didaskalia
gazeta teatralna

From the issue: **English Issue 2020**
DOI: 10.34762/whzx-sr90
Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/demons-and-body-ingmar-bergmans-magic-lantern-somatopoetic-perspective

/ THE BODY AND THE ARCHIVE

Demons and the Body: Ingmar Bergman's "The Magic Lantern" from a Somatopoetic Perspective

Jan Balbierz | Jagiellonian University in Kraków

The article attempts to show the work of Ingmar Bergman, in particular his 1987 quasi-autobiography *The Magic Lantern*, from the perspective of the medical humanities. Following a slew of Swedish commentators, the article shows the problematic nature of reading Bergman's text autobiographically, instead focusing on numerous representations of the body and illness. The somatic, psychic and psychosomatic insecurities of the narrator not only occupy a central place here, but they are also one of the basic themes of the Swedish director's whole oeuvre (they appear, for instance, in the related narrative of Fanny and Alexander). The article also shows how Bergman benefited from the achievements of the American anti-psychiatry movement and how his literary texts fit into wider cultural contexts in the tradition of melancholy, carnivalesque and abject writing.

Keywords: medical humanities; Ingmar Bergman; somatoaesthetics; abject; disease

1.

The branch of humanities known as *medical humanities*, situated on the

border between literature studies, anthropology, cultural theory and medical sciences, has been experiencing turbulent development for over a decade. Like all the so-called interdisciplinary areas of the humanities, it brings new, unexpected perspectives to the interpretation of verbal and visual works, but also has problematic aspects, the most important of which is the limited competence of the vast majority of humanists in understanding and describing contemporary medical and natural science practices. On the other hand, the enormous wealth of material – from the deformed pieces of meat in Francis Bacon's oil paintings, through the medical-historical novels of Per Olov Enquist such as *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, to the dissertations on the psychophysical background of disease conditions by the young Friedrich Schiller (a medical doctor by training) – opens up a wide and fascinating field of research for humanists. The terms, theoretical perspectives and sub-branches are, of course, legion. Anna Burzyńska, writing in one of the chapters of *Anty-teoria literatury (the Anti-theory of Literature)* on Barthes' project of transferring the sphere of intimacy and the pleasure of reading category to the theory of literature, notes that "[r]eading has become for Barthes simply a way of experiencing 'the joy of writing', and not a compulsion to seek content, paralysing all pleasure". (Burzyńska, 2006, p. 235). These hedonistic aspects of writing and reading are inseparably connected with the notion of a "reading body" – corporeal, material and open to the sexual (in the case of the French author – homosexual) pleasures of the subject. Anna Łebkowska, in turn, in an article published in the second volume of *Kulturowa teoria literatury (Cultural Theory of Literature)*, proposes the term "*somatopoetyka*" (*"somatopoetics"*) (Łebkowska, 2012). If, in accordance with the author, we assume that somatopoetics is a branch of cultural theory, trying to answer questions related to the possibilities of representation and articulation of our bodily experiences, then the work of

Ingmar Bergman will perfectly fit into this research field. The films of the Swedish director are usually interpreted in two contexts. Firstly, Bergman is presented as a dark post-existentialist, showing the tragedy of human existence in a world devoid of divine instance, and secondly, as a diagnostician of toxic family and partner relations. Both lines of interpretation are, of course, justified; however, I would like to focus on another aspect of the Swedish director's work, namely the threads of corporeality and disease that appear in it.

The quasi-autobiography *Laterna magica (The Magic Lantern)* published in 1987, is an excellent starting point here. It was written during a period of creative flow after the director's return from – largely voluntary – emigration to Germany, where he had worked for seven years in Munich's *Residenztheater*. Maaret Koskinen points out that Bergman's hybrid texts and theatrical productions of the 1980s are directed towards the past – both the personal and the artistic past. In them, Bergman returns to motifs and themes known from early films, but also collaborates with actors from those films. At the same time, he does not shy away from autobiographical allusions: Peter Stormare as Hamlet (1976) appears in a cap and jacket that are deceptively similar to the ones Bergman wore in the 1950s; in Bergman's staging P.O. Enquist's*The Image Makers* (2000) there is a screening of *The Phantom Carriage* by Victor Sjöström, Bergman's former mentor, who played the lead role in *Wild Strawberries*. Two autobiographical screenplays, in a form resembling novels, were also written at that time: *The Best Intentions* (1991) and *Sunday's Children* (1993, cf.: Koskinen, 2001). *The Magic Lantern*fits perfectly into the space of memory, created by Bergman in the last decades of his life. The original version of the text was written with a ballpoint pen in an A4 format school notebook. Proposals for motifs and themes which would later be included in the book appear on the first pages

of the manuscript: we will find sections here on the following: “About mother, father and grandmother”, “theatre”, “acting”, “the actor’s craft”, “lies”, “sexuality”, “school”, “death and fear of death” and “new fears every day”. For many years, the director of the *Seventh Seal* used to write down his scripts and prose texts in almost illegible writing in notepads; subsequent versions were later re-typed. The differences between the variants are often considerable. The handwritten manuscript and several versions of typescripts of the *Magic Lantern* have been preserved in the Bergman archives. The changes in these versions consisted mainly in the introduction of stylistic corrections and the deletion of some longer – we might guess, overly controversial – fragments. The title of the book changed several times: amongst them, we can find *Gycklarans afton* (*Sawdust and Tinsel*) and *Skala lök* (*Peeling an onion*), which is a reference to the famous scene from Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, staged twice by Bergman (in the eponymous manuscript, the whole scene can be found on the front pages as a motto). In the ever-swelling torrent of academic output on the subject of the Swedish director, *The Magic Lantern* is invariably treated as memoir literature, and information presented in it is repeatedly quoted by numerous biographers *in extenso* as facts from the director’s life. However, the fact that Bergman's prose belongs to the autobiographical genre has not been confirmed anywhere in the text. Thus, we will not find any paratextual indications (such as a subtitle) or even Lejeune's concept of the “autobiographical pact”, unity of the author-narrator-hero's name. More recent archival research, above all the book by Jan Holmberg *Författaren Ingmar Bergman* (*The Writer Ingmar Bergman*), published recently , shows that the level of fictionalization is no less than in the script for the film *Fanny and Alexander* – inspired by the fantasy stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann, or in the already mentioned narratives *Sunday’s Children* and *the Best Intentions*.

Holmberg considers that there are several reasons why the memoir *The Magic Lantern* should be placed alongside the historical drama film *Fanny and Alexander* written just before it (Holmberg 2018, p. 165). (Therefore we should not be surprised that we will find an envelope entitled *The Magic Lantern* in Bergman's archive – something which the Swedish commentator does not mention; however, it does not contain the text of the quasi-autobiography, but an early version of the screenplay of *Fanny and Alexander*). Several key episodes of the quasi-autobiography – the description of his grandmother's home in Uppsala, the first cinematograph as a Christmas present for his brother – appear in Bergman's writings as early as the 1940's. In his 1947 commentary – *In Grandmother's House* – the director recounts how he was very young when he visited her house for the first time, and then never saw it again, which was probably why he subsequently described it through the eyes of a child (as cited in: Holmberg, 2018, p. 164); similar statements return in the essay *The Making of Film* from 1954. In the *Magic Lantern* and *Fanny and Alexander*, descriptions of the house in Uppsala appear again in an almost identical form. Holmberg discusses Bergman's accounts of the "poisonous pedagogy" to which he was supposed to have been subjected by his father, a pastor, suggesting that the unchanging dark image of Erik Bergman presented by the director was a composite – a phantom image – made up of fragments appearing in the whole autobiographical project. Holmberg adds that other sources – more trustworthy than Bergman – claimed something completely different about who Erik Bergman was and what he was like (Holmberg, 2018, p. 173). Equally interesting are the memory gaps and intentional omissions in the autobiographical project. Nowhere in his published writings and manuscripts will we find, for example, any mention of the fact that the director's parents took in a Jewish boy before World War II, who lived with

the Bergman siblings for several years; the months when he served in the army as a conscript are not present in the director’s writings either. Both the introduction and the end of the quasi-autobiography are examples of extensive auto-mythologization strategies. (In a short, handwritten note, Bergman commented on his text, stating that he had intended to stick to reality, but that this was difficult for an old hardened martyr of fantasy and deceiver who found pleasure in his practices, for someone who had never hesitated to give reality the form that a given moment required; as cited in: Holmberg, p. 167).

And so, in the first paragraph, the narrator describes his own dramatic birth:

> When I was born in 1918, my mother had Spanish influenza. I was in a bad way and was baptized as a precaution at the hospital. One day the family was visited by the old house doctor, who looked at me and said: “He’s dying of undernourishment.” (Bergman, 1988, p.1).

The narrator returns to the subject on the last page of the book, quoting a longer fragment of his mother's diary:

> Our son was born on Sunday morning on 14 July. He immediately contracted a high temperature and severe diarrhoea. He looks like a tiny skeleton with a big fiery red nose. He stubbornly refuses to open his eyes. I had no milk after a few days because of my illness. Then he was baptized in an emergency here at the hospital. (Bergman, 1988, p.289).

Bergman's parents held a high position in the social hierarchy and his father fulfilled public functions (he was a vicar in the parish of the Stockholm Church of Hedvig Eleonora, then a pastor at the royal court), so many official documents linked to their life have been preserved. The diaries of Bergman's mother, written in secret from her husband, which return in late films, such as *The Best Intentions* and *Private Confessions*, provide additional biographical information. These documents indicate that Bergman was baptised not in a hospital, but during a conventional church ceremony, that his mother was never ill with Spanish flu and, most importantly, that an alleged excerpt from her diary was entirely written by the director; there are no such words in the authentic diary. Instead, according to Holmberg, there is simply a laconic entry, giving his Christian names (Ernst Ingmar), date of birth (14 July 1918), and a reference to a psalm in a Swedish psalter (257:10) (Holmberg, 2018, p. 182).

Instead of showing in great detail successive inconsistencies with documents and testimonies left by others, or returning to the – all too obvious – thesis about the inherent unreliability of the autobiographical genre, it is worth noting Bergman’s penchant for making use of narrative tricks – known from film – in *The Magic Lantern*. First of all, therefore, he makes use of the well-known mindscape technique, used by him in *Persona* and *Hour of the Wolf*, among others; the whole diegesis here has been subjected to introspective distortion of perspective, internalised and extremely subjectivised. Secondly, he refers to low and coarse forms of culture, for which he had a clear predilection (he loved circus, melodrama, soap operas and commercial silent film); the portrayal of the “I” in *The Magic Lantern* was adopted, I believe, from slapstick comedy – a genre in which the director presents himself in front of the camera in his exaggerated and crude physicality.

2.

The Magic Lantern differs from traditional memoir literature in that it is above all a pseudo- (or else a crypto-) autobiography of the body (an astoundingly similar approach was used by Paul Auster in an autobiography published several years ago; in his *Winter Journal* we accompany the narrator from early childhood to retirement age from the perspective of corporeal experiences). From the first paragraph onwards, often in a drastic way, Bergman's text deals with biological aspects of existence and somatic or psychosomatic ailments of the narrator:

> I have always suffered from what is called a nervous stomach, a calamity as foolish as it is humiliating. With a never-ebbing and often sophisticated wealth of invention, my bowels have sabotaged my efforts. Thus school was an unremitting misery, as I could never calculate when the attacks were going to hit me. Suddenly shitting in your trousers is a traumatic experience […].
>
> No medicaments help as they either cause apathy or arrive too late […] In all the theatres I have worked in for any length of time, I have been given my own lavatory. These conveniences are probably my most lasting contribution to the history of the theatre (Bergman, 1988, p. 62).

As Edward Shorter writes, somatization processes are subject to historically conditioned cultural pressure; hence psychosomatic symptoms also change together with changing concepts and definitions of illness:

> The unconscious mind desires to be taken seriously and not be ridiculed. It will therefore strive to present symptoms that always seem, to the surrounding culture, legitimate evidence of organic disease. […] Psychosomatic illnesses have always existed, because psychogenesis – the conversion of stress or psychological problems into physical symptoms – is one of nature's basic mechanisms in mobilizing the body to cope with mental distress (Shorter, 1992, p. X).

The term "psychosomatics illness" does not appear in disease classifications until the 1950's. The concept itself is – of course – much older. In particular, the period around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries abounds in descriptions of cases of neurotics and hysterics, in whom a spectacular, often quasi-theatrical staging of bodily symptoms (paroxysms; compulsive tics; obsessive, monotonous diets; catatonic freezing in one position) is only a symptom of internal dissonances and anxieties.

Perceiving disease in this way as a sort of translation of internal tensions ("as I harbour a constant tumult within me and have to keep watch over it" – Bergman, 1988, p. 33) into the language of physical symptoms, as a "drama of the id" (as one of the precursors of thinking in psychosomatic terms, the German medical doctor and psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck, referred to it), it repeatedly returns in the Swedish director's narrations.

He wrote about his brother, who was in conflict with his family and was afflicted at the end of his life with severe paralysis:

> To me, my brother's illness is understandable, paralyzed as he was by rage, paralyzed by two overwhelming twilight figures,

> suffocating and incomprehensible: Father and Mother […] He faced pain and humiliation with angry impatience, and made quite sure he was so unpleasant that no one could ever feel pity for him (Bergman, 1988, P. 57-58).

The Magic Lantern is in many places a chronicle of the most varied, real and imagined, ailments of the body and spirit:

> I went over my actual situation. How was my body, how was my soul and, most of all, what had got to be done today? I established that my nose was blocked (the dry air), my left testicle hurt (probably cancer), my hip ached (the same old pain), and there was a ringing in my bad ear (unpleasant but not worth bothering about). (Bergman, 1988, P. 64).

Diseases of the gastric system occupy a privileged position. Repeated descriptions of digestive disorders fit Bergman's narrative into a long cultural tradition, connected with a melancholic temperament. According to a cultural concept established in antiquity, creativity and a tendency to artistic activity are associated with stomach problems in melancholics. The correspondence between the creative process and the organs and fluids of the human body (in this case: “black bile”) has for centuries defined the medical-psychological discourse relating to the genesis of art and literature. Despondency, depression, spleen – these are not only conditions conducive to artistic creativity, but they are also associated with, often highly peculiar, nutritional compulsions and obsessions, as well as notorious constipations and diarrhoeas (these symptoms can be found, for example, in the classic description by Robert Burton). I return to the thesis presented at the

beginning of the text: Bergman is not only a post-religious existentialist, but also a writer and director of theatrical productions and films that have been thoroughly carnivalised, a presenter of sick, hideous, abject bodies.

Revealing the sphere of corporeal intimacy, scatological jokes, bodily degradation, fascination with faeces and regression to the anal sphere occupy a central place not only in his autobiographical project, but in his entire oeuvre. The physicality of death and the ugliness of an ailing body return in characters such as the translator Esther, worn out by illness, in *The Silence*; Agnes, dying in agony in *Cries and Whispers* (it is no accident that Susan Sontag mentions this film as one of the most important representations of the physicality of cancer in 20th century culture: "Contrast these ennobling, placid TB deaths with the ignoble, agonizing cancer deaths of Eugene Gant's father in Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* and of the sister in Bergman's film *Cries and Whispers* – (Sontag, 1989, P. 17)); the paralyzed Helena in *Autumn Sonata*; or the bedridden Blenda Vergérus in *Fanny and Alexander*. In the spectacle *In the Presence of a Clown*, a play produced for television, and a much earlier staging of *The Rake's Progress*, by Stravinsky, Auden and Kallman (Royal Opera, 1963), the protagonists are dying in the last phase of syphilis; in the staging of *Hedda Gabler* (Dramaten, 1964), the heroine, disgusted with her own pregnancy, tries to induce a miscarriage with her hand; *Miss Julie* (Dramaten, 1985, re-issue 1991), in turn, for a long time and with disgust wipes the virgin blood flowing down her thighs. Advertisements for Bris soap made during the *lock-out* deal entirely with the fatal effects of sweating. However, the most physical (and most feministic) amongst all Bergman's films is *Brink of life*, an intimate drama entirely set in a delivery ward and dealing with the subject of unwanted motherhood and absent fathers (the script was written by Bergman's friend, the excellent writer Ulla Isaksson). Bergman's

representations of mental illness occupy a separate place. In numerous interviews, the director spoke about his own borderline states as “my demons”. *Persona* or *Hour of the Wolf* present psychotic episodes of the protagonists. Mental illness appears in a more explicit form in *Face to Face,* a relatively unknown English language film produced by Dino De Laurentis (the working title was *Psychiatrist*; a broader discussion of the film can be found in: Tapper, 2017, followed by information linked to the creation of the film). The dense network of intertextual references here encompasses Strindberg’s *The Defence of a Fool*, Kesey/Forman’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Doris Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and finally the paintings of Leonor Fini, which Bergman looked at before beginning production of the film. The director was also astonishingly well read in newer, “alternative” psychiatric literature. As early as the 1960’s he came across the writings of Karen Horney; two volumes can be seen on a bedside table belonging to the protagonist played by Liv Ullmann in one of the scenes of the film *Prisoners of Psychiatry* (1972) by Bruce J. Ennis, the author of books about the repressive system of psychiatric hospitals, and *The Psychiatric Interview* (1970) by Harry Stack Sullivan. The main source of inspiration, however, was the classic example of anti-psychiatry, *The Primal Scream* by Arthur Janov, which has weathered badly over the years and is today ridiculed in professional psychiatric circles, but in the 1970’s was extremely popular throughout Scandinavia. Bergman read this book in 1974, and a year later, during his visit to California (where, incidentally, he always felt terrible) he visited Janov’s clinic and met its author. Many years later he reminisced in *Images: My Life in Film* that *Face to Face*had arisen under the direct influence of Janov’s *Primal Scream*:

> There is no doubt that there exists a huge shout trying to find its

> voice. Then the question is whether I have the ability to release the shout, to set it free […] Will I be able to get close to the point where my own despair is hiding, where my own suicide lies in wait? I don't know. This is the true birth: hold me, help me, be kind to me, hold me tight, why isn't there anybody who cares about me? (Bergman, 1994, p. 75).

Janov's theory derived all mental illnesses from one source – deficiency of maternal love. The remedy for them was supposed to be primal scream therapy (the album *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, in particular the song *Mother*, was created under its influence; Bergman, let us add, was an ardent fan of the Beatles). The theory of the American psychiatrist was a perfect fit for the anthropology formulated by Bergman much earlier, positing that lack of love is the most powerful of all traumas and a universal blemish on human nature.

3.

Jan Holmberg writes that Bergman undertook work on *The Magic Lantern* in the mid-1980's largely as a follow-up to *Fanny and Alexander*. Holmberg considers that this is worth noting, as the similarities between the two works are so great that it is often difficult to distinguish between them – apparently even the author himself had difficulty with this! (Holmberg, 2018, p. 173). One of the recurring themes in both texts (as well as in the film production of the story of two siblings from the Ekdahl family of actors) is – often obscene – carnality. Both also form a two-part anatomy of disgust.

In a monograph devoted to *Fanny and Alexander*, Maaret Koskinen and Mats Rohdin point out that in this film Bergman's fascination with phenomena

relating to the functions of the intestinal tract and with lower regions of the human body in general (Koskinen/Rohdin, 2005, p. 168), and his fondness for Rabelaisian tragi-comic scene reach a climax (Koskinen/Rohdin, 2005, p. 171) reach a climax. In the prologue, after a short introduction in which Alexander plays with a cardboard model of a theatre and looks at the enchanted interior of his grandmother's flat, the action of the film moves to an outhouse:

> A long dark passage with a lofty ceiling goes through the apartment […]. At the angle of the passage is a secret room. The door has five holes bored in it just above the floor and the walls are covered with red material. On them hang some framed colored pictures representing knights' castles and beautiful damsels in billowing wimples. In the middle of the cramped square room stands a throne with arms and back; it too is covered with red material and has brass fittings on the corners and sides. The seat can be lifted, and under it is a black hole, a bottomless pit, Alexander thinks. Here Grandmamma sits for a long time, groaning and sighing. Alexander has once or twice offered to keep her company in order to divert her, but she has always declined. Alexander's father says Grandmamma suffers from constipation because she is stingy (Bergman, 1982 , pp. 16-17).

A similar scene can be found in working notes to *Cries and Whispers*: "There is Amalia, Aunt Amalia, seated on the toilet, eating a liver pate sandwich, who keeps up an excessively detailed monologue about her digestion, her intestines, and her stools." (Bergman, 1994, p. 88). A penchant for the carnivalesque – feasting images descriptions of the belly and lower bodily

regions or parodic descriptions of transgressive corporeality (in Bachtin's view: "the gay, material bodily cosmos, ever growing and self-renewing" – Bachtin, 1984, p. 364) permeate both the screenplay of *Fanny and Alexander*and the text of *The Magic Lantern.* Successive episodes of Bergman's reminiscence prose are arranged around clusters of diseases, misfortunes and all kinds of somatic ailments. Ingrid Bergman, acting in *Autumn Sonata*, dies of cancer; the director's homosexual assistant drinks himself to death after an unsuccessful affair; the young Ingmar's favourite uncle begins to suffer from incontinence. In the whole, very extensive, gallery of freaks and eccentrics appearing in Bergman's reminiscence prose, it is hard to find even a single character who would not one day fall ill with typhus, polio, tuberculosis, schizophrenia or at least – in the best case – with one of the minor venereal diseases. Terror and disgust are often accompanied by erotic pleasure, like in the stories of the pastor with a rotten corpse-like face emerging from a coffin, and of clandestine visits to a mortuary (this motif also appears in the prologue to *Persona*). The key concept here is repulsion; Bergman joins a long line of copro-eroticists and scatologists, but also portraitists of old hags – who are both repulsive and attractive at the same time – appearing in the literature of modernism (compare Menninghaus's analyses in: Menninghaus, 2009). Corporeality dominates the chapter (which was full of digressions and anecdotes) devoted to work on the staging of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* from 1986:

> I look through my diary notes from work on *A Dream Play*, not very encouraging reading. I was in bad shape, uneasy, dejected, tired, my right hip hurting […] My stomach was sabotaging me with cramps and attacks of diarrhoea. (Bergman, 1988, p.41).

And a few pages later:

> On the Monday night, I had a high temperature and was shaking and sweating, every nerve rebelling […] I had a high temperature for ten days, unable even to read, but simply lay there mostly dozing. When I got up, I almost immediately lost my balance. I was so ill it was almost interesting. Dozing, falling asleep, waking, coughing, sniffing, influenza blossoming untiringly, my temperature leaping about (Bergman, 1988, p.44).

A month before starting rehearsals for *A Dream Play*, Lena Olin, who was playing the daughter of Indra, asked Bergman for a short talk. It turned out that: "She had been infected by the prevailing fertility rife in the theatre" (Bergman, 1988, p 42) and was pregnant, as a result of which, the run would have to be cancelled shortly after the premiere. It is followed by a series of fragmentary narratives about persons from Bergman's closest circle. A former lover of the narrator, "this beautiful and brilliant actress lost her memory and her teeth and died at fifty in a mental hospital" (Bergman, 1988, p. 35). A set designer, whom Bergman had hired at the beginning of work on the staging of the play, quickly withdrew from the project:

> [H]is partner of ten years left him for a young actor. The stage designer acquired a stomach ulcer and arrived in a wretched state at my home on Fårö just after midsummer. In the hope that work would contain his depression, we started our daily meetings. The designer's lips trembled and he looked at me with slightly protruding eyes. 'I want her to come back,' he whispered (Bergman, 1988, p.35-36).

The flow of memories is consistently linked with illness and death: “A few years ago, I visited a friend who was dying of cancer; he was eroding away, transformed into a shrivelled gnome with huge eyes and large yellow teeth. He was lying on his side, connected to a number of machines” (Bergman, 1988, p.44). During a school performance of *Macbeth,* one of the actors was struck with a sword “on the head so that blood spattered in all directions. He was taken to hospital after the performance.” (Bergman, 1988, p. 46). At the same time, the body of the director himself was deteriorating: “My nights were sleepless, filled with anxiety and physical discomfort, the influenza leaving me with a depression I did not recognize, living its own poisonous life within my body” (Bergman, 1988, p. 45), and in another place: “My body reacted with cramps and disorders of balance. I seemed to have been poisoned…” (Bergman, 1988, p.61). We will not learn much from *The Magic Lantern* about the fact that the body can also be – at least sometimes – a source of pleasure and delight. Episodes relating to masturbation and first sexual experiences – obligatory in male coming-of-age stories – are almost exclusively limited here to descriptions of physical pain, disgust and the sense of deep shame and inner chaos that accompanies them:

> This illness or obsession afflicted me without pity, the action constantly repeating itself, almost compulsorily […]. In desperation – the narrator concludes this thread – I turned to Jesus and asked my father if I could attend confirmation classes […]. The night before my first communion, I tried with all my might to resist my demon […], but lost the battle. Jesus punished me with a gigantic infected pimple in the middle of my pallid forehead. When I received the means of grace my stomach contracted and I almost threw up (Bergman, 1988, p.110).

Bergman's corporeal fixation and the constantly appearing images of bodily decay in his work (let us recall, for example, the rotting corpse consumed by disease in the *Seventh Seal*) have a significant intertextual dimension. And so the world presented in *The Magic Lantern* is the world of Strindberg's late plays, in which existence appears as an endless *Gehenna* and, perhaps, as punishment for sins committed in previous incarnations. In *A Dream Play*, Agnes, who has been sent to this earthly plane, lands in a material world permeated by suffering and vulgar triviality, and her disillusionment encompasses successive spheres of human experience. Bergman comments on the circumstances of the genesis of the dreamlike drama – written at the time of the long and painful process of Strindberg's separation from his third wife, the actress Harriet Bosse – in the following way:

> The wound is now deep and bleeding profusely. The hurt cannot be turned on or off as in other disasters in life. The pain bores its way towards the unknown room and opens the floodgates. Strindberg writes in his diary that he wept, but the tears cleansed his eyes and he could look on himself and his fellow men with conciliatory indulgence. He was certainly speaking a new language (Bergman, 1988, P 38).

The Magic Lantern is not only a meta-commentary on Strindberg, but it also theatricalizes – in diagetic mode – Strindberg's vision of the world as an inferno. At the same time, the narrative forms a passionate story about the agony, death and resurrection of the artist. The turning point here is the day when a cinematograph appears in the boy's life. The moment when the narrator first comes into contact with the medium of film is also the beginning of symbolic liberation. The culture of modernism has

fundamentally re-evaluated the opposition: *bios-logos*. The Cartesian anthropological paradigm, according to which the essence of humanity is thinking, is replaced here by a wide spectrum of views and attitudes, presenting human being ruled by underground impulses and drives not subject to the power of reason. As Birgitta Steene notes, Bergman – although born a few years after Strindberg's death – belongs to the same cultural formation: hierarchical, patriarchal and deeply rooted in the Protestant religion. To this should be added that the director takes pleasure in addressing the great themes of literature of the early modernist phase, such as the belief that it is impossible to express our experiences in words (hence the turn to sounds and images), or the opposition: artist-bourgeois. In a deleted and unpublished fragment from the typescript of *The Magic Lantern*, a conviction – very well-known from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, for example – appears that the artist is the last link in the evolution of the bourgeois line, which is becoming degenerate and is doomed to extinction. In this unpublished section, Bergman also describes a mysterious and incurable disease of the muscles that afflicted the Bergman family, befalling it in a capricious and inexplicable way, leaving Bergman’s father severely incapacitated at the end of his life and his brother completely paralyzed – in the last years of his life he only moved his head. Furthermore, one of his aunts died at a young age. In the unpublished typescript, Bergman goes on to discuss another family condition – the Bergman loss of feelings, which in his view could lead to catastrophic situations if allowed to take over without restrictions. His mother was “infected” by it at an early age, and bravely tried to defend against it, but eventually gave up, though not entirely. Bergman further describes how he himself is a psychological mess – a cocktail of pride, shyness, shallow emotions, irritability, turning away from the world, but also having the need for contact, warmth, joy, anger,

tenderness, and desire. (unpublished typescript, Bergman archive).

* * *

The Bergmanesque corporeal aesthetics, present in his pseudo-autobiography, but also in his film and theatre work, is subversive towards the global transformations in mass culture. Contemporary popular culture, mercantilized and oriented towards hedonism – as pointed out by Mike Featherstone, among many others – has created a corporeal aesthetic whose central aspects are narcissism and the cult of beauty and youth. Stylized, idealized, eternally young bodies appearing in advertisements are intended to encourage consumers to maintain their own body in good health through jogging or yoga, consumption of yoghurts, nutritional supplements and fat-free food or by applying various diets. If in turn we look at *The Magic Lantern* in the context of the changes in Swedish culture from the 1930s to the 1970s, then here as well, the text is in clear opposition to the dominant political and cultural discourse at that time. This discourse was based on a functionalist definition of modernity, progress understood in terms of rational, socially beneficial behaviours. Meanwhile, bodily functions were to be subjected to control and regulated through practices such as gymnastics and sport, appropriate dietary regimes and choice of healthy food, limiting consumption of alcohol and contraception. Meanwhile the *corpus* in Bergman's text is transgressive and carnivalesque, the bodily fluids – blood, sperm, vomit, sputum, and urine – are flowing here in streams, and the unsteerable, excessive body is revealed to us in crude materiality and unceasingly gravitates towards the field of abject art, where repulsion and disgust meet with fascination and sexual *plaisir*.

Translation: George Lisowski

Author

Jan Balbierz

Jan Balbierz (jan.balbierz@uj.edu.pl) is a professor at the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków. He is the author of A New cosmos. Strindberg, Science and Signs (Gdańsk 2008) and other books and articles on Scandinavian Modernism and comparative literature. ORCID: 0000 -0001 -7625 -9551.

Bibliography

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais And His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984.

Bergman, Ingmar. *Images: My Life in Film*, translated by Marianne Ruuth, Arcade Publishing, New York 1995.

Bergman, Ingmar. *The Magic Lantern*, translated by Joan Tate, Viking Penguin, New York 1988.

Burzyńska, Anna. *Anty-teoria literatury*, Universitas, Kraków 2006.

Holmberg, Jan. *Författaren Ingmar Bergman*, Norstedts, Stockholm 2018.

Koskinen, Maaret. *Ingmar Bergman: "Allting föreställer, ingenting är". Filmen och teatern – en tvärestetisk studie*, Nya Doxa, Nora 2001.

Koskinen, Maaret; Rhodin, Mats. *Fanny och Alexander: Ur Ingmar Bergmans arkiv och hemliga gömmor*, Wahlström och Widstrand, Stockholm 2005.

Łebkowska, Anna. *Somatopoetyka*, [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury 2. Poetyki, problematyki, interpretacje*, red. R. Nycz, T. Walas, Universitas, Kraków 2012.

Menninghaus, Winfried. *Wstręt. Teoria i historia*, przeł. G. Sowiński, Universitas, Kraków 2009.

Shorter, Edward. *From Paralysis to Fatigue: A History of Psychosomatic Illness in the Modern Era*, The Free Press, New York 1992.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, Anchor, 1989.

Tapper, Michael. *Ingmar Bergman's Face to Face*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017.

Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/article/demons-and-body-ingmar-bergmans-magic-lantern-somatopoetic-perspective