features a rapid Eisensteinian montage of images that contrast with one another with great force. In a piece of extraordinary editing, long shots butt up against close-ups, objects against people, agonized faces against laughing ones, rocks against smeared make-up all of which produces a dizzying effect. As Coates observes, "the movement between self and other is that of a cut, and the splicing together of the person and their apprehension by the other becomes a negative form of suture... Unlike the

suturing process so often ascribed to classical Hollywood, there is no smoothing of transitions or implications of fullness of knowledge.” (2010).

But the extreme “look” of the sequence that makes it metafilmic is also accomplished by the almost painfully bright, white lighting. Bergman has said,

I solljus får jag klaustrofobi. Mina mardrömmar är alltid indränkta av solljus och jag hatar södern, där jag är utsatt för det oavbrutna solljuset som ett hot, någonting mardrömsaktigt, någonting skrämmande. ... [*Gycklarnas afton*] ville jag att det skulle vara så vitt som möjligt allting, så hårt och så dött och så vitt som möjligt, det skulle vara nån sorts obarmhärtighet.  
(Björkman et al. 1970a 81, 97)

[Sunlight gives me claustrophobia. My nightmares are always saturated in sunshine. I hate the south, where I'm exposed to incessant sunlight. It's like a threat, something nightmarish, terrifying... (In *Gycklarnas afton*) I wanted everything to be as white as possible; hard, dead, and white. Merciless in some way.]  
(Björkman et al. 1970b 78, 87)

Viewers often assume that this sequence is merely over-exposed, but such is not the case. Instead Bergman achieved this “merciless” white by making a positive of a negative, a negative of that positive, and a positive of that negative and so on time and again until he had washed out all realistic detail. The effect is expressionistic or one might say that it renders the actions and the characters veritably archetypal. This processing also transforms the characters, rendering their faces grotesque, almost featureless, chalk white with, as Cohen puts it, “black blurs for eye sockets” (115).

But Bergman’s technical bravura in this scene is not confined to editing and lighting. The soundtrack is also remarkable. Natural, diegetic sound is replaced by cannons booming, oom-pah-pah circus music, laughter, and finally complete silence. John Simon finds that the horror of the sequence is increased when the laughing mouths are shown in close-up but with no sound emanating from them (70). But the silence is especially striking when Frost shouts desperately to his wife as we can see his mouth making the sound “Alma,” but we hear nothing. Ultimately this silence emphasizes the visual, emphasizes the image as such. But it also emphasizes the impotence of the artist, his inability to make himself heard. The scene concludes of course with alternating extreme long shots and extreme close-ups of Frost carrying his wife up a rocky hill to the sound of drum rolls. The camera isolates his bare feet on the stony ground and finally he collapses and is brought back to the circus. The cinematic imagery clearly suggests that this is Frost’s Golgotha and Alma his cross. Indeed, the entire film posits the notion that female sexuality is a burden to the male, a cross to bear and a source of inevitable humiliation, while male infidelity is not visualized in the same harrowing terms.

The insights into gender issues that will inform Bergman's later work are absent here.

The sequence ends with a high angle shot of Frost after he has been carried back to the circus and collapsed, an image of his face upside down, and then one of bare ground. This composition of an upside-down face is, of course, an unusual one and the fact that Bergman uses it throughout his career is telling.<sup>6</sup> Because such shots are so rare in the history of cinema, they have a kind of shock value for the spectator and serve increasingly throughout Bergman's career as self-conscious, metafilmic moments that interrupt the spectator's absorption in the fiction onscreen (see especially these shots in *Tystnaden* and *Persona*). Bergman's repeated use of such shots is grounded, at least in part, in the fact that all single lens optical systems, which is to say both the human eye and the camera, project images upside down. A convex lens bends the light rays and focuses them so that they converge in a single point. At that point, an upside-down, reversed "real image" of the object is formed. Only within the brain, within the visual cortex, are these "real" images reversed so that they appear right side up. The upside-down images that Bergman presents during highly charged narrative moments are, then, more "real" than the real-seeming upright images that constitute conventional film. They are heavily encoded moments that suggest the connection between filmic and non-filmic seeing and the privileged position that art in general and film in particular occupy in our quest to understand vision both literal and figurative. The human physiological apparatus is hard-wired like a camera as a result of which film, Bergman suggests, has something to teach us about the nature of human experience. Film and filmic art for him provide access to certain aspects of human subjectivity that other experiences cannot.

It is telling that most of Bergman's characters who are photographed from this angle are artists and/or performers either consciously or unconsciously (Ester in *Tystnaden* is a translator whose profession, like that of the artist, entails transgressing boundaries, and Alma in the first part of *Persona*, although she is not an actress, is clearly playing various roles, and Carl in *Larmar och gör sig till* is actor, author, and director). These characters clearly have or come to a more truthful—though often tortured—understanding of, if not relationship to, the world around them. They are in a privileged position to comprehend that "identity," as it is conventionally understood, is a lie, that subjectivity instead is a series of masks or personae (we note that Frost is in his clown make-up). And since subjectivity is performance, a series of masks or roles, it is only fitting that the most authentic insights into the nature of subjectivity are experienced by artists/actors.

The image of Frost emphasizes the distorted, gruesome nature of his (and by extension the artist's) experience at the same time that it suggests that performers are particularly sensitive to, particularly aware of the distortion, grotesqueness, and brutality of conventional reality. In short, they see more

clearly. What makes this scene all the more devastating is, of course, the fact that this image of Frost, who has walked barefoot over jagged rocks while trying to carry and protect his unfaithful wife, is a clear foreshadowing of the troubles that await Albert and Anne. Thus this kind of shot reflects a crisis of subjectivity, a loss of the masterful self. This loss is reflected in the disappearance of the male and of all human life in the next shot which reveals nothing but the barren ground on which the performers had stood. As Bergman puts it, “då är de plötsligt borta alla” [Suddenly they're all gone] (Björkman et al. 1970a 98; Björkman et al. 1970b 92). Shame has led to the disappearance, temporary this time, of the unitary male self.

Coates is, I think, right to suggest that the Frost and Alma sequence leaves the spectator “stunned and harrowed, as if indeed disoriented by a nightmare that prevents one perceiving as real the reality that follows it... [The sequence's] fantastic reality bleeds into the rest of the film” (2010). Obviously it foreshadows Albert's humiliation in the circus ring by Frans's public announcement of Anne's infidelity, but equally importantly it is an extraordinarily powerful scene in which virtually all the techniques of cinema—editing, shot range, lighting, and sound—come together metafilmically to reveal both the machines behind film and the power of imagery to demonstrate the extraordinary power of cinema. Kalin goes so far as to argue that this episode “expresses the core of Bergman's vision in which our most basic weaknesses and vulnerabilities are portrayed in a master narrative of abandonment, passion, and return” (52).<sup>7</sup> But the combination of the metafilmic and the narrative concern with art and artistry also coalesce to create a remarkably sophisticated, yet subtle treatment of mirrors and mirrorings.

## Mirroring and Subjectivity

The centrality of mirrors and mirroring to the trajectory of the narrative is apparent in Simon's observation that all the stages of Anne's seduction and Albert's concomitant humiliation are charted in mirrors (76). But mirror images have more than a narratological function; they inform the totality of the film and serve as Bergman's clearest articulation to date of the conditions, possibilities, and effects of film as a genre. Indeed individual mirror images figure prominently in many Bergman films—*Kris* [*Crisis*], *Musik i mörker* [*Night is my Future*], *Hamnstaden* [*Port of Call*], *Törst* [*Thirst*], *Sommarlek*, *Sommarnattens leenden*, *Smultronstället*, *Ansiktet*, *Såsom i en spegel*, *Tystnaden*, *Persona*, *Viskningar och rop*, *Ormens ägg* [*The Serpent's Egg*], *Fanny och Alexander*, and *Efter repetitionen*, to name but a few. Jesse Kalin suggests that mirror images either “reflect truth” or “reproduce desire” (35). But I am not sure that we can separate truth from desire quite so handily. Clearly mirrors don't function the same way in each film but one common feature



in these mirror scenes is that they are usually constructed in such a way that they register epiphanic moments (sometimes with an erotic component) not only for the character looking in the mirror but also for the spectator. In Bergman's works, however, the search for self-knowledge at the mirror increasingly becomes a questioning of conventional notions of identity, an acknowledgement, as we see in *Persona* and *Fanny och Alexander*, that there is no stable identity, that subjectivity consists of a series of roles, personae. Thus the notion of the mirror as a reflector of a simple direct truth is increasingly undermined as Bergman's career progresses.<sup>8</sup>

But mirror images also, since they almost always are framed, are foregrounded precisely as images and thus speak to Bergman's notion of what film is and how it functions. In *Gycklarnas afton* mirrors are not merely images suggesting narcissism, they are not merely occasions for self-contemplation, they do not simply reflect or reveal reality (although they do all that too); they also are surrogates for film itself. The spaces these mirrors create foster new subjectivities and problematize the filmic enterprise.

Although the mirror for Bergman reveals the central subject in the scene, there is often someone observing this character. As in the Frost and Alma scene, this observer ultimately shames the subject, removing from him or her the mask the subject thought he or she controlled and revealing a debased and degraded self in its stead. And, as we shall see, each of the mirror subjects in *Gycklarnas afton* posits an observer mediator whether that mediator is intra- or extra-diagetic.

But if Bergman's mirrors are associated with different selves, so too do they reflect and, more importantly, construct different spaces.<sup>9</sup> Simon points to the ways in which Bergman uses mirror images to "effect a change or estrangement of the shape and size of the space in which people move... [They] can confirm the illusory, or confound reality with delusion" (92-93). But one of the most interesting readings he and Koskinen give of mirror spaces lies in the view that they function as extensions of the theatrical stage that appears in the narrative, that mirrors here in effect are stage spaces circumscribed by the mini-proscenia of the mirrors' frames (Simon 75-76 and Koskinen 1993 64, 94-97). But I would argue that mirrors function in *Gycklarnas afton* not merely as stage-like spaces but also, and perhaps more importantly, as surrogate cinema projection screens, flat surfaces that like movie screens reflect depth and pretend to represent reality. These mirror surfaces, at important points throughout the narrative, make the spectator aware of his or her presence as a filmic spectator and thus problematize the relationship between film and its viewer.

The first mirror sequence of any consequence occurs when Anne and Albert have received permission to borrow costumes from the director of the local theatre production and Anne is in the costume room trying some on. The first image reveals Anne in a long shot in a floor-length mirror as she preens in the borrowed costumes, a clear association between her and the masks that surround

her in the space and masks in general. Then the long shot pans 180 degrees left to her image in another floor-length mirror as she continues to exhibit herself now for the actor Frans who has approached her, declaring his love. But here we see only the left and right part of the frame, not the top and bottom so the mirror frame that makes it clear that what we are seeing is a reflection rather than reality is less obvious. This obfuscation of the boundary between mirror reflections and reality continues throughout the film to culminate in the second half of the next Anne and Frans scene later in the film.

We next see Anne move back to her reflection in the first mirror as the camera follows her and we see her in the mirror as headless, decapitated, a shot worthy of *Persona*, an image that associates Anne with truncation, with a lack of wholeness. The two characters circle around each other verbally sparring and trying to dominate the other. But it becomes evident that Anne, like Frans, is playing a role, for her assertiveness and control are but illusion, and we discover later just how vulnerable and dependent she is. Thus Bergman foregrounds again the notion that language lies, only the screen-like surface of the mirror tells the truth. But because in one shot we also see Anne in diageitic reality and in the mirror, we get two images of her and only one of Frans, a cinematic set-up that undercuts, as does the film as a whole, the notion of the unitary self. Furthermore, this doubling of her in the image suggests her multiple personae and foreshadows in her a psychological split that later in the narrative comes to the surface. Finally Anne humiliates Frans further, almost kisses him, and then orders him to leave. Throughout the scene her banter with Frans suggests an illusion of control on her part, an illusion, however, that fails when their play threatens to become reality with the kiss.

But this sequence is interesting in other respects as well. First, the entire scene is done with a panning camera. Peter Cowie rightly observes in this connection that "the mirrors in the theatre obviate the need for conventional crosscutting and add a density to the image, a look of abnormality" (118). Indeed the camera's movement from a long shot in a mirror to a close-up in diageitic reality to a long shot in what we only suspect is another mirror has a dizzying effect and confuses the spectator who does not know on first viewing that there are two floor length mirrors in this space. Their position opposite each other has a kind of "fun house" effect of confounding space and disorienting the viewer (see Koskinen 1993 95). Secondly, when the camera pans from the first to the second mirror, it moves so rapidly that everything in between is out of focus, a technique that reinforces this spectator disorientation. Interestingly too, this playing space in the mirrors allows Anne to act out an image of feminine sexuality for both herself and Frans but the camera captures the extent to which that idealized femininity is an illusion. So mirrors are, already in this first adduction of them, associated not only with doubling and personae but also with the deception of the filmic spectator. Thirdly, this point is underlined by the ending

of the scene when Anne swings a parasol directly into the camera lens, thereby completely blocking the spectator's field of vision (Koskinen 1993 also makes this point 181). The spectatorial confusion born of the rapid panning between the two mirrors and the abrupt vacillation between long shot and close-up reflects Anne's uncertainty but also undermines our notions of verisimilar filmic space.

The next appearance of a mirror occurs when Anne, angry that Albert has gone to visit his wife, comes back to the theatre to see Frans. We watch as she makes her way towards the camera through the narrow corridors of the theatre when suddenly a quick pan reveals that Anne's approach was not filmed "reality," but rather an image in a mirror (Koskinen 1993 96). The important point here is that, unlike the mirrors in the first scene, this one is invisible, at least on first viewing, and the image is all the more disorienting for that. We have here a striking metafilmic moment, with the mirror at once reflecting and embodying vision. Again the boundary between reality and reflected reality is blurred.

The next mirror surfaces again in the theatre but now in Frans's dressing room where Anne has gone to beg him to take her with him. Anne opens the door to the room where we see centre stage a—so to speak—diagetically empty make-up mirror (after it had reflected him applying perfume). After he comes up behind her and insults her—"Vet du att du luktar stall, dålig parfym och svett?" [Do you know that you smell of the stables, cheap perfume, and sweat?]-, he promises to teach her how to apply make-up. A cut reveals a mirror placed diagonally in the frame with slashes of black screen on either side; diagonals in Bergman here as almost always suggest disharmony and unrest. Anne and Frans enter the mirror space and fill it. We note that Bergman here breaks with his habit of isolating men and women into two different spatial dimensions and of allowing only one character's image to be reflected in a mirror at a time (Koskinen 1993 82). The content of this moment at the mirror underlines its association with the world of theatre and illusion as well as with deception and self-deception. The inclusion of two people in this mirror happens, I think, because the relationship that we see reflected in the mirror is quintessentially false. As Koskinen puts it, "Frans sminkar Anne—det vill säga anlägger den mask som det sexuella illusionspelet och bedrägeriet dem emellan tycks kräva" [Frans is putting make-up on Anne, that is to say applying the mask that is required by the sexual play of illusion and betrayal that occurs between them] (1993 82). Even as the mirror frames the two characters together, it also ironically reflects the lack of connection between them.

After a pan left to "reality" Anne and Frans begin to discuss the amulet he is wearing, he claiming it was a gift from another woman. Again they begin to engage in one-upmanship. In the scene at the theatre he had asked how much she cost, to which she has responded that he was so pretty, he looked like a girl. Now she brags of how strong she is and criticizes his body saying he eats too much. The aggressive undertone of their previous encounter continues as this

series of cuts shows them arm-wrestling and struggling on the floor after she loses. The antagonism between them is reinforced by the shot-reverse shot editing that replaces the panning of the first mirror sequence. This scene is one of “somasochistic maneuvering, of compliments mixed with insults, and of violence that merely apes passion” (Simon 62).

Although there is interesting mirror imagery beforehand, two shots in this sequence stand out. As the scene draws to a close, we see Frans rise in a mirror in the left foreground while Anne enters reality on the right and tries to leave demanding the key. He is still in the mirror when, in a remarkable moment, Bergman has Frans dangle back and forth an ostensibly valuable amulet in extreme close-up. She looks towards it and us. Because Frans is visible in the mirror while the amulet is so close to the camera and thus looms so large in our field of vision, that this becomes, I think, an ironic metafilmic moment that tacitly refers to the hypnotic power of film, the willingness of the spectator to be drawn in, as seduced by the film before us as Anne is by the amulet. Significantly, the seduction happens in a mirror, on a flat, film screen-like surface. This placement of the amulet furthermore undermines depth perspective and flattens out the filmic space, a lack of depth already implicit in the composition where the mirror image of Frans appears right next to the image of Anne on the same plane in diagetic reality. Thus this shot makes filmic space even more resemble the mirrors that are so central to the film, and the shot's status as image is underscored. Thus, as Koskinen so eloquently points out, this scene creates “ett glidande, undanglidande, *bedrägligt* rum; bokstavligen en värld av teater och illusion, av föreställning och förställning, bedrägeri och självbedrägeri (vilket för övrigt är vad filmen i sin helhet kan sägas handla om)” [evasive, elusive, *deceptive* space; literally a world of theatre and illusion, of presentation and representation, deception and self-deception (which furthermore is what the film in its entirety can be said to be about)] (1993 96). Frans's seduction of Anne significantly happens in a mirror, a mirror associated with narcissism, duplicity, doubling, and now spectator consciousness.

After a scene in Albert's wife's house (which Kalin appropriately describes as an “anesthetized” world [37]), the camera dissolves Agda's face into Anne's, a technique that again underscores the mutability of subjectivity. When asked about this dissolve, Bergman said,

Det är fascinerande med ett ansikte där plötsligt ett annat ansikte tränger igenom och materialiseras. Sen kan man säga att det är en formell grej, en sammansbindningsgrej, men själva bottenlusten finns med här, som jag sedan använde mig av i *Persona* där ansiktena går i och ur varandra.  
(Björkman et al. 1970a 96)

[It's fascinating. A face, then suddenly another face forcing its way through and materializing. But one could also say it was for formal reasons; a gimmick to tie

the two actions together. But it is motivated by the same basic pleasure, which I exploited afterwards in *Persona*, in letting faces float in and out of the other.] (Björkman et al. 1970b 86)

Back in Frans's dressing room, we see a shuttered window on the left, and on the right Anne in extreme long shot stares vacantly off into space, looking small, hopeless, and disillusioned. A vertical bar of some sort separates the two sides of the composition. If we examine it closely, we see that there is something odd about this image. There is some kind of spatial/focal distortion according to which the Anne half of the image looks out of focus. The representation of space is again confusing. Frans emerges from behind what we begin to understand is a mirror in order to open the shutters. He turns from the window, walks towards us, and drops the amulet in the foreground of the shot. Anne's hand quickly reaches out from the audience's spatial field to grab the amulet. Only now do we realize that we have been seeing her in a mirror. What contributes to the distortion of space in this shot is the fact that we see only a part of the mirror through which we have been seeing Anne. The camera and the mirror have then conspired, so to speak, to delude us as to what is "true" and what is "reflected" space. Just as Anne is seduced by the cheap gee-gaw that Frans gives her, so too is the presumptive spectator first hypnotized and then seduced into a fundamentally false understanding of diagetic reality. Thus the scene in its totality charts both the development of a new, more authentic even if deeply painful subjectivity for Anne and a rupture in the conventional boundary between spectator and film. And, in a sense, what we see in the mirror—Anne's desolation—has more truth value than what we see in diagetic reality—Frans the poseur.

The last instance of a mirror in the film occurs after the circus performance which has resulted in Albert's public humiliation. Albert's degradation when Frans taunts him and Anne about his having had sex with her earlier in the day takes place not only in front of the entire audience, which is laughing at him, but also in front of Albert's co-workers. The extent and depth of this degradation is suggested by the fact that there are soldiers present in the audience, paralleling the fact that Frost was mocked by soldiers in his earlier experience. Soldiers are, of course, representatives of the civil, social order and, as such, in Bergman's world view, antagonistic to art and the artist.

The circus performance itself begins with a clown act that consists of a series of gags that might be described as "humiliating the patsy" (Simon 64). But Livingston is most illuminating on this point. Speaking of a number of such scenes in Bergman, he points out that

Performances where violence is only mimicked threaten to become bloody spectacles and often regress to violence. Bergman's performers balance precariously

at the edge of this difference... the boundaries collapse and the line separating stage and audience, performer and victimage, dissolves.

(57)

In the same vein Koskinen rightly points out that Bergman emphasizes the active role the audience plays in Albert's humiliation by rapidly cutting back and forth between events in the ring and the laughing faces of the spectators thereby portraying them as egging the others on and participating in Albert's humiliation (1993 183). Thus it is hardly surprising that Bergman should exclaim: "Jag hatar publiken, jag fruktar den. Jag har ett obetvingligt behov att beveka, behaga, skrämma, förödmjuka, och förolämpa. Mitt beroende är smärtsamt, men stimulerande, äcklande och tillfredställande" [I hate the audience, I'm afraid of it. I have an irrepressible need to move, please, frighten, humiliate, and insult. My dependence is painful, but stimulating, disgusting and satisfying] (1958 2f.).

The intensity of Albert's shame can barely be overestimated for it is grounded in a loss of self. As Coates argues: "shame can be linked to a falling between identities... Shame, that ontological affliction, strikes at the heart of being, dissolving one before mocking gazes" (2010). Indeed, the entire film chronicles Albert's humiliation—through his double Frost, at the hands of the theatre director Sjuberg, at the home of his wife Agda, and now before an audience representing the entire town and the larger social order, just as humiliation is a constant theme throughout Bergman's production.

The extent to which his self is "dissolved" is apparent in the final mirror scene. As it commences, Albert has retreated to his wagon and the first shot we see is an unusual one, a close-up of a gun pointed directly at us. The image suggests a variant of direct address, a kind of aggressiveness towards the spectator. The camera pans to a shot of a mirror reflecting Albert's bruised, swollen, and bleeding face. One can make an argument, I think, that the preceding scene in which the actor's humiliation is represented as a spectacle for the amusement of the bourgeoisie makes this face a theatrical mask fashioned and demanded by the bourgeois consumers of art. It is significant that we do not see Albert in diageitic reality here; in the initial mirror images there is no actor separate from the filmic playing space in the mirror. He draws the gun up to his temple and then puts it down and lays his head on his hands. Drum rolls like those we heard when Frost climbed his "Golgotha" are heard on the soundtrack. Another shot shows a profile of Albert in the mirror where we note that this mirror image is clear while the "real" Albert in the foreground is out of focus. Bergman seems to be suggesting that the mirror image somehow has more truth value. In the mirror we see Albert pull the trigger; but the gun misfires. Then the camera pulls back and Albert puts the gun down and examines it as it is still pointed at the mirror. We hear a click from his pulling the trigger again, the bullet hits his image in the mirror, and he

drops the gun, upon which Frost comes to the window and knocks frantically, pleading “Albert, är du död?” [Albert, are you dead?]

This scene reveals, I think, Albert’s confrontation not only with himself, but also with the dualism inherent in both his life and his profession. But the key to it lies in the fact that it occurs as a result of the ritual humiliation visited upon him by the circus audience who laughed and jeered as he was both psychologically and physically humiliated. For Bergman, as we also see in later films like *Det sjunde inseglet*, *Riten* and *Persona*, spectating is a brutal affair. The circus scene shows precisely how morally culpable, how cruel spectatorship is. Again we see this same point many times in later Bergman films. Thus this last mirror scene charts just how cruel spectatorship is, but now that cruelty is aligned not with the loathsome Frans but with the implied filmic viewer. The scene begins with the metafilmic device of a gun pointed at the film’s spectator, and ultimately we are the ones who mediate Albert’s humiliation, his knowledge that what he sees in the mirror is his actor’s persona, the persona that is his lot in life. He shoots in the mirror, however unintentionally, the mask that his art produces and demands. Cohen sees this event as “God’s intercession” and argues that it turns the film “(blackly) comic” (125), a view that runs counter to two facts: (1) there is no other adduction of God in the film that might make this one seem a remotely cohesive element and (2) the ending can only be seen as comic if one holds that any ending that is not tragic is *ipso facto* comic.

In this connection we might consider two other Bergman films, one from the beginning and one from the end of his career. In *Sommarlek* from 1951, the ballerina Marie tells the ballet master in a scene where mirrors also fashion space that it is as though her costume is “fastbränd” [burned fast]. Some thirty years later in *Fanny och Alexander*, Bergman’s self-avowedly last film, the lives of the Ekdahl family centre around both the theatre they own and the theatrical in general. And one night the emotionally and spiritually corrupt Bishop says to his wife, who belongs to the Ekdahl clan: “Du påstod en gång att du byter masker oavbrutet så att du slutligen inte visste vem du var. Jag har bara en enda mask. Den sitter fastbränd i mitt kött.” [You said once that you constantly change masks... I have only one mask. It is burned fast into my flesh].

Thus, Cohen’s contention that Albert shoots “only” his image (41) is misguided. It is precisely his desire to destroy the image/mask that his art requires of him that is so significant. On this point Kalin is closer to the mark: “the shattered mirror now gives an even more accurate image of the man whose illusions have been shattered” (169). But he does not go on to connect that shattering with the “truth” of art. Again if we turn to *Fanny och Alexander*, we find this connection. Helena, the family matriarch, ur-actor, and central benevolent force of the film, confides to her son’s ghost:

Alltsammans är förresten roller. Somliga är roligare, andra mindre roliga... Den ena rollen avlöser den andra. Det gäller att inte dra sig undan... Jag sörjde förfärligt när du gick bort. Det var en underlig roll. Känslorna kom från kroppen. Jag kunde visserligen behärska dem men de slog sönder verkligheten... Sen dess har verkligheten förblivit trasig. Underligt nog känns det riktigare på det sättet.

[Besides everything is roles. Some are more amusing, some less... One role replaces another. It's a question of not avoiding them... I grieved terribly when you died. That was a strange role. My feelings came from my body. Of course I could control them but they shattered reality... Since then reality has remained shattered. Strangely enough it feels truer that way.]

Clearly, fully thirty years later in a film that marks the culmination of his career, Bergman's conception of the truth and authenticity of roles and of a "shattered" reality is remarkably similar to that which he articulates in *Gycklarnas afton*. Although Bergman's concept of the relationship between mask and artist undergoes some modifications in individual films, the notion that mask and identity are conflated is consistent across his production. The artist's mask and his or her subjectivity are one and the same. The only difference is that in *Fanny och Alexander* the actor is associated with multiple masks, multiple roles or personae.

Thus the mirror imagery throughout *Gycklarnas afton* asserts the notion that the illusion presented in playing/cinematic space is somehow truer or is more privileged than the "truth" of the narrative. As Bergman once put it, "Please don't talk about the truth; it doesn't exist! Behind each face there is another and another and another" (Samuels 103). It is the truth that Anne and Albert learn in their filmic mirror surfaces, the truth of their masks and of their humiliation, that allows for the conclusion of the film. And both of those complementary truths, both of the new subjectivities forged on these surfaces foreground the status of the image and, even more prominently, problematize spectatorship. The mirror scenes in *Gycklarnas afton* foreshadow much of Bergman's most highly regarded later work in their assertion that spectatorship is not the innocent act it seems; instead it truly is a blood sport.

After Albert shoots Alma's sick bear, an action that is both a kind of ersatz suicide given the bear's physical similarity to Albert and also an act of revenge on unfaithful women (see Björkman et al. 1970a 98, Björkman et al. 1970b 93)—and we recall that he has almost shot another double, Frost, earlier when he was drunk—he goes to Anne's horse Prince and finds solitude there.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately Albert gives the order that the circus pack up and move on to the next town.

All these mirror sequences can, of course, be considered plays-within-plays of sorts, audiences watching artists. The scenes when Anne and Albert are in the theatre, when the troupe goes through town trying to drum up business, when



three old ladies stare disapprovingly at Anne and Albert—all these cohere with the Frost and Alma sequence, the events at the circus performance, and the mirror scenes, to suggest the complicated nature of the performer/spectator relationship. But the Frost and Alma sequence with its foregrounding of the machines and tools behind cinema and the mirror scenes along with a consideration of the beginning and end of the film are notable for both their depth and their nuance.

## 4. The Cyclical Narrative Ending: Subversion *redux*

As the film comes to an end, we witness what appears at first glance to be a traditional cyclical narrative ending with reconciliation between Anne and Albert. But in order to read it, we have to go back to the beginning of the film to the shot that first introduced them to the spectator. It is the film's first instance of an inverted close-up. We first see Albert asleep in the wagon, photographed in medium close-up, upside down, foreshortened, and positioned diagonally in the frame along an upper left to lower right axis. As he wakes up, the camera pans over and down to Anne who is also in a foreshortened, upside-down close-up, but this time the image is situated in the frame along an upper-right-to-lower-left diagonal. The action here, as in most of Bergman's inverted face shots, occurs in a bed (the one of Frost is an exception), for bed shots can show us the experience of characters in their most private, most vulnerable, most authentic moments. Throughout the shot we hear the ambient noise of the wagon moving along the road and the lighting is soft and gentle. The diagonal lines connote, as always for Bergman, a kind of existential instability and disharmony. These lines along with the upside-down compositions reflect Bergman's notion that these people as artists experience and see reality differently and, given that vision is hard-wired in human physiology the way that it is, more accurately than do others. The juxtaposition of these two images in one shot clearly suggests that the two characters are deeply connected, almost doubles of a kind, but doubles who, at the moment, are in a state of opposition.

It is only through the course of the film that this opposition is resolved. Like the other characters throughout his canon who are shot in upside-down close-ups, Anne and Albert come to a clearer understanding of who they are and what their true relationship with the world around them is. They each learn and come to accept the lesson of what it means to be an artist and what the conditions of that artistry are. The film's conclusion resonates with the first shot of them. The two characters are again allotted equivalent shots in terms of camera range, lighting, composition (he is on the left of the screen, she on the right as they balance out each other), and even facial expression, but here they are filmed in shot/reverse

shot, not with a pan, a cinematic choice that suggests their increased independence and awareness, at the same time that their walking off together in the dawn light clearly connotes a conscious commitment between them. The opposite lines of the opening shots are resolved into one line and the two characters are conjoined in a single long take. The upside-down images that, because of human physiology, are more “real” are replaced by conventional, filmic right-side-up images, a fact that suggests that the lesson these characters have learned has to do precisely with the quality of illusion that imbues their life in the circus. This is the lesson that Anne has learned from Frans and her mirrors, and that Albert learned from the fight in the circus ring and from his mirror. They learn how thoroughly illusion and masks inform their lives. Bergman again represents the impossibility of authenticity and suggests that the masks that society forces upon the artist are the only truth available to these characters or to the spectator.

Bergman once said, “The real theatre always reminds... the audience that it is watching a performance... From being completely involved at one instant, [the spectator] is in the very next instant aware of being in the theatre... And that is part—and a very, very important part—of his being participant in the ritual because that word *Verfremdung*... is a complete misunderstanding. The spectator is always involved and he is always outside, at one and the same time” (Marker 231). In a number of his most remarkable films, of his “classics,” Bergman galvanizes metafilmic techniques in order to foster a spectator experience that vacillates between identification and distance, absorption and critical awareness. *Gycklarnas afton* truly belongs in this pantheon.

#### NOTES

1. Serious Bergman scholars tend to esteem the film quite highly. A case in point is Maaret Koskinen, perhaps the leading Bergman critic of our day, who calls it “den första Bergmanklassikern” [the first Bergman classic] (79). No less laudatory are John Simon: “it was not until 1953, with *Gycklarnas afton*, that Bergman achieved his first masterpiece” (42); James Baldwin: “I [consider] Bergman’s best movie [to be] *The Naked Night*” (cited in Simon 50); and Dwight Macdonald: “Bergman’s masterpiece” (cited in Simon 50). More recent North American criticism concurs. Cohen claims that “it is *Sawdust and Tinsel*... that signals the presence of not just a precocious, but a ‘great’ artist” (83); Gado calls it “Bergman’s first masterpiece” (164), and Kalin contends that it is “the most raw and primal of all of Bergman’s films” (33). But this state of approbation did not always prevail. The initial Swedish and American reception was quite brutal. In the Stockholm daily *Aftonbladet*, Filmson wrote “Jag vägrar dock att okulärbesiktiga den uppkastning IB lämnar efter sig den här gången” [I refuse to inspect the vomit Ingmar Bergman has left behind him this time] (Björkman 1970a 87; Björkman 1970b 81), and other critics in his homeland were almost as negative (see Steene 207). And the U.S. reception when the film first came out was hardly more welcoming; typical was the *New York Times* which called the film “an offensive imitation of the

worst aspects of cinematic expressionism” (cited in Steene 208). Indeed, on its release it was only in Latin America that it was well-received, even garnering first prize at the Montevideo Film Festival in 1954. But in the late fifties, the French and Germans “re-discovered” the film awarding it various prizes and devoting special issues of film journals to it (Steene 208f.). And the rest of the world film scholarly/critical community slowly came round until now *Gycklarnas afton*, while still far less well known than the canonical films of the fifties such as *Det sjunde inseglet*, [*The Seventh Seal*] and *Smultronstället* [*Wild Strawberries*], is treated seriously in some books on Bergman even if there haven’t been individual articles devoted to it.

2. Several critics disagree on this point and claim that *Sommarlek* [*Summer Interlude*], the Bergman film that antedates *Gycklarnas afton* by two years, deserves this designation and one even claims this title for *Fängelse* [*Prison*]. But, as indicated above, by far the majority of serious Bergman scholars regards this film as his first masterpiece.
3. Cohen points out that Bergman uses this kind of shot in *Hamnstadén* [*Port of Call*], *Musik i mörker* [*Night is my Future*], and *Det sjunde inseglet* [*The Seventh Seal*] (125).
4. It is not surprising that this issue should play such a prominent role in this and other Bergman films since infidelity featured so frequently in his own life. It is also perhaps worth noting that here, as so often in his career, his work in film and on the stage reinforce each other. Shortly before filming *Gycklarnas afton*, he staged a play entitled *Guds ord på landet* [*God’s Word in the Country*] at the Göteborg City Theatre, a play that also centred on infidelity *in flagranti* (see Koskinen 2001 33f.)
5. This stripping motif is one that occurs in several later Bergman films, most notably in *Sommarnattens leenden* [*Smiles of Summer’s Night*], where all three male protagonists are stripped of certain items of clothing and thereby of their dignity. This is almost surely a motif that one can attribute to Bergman’s intense indebtedness to Strindberg for whom the notion of being “stripped” of the attributes of this world had strong religious connotations.
6. See my “Subjectivity *in extremis*: Image Composition in the Films of Ingmar Bergman” for a detailed treatment of this image.
7. Where Kalin’s argument goes too far is in the statement that immediately follows this one, a contention that pervades his entire book: “at one level, everything else [Bergman] has done is a variation on this quintessential minifilm” (52). Such a view is reductionist at best and is not borne out by the richness and variety of Bergman’s subsequent production. Similarly Gado wants to reduce all Bergman’s films to one great oedipal drama as evidenced in the multiple occasions when he misquotes (intentionally?) the text. He claims for instance that as Frost recounts his dream to Albert at the end of the film, he says that Alma offered to make him “small as a penis” (170) whereas the film says no such thing. The term used is “liten som ett foster” [small as a fetus]. Similar glaring inaccuracies, all of which support the oedipal drama thesis, occur throughout Gado’s book.
8. Cohen devotes several pages to Bergman’s use of mirrors and makes the interesting and probably at least partially true observation that they function as “an expression of Bergman’s fascination with the close-up.” He goes on, however, to make the extremely dubious claim that mirrors “underscor[e]... Bergman’s core theme,

- narcissism" (82). Of all the many human experiences that figure prominently in various Bergman films, narcissism is one of the least frequent.
9. Koskinen, as a part of her insightful and indeed path-breaking treatment of mirrors in Bergman's production (1993 79-134), to which I am much indebted, discusses how the director uses them as sexually differentiated spaces. But, because this technique only occurs once in *Gycklarnas afton*, namely during the scene in Frans's dressing room, I shall not address it at much length here.
  10. Kalin's argument in this connection that "In Bergman's tale of our origins, the jungle must give way to the barnyard" (42) is so wrong-headed one barely knows where to start to respond to it.

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