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Losing Something in Translation

By Andrew Sarris

THE SERPENT'S EGG. Directed and written by Ingmar Bergman. Produced by Dino De Laurentiis. Released by Paramount Pictures.

A NIGHT FULL OF RAIN. Directed and written by Lina Wertmüller. Produced by Gil Shiva. Released by Warner Brothers.

Ingmar Bergman and Lina Wertmüller have come a cropper with their latest films, and, by an interesting coincidence, both efforts have been rendered in English rather than in the customary Swedish and Italian respectively. This disastrous breaking of the language barrier raises the old question of whether art-house deities are actually corrupted by attempting to communicate in the English language or are simply exposed. Back in the bad old days when foreign artists were lured to Hollywood by filthy lucre, it was fashionable to say that Hollywood had "ruined" them. Hence, the very considerable achievements in America of Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, Max Ophüls, Jean Renoir, and many others were given undeservedly short shrift. For their part, defenders of the American cinema have argued that foreign films are overrated simply because their dialogue does not have to pass muster in a strange tongue. Actually, people merely listen to American movies as if they were illustrated radio scripts but they really look at foreign films, and can thus rhapsodize over the "visuals," marred every so slightly by discreet subtitles at the bottom of the frame. There is also the familiar snobbery of the exotic, the esoteric, and the unknown, a snobbery clinically designated in New York as the Russian Tea Room syndrome.

For most of my critical career I have tried to steer a middle course between Hollywood xenophobia and New York xenophilia. I have liked many foreign films but I have always left a margin in my critiques for further research. As much as I admire and revere Kenji Mizoguchi's

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Ugetsu, I can never write as authoritatively about it and all its cultural components as I can about Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. This does not stop me from reviewing Mizoguchi or other foreign directors, but it does prevent me from allowing my relative familiarity with American culture to breed contempt for American movies.

As far as Bergman and Wertmüller are concerned, I would say that the former has less to prove in English, or any other language, than the latter. Bergman already made the jump into English with *The Touch*, a movie that impressed me much more than it did most people. Language was not the big problem there, since what most people couldn't stomach was Elliott Gould's presumptuousness in joining Bergman's Swedish stock company and proceeding to manhandle the exquisite Bibi Andersson. What chutzpah!

By contrast, the casting of *The Serpent's Egg* should not, in and of itself, have caused any insurmountable problems. David Carradine has the right "look" with which to relate to Liv Ullmann, particularly in the alienated world of 1923 Berlin in which Nazism is being hatched out of poverty, paranoia, decadence, inflation, and bigotry. What seems to have gone wrong, instead, is Bergman's very oblique strategy in dealing with the currently fashionable subject of embryonic evil culminating in Hitler and the Holocaust. Despite every temptation to be entertainingly decadent, *The Serpent's Egg* is one of the least sensual Bergman films, even with Liv Ullmann doing the Dietrich *Blue Angel* bit with garters and gaucherie. Bergman seems content to reduce the Weimar atmosphere to scattered signs and portents without fleshing them out, and this seems doubly strange when one recalls the sub-

lime fleshiness of *The Night of the Clowns* and *The Silence*.

It may be that Bergman cannot relate either to his characters or to their supposed milieu simply because he is too preoccupied with his own problems of dislocation and readjustment. His very abstract, stylized narrative full of mazes and shock tableaux may refer as much to a director's troubles with the tax authorities as to a society's torment. The odd mixture of Franz Kafka and Fritz Lang in the scenario does not seem to correspond to Bergman's greatest strengths as an artist. Only in an early sequence in which a suicide is revealed by an opening door does Bergman reveal his genius in rendering the most desperate feelings in the most eloquent images. For the rest, he seems to wander in a daze among his incoherent and unresolved characters. He seems particularly tentative about the Jewish question, dropping all sorts of heavy hints but always pulling back before the temptation of banality becomes irresistible. Bergman has abandoned the island of his mind only to sink into the wasteland of history. Up to now his characters have always occupied the foreground so strongly and so clearly that the sketchy outlines of the social background could be understood as hallucinatory impressions. In *The Serpent's Egg*, the characters are thrust into the background of an unfocused nightmare, the design of which is more complicated than compelling.