

## Self-Reflexivity in Strindberg and Bergman

In an essay first published in 1959, Roland Barthes declared that modern literature had become “a mask pointing to itself”.<sup>1</sup> Barthes described this self-reflexivity as an anxious, even tragic condition, a tortured process in which literature divides itself into the two logically distinct, yet inter-related levels of object-language and meta-language. Asking itself continually the single, self-absorbing question of its own identity, literature becomes a meta-language and thereby ceases to be an object-language capable of depicting or describing anything other than itself. “It follows”, Barthes proclaims, that “for over one hundred years our literature has played a dangerous game with its own death, or in other words, with a manner of living through its own death”. Barthes conjectures in passing that this perpetual self-questioning began with the bourgeoisie’s loss of its *bonne conscience*. Literature’s self-reflexive turn has resulted in a variety of fascinating writerly strategies, but has also had the global effect of precluding the emergence of a literature of action and engagement. Ceasing to ask: ‘What is to be done?’, the artist can only utter the words: ‘Who am I?’

Barthes’s dazzling claims provide a useful point of departure because they starkly illuminate one side of artistic reflexivity while casting other aspects of the subject in the darkest shadows. One agrees, of course, that an important vein in modern art has been an anxious reflection on the very being of art—the manifestation of a kind of ‘ontological sickness’, to recall R. D. Laing’s term from *The Divided Self*. Some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, 1964, p. 107.

brilliance of Bergman's characterization of Elisabeth Vogler in *Persona* involves quite precisely a skilful mobilization of this theme, especially if we lend credence to the doctor's speech about the silent performer's motivations. And there is also the film's highly cinematic exemplification of artistic breakdown and disintegration. The film's title means 'mask', and this is certainly a mask that points at itself!

At first glance, then, these and many other aspects of Bergman's oeuvre look precisely like the kind of reflexivity Barthes codifies: incapable of direct social action, the fine arts agonize. Their nervous vitality is that of the ants in the snakeskin. I shall argue in this paper, however, that there is much more to artistic reflexivity than the kind of paradoxical and problematic self-interrogation that Barthes and many other critics have described. I want to distinguish between two different kinds of artistic reflexivity, so as to be in a better position to explore different instances of reflexivity in specific works.

The sort of reflexivity that Barthes characterizes as the very essence of artistic modernity can be labelled 'anti-illusionism'. This is the form of reflexion that emerges directly in response to a loss of faith in art's mimetic or representational capacities and goals. A heightened sense of the opacity and arbitrariness of linguistic and stylistic conventions leads certain artists to invert the mirror and to meditate on what is perceived as the prison house of artistic languages. Yet it is important to note that this depictive and expressive project of self-reflexion also requires a mimetic function. Self-reference is a special case of reference. Thus anti-illusionism typically draws the artist into a paradoxical and self-defeating process of trying to represent the impossibility of representation. All artists are liars, says the artist. The mythological serpent, or snakeskin, attempts to devour itself.

A second sort of reflexivity, one that Barthes and his followers do not tend to stress, can be called 'mimetic or referential reflexivity'. It might not be wholly preposterous to evoke here the idea of a *Shakespearean* reflexivity. 'All the world's a stage' is the guiding idea. The mask points to itself, but in so doing, refers to the many other masks in the world. The artist does not belong to some special category of agonizing beings who are alone doomed to question their own identities. Nor is

self-reflexivity, or speculation over identity, a private, wholly individual process. As the speculation speech in *Troilus and Cressida* has it, the eye does not behold itself, and ‘speculation turns not to itself, til it hath travel’d and is married there / Where it may see itself. . .?’ (III, 3, 105-111). The display of a mask pointing at itself can have a referential function, that of employing artistic devices to depict or evoke aspects of both artistic and other identities. ‘*Persona*’, after all, means both mask and person. The reflexivity of *Persona*, then, expresses something about relations between the artistic figure and other social characters. It suggests ideas about personal identity in general, evoking its relational, mimetic character.

In Bergman’s works, mimetic reflexivity has an essentially ethical character and motivation. Masks can be seductive. Seduction can involve deceit and exploitation. The self-reflexive artist is concerned about his or her place in such an exchange, and wonders whether there is any alternative. The anti-illusionist strategies of the avant-garde provide no simple solution, because even a mask pointing to itself can be seductive and exploitative. And when the mask pointing at itself fails to be seductive, which is so often the case, it is the artist or performer who suffers humiliation. Bergman has referred in this context to an “unsolvable moral conflict” that should be awakened in those occupied with making or selling the film industry’s products.<sup>2</sup>

Here I find a direct link to Strindberg. At least in his pre-Inferno days, Strindberg was acutely interested in the ‘eat or be eaten’ dilemma, but, of course, without always expressing the same ethical concerns with regard to these interpersonal dynamics and conflicts. For the naturalist Strindberg, the artist’s game is suggestion: the actor hypnotizes the public, just as the painter is an enchanter. But in keeping with the views of Max Nordau, which, as Lindström sufficiently documents, Strindberg expressly endorsed, none of this is special to the realm of the arts, since suggestion is also the fabric of all social relations. And it is not always the artist who is the strongest party in these transactions, even

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<sup>2</sup> Bergman, 1954, p. 2.

though masks, deceit, performances, and staging are often the means to victory in 'the great battles'. One thinks here of the illusions employed by the professor in *Tschandala*, where, in a kind of proto-cinematic moment, it is a magic lantern that allows the Aryan professor to prove his superiority over the despised gypsy rival.

An irony here, which I am not sure Strindberg appreciated, is that such a victory hardly manifests the sort of non-reactive force and non-imitative, spontaneous power that a truly Nietzschean hero ought to display. Strindberg, however, seems to have known no such scruples. In *Fordringsägare*, it is Adolf who is supposed to be the artist, but it is Gustav's lies, suggestive stagecraft, and hypnotic behaviour that determine the action in this delusionary fantasy of conjugal revenge.

One of Strindberg's self-reflexive moments in *Fordringsägare* has to do with an artist's choice of a medium. Adolf, we gather, was a painter until his encounter with Gustav, who uses his suggestive powers to convince the fellow that sculpture is the more vital art form. Imitating the forceful suggestions of the stronger man, the artist changes media. Later, at the moment when Gustav wants to undermine and destabilize his rival, he reverses this opinion, forcefully declaring that sculpture is lifeless and out of date. Poor Adolf instantly loses his confidence and abandons the newfound conviction. In this strange conversation over different art forms' mimetic capacities, we have an artist's reflection on art's illusionistic powers, but not in the abstract manner envisioned by Barthes; instead, Strindberg traces a triangular relation in which art's representational capacities are situated within a power struggle between rival persons. The mask points to itself, to the persons who wear it, and to their relations. Or to revert to Shakespeare: "eye to eye opposed salutes each other with each other's form" (*Troilus and Cressida*, III, 3, 107-108). On one reading, of course, not everything Strindberg has to say about these relations is a matter of deep insight. At least according to the play's most salient thematic structures, Gustav, the truly powerful and superior individual, masterfully uses his mimetic skills to destroy the rival who has taken his wife, and to teach the ungrateful, imitative female a lesson about her inferiority. So in this case, the work's extensive mimetic reflexivity does not involve any special veracity, but it certainly

does give the play its venom, especially if we map the fictional relationships back onto the marital dramas in which Strindberg himself had been engaged. Mimetic reflexivity has, quite typically, a different function in Bergman, partly because he tends to reflect upon, rather than indulge in, fantasies of humiliation and revenge.

I turn now to another aspect of artistic self-reflexivity that tends to be overlooked in formalist accounts inspired by anti-illusionist preoccupations. The wrong view, I have suggested, is the idea that reflexivity necessarily involves a turning away from the medium's referential, assertive, and ultimately, communicative powers. Instead, I have suggested, mimetic reflexivity is at once expressive and communicative, and can even involve the conveyance of valuable insights. It is also creative, in ways that are not always noticed. This is the case in part because one of the means by which an artist can engage in self-reflexivity is to produce a work of fiction in which another work is embedded or depicted. The work within the work, far from being a paradoxical and sterile impasse of art feeding on itself, is a complex and fertile *topos*, partly because of the many different possible referential and thematic relations that may be developed between embedded and embedding works. The embedded work can help to express views about the embedding work, and indeed, about mimetic patterns in general; at the same time, the embedding work provides a context for our interpretations of the works embedded.

In some instances, the work embedded in another work is an actual work of art that is in whole or in part presented and remobilized in a new context. This is a kind of artistic reflexivity in which one artist comments on another work, sometimes in order to explore his or her own artistic and cultural identity. Bergman's enchanting depiction of a fragment of a performance of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in *Vargtimmen* is a noteworthy example. The world of Johan Borg, we are led to reflect, is the world of Tamino in reverse. In other cases, reflexivity is achieved by means of an embedding in which the work within the work has no existence prior to the creation of the embedding work.

I want now to take a slightly closer look at an example of this sort of mimetic reflexivity in Bergman, namely, *Gycklarnas afton*. People often

overlook or forget the fact that this film actually has a subtitle: *Skillingstryck på film av Ingmar Bergman*. By means of this subtitle, Bergman self-reflexively situates his work as deriving from a specific popular tradition of penny songs. The mask points to itself at the outset, but not in the purely anti-illusionistic mode of avant-garde formalism. Instead, one may read this subtitle as initiating the film's thematic exploration of relations between high and low cultural performances, and their rivalrous, problematic relation to each other and to the public they must struggle to attract and seduce. This thematic is stressed throughout the film's story, where the denizens of established bourgeois drama and the nomadic circus performers (a metaphor for the film makers, of course) meet and compete. Bergman's depiction of this process focuses on the power relations involved in the cultural hierarchy, but ultimately stresses the similarities rather than the differences between the various performers. One of his central devices in this regard is the performance within the work, a key issue being the blurred boundary between genuine action and the imitations and mimicry that are supposedly special to the artist's identity. An example is the scene in which the circus performer Anna visits the theatre and is enthralled by Frans's seductive rehearsal. What is this play that we see Frans rehearsing in the film? We of course never see the whole play, but if we have sharp eyes we can read the play's title on the playbill, briefly visible in the background of a shot depicting Anna and Albert at the door of the theatre: *Förräderiet: den gale grevinde*. I strongly suspect, but cannot prove, that this play within the film is a creation of Bergman's, a little fragment of third-rate 19th-century drama he must have greatly enjoyed concocting. Embedded in a cinematic work, Frans's overblown dramatics cannot help but seem false and artificial. The language and gestures are hopelessly pretentious. And compared to the kinds of depictive effects of which the film medium is capable, the dramatic devices, especially the attempt at portentous claps of thunder, are just laughable, even though neither Frans nor Anna thinks so.

With his own viewer's likely response firmly in place, Bergman can develop an easy and sharp contrast with Anna's naive, emotional response. She is taken in, we are not. And she ought not to be deceived.

Frans's play-acting and deceit are endless, and he goes on acting well after the scene is over, even though he does not seem to know she is watching. Frans is the perfect hypocrite, the deceptive and exploitative seducer. Anna is his victim, like the other poor, bedraggled circus people are victims. But we must not stop here. Were we to accept such clearcut and stable moral hierarchies, this film would function as a film maker's fantasy of revenge, or at least as some sort of momentary revolt against a cultural and artistic hierarchy. See what villains these pompous, established theatre people are! Yet Bergman's self-reflexivity in this film is more subtle than that. The circus people are, we have seen, anything but angels, and Bergman has already shown us that they betray, seduce, and deceive each other as well. Everyone participates in Frosty's humiliation on the beach, and he will be involved just as soon as it is someone else's turn. Consider as well the implicit parallel between the work's two suicide scenes. It is a mistake, we have observed, for Anna to be swayed by Frans's pretended suicide. He seduces, uses, and insults her, and she, not he, is the victim of love. Later in the film, the circus director Albert sits before a mirror and raises a pistol to his head. Anna has betrayed him, just as he betrayed her. The circus life is a disaster, a constant humiliation, and efforts to retreat to life in town have ended in failure. Should we be moved by his torment? Or is this just the moment when Bergman is in danger of manipulating the emotions of his own viewers? If *Gycklarnas afton* is just a penny romance--as the title of the film announced--perhaps we should maintain our emotional distance from all of this, especially insofar as strong emotional responses are based on illusory differences between the moral merits of the characters in the drama. So here we have artistic self-reflexivity coupled with the expression of a moral theme: no one, especially not the actors, has any monopoly on play-acting and deceit; if the artist carries through the self-reflexive interrogation concerning his or own identity, the answer ought not to be, "a unique creature of mimetic illusion", but rather, just another *persona* amongst the others, that is, one of all the many who strut and fret and then are heard no more.

I have not proposed a strict definition of self-reflexivity in art, but it should be clear from my remarks that I favour a broad rather than a

narrow approach to this problem. Works can, I think, be self-reflexive in subtle and indirect ways, as well as in the more overt and blatant manner. Whenever the artist has put something in the work that is intended to get the audience to recognize that this very feature is meant to prompt them to think about the work *qua* work of art, we have a moment of artistic reflexivity. Sometimes the referential link is quite indirect, and its recognition depends on complicated background knowledge shared by the artist and audience. For example, Bergman is not literally a circus performer, but his various fictional depictions of clowns and other circus folk do serve a self-reflexive function, as is often the case in the history of modern art, where, as has been ably documented by Jean Starobinski, the *portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* has been a privileged motif. I think it important to add that it is a mistake to assume that self-reflexivity serves any one role or function. Anti-illusionism and distanciation are just one possible function, and in this essay I have tried to identify others. As I do not believe in a recipe for artistic value, I am not trying to argue that self-reflexivity, in any of its forms, necessarily contributes to the value of a work, and indeed, in some cases, self-reflexivity does just the opposite. I do think that anti-illusionist forms of reflexivity have tended to draw certain artists into a sterile impasse, and thus I think it worthwhile to draw attention to other, more fertile kinds of self-reflexivity, including the mimetic variety that Bergman has so ably developed. Referring, directly or indirectly to the artist's identity and social relations, Bergman has articulated a form of reflexivity that is, while introspective, also external and expansive. His reflexivity has been at once articulate and frequently insightful, and has helped to make his oeuvre one of the most important contributions to 20th-century art.



## References

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