

INGMAR BERGMAN'S
**THE
SERPENT'S
EGG**





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THE SERPENT'S EGG

CAST

Liv Ullmann Manuela Rosenberg
David Carradine Abel Rosenberg
Gert Fröbe Inspector Bauer
Heinz Bennent Hans Vergerus
Fritz Strassner Dr. Soltermann
Hans Quest Dr. Silbermann
Edith Heerdegen Mrs. Holle
James Whitmore The priest
Glynn Turman Monroe

CREW

Directed by **Ingmar Bergman**
Produced by **Dino De Laurentiis**
Executive Producer **Horst Wenlandt**
Music **Rolf Wilhelm**
Director of Photography **Sven Nykvist A.s.c.**
Production Designer **Rolf Zehetbauer**
Costume Designer **Charlotte Flemming**
Production Executive **Harold Nebenzal**
Casting Director **Irmí Kelpinski**
Assistant Director **Wieland Liebske**
Music **Rolf Wilhelm**
Choreography **Heino Hallhuber**
Production Manager **Georg Föcking**
Unit Managers **Rudolf Geiger, Franz Achter**
Editor **Jutta Hering**
Sound **Karsten Ullrich**







THE SERPENT'S EGG

by Geoffrey Macnab

"Man is an abyss and I turn giddy when I look down into it," Ingmar Bergman writes in the preface to his screenplay for *The Serpent's Egg* (1977). This is one of the most intriguing and neglected films in the Bergman canon. It's among his most personal projects and yet is also one of his most expensive – a big budget, English-language feature made far away from home in Germany (where he was briefly a tax exile) and produced by Dino De Laurentiis.

The film opens with eerie, sepia-tinted, slow motion footage of a crowd. These are typical German citizens, no better or worse than anyone else, but (Bergman goes on to tell us), they harbour the potential for immense evil.

"The scene is Berlin, the evening of Saturday November 3rd, 1923. A packet of cigarettes costs 4 billion marks and almost everyone has lost faith in both the future and the present," a whispered voice sets up the drama.

It was a grim period in the city's history. Look at the records and you discover that the Reichsbank had issued a 100 trillion-mark banknote the day before. "A mob of poor and unemployed Berliners stormed the Grenadierstrasse and attacked Jews that they blamed for the high prices of food," the newspapers reported in this period. Adolf Hitler was preparing his beer hall *putsch*. Bergman brings us in at the nadir of Weimar Germany, when inflation is running rampant, suicides are commonplace and political discontent is simmering away very dangerously. We are in a Berlin where the rain never stops and fear "rises like vapour from the cobblestones". Everyone "bears it like a nerve poison", Bergman suggests in one part of the voiceover, conjuring up images of the First World War trenches.

The vision of Hitler here is of the devil in waiting. That, of course, is not how Bergman regarded him when he spent a summer holiday as a teenager with a Nazi-supporting family in Germany in the 1930s. He heard Hitler speak at a rally. His own uncle was a Swedish fascist, founder of the Swedish National Socialist Party.



One of Bergman's most startling traits is his extreme honesty. Other prominent cultural figures (notably Günter Grass) were coy and evasive about their entanglement with the Third Reich. Bergman, true to form, was completely open. "For many years, I was on Hitler's side, delighted by his successes and saddened by his defeats," he writes in his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, as if the Nazi party was the equivalent of a favourite football team.

Alongside his honesty, Bergman was also prey to remorse. It is tempting to see *The Serpent's Egg* as an attempt to atone for guilt about his childhood naiveté – and his occasional moments of cowardice. (He once stood by as Nazi-sympathising thugs painted Swastikas on the summer house of a Jewish director who lived close to his family.) When he did finally learn about and accept what had happened in the Holocaust, he was utterly devastated.

The main character in *The Serpent's Egg* is Abel Rosenberg (David Carradine), a circus performer who, like almost everybody else in the Berlin of the time, has fallen on hard times.

Carradine was an intriguing choice to play Abel. With his stony, lugubrious face, the American actor (who had been starring in Kung Fu on American TV and had played radical folksinger Woody Guthrie in *Bound for Glory*) has more than a passing resemblance to the great silent comedian, Buster Keaton. He looks so serious that you half-guess he must be a clown or trapeze artist. He was also a bankable American name who had the same gravitas and screen presence as Bergman regulars like Max von Sydow and Erland Josephson. Bergman had considered other, bigger stars, among them Robert Redford (who politely declined on the grounds that he didn't see himself as a Jewish circus performer), *Columbo's* Peter Falk and even hell-raising Irish actor Richard Harris (who had contracted pneumonia and therefore had to drop out of the running.) Carradine seemed a satisfactory alternative, even if Bergman found him on their initial meeting to be "absent-minded and a bit strange".¹

As the film starts, Abel is at a loose end, drinking too much and wandering around a city where menace seems to lurk everywhere. *The Serpent's Egg* was made a year or two after *Cabaret* and has some overlaps with Bob Fosse's celebrated Oscar® winner. Its costume designer, Charlotte Flemming, also worked on *Cabaret*, and its main female character, Manuela (Liv Ullmann), has a hint of *Cabaret's* Sally Bowles about her. She is a performer who is eking out a living in Berlin's more disreputable nightclubs. She is married to Abel's brother, Max, who, as we quickly discover, has just blown out his brains. His suicide brings

¹ - Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994)

the burly police inspector, Bauer (Gert Fröbe, the villain from the James Bond movie *Goldfinger*), into the story.

One image stuck in the director's mind when he was writing *The Serpent's Egg* and it is hard to forget when you see it. The Berliners are so hungry that, at one stage, we see them devouring the flesh of a dead horse. A woman takes some of the beast's bloody flesh and presents it to Abel, as if it is a votive offering.

It should be noted at the outset that *The Serpent's Egg* is highly stylised. It was shot in a studio in Munich and offers us Bergman's expressionist and often horrific vision of Berlin rather than a realistic representation of the city. The Berlin Bergman shows is nothing like the seething, lively place film lovers will know from silent classics like Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) or *People on Sunday* (1930), the delightful movie made about the metropolis by Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer with a screenplay by Billy Wilder and with Fred Zinnemann as assistant cinematographer. Bergman's Berlin is strangely empty. It has that same haunting, surrealistic quality as the city the old professor wanders through in his dream at the start of *Wild Strawberries*.

The Swedish director can't entirely avoid slipping into caricature. Some of the more grotesque figures here could have stepped out of one of artist George Grosz's drawings or paintings from the period. Bergman is very keen to show the desperate hedonism of the Berliners, cross-dressing and performing or watching obscene routines as they try to distract themselves from the misery around them. The violence is frighteningly real. Abel can't help but notice fellow Jews being forced to clean the streets. In one scene, militia raid the nightclub and casually beat its proprietor's head to a near pulp. Bergman also throws in sly references to some of his own previous films. For example, early on, we see Abel peering down at the street from a high window. He notices a couple pulling a wagon which holds all their worldly possessions. They look not so different from the husband and wife stripped of all the trappings of civilisation and reduced to penury at the end of *Shame*.

Abel and Manuela are thrown together. They become a couple by default. Abel has the money – the precious dollars – that Max earned through secret work. Manuela herself has a mysterious new job. She claims it is with a society for "church democracy". In fact, we discover, she is working at a high-class brothel.

The Serpent's Egg boasts one of the most unctuous and repulsive villains in all of Bergman's movies. This is Hans Vergerus (played in memorably creepy fashion by Heinz Bennent, a



well-known German actor whose son, David, was the child star in an equally unsettling film set in the Nazi period, Volker Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum*).

Vergerus is one of those names that recur in Bergman's films. It is also the surname of the sadistic bishop in *Fanny and Alexander*. Here, he is a shadowy figure with a hint of Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse about him. Bergman's screenplay stretches credibility by suggesting this fiendish professor first met Abel when both were still children. They used to spend summers in Amalfi together. This is where Abel's mother used to come because of her lungs. She didn't like little Hans Vergerus at all. Back in those days, Vergerus would cut open still-living cats so that he could show Abel how their hearts continued to beat. As an adult, his experiments have become far more fiendish than that. He behaves like a 1920s incarnation of Josef Mengele.

Bergman is paying lip service to the idea of the detective mystery. A series of killings have been taking place around town. Abel always seems to be in the vicinity and so is naturally regarded as a suspect. The crime story, though, is strictly secondary. The director's real interest is investigating the roots of evil, both in the abstract and in a frighteningly real way. His question here is how the anonymous citizens we see walking the streets in haunting slow motion at the start and end of the film usher in the Nazi regime. The title of the film is explained late on. Through the thin membrane of the serpent's egg, you can already discern the reptile beneath – and it is already perfectly formed. In other words, the evil exists in nascent form all around Abel Rosenberg, even if it will take another 12 years for Hitler to become Chancellor.

Bergman had come to Germany because of his well-publicised run-in with the Swedish authorities over his tax affairs. "I was able to negotiate a sizeable director's fee since I, for the moment, was a 'bankable' name," he later wrote.² However, this was a deeply personal project, not something he was working on as a director for hire. He was passionate about the film. It didn't garner the reception he had hoped for. "*The Serpent's Egg* is the darkest, most barren Bergman film since *Shame*, and the windiest, most banal since *The Touch*, full of dark portents that he treats as if they were his privileged information, as if they hadn't been in the public domain for nearly four decades," Vincent Canby wrote in the *New York Times*. He called it "dispossessed Bergman, Bergman in exile". In Canby's eyes, and those of many other critics, the Bergman working outside Sweden was a weakened, fatally uprooted figure.

2 - Ibid.

Other critics were much kinder but, of course, Bergman didn't pay attention to them. He accepted Canby's verdict that the film was a failure. He took it, at least, as a very useful "learning experience". His subsequent film in Germany, *From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980), was one of his best – and one of his most underrated. On that film, though, he was working in the German language, with German actors. Inevitably, *The Serpent's Egg* (which was his 40th feature) suffered from being shot in English with a cast drawn from the US, Sweden and Germany. Nonetheless, it is a film ripe for rediscovery. It is one of his most chilling and despairing works. Strangely, although being shot so far from home, it is also one of his most personal films. He clearly identified with Abel, the man who stands by and doesn't intervene when the Nazi thugs unleash their violence in front of him. Like Abel, Bergman initially didn't recognise the evil and depravity around him. When he finally realised just how noxious the Nazis and their regime were, his dismay was matched only by his guilt.

Geoffrey Macnab writes on film for The Guardian, The Independent, and Screen International. He is the author of several books, including Ingmar Bergman: The Life and Films of the Last Great European Director (2009).

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ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Serpent's Egg is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with 2.0 Mono sound.
The HD master was provided by MGM.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Kevin Lambert

Executive Producer Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

QC Alan Simmons

Authoring & Subtitling The Engine House Media Services

Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Elijah Drenner, Torben Thorup Jørgensen, Morten Korsgaard,
Michael Mackenzie, Geoffrey Macnab, Anthony Nield, James Plumb, Jack Whiting



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