

Bergman's Dreams

Some notes

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ABSTRACT: The centrality of dreams to Ingmar Bergman's oeuvre has been noted so frequently that no single article could engage properly with the extensive literature on the topic. This article therefore considers only some aspects of the role they play at several points in his career. Its main hermeneutic contention is that even apparently realistic surfaces often have resonances acquired through implicit use of such tropes of "dreamwork" as condensation, displacement and, of course, symbolization. Thus in *Dreams* such frames within the frame as a portrait and a window open up onto the oneiric; in *Wild Strawberries*, dreams are involved in the extensive doubling characteristic of the Expressionism also central to Bergman's work; the oneirism of *Persona* may be illuminated not only by the obvious comparison with Edvard Munch, but also with Greek vase imagery; while *Shame* identifies the evaporation of dreams as one of humanity itself.

RÉSUMÉ: La place centrale accordée aux rêves dans l'œuvre d'Ingmar Bergman a été si souvent soulignée qu'aucun article ne pourrait à lui-seul englober correctement la vaste littérature sur le sujet. Cet article ne se penche donc que sur certains aspects du rôle qu'ils jouent à divers moments de sa carrière. Sa principale affirmation herméneutique est que même les surfaces apparemment réalistes résonnent souvent de l'usage implicite des tropes de « dreamwork » tels que la condensation, le déplacement et, bien sûr, le symbolisme. Ainsi, dans *Dreams*, un plan dans un autre tandis qu'un portrait et une fenêtre s'ouvrent sur l'onirique, dans *Wild Strawberries*, les rêves sont partie à la caractéristique d'amplification extensive de l'expressionnisme également central aux travaux de Bergman, l'onirisme de *Persona* peut être éclairé non seulement de la comparaison évidente avec Edvard Munch, mais également de l'image des vases grecs, tandis que *Shame* identifie l'évaporation des rêves à celui de l'humanité elle-même.

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Despite the prevalence in Bergman's work both of dreams and of compressed, irrational images that form the stated starting points of his conception of a film (Bergman 188), film after film is as classical, as apparently concerned to recount an intelligible story, as it is dreamlike: with the arguable exception of *Persona* (of which more later), the works themselves do not pretend to be dreams, but are spun around and shot through with the oneiric. This very tension of classicism and dream may be the source of the works' fascination, as they shimmer between two very different registers, making it often hard to discern just where the one begins cryptically to contaminate the other, dream as it were seeping up through the gaps in the boards of a conventional stage—as will be seen below. The relationship between these works and dreams has been the subject, of course, of an extensive literature including one entire volume on the topic, whose contributors include the eminent Harvard dream researcher Alan Hobson (Petrić). The following notes represent an extremely modest addendum to this literature.

Dreams

The film distributed under the title *Dreams* (*Women's Dreams* being a literal rendition of the Swedish title, and *Journey into Autumn* the alternative distribution title) displays another aspect of Bergman's indebtedness to Expressionism, which here is both thematic and stylistic, involving an explicit doubling of characters through window and picture frames. Here the entry into a dream involves a step into a frame of one kind or another. As in Fritz Lang's *M*, a character (Harriet Andersson's Doris), is reflected in shop windows in front of objects of desire—in this case, a dress. An elderly Consul—Otto Sönderby—appears beside her in the window, like a fantasy materialization of the fairy-tale donor, and buys it for her. It is delivered to his house, where one prominent fixture is a painting of Otto's wife in her youth, doubtless before the birth of her daughter Marianne precipitated her into depression and insanity. When Marianne appears unexpectedly, she proves to be obsessed with the money Otto customarily withholds, but which he has lavished on Doris, whom he has also given Italian gloves and a pearl necklace. As Doris, wishing not to be discovered, remains hidden in the room where she and Otto have drunk champagne, she hears Otto tell Marianne that her mother's apparently demented view of her as having a wolf's head may not be a fantasy, adding that he himself resembles her. Doris may hide behind a new frame, the door to another room, but Marianne enters, and insults and slaps her. As if realizing that she has been framed by another's fantasy, with the palace of dreams suffering a fairy-tale inversion into a wolf's lair, Doris abandons her acquisitions and the house. As she leaves, her head is aligned momentarily with the portrait. In moving beyond it

she breaks out of it, and out of a potential insanity, dissolving a spell. Unlike the Consul, she is not someone who would mistake a funfair's Phantom Ride for a real inferno. As she stands outside in the street and looks up at the window, she sees Otto still standing there, caught in a frame representing his inability to unfreeze himself. It is as if Otto's placement in the frame is the reversal that has enabled Doris to escape her own framing—by her own fantasy, and by that of Otto, whose wife's portrait she resembles. Otto resumes the position of sacrificial victim for which he had selected her, and which by implication had been that of all the women linked to him intimately. The moment of the reappearance of Marianne, the true version of the daughter reincarnated in fantasy by Doris, nevertheless also, because Marianne is older than the figure in the portrait, suggests that of the wife, and is both a moment of truth and the consummation of a dream: a moment of truth for Doris's dream; and an irruption of dreamlike fantasy, in the suggestion of a fusion of wife and daughter in a dream it would be most dangerous for Doris to enter, as doing so would dissolve her identity. (The fusion of portraits of persons of a different age recurs in later Bergman, in *Cries and Whispers*, when Liv Ullman's Maria looks at a portrait of her mother, a role she herself also plays; while the danger of stepping into a dream parallels one possible reading of what Alma does in *Persona*.) In keeping with the gender-indifferent nature of the anguish endured by Bergman's characters, Doris has almost been doubled doubly, even trebly, in Marianne, her mother, and finally Otto himself, her selfhood almost overwhelmed by its outnumbering.

Doubling assumes another, more shadowy form in the other plot-strand of *Dreams*, that involving Eva Dahlbeck as Susanne Frank, who runs the modelling agency for which Doris works. Susanne meets a lover, Henrik, in a hotel room, but Henrik's wife Marta tracks them down. Marta remarks that Susanne only wants to have Henrik's child because that would bind him to her. Since we have seen Susanne mention her desire for a child, but do not know how Marta learned of it, the latter seems to manifest uncanny knowledge of Susanne's thoughts, as if in fact she has materialized out of Susanne herself: a possibility that anticipates one reading of the shot/reverse-shot monologue about the loss of her child delivered to Elisabet by Alma in *Persona*. As double, she becomes, as it were, the embodiment of Susanne's second thoughts, describing her speech as an utterance of "things you already know. You just don't want to think about them." The ontological uncertainty of doubling is also that of shame and humiliation, doubled in Henrik's subsequent statement—an echo of *Sawdust and Tinsel*, and an anticipation of *Shame*—that "I'm terribly ashamed. I feel naked." Henrik himself becomes a fantasy figure as he opens the door before Susanne, but the camera withholds a shot of him: it is as if she were addressing herself, in a dream that he has returned to her, and not just for his briefcase. As so often in Bergman, the line between fantasy and reality may be observed on one level of the text, but on another it dissolves completely.

Wild Strawberries and/as dream

Wild Strawberries may be classical in its simplicity, its economy, and its use of even small details for prefiguring (the encounter with death prefigured for instance in the casual touch of the chess set at the beginning), yet many details exemplify the mechanisms Freud described as constitutive “dreamwork”: symbolization, condensation and displacement. Thus in the long central dream the wife also condenses Sara (the mirror), Berit (the laugh) and herself, while the situation Borg views alongside Aleman echoes the primal scene whose importance for this film has been noted by Alan Casebier (15-19) (this “scene” of course may be the product of a child’s imaginings or of actual witnessing of parental intercourse). Aleman himself is of course a double of Borg, another spokesman for the dream that informs him of his psychic plight. Then there is displacement, as in the nail on which Borg catches his hand, which suggests a father/crucifixion complex, and links to the name Isak itself (almost sacrificed by father) and hence to Borg’s longing for the lost Sara (Sara was married to Abraham—the father—, not Isak, he wistfully tells Sara). Symbolization involves, among other things, the burnt ladder marking the breaking of connections between levels of existence. The doublings of the initial dream (two clocks without hands, two Borgs, two encounters with a corpse) may resemble those of Pharaoh’s dream as interpreted in *Genesis* by Joseph, who remarked that a doubling of dreams signals the imminence of the events to which they refer.

What is Borg’s problem? The initial dream, whose seed-bed relationship to the rest of the text is reminiscent of that between the Frost-Alma humiliation sequence and the main body of *Sawdust and Tinsel*, leaves it unclear whether it is imminent death or emotional life-in-death. The text’s dogged persistence may seem to follow an intuition that further dreaming, or secondary revision, is necessary to clarify this, to show it to be the latter, but the choice of the latter reading may itself be a wish-fulfilling redefinition of the problem as possibly manageable—unlike death, of course, which is not. This interpretation of the dream allows one to see the cold surrounding Borg as generated initially by the sense of being outside, created by the primal scene (literally out in the cold, looking through the window at Sara and Sigfrid, in the long central dream), which is why versions of this onlooking occur. It is resolved only when he ceases to focus on his loss and considers the plight of his son and daughter-in-law instead: doubling enables a fantasy of persistence in the younger generation, and of oneself becoming a child again, unthreatened by death, tucked in by a Marianne who is now the fantasized warm mother, an unthreatening version of the Alma of Frost’s dream.

As so often in Bergman, the face and what the Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs would have termed its “silent soliloquy” are central objects of meditation.

As so often, the silence limns the presence with absence, in the same way as the hidden transgenerating of so many of the figures in Bergman's films—a feature isolated, for instance, in P. Adams Sitney's analysis of *Cries and Whispers* (37-41)—means that even the presence of the Goddess can tip over into an ambiguous signifier of the absence or debility of the male, and of God, rendering the Goddess herself castrating, or the mask of the castrating father. The key face in *Wild Strawberries* belongs of course to Victor Sjöström, whose various moods fascinated Bergman and prompted him to speak of its shifts between “a dumb cry of pain” and “senile querulousness” among other things; the opening dream can be seen as a homage to Sjöström's films of the 1920s, particularly *The Phantom Carriage*, its near-silence and focus on the street recalling both silent cinema and German expressionist “street films.” Only the strongest of Bergman's regulars—Ingrid Thulin—has a face able to hold its own with Sjöström's. Is it because (as in *The Face* in particular, where she wears male clothing and has short hair) its strength suggests a cryptic masculinity, becoming in fact another version of his visage?

The most stringent Bergmanian examination of the face, of course, would occur in *Persona*.

Persona and the face

Whereas *Wild Strawberries* appears to separate reality and fantasy by assigning them to different stylistic registers, *Persona* reveals the bedrock of Bergman's imagination by ostentatiously fusing them. Even though the film is not a tragedy, the classical, anti-individualistic tragic notion of *hamartia* (tragic flaw) is relevant as the marker of the primacy of a situation that bifurcates even the most sovereign of characters, bringing out the worst in them, as this one can be said to do with Elisabet and Alma. Hegelian tragic theory would adjudge each devastated by the necessary one-sidedness of individuation, while a Marxist tragic theory—should there be one, inevitably building on and inverting Hegel—would align each protagonist's one-sidedness with a class allegiance. Bergman's own tragic theory, meanwhile, might superimpose upon these separations the ones between artist and non-artist, or within the artist him or herself. False consciousness is the sign of its presence: the false consciousness of the filmmaker who famously likened himself to an artisan working on Chartres cathedral. The split may be bridgeable, but at a heavy cost. Thus, in the monologue concerning Elisabet's putative pregnancy, as recounted by Alma and shot twice, Alma herself briefly becomes an artist—then fails in that role, mimicking her model Elisabet's failure in hers, saying “I'm not Elisabet Vogler.” Fittingly and devastatingly, the sequence ends with their two faces fusing and neither Liv Ullman nor Bibi Andersson recognizing themselves in this image. If, for Susan Sontag, the film is a set of variations on

the theme of doubling (Sontag 135), this sequence shows how a concern with doubling logically leads to one with variation (repetition with a difference). Modernistically self-conscious, this breathtaking sequence is both an essay on shot/reverse-shot, composition and rehearsal—that other meaning of “répétition”—and profoundly disturbing.

Persona's visual vocabulary is primarily close-up and long-shot (Björkman, Manns and Sima 206), almost eliminating the middle ground: this enhances the sense of division, and also arguably marks an extreme point of development of a “European” aesthetic, removing the intermediate terrain on which most of classic Hollywood has been played out (so much so that French critics would dub the medium long-shot “le plan américain”). In the context of the widespread politicisation of cinema in the 1960s, its incorporation of the images of the burning monk and the Warsaw ghetto can be taken as Bergman's implicit answer to criticisms of irrelevance, as it homologizes individual(istic) and collective conflict. This is perhaps why this film could influence Margarethe von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*, about two German sisters, one terrorist and one not, whose working title had been “The Exchange” (Der Tausch), and which also features a fusion of faces—albeit one achieved realistically—as the reflection of Juliane's face melts into Marianne's on the prison glass separating them. The power of the work Sven Nykvist and Bergman did on the face in Bergman's 1960s films is evident in the proliferation of art cinema allusions (e.g. Fassbinder's in *Effi Briest*) to the possibly archetypal image of a face looking forward bisected by another, foregrounded face in profile. Such copying, often in unexpected places—what the Polish film-maker Krzysztof Kieślowski, in his piece on Bergman's *The Silence*, called a wandering of motifs among works, citing the repetition of the shaking glass of that film in Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (425)—means that although one may and should share Bergman's scepticism of the idolatry of the artist practised by Alma, one cannot but admire the work, which is a different matter, of which the artist is merely the servant, and which has its own independent logic.

Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux notes in her discussion of Greek vases that their habitual depiction of figures in profile means that the spectator sees them as he or she sees others, and as one cannot see oneself (Frontisi-Ducroux 78). Bearing this in mind, a work that repeatedly features and contrasts full-face image and the profile, such as *Persona*, may be preoccupied both with narcissism or isolation and its denial. Frontisi-Ducroux comments also that on Greek vases sleepers are sometimes presented full-face, thereby underlining their separation from the figures in profile around them (Frontisi-Ducroux 81-2). Hence Bergman's preoccupation with isolation, full-face and the profile is linked to that with dream. Immersion in dream is of course the acme of isolation. Since his figures' separation renders them vulnerable to manipulation by others, like the sleepers on those vases, it may reinforce the theme of humiliation in his work. If, for Bergman, the

look away from the other occupants of a world and towards the spectator can also be conscious, like Elisabet Vogler's step away from the stage illusion of *Electra*, the relationship between that step and a vocabulary of representation linked to sleep suggests that even deliberate action may be limned with unconscious motives, as is surely the case for her. In *Persona*, meanwhile, the formal interest in the profile corresponds to the thematic one in a bifurcation of consciousness that may even reduce it to a shadow, that key element of Expressionism. In this context it is relevant to note both Aristophanes' comment in *The Symposium*, cross-referenced also by Frontisi-Ducroux (80), that the four-legged being split in two at the beginning of the human race could be bifurcated once more along the line of the nose and rendered a mere profile, and the numerous expressionist films that thematize the relationship between the 2-D of shadow play and 3-D reality (most explicit among them, Arthur Robison's *Schatten* [Warning Shadows])—as Bergman's indebtedness to Expressionism is of course profound and often-noted.

Insofar as the preoccupation with dreams, isolation and shadows is expressionist, it overlaps with the work of a figure who prefigures Expressionism and whose influence on Bergman is patent, Edvard Munch, who often presents one figure in full-face and isolated thereby from the interactions of others of whose relationship he is jealous. The composition reappears at one point in *Persona*, as Elisabet looks out of the screen in full-face while her husband and Alma face one another behind her, a scenario suggestive of jealousy. Since Munch was, of course, interested in the Greeks' association of blue and death (an association due perhaps to their non-distinction between blue and black), he may also have tapped other elements of their visual vocabulary, such as the use of full-face to indicate isolation. Insofar as a figure's reduction to a shadow resembles that to the shades who people the underworld, the frequent full-face representation of the dead also found on Greek vases (Frontisi-Ducroux 82) matches a preoccupation with death that pervades Expressionism (even though, of course, the dramatization of the workings of Death that most impressed Bergman was the one found in the more naturalist Sjöström's *Phantom Carriage*). Hardly surprisingly, the image of Death widely-reproduced from *The Seventh Seal* shows him extending his black cloak and looking fixedly at the camera. It is as if that black cloak embodies the outreaching shade he will drop upon mortals, like a conjurer whose mantle permits a simulation of the black art of making things and people disappear.

Epilogue: *Shame* as “elegy in advance”

Shame may be described as a possible exception to the Bergmanian rule that allows fantasy perennially to double and masquerade as realism. Although I will argue

that in the end it is tinged crucially with dream, its general sobriety surely stems from its placement in the future, however near, and thus well away from the past continually reworked in unconscious fantasy, like the “day’s remnants” obsessively refigured by dreams in Freudian theory. For Bergman, unlike most other filmmakers, futurity and fantasy are in fact opposites. Indeed, the absence of fantasy, the waning of dream, becomes the index of a feared blankness of a future losing all connection to the stuff of dreams, the deeper roots of selfhood. Reviewing it on its appearance, Pauline Kael termed it “an elegy written in advance for a civilization that seems already lost”, “a just elegy” (220, 221) *Shame* demonstrates the extent to which cinematic elegy moves on the edge of stasis, gravitating towards the freeze frame to imbue any life subsequent to that held moment with the status of “life-in-death,” a fit object of lament. This is not the freeze frame that momentarily compels a character’s stillness near a film’s beginning, like a mother calming Fidgety Philip to give the voiceover time to introduce him, extinguishing his distracting mobility (for it usually is him, a kinetic dervish stilled only by an artificial technical device), as in Martin Scorsese’s hyperkinetic *Goodfellas*. Rather, this moment marks an end of life, be it literal or metaphorical. In *Elvira Madigan*, by Bergman’s compatriot Bo Widerberg, the death marked by the freeze-frame is literal; it is metaphorical in *Shame*. That last framing is of the face of Liv Ullmann (Anna), the primary embodiment of humanity in an anonymous wartime universe, as she huddles in a boat whose drift pushes forwards to nowhere, through the bobbing corpses of soldiers. If Bergman’s elegy is indeed “just,” it is by virtue of chronicling the stage-by-stage destruction of hope, the final shot marking its dousing in Anna’s face. These stages correspond to aesthetic modes, as an opening realism gives way not to fantasy but to the Beckettian absurdism of a mutually berating couple (Ann and her husband Jan) scrabbling for potatoes in the mud, and then to a *Lear*-like vision of isolated humans moving through devastated landscapes like “bare, fork’d animals.” For Bergman, the man of the theatre, the movement—in effect, from *Endgame* to *King Lear*—seems also to mourn, and seek to revoke, the humanistic tradition’s levelling into the Absurd in the Shakespeare criticism of Jan Kott. When Jan and Anna appear silhouetted against a horizon near the end, the echo of a signature image of Bergman’s own *Seventh Seal*—that of Death leading away all its linked protagonists—underlines their movement’s status as a Dance of Death. Bergman’s subtlest Strindberg allusion stresses the continuity between the elegy for humankind of *A Dream Play* and the earlier, inter-personal violence of *The Dance of Death*. The silhouetting against the horizon also echoes that of the circus caravan at the beginning of *Sawdust and Tinsel*, and it is surely telling that the outdoor scenes at that film’s circus encampment suggest a *Lear*-like chaos on the heath, or that Albert should anticipate the later film by saying it is a shame to be Albert: he too is eaten up with an ontological self-digest.

Bergman analyses the cost of the survivor mentality: the dehumanization that overtakes Jan. Its development is documented unsparingly. Ironically, although Jan's hardened refusal to surrender the found money that would buy the freedom of mayor Jacobi constitutes his revenge for the other's seduction of Anna, she may be unwittingly complicit in another way, her earlier mockery of his hysterical sensitivity having strengthened his resolve to "act the man" of which he becomes the grotesque parody, as the role is not natural to him. Whence the justness of the elegy, which recognizes flaws even in its primary source of value. "What is it going to be like if we can't talk to one another any longer," Anna says shortly before the end, receiving no reply. In other words, her lament precedes the death of intimacy by a tiny fraction of time. Bergman accords a similar status to his own elegy, made in 1968 but set a mere few years later, in 1971. Cut off from intimacy with Jan, Anna then finds intimacy with her deepest self, as represented by dream, beginning to fade. This fading too has been gradual. Earlier she had reported feeling as if she were living in somebody else's dream. At the end, she recounts a dream in which, after viewing explosions that were beautiful despite being awful, and a little child woven by dreamwork out of the daughter she wished to have ("dreamed of having") and the real dead child we have seen her kneel beside, she feels she should remember something someone had said, but cannot do so. As Anna and Jan cease to speak, speech itself begins to dissolve. Like the humanity Bergman laments, the boat drifting nowhere, she is clearly lost, and it would be too painful to watch any more. This too, of course, is *Lear*-like, tracking pain to the edge of silence, where the only regal imperative left is the command "Howl": the injunction to forsake speech, to become a "bare fork'd animal" indeed.

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