

## INGMAR BERGMAN'S THE SERPENT'S EGG: REFLECTIONS OF REFLECTIONS ON RETRO-FASHION

*Thomas Elsaesser*

This chapter locates Ingmar Bergman's contribution and response to the so-called 'retro-fashion' of historical films, made during the 1970s by many notable directors all over Europe (among them Luchino Visconti, Bernardo Bertolucci, Pier Paolo Pasolini, François Truffaut, Louis Malle, Joseph Losey, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff). They invariably deal with the phenomenon of fascism and Nazism, but unlike the first post-war 'rubble films' of Italian Neo-Realism and its national variants in France or Germany, these films of the 1970s approach Europe's troubled past across showbusiness, the mode of spectacle and excess, or of sexual perversion. In Bergman's case, this resulted in one of his most expensive but least loved films, either by the critics or apparently by himself.

I will thus take a doubly reflected look at a number of complexes in the representation of history in film, in order to indicate how one might extend, displace or simply re-affirm some of the dominant *auteurist* and aesthetic approaches to the work of Ingmar Bergman. In particular, I hope to use Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg* (1977) as a lens across which to discuss several issues in European cinema. In the process, I also try to test a more theoretical proposition, which has to do with the cinema's relation to memory, both collective and individual, as well as suggest a kind of epistemic break also occurring in the 1970s, and refiguring the 'value relation' between Europe and America, itself such a crucial aspect of the *auteurist* cinema's self-definition and thus central also to Bergman's work.

Texts, Sub-texts, Intertexts

*The Serpent's Egg*, made in Munich in 1976 during Bergman's five-year exile outside Sweden, was one of several films the director had contracted with the Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis, who wanted to use Bergman's extraordinary international reputation in order to break into the American market, with a number of films made in English and featuring at least one international star or American actor. After a

few false starts, Bergman eventually hired David Carradine to play Abel Rosenberg, an American trapeze artist, stranded in Berlin in November 1923 together with his brother Max and Max's estranged wife, Manuela, played by Liv Ullmann. After the suicide of Max, Abel drifts through the city, which is in the grip of hunger, cold, rain and hyper-inflation, recklessly spending the hard-currency dollars his brother had stashed away. Suspected of involvement in a series of murders and suicides, Abel is summoned several times by the police commissar Bauer, but also meets a former acquaintance, now having a sexual relation with Manuela. This acquaintance, a Dr Hans Vergéus, runs a clinic, and is also in charge of a series of experiments for which he recruits unemployed and destitute men and women of Berlin, several of whom die as a consequence. When Manuela, too, seems to have been killed or committed suicide, Abel challenges Vergéus, who – sensing his game to be up – explains his vision of the future and commits suicide in front of Abel. Bauer returns Abel's papers to him and tells him that he has to leave for Switzerland, where his former circus employer is willing to give him work. But Abel escapes into the Berlin night.

I said that *The Serpent's Egg* became Bergman's most costly failure, and was universally condemned by the critics for its melodramatic and improbable story, its bad acting, poor dialogue and superficial characterisation of the central protagonist. Bergman, too, did not seem to appreciate the film – although, as I shall try and argue, the director was in fact more ambivalent about *The Serpent's Egg* than the wholly negative evaluation that he gives in *The Magic Lantern* (1988) would suggest. Be this as it may, I think it is time to give *The Serpent's Egg* another look, and this from a number of possible vantage-points. I shall mention a few that have struck me, but will then concentrate on one in particular. First of all, *The Serpent's Egg* clearly has a rich cinematic intertext, with allusions to a host of films, but also commenting more subtly on the conditions of production in Munich's Bavaria Studios, where Bergman made the film. For instance, one is tempted to read the film allegorically, coming as it does at a point of personal crisis for Bergman, so that the obsessive mention in the film of worthless money, plus the fetish importance given in the story to the dollar, nicely symbolises Bergman's own position between the threat of huge tax repayment and the well-stuffed wallet of Dino De Laurentiis, who in the film would be Hollinger, the circus owner anxious to hire Abel, and who gives him all the German money he, Hollinger, no longer needs, since he is leaving for Switzerland, the country at the root of Bergman's tax troubles.

Also, even without tracing the film's three main character constellation of dependency, jealousy and sexual humiliation back to Bergman's own cinematic universe (*Sawdust and Tinsel*, 1953; *The Face/The Magician*, 1958; *The Rite/The Ritual*, 1969 [xxx last 2 films have titles reversed in biblio: which is correct?], and many others), there are a number of motifs that seem worth reconsidering. The elaborate apparatus of surveillance, installed by Vergéus to spy on his patients and subsequently



Bergmannstrasse at Bavaria Studios

on Abel and Manuela evoke Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (1933), while the manner of his death is adapted from Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). The Piranesi-like corridors in the clinic and the prison cell at the police station cite Lang's *Spione* (xxx any English-language title?, 1928), but surveillance also makes allusion to the situation in West Germany at the time Bergman had exiled himself there, in 1976–77, the years at the height of the Red Army Fraction's acts of terrorism, and the state's response in the form of state-of-emergency measures (briefly) imposed by the Bonn Government. There are thus several topical interests in play.

The pervasive sense of surveillance and paranoia puts in stark relief another key theme of the film – that of (monetary) inflation as a metaphor for the suspension of all other values, ushering in a black market of humanist principles, as well as the nihilist reversibility of moral stances and choices. The black market theme was very much also among Fassbinder's abiding preoccupations, in both *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) and *Lili Marleen* (1980) – the former, covering much the same period and shot on Bergman's Munich set three years later. *The Serpent's Egg* thus opens up an interesting basis of comparison between the two directors, in other ways so different from each other.

Finally, the notion of society as a laboratory, where everything seems possible and permissible, offers Bergman the opportunity to identify different ethical positions, where notably any absolute contrast between victim and perpetrator is replaced by a

quite different scale of possible agencies. Bergman questions the roles of active and passive, participant and bystander, insider and outsider, in order to explore the more difficult moral laws of unintended consequences that may require one to redistribute blame and virtue, while not releasing anyone from accountability. This, too, is a Fassbinder theme, but as I will indicate, not only his.

Thus, even if the box-office failure of *The Serpent's Egg* is a fact, the subsequent and still persistently negative evaluation of the film – with a few exceptions that I shall mention – is still surprising, or should I say symptomatic? On the face of it, *The Serpent's Egg* may be a difficult, but totally fascinating film, and this within quite a few discourses, familiar from film studies as well as wider afield, such as the debates about Europe's historical identity. It also has some very remarkable scenes that no one who has seen the film is likely to forget. I am not so much thinking of the spectacular set – the famous Bergmannstrasse erected at Bavaria Studios in Munich-Geiselsberg, kept there and put to good use for years to come – but also of scenes of barely supportable physical intensity, rarely encountered in Bergman's other work. Here the violence is visceral and graphic in a way Bergman did not often permit himself either before or after *The Serpent's Egg*. Unusually frank is the scene of humiliation of the black homosexual Monroe in the brothel, and quite unbearably shocking is the brutal treatment meted out by a group of anti-Semites to the Jewish owner of *Der blaue Esel* (the Blue Ass) the night-club where Liv Ullmann performs.

### The Serpent's Egg: An Auteurist Reading

Conventional wisdom has it that *The Serpent's Egg* was a failure because it did not engage with the political reality of the period in a realistic or psychologically credible way: 'The skills that forged his unique intimate cinema are entirely opposite to those required for this historical drama, and Bergman's lack of overt political analysis for once does make the work superficial. Like *The Touch* (1971), *The Serpent's Egg* was a commercial and critical disaster (Ford 2002 [xxx no closing quotation mark. If this is a direct quote, please provide page number and close the quote where necessary]).

However, one could also argue – still in the *auteurist* vein – that *The Serpent's Egg* is a typical Bergman film, in that it reworks the Master's familiar constellation of an Oedipal triangle. It makes Dr Vergéus the paternal authority, against whom the son has to prove himself over the possession of the mother: nurturer/whore (also the basic configuration of *film noir*, if one follows Slavoj Žižek [xxx JD add accents etc] (2001: 245–6), with Vergéus the 'enjoying' superego father: beyond the law, as the master of life and death). The son – unable to meet/defeat the father head on – seeks out substitutes, or tries to stage scenes of the father's humiliation and defeat: the humiliation of the cabaret owner by the gang of virile young men who smash his face into a piece of meat; the priest who has lost his faith, on whom Abel spies; the

proxy fight with the Jewish grocery shop owner; the demonstration of impotence by the black musician Monroe, whom Abel pays in order to observe him, thereby assuming the role of Vergéus in relation to himself and Manuela. Abel is 'trying out', as it were, what it means to be the superego. Then, by practically raping one of the prostitutes, he compensates for his inability to make love to Manuela, the mother figure and mistress of Dr Vergéus. Another substitute parricide would be the scene where he kills the man who attacks him in the clinic's stairwell. Vergéus' suicide, in the face of the imminent arrival of Bauer, the police commissar (another, benevolent father), finally would be Abel's wish-fulfilling fantasy, ridding him of the oppressive father figure, without him having had to carry through and execute the Oedipal revolt. Abel's brother's suicide, which opens the film, provides the negative version of this fantasy, the alternative road not taken by Abel, namely constructing a scenario, where the son punishes the father by killing himself.

Another reading of the same symbolic matrix, but with an added inversion, is proposed by one of the few positive assessments of the film. Frank Gado, in his study *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, also argues that the scene in the brothel is crucial, in that it makes explicit the homosexual subtext sustaining Abel's dilemma (framed by the two suicides), suggesting that *The Serpent's Egg* shows Bergman 'working through' a latent homosexuality that is not free of homophobia, which might explain the torn, tormented and darkly despairing personality portrayed by David Carradine (1986: 471–81).

A third notable reading is that proposed by David Aquilon (2005 [xxx in the biblio it is him et al. Please provide details of his specific contribution being referenced here: title, page range.]), a former graduate student from Lund, whose work on Bergman and *The Serpent's Egg* has recently been posthumously published. Aquilon sees the central male protagonists Abel, the Commissar and Vergéus as forming three obliquely communicating and intersecting circles. These circles describe complementary movements that together make up the necessary constellation for genocide and the totalitarian state: the apathetic, compliant or cynical citizen (Abel), the bureaucrat who just follows orders (or as Bauer says, needs to create a little corner of order on his desk as a defence against the chaos around him), and the visionary or ideologue, the man seemingly above the law, who can see through the thin membrane of reality, identifying the fully-formed reptile, while knowing exactly what is his historic task. This analysis of the Nazi mentality, taken from Zygmund Bauman's study *Auschwitz and Modern Society* [xxx this Bauman not in biblio: pls provide details or clarify title if the one in the biblio refers to this ref here] allows Aquilon to read *The Serpent's Egg* as a kind of allegory of how Bergman thinks responsibility for the Holocaust ought to be apportioned across these three social fields which, of course, are neither confined to the Weimar Years nor to Hitler's Germany. Aquilon also contrasts the circular movements that the characters execute around each other

with the vertical axis in the film, introduced most dramatically through the stairwells and elevator shafts in the clinic and the prison, associated with the attempt to gain perspective and vision, and indicative of Abel's attempt to wrest panoptic control from the figures of authority. The two – the circle and vertical – are resolved or compressed in the homophony (in Swedish) between the word for 'egg' and 'eye', thus effectively combining or uniting the instances of the genocidal social field around the ubiquity of surveillance and the proliferating mechanisms of social control.

I think this is a very challenging argument, and certainly the only essay I have come across that actually engages with the specific architecture of Bergman's very sophisticated *mise-en-scène* in the film. My own – at this point very general – approach would, as indicated, first focus on the period and circumstances when the film was made, and thereby comment on the significance of Bergman's engagement with the dominant genre of European art cinema of the 1970s, responding both to the demand of 'mastering the past', but also to the challenge (manifested in films like *Cabaret* (1972), and subsequently by television series like *Holocaust* (1978)) that Hollywood was 'taking over' typically European subjects, by, as Edgar Reitz was to call it, 'taking away our history' [xxx source?]. Europe, in its retro-fashion films was beginning to tell 'its' own stories – and to tell them also to America. For it was precisely with these films that took the Third Reich and its aftermath as their subject that European *auteurs* were able to enter the international market, notably America. Fascism, ironically, became continental Europe's own version of the (British) heritage industry. Or as one might prefer to see it: it became that moment when the European cinema – but not only the cinema, the European Union, too – began to be haunted by history and Empire. And luckily (one is almost tempted to say), Bergman failed in this endeavour to 'sell' European history to the Americans, on the Americans' own terms. Let me explain.

### The Hitler Welle

When describing the origins of *The Serpent's Egg*, the context that Bergman specifically evoked and referred to, is that the idea of a film about Berlin in the 1920s came to him after reading Joachim Fest's biography of Hitler, published in German in 1973 and translated into Swedish the following year (Bergman 1994: 191). Fest's book, which was an international bestseller, sparked off in Germany what became known as the 'Hitler-Welle'[xxx not hyphenated in sub-heading above. Which is correct?], a wave of publications, television programmes and coffee-table books, as well as feature films that 'discovered' Hitler and the Nazi regime as a topic for popular culture. Denounced as nostalgia or retro-fashion, and critiqued for giving legitimacy to the growing surge of right-wing politics, the Hitler-Welle, at least in Germany, became also connected with a left-wing demand, voiced mainly by the radical student move-

ment, that West Germany finally face up to the legacy of Nazism. Much of the violence of the RAF, for instance, was justified by this argument. The need for Germany to 'master its past' – or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as it came to be known – led in more academic circles to the internationally known Historians' debate, in which the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas openly attacked what he saw as the revisionist historical theses of historians such as Ernst Nolte, Andreas Hillgruber and Joachim Fest – a debate notably about the nature of fascism and National Socialism, and its supposedly historical function in 'providing a buffer against' Russian Communism.

Bergman himself was most directly inspired by Fest's description of the inflation period, and in particular the sense of the loss of all values – moral, personal, political – that seemed to go hand in hand with the hyper-inflation experienced by the German post-war currency. Hence Bergman's choice of the period and date: the week from 3–11 November 1923, at the height of inflation (the mark was 'reformed' on 16 November 1923) and during the week when Hitler launched his unsuccessful Munich beer-hall putsch (on 8 November), which should have put him behind bars for five years, but only cost him nine months, during which he wrote *Mein Kampf*. Bergman's choice of a very precise set of dates is thus over-determined by at least these two events – the peak of hyper-inflation and the foiled beer-hall putsch, as well as particularly early and severe winter weather.

As far as film history was concerned, the Hitler-Welle must be referenced also to the extraordinary worldwide success of *Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse, which, based on Christopher Isherwood's novel *I am a Camera* [xxx date?], depicted the life of a group of American and British expatriate thrill-seekers in the nightclub, showbusiness and homosexual milieu of Berlin in the early 1930s, just prior to Hitler's accession to power. *Cabaret* consolidated many of the thematic motifs as well as defining a whole iconography of decadence, showbusiness and ambiguous Nazi glamour that was already present in Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970), but which return in force in subsequent films. We only have to recall Truffaut's *The Last Metro* (1980), Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) and *Monsieur Klein* (1976) to realise that this was a European phenomenon, and not limited to Germany. In Germany, the group of films to which *The Serpent's Egg* belongs extend from Fassbinder's *Despair* (1976), with which it has many similarities, to Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1976–77), Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* (1980) and Schloendorff's *The Tin Drum* (1980), after Günter Grass [xxx not sure why after Günter Grass is here. Pls clarify]. What can be said about the films within a European context is that they broke many of the previously-held taboos about the representation of the Nazi period, not least by acknowledging the ambiguous fascination of fascism. Yet by doing so in terms of spectacle, glamour and erotic perversion, they also 'took back' neo-realism as the dominant filmic language of the post-war period. None of the films, however, is as

bleak and pervaded with squalour as is *The Serpent's Egg*.

What the 'retro-fashion' often bracketed off was the fate of the Jews under Nazism and, in particular, the genesis and history of their persecution, deportation and destruction in Germany, as well as West and Eastern Europe. It was another US production, this time the television series directed by Marvin Chomsky, called *Holocaust* that in 1979 [xxx 1978 earlier] gave rise not only to a vivid controversy in Germany about telling the story of the extermination of the Jews as a family melodrama and soap opera, but also contributed to a shift in the dominant discourse: from now on, the history of Jewish persecution became generally known as 'the Holocaust', and with it the subject left the specialist historians' domain and has entered popular culture, where it has remained ever since, not least thanks to other controversial and successful Hollywood blockbusters, such as *Schindler's List* (1993).

Bergman's film thus situates itself on the one hand within the Hitler Welle [xxx no hyphen now] and at the beginning of the refocusing on the fate of the Jews rather than the Nazi elites or the sexual danger and social decadence of the dying Weimar Republic.

The 'retro-fashion' of the 1970s has sometimes been called 'the return of history as film' (Kaes 1989: xxx pg number?), indicating two distinctly new moments in modern cinema's relation to and depiction of the past. One speaks about the specific role of the moving image in the representation of extreme historical events such as genocide, civil war and other man-made disasters, involving large numbers of victims, and often concerning political regimes that either deny the occurrence of these atrocities, or are actively engaged in obliterating their traces, notably any photographic evidence.

The other aspect of the return of history as film names the fact that much of our collective or cultural memory of the twentieth century is now constituted by precisely the filmic and photographic record that has been preserved or passed on, where the generic distinction between fiction and documentary, between 'the truth' and 'the staged', between 'record' and 'propaganda' seems to become more and more indistinct and even irrelevant, as the distance in time increases and the popular media, notably television, use these images over and over again, often out of context and in order to 'authenticate' often very different arguments and positions.

The two aspects – the limits of representation on one side, and on the other the constructed or staged nature of what we now understand as the past – are of course intimately intertwined. They are the two sides of the same dilemma of what to trust: media memory (also called prosthetic memory) combined eyewitness accounts, or painstakingly researched, multi-faceted factual history, which presents its arguments on the basis of written documents. For those who distrust the first kind of memory, it seems as if only that which has survived in the dominant media of the twentieth century, namely film, radio and photography, may soon be said to have 'existed' at all,



Decadence and cabarets: Liv Ullmann as Manuela

at least in the popular imagination.

### The Bergman Turn and Return to (Film-)History

It is easy to see how Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg* situates itself very precisely and totally lucidly within this problematic. It does so in a number of ways that I just briefly want to sketch or indicate, firstly by Bergman's own invocation of just such a popular media memory, by what used to be called postmodern citation and pastiche, but which – as indicated – I prefer to see in a broader, epistemological or even ontological context. *The Serpent's Egg* is full of references to other films, beginning with *Cabaret* itself, insofar as one of its major locations is the nightclub where Liv Ullmann performs; but of course, Liza Minnelli's Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* already trades on and invokes Marlene Dietrich in *Der Blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930), clearly alluded to in Bergman's cabaret *Der Blaue Esel*. But this is only the most obvious reference: as already mentioned, Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse*, both the original 1921 film (which explicitly deals with inflation and black-marketeering), and the sequels (*The Testament of Dr Mabuse*, 1933, and *The 1000 Eyes of Dr Mabuse*, 1960 [xxx JD get orig-lang titles]) are cited, not least through Gert Fröbe, the actor playing the commissar Bauer (who also plays the commissar in *Die 1000 Augen* [xxx is this the orig-lang title

of 1000 eyes?). At one point Bauer refers to one of his predecessors, a Commissar Lohmann, who was indeed the policeman who tracked the child-murderer in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) – the inverted temporalities of this reference being surely deliberate. We find references to G.W. Pabst's *The Joyless Street* (xxx is there an orig-lang title? 1935), where Greta Garbo played a kind of Liv Ullmann character; there are allusions to several of the chamber play films of classic Expressionism, such as Karl Grune's *Die Strasse* ([xxx I can translate this! But, was it ever known by an English-language title?] 1923), as well as to Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), which critics thought they recognised in the pre-credit scene of the silent crowd shuffling in the cold, not unlike the underground workers in that film's opening. The list of citations could go on, especially since we know that Bergman showed the cast two famous Berlin films from the late 1920s – Ruttman's *Berlin, Symphony of a Big City* (1927) and Piel Jutzi's *Mother Krause's Trip to Happiness* (1929), as well as newsreels and other documentary material. He also put on record that the set was inspired not by a real location (he scoured Berlin and could not find anything that struck him as suitable), but by the charcoal drawing of a Berlin street he discovered in a contemporary magazine (sometimes it is *Simplexissimus*, at other times it is from *Berliner Illustrierte*). Another intertextual reference was provided by Bavaria's and Bergman's set designer, Rolf Zehetbauer, who had received an Academy Award for his sets for *Cabaret*, which as indicated, became (and still is) the template for what 'Berlin' had to look like in a film about it in the last years of the 1920s and 1930s.

What interests me, however, about these references to a shared cinematic cultural memory is not so much the intertextuality or postmodern mania for allusion and pastiche; instead, it is what one might call a constitutive anachronism: meaning in the first instance that a set of signifiers – props, colour schemes, hairstyles, fashions (which may or may not be 'authentic') – have come to stand for the era, providing a kind of autonomous reality, cut off from period, class, circumstance or motive. Furthermore, *The Serpent's Egg* shows a certain tension between the very exact time frame and historical referentiality that the voice-over provides (maybe a late addition by De Laurentiis, seeing how difficult the film was for a general public) and the essentially a-chronological quality of the film, and of the suspended lives of its characters. This astutely uses the drawbacks of the film – clearly a studio-made Berlin, with always the same cars, the same tram, the same section of street visible – in order to emphasise the claustrophobia, the timelessness but also the allegorical aspect of the story. Given that time is floating, space becomes very important, in that each of the interiors has a clear symbolic value: the tavern where Abel lives with his brother, the apartment of the rich widow with the expensive chairs and furnishings, and then the flat they rent from Dr Vergérus. Each space abuts on some other quite different space, creating its own kind of incongruous contiguity. Or the characters have to traverse spaces, wasteland, cemeteries, the bas-fonds, past rubbish, rats or near-dead



Anachronisms: Abel faces an anti-Semitic gang

people. It is a film full of thresholds, liminal spaces and hyper-expressive spaces – imprisonment being the key metaphor, but also the contrast of squalor and hospital whiteness in the St Anna Clinic, the long endless corridors of the medical archive, backstage at *Der Blaue Esel*, the transitional space in the widow's house, the frosted glass partitions at both the widow's house and the brothel, together making up the many spatial rhymes achieved through repetition of location and setting.

Bergman himself alluded to several specific anachronisms by saying that he realised the anti-Semitic attacks by gangs of thugs and SA men did not belong to 1923, but to the mid-1930s, that is, well after Hitler had come to power (Bergman 1994). Similarly, the scene at the end of the film, when the commissar says that Hitler's march on the Munich city hall had failed miserably, because he had underestimated Germany's democracy, we are tempted to put the apparently tragic irony of this remark down to hollow wisdom gained with hindsight. But other readings are possible, not least one that points out that with the stabilisation of the mark, Germany experienced a veritable recovery, in fact five golden years of prosperity and reconstruction, dashed not by Hitler, but by the Wall Street Crash of 1927 whose catastrophic consequences for Germany resulted in widespread unemployment, the radicalisation of the working class on both the left and the right, and thus the conditions that eventu-

ally led the National Socialists to their electoral victory in 1933.

Bergman was chided for these and other 'mistakes' in his portrayal of November 1923, so much so that he was advised to return to his chamber settings and leave history alone. He tended to agree with this verdict, as he generally did in considering the film a failure. Interestingly enough, however, the reasons he gave for the failure varied from period to period. At first he put it down to having opted for a realistic, historically located cityscape, that is, Berlin in November 1923, rather than his imaginary city of war and imminent dread, as in *The Silence* (1963) or *Shame/The Shame* (1968). But as indicated, both the date and place are crucial to the cultural memory the film works on and contributes to. Then, he argued that the reason he demanded such a big set was that during the period he was shooting, coming so directly after his nervous breakdown and the tax *imbroglio*, he was on beta-blockers, which made him have a permanent fever and terrible mood swings, including periods of megalomaniac self-delusion. Then again, it was Dino De Laurentiis's four million dollar budget that seduced him into having Zehetbauer construct the set that consumed most of the money, then it was the fact that the charcoal drawing referred to the Bergmannstrasse, a real street in Berlin at the time, which the director evidently saw as a good omen, and even later, in *Images: My Life in Film* (1994), the failure was due to the fact that the Vergérus story of what he called voyeurism had nothing to do, according to him, with the story of inflation. In other words, reading this, one begins to wonder whether in these all too many explanations of failure we do not have a case of rationalisation, and even more so, a case of disavowal: the disavowal being that Bergman himself, deep down, may not have considered the film a failure at all, but thought of it as rather crucial, in fact one of his masterpieces. Only the dismal reception it received persuaded him to disown it, siding as he so often claimed he did on other occasions in his life, with those who were out to punish him, or thought him to have failed or done wrong. Bergman's own self-advertised guilt complex would thus seem to be involved in these many negative and half-exculpatory justifications he has offered for the failure of *The Serpent's Egg*.

However, I would want to de-personalise this whole aspect of failure for a moment, and come back to what I called the film's – but also the wider genre's, that is, the return of history as film genre – constitutive anachronism. I am not convinced by what critics at the time complained about, namely the shameless nostalgia, the retro-fashion or the revival of the Nazis own kitsch and death fantasies, in Saul Friedlander's graphic phrase [xxx Pls put direct quote in ref to Friedlander's phrase in quotation marks and give page number] (Friedlander 1993) as being a satisfactory explanation for the phenomenon. After all, it has persisted since, all the way to today, with yet another Hitler wave, if one thinks of *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004), about Hitler's last days, or the television series *Speer und Er* (xxx is there an English-lang title? Ie: what is the 'Er'?, 2005), about Hitler and Albert Speer. What keeps return-

ing, I would argue, is a crucial aspect of media memory or prosthetic memory: what I would call history's new temporalities. To put it perhaps a little too briefly, once media memory has become our cultural memory, our *lieux de mémoire* to cite Pierre Nora (1984–1992 [xxx this is the date in the biblio, but cannot be correct publication date! Pls explain]) then the whole notion of a linear chronology, or of time's arrow only pointing in one direction, becomes difficult if not impossible to sustain. After all, these moving images from the past are so alive, they exude so much presence, that to call them 'passed' in the traditional sense would not do justice to either their power or their fascination, especially when we see them associated with so much evil or such troubling actuality, as happens to be the case with the most violent periods of the last century. These images, I would say, whether in the form of historical period material or as restagings and uncanny recreations, have become the undead of history. Which makes our film and media-saturated history not so much a new ontology, but a new in-between state, or a kind of hauntology, to evoke a term used by Jacques Derrida to allude to the spectral quality of our contemporary world (1994: 25–6), in its relation to both the unfulfilled pasts of socialist utopias and the no longer even imaginable future of our paralysed societies.

This sense of being haunted by history, so typical of Europe since the end of World War Two, is of course intimately linked to a more general sense of historical failure, notably the failure of the European Enlightenment, but also our Christian traditions, to have prevented Nazism, and more crucially, to have prevented the discrimination, deportation and eventual destruction of European Jewry in the death camps of Auschwitz. Again, two kinds of failure seem to converge and never quite confront each other in these films from the 1970s: the failure of keeping to a strict but no longer credible linear or causal chronology (the anachronisms) already mentioned, and the failure of not having foreseen and thus not done something to forestall Auschwitz and the Holocaust. There is a link between the two, if you like: namely the breakdown of the belief in progress – the end of the grand narratives of European civilisation – and the unresolved Christian legacy of anti-Semitism. For when we look at these films of the 'retro-fashion' today, after more than twenty years of the media seemingly talking about nothing but the Holocaust, we realise that the Jews are indeed missing from the films, or rather their presence, such as in *The Serpent's Egg*, presents a particular burden of representation, where they are either the signifier of a radical and irrecoverable 'otherness', at once 'sacred' and 'inhuman', or their Jewish-ness is no more than a psychological attribute in an individual's fate, and thus not capable of bearing the burden of the knowledge of what was to be their collective fate. Bergman's male protagonist Abel Rosenberg is just such a figure: not 'other' enough to be 'the Jew', and not 'ordinary' enough to be one of those who will eventually make up the six million German, French, Polish, Czech, Dutch, Hungarian or Romanian citizens who, deprived of their most basic rights as human beings,

perished in the camps.

Important, however, about these skewed temporalities of the constitutive anachronism of media memory and the equally constitutive feelings of guilt and regret about not having foreseen the dangers of Nazism, are two other aspects within European post-war consciousness: one is that we know such a different temporality in the realm of psychic pathology, notably in the case of traumata [xxx trauma?]. There too, the traumatised subject lives in a different temporality, one where the traumatic event or experience from the past can come upon him or her, all of a sudden, without warning, triggered by whatever incident, and then manifest itself in the full force of the present. A traumatised subject lives almost by definition in a permanent potential presence of the past, never quite able to relegate the traumatic moment to the temporality of an ordered, that is to say, chronological or causal narrative. Haunted by history, through the ever present presence of media images of the past on television, in books and in the cinema, is thus to be quite literally 'traumatised' by history, as if 'the cinema' and 'history' stand in an epistemologically impossible relation to each other. How often have we heard that a film does not reproduce a given historical reality 'accurately', and how often have we heard this complaint voiced especially against films dealing with the Holocaust. Yet the accusation, if based on realism, misses its goal, it seems to me, because in the case of traumatic events what would be an accurate rendition if not one that took account of the hauntological, traumatic dimension; this is to say, which did not somehow include the failure of narrative emplotment, of causal chronology and objective depiction. If the cinema and history thus relate to each other as each the other's representational failure, then we can also see Bergman's own discourse on the 'failure' of *The Serpent's Egg* in another light.

For instance, we could also note that ever since the 1970s, and even more intensively in the last 15 years, that is since the fall of the Wall, we have seen in European cinema the emergence of protagonists who are not so much unable to act – paralysed or aimless – but who are abject, who seek to divest themselves or allow themselves to be divested of all the symbolic supports of selfhood and identity. I am thinking of the line that goes from Fassbinder's victim figures in *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1972), *Fox and his Friends* (1975), *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978) [xxx original-language titles for each please], to Agnès Varda's heroine in *Sans Toit ni Loi* (xxx is there an English-lang title?) (1985), from the hero of Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993) and the protagonists of the films of the Dardenne Brothers (such as *Rosetta*, 1999), to the characters in Gaspar Noé's [xxx JD check umlaut and add if nec] *Seul contre tous* (*I Stand Alone*, 1998) or Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand* (xxx is there an English-lang title?) (2004). In the light of this genealogy of abject heroes, Bergman's protagonist in *The Serpent's Egg* has all the potential for being not just an outsider or victim, but in truth fulfils a more ambiguous but also for that very reason, more interesting role, where the general script we have learnt to apply to the Holocaust and Nazism, with its clear

divisions between victims and perpetrators, between by-standers and outsiders, between collaborators, tolerators and traitors, no longer seems to hold.

### Personal Failure as the Parapraxes of Historical Agency

Important in this reading is what I have called the constitutive anachronisms [xxx ok, by now you will see I have removed the hyphen in all instances of this word. But it is so regular I fear I am doing the wrong thing! Could you ls explain why you put it there? Thanks], not as wisdom through hindsight or nostalgic retro-fashion, but drawing the consequences of a new kind of media memory in which the cinema and history are confronted in such a way that each is the other's 'failure' of representation.

By this, I mean to draw attention to another feature of Bergman's film, what one might call the film's parapraxes, its bungled actions or apparent role-reversals: the wrong man at the right place, the inversion of the meanings of an act or gesture (the smashing of the shop window, the kiss on the old woman's mouth, the Vergéus role that Abel assumes in the brothel). In one sense, as we saw, these scenes provide the motifs for an *auteurist* psychoanalytic reading. But I would argue that they make equal sense in the historical context, manifesting something like a political unconscious, an unconscious turned inside out, to document the law of unintended consequences – for instance, the causal chain that leads from throwing the stone through the shop window to Manuela's death and the smashing of windows to reveal the hidden cameras of Dr Vergéus.

It gives a different meaning to the all too familiar literal mirrors in Bergman's films, as well as to the metaphoric mirrors, echoes and repetitions that thread themselves through his work over the years and decades, where characters' names repeat themselves (such as Rosenberg and Vergéus), as do the situations and character constellations, and the emotional climaxes of humiliation and moments of shame. All of these phenomena, I would argue, permit one to put the explicitly historical and political references in a slightly different context.

What makes Bergman's film remarkable in light of this argument is the combination of a very precise historical moment – a turning point or crisis moment in Germany's but also Europe's history – and the a-temporal, science fiction or time-travel quality of the film, once more indicating why the idiom of realism no longer sustains the new media temporalities of prosthetic memory, after scholarly history or eye-witness testimony.

Thus Abel's permanent bouts of drunkenness, his mood-swings between catatonic apathy and violent aggression, his alternation between self-pity and self-aggrandisement, between being a sheepish victim and a sadistic aggressor, could also be read as ways of trying to unfix and unhinge himself on the way to that status of

abjection, across which the hero seeks to attain a cleansing redemption in a world without either stable values (the inflation) or religious transcendence (here signalled by the scene of the priest, unable to give comfort and solace to his parishioner, because of his own spiritual doubt or lack of faith). In reaction to the dance on the volcano (in the bars and nightclubs), the biting poverty, hunger and cold of the Berlin masses, and the failure of Christianity, the abject state of Abel Rosenbaum and the amoral medical experiments of Hans Vergéus confront and complement each other across the abyss of lawlessness and nihilism of the epoch, each escaping the non-functioning of Weimar society by inventing another one, so to speak, above and below the bankrupt symbolic order.

### Bergman's Failure, or Europe's Failure?

Here, I think, we need to come back to Bergman's own discourse of failure, and what I suggested is a more complex matrix of defensiveness and disavowal regarding the place of *The Serpent's Egg* in his own trajectory and oeuvre. I think it is clear that he was genuinely shocked if not traumatised by the public's and critics' reaction, asking himself how he could have been so self-deceived. Now, this very posture is, of course, one that Bergman assumed many times in his career and in his comments on his own work, being part of his lifelong, ongoing self-examination and auto-analysis. It applies, however, with special force to his relationship to Germany, and notably Nazi-Germany. He was always most candid about the time he spent there as a 16-year-old boy in the mid-1930s while an exchange student, and how he returned to Sweden an enthusiastic and fervent National Socialist, inspired not so much by the ideology (for which he was both too young and too apolitical), but by the combination of youthful idealism, the general air of excitement and anticipation, as well as the tenderness and affection lavished on him by the young people and especially a girl whom he met through his aunt, who initiated these German connections. In fact, the chapter in *The Magic Lantern* describing the stay, as well as his interview with Swedish television in 1977 [xxx can you provide details of the TV show etc?], on the occasion of the opening of *The Serpent's Egg*, gives one the sense that this may have been one of the very few periods of his life where he felt completely happy. When asked during the same interview in 1977 whether he had ever fully come to terms with the Nazi within him, he replied: 'No – learning about the camps after 1945 was above all a profound emotional shock. As if I had discovered that God and the Devil are two sides of the same coin. It was a horrible experience.' He was asked if this experience gave rise to a film like *The Serpent's Egg*? He replied, 'I am not sure. I cannot give a definite answer to this question. The week of November 1923 is a metaphoric frame, it's also about what could happen to all of us, here and today, or even tomorrow. That is the real subject of the film: almost science fiction.' So, what Bergman highlights is

his profound shock at having been so deeply mistaken about his own emotions and convictions (but, as he points out, not that different from many Swedes of his and his parents' generations, who remained Germanophile and anti-Semitic well into the 1940s). Yet he also sees this very specific historical moment caught or suspended in several temporalities: the past, the present, the future – history as time-travel and science fiction, and melodrama as par excellence the genre of bad timing or, rather, the combination of the temporality of regret: 'if only' (if only I could turn back the clock/ if only I had known) alongside the temporality of the hypothetical 'what if' (what if the end of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime had been a kind of historical fast-forward, which the second part of the twentieth century was doomed to re-run and repeat, in slow motion, just like the grey masses we see at the beginning and the end of the film?).

This emphasis on a certain notion of failure as programmed into the genre of 'the return of history as film' allows me to re-read Bergman's own explanations of the film's failure symptomatically: as in itself contradictory, and thus requiring a more parapractical reading, namely in relation to his own sense of the importance of the film, and secondly in relation to his shock at not being able to trust his own political instincts. This in turn leads me to the historical implications of this shock, namely his own seduction by Nazism in the mid-1930s. Again, however, we should guard against interpreting this solely in the light of Bergman's own moral dilemma and individual psyche, but recognise it in the context of all the other, more open accounts of culpability on the part of European societies, and notably the bourgeoisie, in the acknowledgement of their common responsibility for not having opposed fascism. In this respect, Bergman was not only in the European mainstream, but in a sense ahead of others.

This brings me back to the broader context of the film, and Bergman's assertion that the Vergéus theme of voyeurism, experiment and auto-analysis did not fit with the inflation theme, that is, the emphasis on the black market and on the complete meltdown of civilised values as hunger, unemployment and lawlessness grip post-war Berlin society. But the fact that Bergman actually connects Vergéus' experiments with something he had read about the CIA gives one pause for further thought. For the 1970s were not only the moment of postmodernism and the end of the grand narratives of progress. It was also the period when the narratives of progress based on what one might call political-cultural values, give way to a narrative of progress based on science, and in particular on the neuro-biological and genetic sciences. What Bergman saw and recognised in Vergéus may have been something like an epistemic break, where the self-examinatory, self-observational and self-analysing impulses of Protestant religion and Freudian psychoanalysis – the twin poles of Bergman's own moral world – began to give way to the self-experimenting, species-enhancing scientific tendencies of the US-dominated behavioural sciences.

These would catapult – as many feared and still fear – the human species out of its traditional self-definitions and towards its own self-obliteration; as if the end of psychoanalysis and the beginning of the dominance of the neuro-sciences and biogenetics amounted to a paradigm shift in the relation between culture and nature. Those who fear this turn are also likely to be those who consider such ‘advances’ a belated victory of fascism, although – as Bergman makes clear – the figure who stands for this self-transcending vision of mankind’s future, namely Dr Vergéus, is not a Nazi (how could he have been one in 1923?), or more precisely perhaps, is not necessarily a Nazi.

In the face of this alternative to bourgeois humanism, we see Bergman contrasting the vision of the new man embodied in Vergéus, with the most creaturely aspects of humanity, embodied in his unsuspecting victims: the vulnerability of, literally, flesh and blood, reduced or purified to the state of ‘abjection’ in Julia Kristeva’s terms (1982), or to ‘bare life’ as Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls it. Flesh, meat, spurt-ing blood, the palpating heart of a cat, under the gaze of the cinematic apparatus turned into the clinical apparatus of surveillance, science and medicine, are among the images Bergman chose to give a sense of the extremes he saw emerging from the break-up of bourgeois humanism, and thus, it would seem, the Vergerus story and the inflation/abjection story do indeed belong together, in fact implicate and necessitate each other: another parapraxis or disavowal at the heart of European (fascist) history.

What *The Serpent’s Egg*, I think, allows one to reassess is that the 1970s really were a key decade, and not only that, but a genuine fork-in-the-road, where the cultural-humanist way of understanding the world had definitely begun to hand over to another narrative of progress, that of genetic evolutionism. What inflation was to Germany in the 1920s, postmodernism may turn out to have been for the 1970s: the period of everything goes, before the ‘currency’ had once more become stabilised, but on the basis of a quite different ontological ‘gold standard’.

In this narrative, the Holocaust marked a watershed, insofar as it did indeed give the world a glimpse of what it means to look at human beings without looking at their humanity, and instead simply regard them under the aspect of their species identity, upon which judgement can be passed, selection can be made and science can intervene. Bergman’s vision, bleaker than most of us would wish to countenance perhaps, because infused by his own sense of guilt and failure, nonetheless reminds us that this particular look has found in the cinema one of its instruments, but also its anti-bodies or *pharmakon*, its counter-poisons – provided it can remain sufficiently Bergmanesque, that is, not afraid of being hysterical and melodramatic, or as I would now call it, not afraid of being anachronistic and parapractic.

## References

- Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Aquilon, D. et al [xxx all names please, and see textual query about this] (2005) *Magisk cirkel*. Lund: Film International förlag.
- Bauman, Z. [xxx not the book cited in text: see query there] (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Bergman, I. (1988) *The Magic Lantern*. New York: Viking.
- \_\_\_\_ (1994) *Images: My Life in Film*. New York: Arcade.
- Derrida, J. (1994) *Spectres of Marx*. London: Routledge.
- Fest, J. (1977 [xxx different date in textual reference. Pls clarify]) *Hitler – Eine Karriere*. Berlin: Ullstein.
- Ford, H. (2002) 'The Radical Intimacy of Bergman', *Senses of Cinema*, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/bergman.html> (last accessed 24 October 2006).
- Friedlander, S. (1993) *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gado, F. (1986) *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kaes, A. (1989) *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nora, P. (1984–1992 [xxx this cannot surely be correct! Date of publication pls]), *Les Lieux de Memoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Zizek [xxx JD add relevant accents etc], S. (2001) *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. London: Routledge.