

Love without Lovers, Words without Images: On Ingmar Bergman's Unrealised Screenplays

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Cinéphiles have many wistful words for abandoned film projects: *unmade*, *unfinished*, *inachevé*, *orealiserad*. The internet bristles with blogpages ranking the 'best films never made'. A canon of lost masterpieces emerges from these exercises in melancholy: Stanley Kubrick's *Napoleon*, Orson Welles' *Heart of Darkness*, Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Dune*, Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Idiot*.¹ In Scandinavia, Carl Th. Dreyer notoriously spent more than twenty years developing three passion projects: one on the life of Jesus, one on Mary Queen of Scots, and *Medea*, adapted for Danish public service broadcaster DR by Lars von Trier in 1988. But one name that rarely appears on such lists is Ingmar Bergman.

Why would the unrealised films of the quintessential auteur escape such nostalgic excesses? One reason might be Bergman's unusual productivity. The Swede directed forty-five feature films to Tarkovsky's seven and Kubrick's thirteen, for example, and so even Bergman aficionados have sufficient extant treasures to keep them from speculating about what might have been. Perhaps, too, the late-blooming masterpiece *Fanny & Alexander* (1982) satisfyingly rounded off the arc of Bergman's cinematic oeuvre as traced by film historians and fans. And his own quasi-autobiographical narrative was given a coda twenty years later; he directed *Saraband* (2003) on digital video at the age of eighty-five, explicitly addressing the ageing process in a kind of call-and-response to his own *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (*Scenes from a Marriage*, 1972) and his former lover Liv Ullmann's re-working of the same in *Trolösa* (*Faithless*, 2000). Another factor may be how widely Bergman's work ranged across media and genres: famously, he considered cinema to be his mistress and the theatre to be his wife, but he also wrote for television, radio and, of course, his mem-

¹ See for example 'The 25 Greatest Movies Never Made', *Indiewire*, 25 March 2014, <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/03/the-25-greatest-movies-never-made-87778/>

oirs. Amid such a fertile and prolific oeuvre, there is hardly room for lost films to take root in the cinema-lover's imagination.

However, the archives of the Ingmar Bergman Foundation do contain a wealth of unrealised projects by the great Swedish auteur. These have been explored by, for example, the playwright Marcus Lindeen, who spent a year searching the archive for fragments from which he crafted the play *Arkivet för orealiserbara drömmar och visioner* (The Archive for Unrealisable Dreams and Visions, 2012).² Lindeen's play addresses the potential of the creative process to teach us about mistakes and dead ends. More recently, the renowned theatre director Suzanne Osten adapted one of Bergman's abandoned projects for radio.³ The erotic vignette *Sextiofyra minuter med Rebecka* (Sixty-Four Minutes with Rebecka), which Osten regards as a feminist intervention, was written in 1969 as part of a tentative collaboration with Akira Kurosawa and Michaelangelo Antonioni. These recuperative efforts recall similar creative responses to the unfinished projects of other filmmakers. French documentarists Serge Bromberg and Ruxana Medrea produced *L'enfer de Henri-Georges Clouzot* (Inferno, 2009), pieced together from fragments and test shots from the set of the ill-starred *L'Enfer*, secured after a chance meeting with Clouzot's widow. Kubrick's *Aryan Papers* was the subject of a video installation by artists Jane and Louise Wilson in 2009.⁴ And BBC Radio 4 has recently brought a series of 'Unmade Movies' by Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, amongst others, to listeners.⁵

As part of my research for a book project about the unfilmed film as a cultural phenomenon, I visited the Ingmar Bergman archives in December 2017. I had a few leads from Swedish friends who half-remembered rumours of this or that unmade Bergman masterpiece, but archivist H el ene Dahl was able to suggest the best starting points for a dive into

² <http://www.ingmarbergman.se/en/adaptions/arkivet-orealiserbara-drommar-och-visioner>

³ <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=478&artikel=6556383>

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/167929772>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06122pr>

the material. What follows is a little glimpse into four of Bergman's unrealised projects, with some remarks on their relationship to the director's broader oeuvre.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

A curious detail of the story of Carl Th. Dreyer's unrealised film on the life of Jesus is that a last-ditch attempt to fund the project, a few years before Dreyer's death in 1968, came from a rich Italian whose only condition was that Dreyer should co-direct the film with Ingmar Bergman. Dreyer rejected the idea out of hand, and Bergman's response is unrecorded. However, in 1975, Bergman wrote his own draft of a feature on *Jesu död och uppståndelse* (The Death and Resurrection of Jesus), which was intended for broadcast on Swedish television, but ultimately not commissioned. The text is structured around the accounts of half-a-dozen Biblical characters who have minor roles in the relevant books of the Bible: Kaifas, the chief priest; Livia, the wife of Pontius Pilate; Jesus' mother Mary; Rufus, a guard in charge of the crucifixion; and Mary Magdalene. While the draft is a sketch rather than a fully developed screenplay, the potential for an absorbing and moving retelling of the Passion through the subjective experience of these individuals is clear in passages such as this one, describing how the day unfolds for Mary:

Mary sits there perplexed in the sunshine by the door, and everyday life continues around her. The wife of another of her sons has a child at her breast. Her son is slicing bread. The other children are playing noisily outside. As for her, she had been just about to go and wash some clothes so that everything would be clean for the holiday. The basket of dirty linen is sitting at her knee. ... She will walk there alone. As soon as she leaves the city gates she passes a low hill. Many people have gathered there. The day is hot and sultry. She hears the pounding of a hammer and animal-like howls. Nothing escapes her. That afternoon, her son cries out in desolation and dies.⁶

Bergman's afterword to the draft is touchingly personal, enriching our picture of his commitment to the human and his spiritual struggles. 'I am not religious', he states. 'Any form of supernatural salvation feels blasphemous to me. My life is most simply expressed as meaningless'. But, Bergman goes on to say, he can grasp the holiness of Jesus with his senses, if not with his reason. The people entrusted with carrying his message out into the

⁶ Translations from the Swedish are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

world were frail, afraid, and all too human. What the television play tries to communicate is how close that world is to ours, however distant it might be in time.

The Merry Widow

Bergman's passion for music is well documented, but he made only one 'musical': *Trylleflojten* (*The Magic Flute*, 1975). This adaptation of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* was made for Swedish television, but also given a theatrical release. It was re-released in UK cinemas and on BluRay by the British Film Institute in 2018 as part of Bergman's centenary celebrations. *The Magic Flute* is notable for its staging of an opera within a film: the camera is just as interested in what is going on backstage and in the reactions on the faces of the theatre audience (shot in lingering close-up, including a flash of Bergman himself) as it is in the production. At almost the same time that Bergman was developing *The Magic Flute*, he was writing a screenplay and libretto for *Glada Änkan* or *The Merry Widow*, the Austro-Hungarian composer Franz Lehár's turn-of-the-century operetta.

Bergman's *Merry Widow* project attracted some press attention, not least because he was rumoured to be pursuing Barbra Streisand for the lead role. Both the production files and newspaper reports of the time corroborate that Streisand was interested, but that the busy schedules of director and film star precluded a proper meeting. Nonetheless, Bergman worked hard on the screenplay, inspired by a tale that captured, he writes in his foreword to the manuscript, all the turmoil of the 'strange year 1900: the year of optimism, pessimism, capitalism, liberalism, celebrations, assassinations, escapism, and the year of great scandals'. The foreword also makes clear that it is the music, first and foremost, in which Bergman is interested. The list of pieces from the operetta is placed foremost in the draft, and preceded by an exhortation from the director to his readers: 'Listen to the music! It has the lead role and it is the reason we are making this film'. He even suggests that the reader of the manuscript — the potential producer, perhaps — should have the relevant music playing in the background while reading. And here, too, Bergman has done his research: he recommends the performance by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Nicolai Gedda and con-

ducted by Lovro von Matačić; Herbert von Karajan's version is too 'florid and scattered', he advises.

If music was to play the lead in Bergman's *Merry Widow*, a riotous eroticism would have had a crucial supporting role. Preserved sketches for the set design by scenographers Ulla Christiansson and Björn Nelstedt are rendered in spidery black ink and embellished with watercolour highlights in rich apple, mauve and bubblegum shades. They hint at a fin-de-siècle aesthetic, highlighting the feathers, frills and stockings of the brothel in which the main character works until she meets her destined spouse. Bergman's screenplay, too, suggests that his *Merry Widow* would have been less innocent than his *Magic Flute*, with one early song being sung by a row of ladies of the night while bent over in flagrante with a group of drunken soldiers.

The official grounds for putting Bergman's *Merry Widow* on ice, at least as communicated in March 1973 by Kenne Fant, the head of the production company Svensk Filmindustri, were galloping inflation in the wake of the oil crisis, and the impossibility of predicting economic developments. But Bergman was still talking to the papers about the project in 1974, with a nod and a wink to the global economic situation. The newspaper *Expressen* ran a series of interviews with filmmakers entitled 'Min drömfilm' (my dream film). When his turn came, Bergman explained that he would choose to film *The Merry Widow*, as long as the newspaper or an 'oil sheikh' would agree to underwrite the twelve million kronor it was going to cost. He fantasised about the cast: with Barbra Streisand still in the title role, Al Pacino, Robert Redford and Danny Kaye would also star, as would, closer to home, Liv Ullmann and Max von Sydow. Bergman's comments to *Expressen* indicate that he had a realist's take on the vagaries of the film industry, at least in a time of international financial crisis. On the other hand, he does wistfully remark in the same interview that he longs for finances not to matter, after chalking up some thirty-five years in the business.

But if this star-studded line-up was too expensive for the imaginary oil sheikh, Bergman had an alternative proposal, he told *Expressen*. He would make a film that consisted only

of one close-up, lasting one hour and forty minutes. It would be the filmic equivalent of every juggler's ambition: to throw a ball into the air and have it stay there, hovering. The audience would leave the cinema convinced that they had seen the world's best film.

The Petrified Prince

What might have been, if not the world's best film, certainly Bergman's only porn film, was *Den förstenade prinsan* (*The Petrified Prince*). This project was abandoned in 1977. Or rather, it was 'buried, having never lived', as the director scrawled on the cover of the typewritten manuscript, complete with crucifix. Nonetheless, a version was adapted for the stage by Joseph Papp Theatre in 1994. The opening sequence in the manuscript indicates that Bergman planned to play both the sex scenes and his status as director for comedic effect. The director opens the film by appearing in front of a curtain. He is immediately interrupted by a cry and the sound of the king and queen of the fictional realm of Slavonia engaged in a 'Homeric' bout of lovemaking. The mirror in which this is framed cracks, the director returns and apologises, and is interrupted again by the insatiable couple, this time punctuated by canon fire. The king dies in flagrante, and the queen, who had been plucked from a life of prostitution by the monarch in a back-story reminiscent of the *Merry Widow*, rejoices at her freedom. The director comments tartly: 'I shall now withdraw — behind the camera, where, during the events that follow, I shall perform a number of unusual spells and banal conjuring tricks. If you look closely, you may glimpse me in a mirror, or perhaps even hanging from the chandeliers'.

Love without Lovers

A comparable meta-cinematic approach to the role of the auteur in his own film can be glimpsed in the screenplay for *Kärlek utan älskare* (*Love without Lovers*). As with other screenplays that had reached the stage of pitching to interested producers, Bergman wrote a preface reflecting on the film's themes, and had the whole document translated into English by his regular translator, Alan Blair. The preface to this particular project includes some delightful ruminations on the filmmaking process, reminiscent of Bergman's precise,

irreverent, light-footed, and utterly cinematic voice as a writer in his various volumes of memoirs:

Filming is a frightful procedure, consisting largely of troubles, disappointments, colds and visits to the toilet. The happy moments — and they are really moments — do not appear to order; they hide in the murkiest corners of the studio or hang like indolent bats under the dusty rafters. (Translated by Alan Blair)

But *Love without Lovers* as a narrative also centres on the persona of the auteur, the materiality of the filmic medium and, above all, the status of the screenplay. Like Bergman's *Persona* (1966), the film was to begin with an apparently arbitrary montage of images: historical footage, pornography, a house burning. It transpires that the images are the remnants of 200,000 metres of footage shot by film director Marco Hoffmann, who has disappeared with the negatives. His editor, Anna Bergman, is attempting to piece together the film, together with the producer, a Dr Kummer. The latter has made seventy-four films and is now busy with a big project, *Love Without Lovers*, a title which he found in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. But Hoffmann has either taken the film's screenplay, or it was never written down in the first place. The story encompasses a love affair, a descent into madness, a political assassination, the tale of Philemon and Baucis, and quasi-autobiographical detail from Ingmar Bergman's own life, obliquely tackling his alleged sympathies for national socialism as a young student in Germany. In the end, Hoffmann reappears and burns the film stock in a huge conflagration, the fire glimpsed in the opening sequence.

Like many unrealised film projects, *Love without Lovers* seems to have lingered on its author's wish-list for several decades. The preface to the manuscript is dated 1978, but the handwritten draft in one of Bergman's typical hardback notebooks is dated 1981. He finally laid the project to rest as late as 1999, writing by hand in Swedish on one of the extant copies:

This manuscript was rejected by three extraordinarily conscientious producers. Their motivations varied, but the general idea was ... to make a film from this material would cost too much. It would be a catastrophe. Suicide. To some extent I agreed with their sorrowful verdicts, and dispatched my manuscript to the section in the archive that deals with unrealisable dreams and visions. So that was that.

The archive, the auteur, and the unfiled film

Arguably, the culture of mourning never-made masterpieces is part and parcel of the construction of the cinematic auteur. The unrealised works of less feted filmmakers — women and minority ethnic directors are cases in point — seldom appear on ‘best of’ blog posts, nor are they preserved in their own well-appointed archives. In this sense, the phenomenon of the unrealised film is both dependent on, and constitutive of, the notion of the auteur. As Bergman’s handwritten farewell to his *Love without Lovers* attests, an auteur’s life’s work inexorably grows into an archive, one that encompasses all manner of materials, not all of them finished films.

If we can get beyond mourning what was never committed to celluloid, and resist asking ‘how would this film have looked?’, then unrealised film projects have much to reveal. They tell us about a director’s working methods, about the limits of creativity, about how and why things go wrong in the pre-production process. They also remind us that the flickering image on the cinema screen is not the be all and end all of a film. Handwritten notes and ring-bound drafts, scenographers’ sketches and test shots, and, above all, the screenplay — these and many other materials constitute the conditions of possibility for a film. Nevertheless, the ontological chasm between words and moving images remains — a chasm which is underscored by this poignant passage in Bergman’s preface to his screenplay for *Love without Lovers*, translated by Alan Blair:

I repeat myself with the obstinacy of a drunk: it is almost hopeless to transform cinematography into words. It becomes indistinct, ambiguous, difficult of interpretation. Actually one should invent a kind of notation. As this notation at present only exists as a remote dream, we must accept the words as unwilling and deceitful helpers.