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Bauman and Bergman: A Short Note*

Abstract: The influence on sociologists of texts by others is widely accepted and a standard line of investigation. However if books can be an influence it is not unreasonable to assume that other cultural products might be significant too in the formation of a sociologist. This Note addresses the possibility by exploring some of the possible meanings of a passing comment once made by Zygmunt Bauman. In conversation with the present author Bauman once said that Ingmar Bergman's film *Winter Light* is important to him. This short Note attempts to work out why, and it focuses on the theme of vocation. It is crucial to stress that this Note was inspired by Bauman's comment but works entirely at the level of publicly available texts. It is not to be assumed that Bauman would personally agree with this explanation.

Keywords: Bauman, Bergman, Culture, Film, Vocation.

For many years before she was forced into exile with Zygmunt and their children in 1968, Janina Bauman worked in the Polish film industry. In some ways it must have been a dream job because, as Janina Bauman said in the second volume of her autobiographical writing, *A Dream of Belonging*, 'more than anything else, we were fond of films, and I was quite happy to spend all evening in the cinema after having seen three or four films during the day' (J. Bauman 1988: 67). Maybe Zygmunt was happier than Janina to sit in the cinema. She said he was 'an even greater film enthusiast than myself' (J. Bauman 1988: 65).

Evidence of Zygmunt Bauman's enthusiasm is scattered through his writing. The most sustained trace is in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, where Bauman shows a deep and perhaps slightly surprising knowledge of *The Omen* and *The Exorcist* (Bauman 1991: 238–245). A couple of years later *Life in Fragments* discusses Coline Serreau's movie *La Crise* (Bauman 1995: 270), and *Liquid Modernity* draws on *Elizabeth* to talk about the relationship between self-identity and mass consumer products (Bauman 2000: 84). *Liquid Love* uses Wajda's *Korczak* and Spielberg's *Schindler's List* to illustrate a point about the meaning of humanity (Bauman 2003: 81–85). The French director Robert Bresson is mentioned in one of the conversations with Citlali Ravirosa-Madrazo making up *Living on Borrowed Time* (Bauman & Ravirosa-Madrazo 2010: 158), and along with Bresson the Dardennes brothers appear in the *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World* (Bauman 2010: 153–156). *What Use is Sociology?* shows a deep engagement with the films of Michael Haneke (Bauman, Jacobsen & Tester

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2013: 63–65). Meanwhile, *Thinking Sociologically* uses the end credits of a film as a rather neat way of illustrating the role of classification in the construction of ordered social life, and of furthermore making a point about how some people involved in the production process are unnamed, consigned to invisibility (Bauman 1990: 179). Given how Bauman has always sought inspiration from a wide range of cultural resources, without care about what academic boundaries might establish as legitimate or not (Beilharz 2000), it is scarcely surprising that films have been useful for the development of his sociological imagination.

When asked what his ‘desert island’ book would be Bauman chose a short story by Borges, ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ (Bauman & Tester 2001: 24). The shadow of the Borges story haunts Bauman’s work. It explores the tension between the straight-line pursuits of instrumentality in which time is about ‘what happens next’, and the human potential to create ‘diverse futures, diverse times which themselves proliferate and fork’ (Borges 1970: 51). The story is a meditation on how, despite the demands of this world, the future might be rescued from predetermination. This is precisely the charge of Bauman’s definition of culture as ‘a knife pressed against the future’ cutting into erstwhile necessity naturalised as ‘common sense’. For Bauman culture is like a knife refuting the apprehension of society as an independent object permitting of no alternatives to ‘what must be done’ (Bauman 1973).

Yet only to ask about a desert island *book* reflects a latent assumption about the primacy of reading pages over reading other kinds of texts in the development of a writer. The influence of films for the formation of Bauman’s thought has been left unexplored. What might Bauman’s desert island movies be? In the course of preparing *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Bauman & Tester 2001) many anecdotes emerged but one has continued to provoke, inviting further investigation. Bauman identified Ingmar Bergman’s *Winter Light* as a film of particular importance to him.²

Bergman’s *Winter Light* was released in 1962. It was made after 1961’s *Through a Glass Darkly*, and was followed in 1963 by *The Silence*. (The film scripts were published in a single volume as Bergman 1969). They are often seen as a trilogy about faith, thanks to a statement Bergman once made about the connections between them. However he subsequently moved away from this family resemblance. He said it, ‘was a *Schnaps-Idee*, as the Bavarians say, meaning that it’s an idea found at the bottom of a glass of alcohol’ (Bergman 1995: 245). Yet Bergman never doubted one thing about the films. Or at least he never doubted one thing about the middle part of the erstwhile trilogy. He was quite clear and consistent in his praise of *Winter Light*. In 1966 he said the film was the only one he had managed to make how he wanted to make it. In 1971 the point was repeated: ‘I think I have made just one picture that I really like, and that was *Winter Light*... That is my only picture about which I feel that I have started here and ended there and that everything along the way has obeyed me’ (Bergman in Shargel 2007: 75). Although Bergman rarely watched his own films,

² This note is my interpretation of why *Winter Light* is important to Bauman. I do not know—neither have I asked—whether or not Bauman agrees with me. In other words, beyond the initial anecdote which stimulated these reflections, the paper operates entirely at the level of the reading of publicly available texts. It makes absolutely no claim to privileged knowledge.

he said that seeing *Winter Light* was 'satisfying' because, 'nothing in it has eroded or broken down' (Bergman 1994: 257).

The narrative of the film can be outlined fairly straightforwardly. *Winter Light* tells of a day in the life of Tomas Ericsson, a sickly pastor who goes through the motions of holding communion for an ever-decreasing congregation. Since the death of his wife he has closed in on himself, and has become incapable of communication. Tomas's inability to understand the fears of one of his communicants leads to the parishioner's suicide, and he treats Märta, the woman who loves him and with whom he has fairly recently lived, cruelly. Tomas is a man who has put up barriers between himself and the world. More than just sickly, he is pretty much dead. Bergman said Tomas, 'is dying emotionally. He exists beyond love, actually beyond all human relations... His hell, because he truly lives in hell, is that he recognizes his situation' (Bergman 1994: 265). However, simply on account of her refusal to turn away from Tomas Märta manages to get through the barriers. Tomas asks her to accompany him as he travels to give another service; Märta drives the car. She is the only person in the congregation for this second service. Despite the temptation to cancel Tomas goes ahead after encouragement from the verger, Algot. The film ends with an extraordinary shot, in which Tomas recites the first words of the service in front of an empty church, and it appears as if his face almost *vibrates* with a new found life, albeit a life cautious, disturbing and maybe unwelcome. He has let love in and been cured of his sickness unto death (the allusion to Kierkegaard is quite deliberate: Kierkegaard 1989). With this ending, *Winter Light* implies a recapitulation of the announcement at the end of *Through a Glass Darkly* that 'God is love'.

It would be foolish to deny the theological weight of Bergman's film. If God is love, if Tomas Ericsson is resurrected by love, then it is a short step to the assertion that as a pastor Tomas is brought back to life through the grace of God. But Bergman is too subtle to be so simply didactic: 'If one has religious faith, one could say that God has spoken to him. If one does not believe in God, one might prefer to say that Märta Lundberg and Algot Frövik are two people who help raise a fellow human being who has fallen and is digging his own grave' (Bergman 1994: 271). Consequently, Bergman opens the space for an approach to *Winter Light* which would interpret it as a story about how the love extended to us by the other, how the love they give regardless of the costs to themselves, is essential to our own capacity to live. By this reading *Winter Light* is a film about love as redemption, love as ethics.

Bergman summed up the position in a way which is not too far from the temper, if not indeed the normative assumptions, of Bauman's work on love: 'What matters most of all in life is being able to make that contact with another human. Otherwise you are dead, like so many people today are dead'. He went on: 'But if you can take that first step toward communication, toward understanding, toward love, then no matter how difficult the future may be—and have no illusions, even with all the love in the world, living can be hellishly difficult—then you are saved. This is all that really matters, isn't it?' (Bergman in Shargel 2007: 46).

Bauman might not go so far as to identify redemption through love as *all* that matters, but he most certainly agrees that without it existence can scarcely be called

life. For him love is the pre-eminent form of being for the other without self-interest. For Bauman love is of the essence of being human and of human being (Bauman 2003). And yet—truth to tell—if this is the sole charge of *Winter Light* it is not too original. If the film is just making a point about love being the prerequisite of the humanity of the other and the self alike regardless of self-interest, it is saying something Bauman could easily have got from elsewhere. Furthermore, Bergman's film was released in 1962 when Bauman's sociological radar was not attuned to questions of love or ethics. (Bauman's sociological interests around 1962 are explored in Tester and Jacobsen 2005). So the charge of Bergman's film either was extraordinarily long-burning or there must be something else about *Winter Light*, some other drama, speaking directly to Bauman's sociological imagination. The clue to the other drama, the drama which traces through to Bauman, is provided by an anecdote Bergman gave about the background to *Winter Light*.

One day, when the film was ready to shoot except for its lack of an ending, Ingmar Bergman invited his father, who was a Lutheran pastor, to accompany him on a Sunday tour of some country churches. They arrived at one church where there was a congregation of four people, the minister nowhere to be seen. Eventually, to the screech of car tyres outside, the minister rushed into the church. He turned to the congregation, told them he was ill and therefore would only give a short service, one without communion. Bergman's father was outraged. He went to the vestry, had words with the minister and churchwarden and took the service—with communion—himself. Bergman summed up the meaning of this little story: 'Thus I was given the end of *Winter Light* and the codification of a rule I have always followed and was to follow from then on: *irrespective of everything, you will hold your communion.*' (Bergman 1988: 273)

What Bergman took from his father and fed into the end of *Winter Light* was an emphasis on *vocation* as a calling to do what one is appointed to do. In theological terms the appointment is made by God. The Lutheran tradition upheld by Bergman's father and indeed by Tomas Ericsson defines vocation through the prism of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where it is written: 'But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk' (1 Corinthians 7: 17) and 'Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called' (1 Corinthians 7: 20). According to the lessons of Corinthians, Tomas Ericsson has been called to be a pastor by God, and therefore he is obliged to uphold this vocation. Indeed, to deny the calling is also to deny oneself, a denial which is, by a theological reading of *Winter Light*, the cause of Tomas Ericsson's illness. Put another way, the acceptance of the call to vocation is a kind of salvation.

Sociologists are familiar with the theological concepts of vocation and calling because Max Weber made them central to his analysis of the Protestant Ethic. According to Weber the idea of the calling, which gave emergent capitalism an ethical legitimacy, has come to be stripped of any salvational aspect. As he famously put it, the world created by the workers of the calling has become a cage (Weber 1920). But towards the end of his life Weber hinted that maybe a vocation could still be pursued if it was identified as response to an inner calling rather than a supernatural one. When Weber

identified politics and science as vocations he gave them both a salvific dimension. They can save the self from the chill winds of the worlds of power and disenchantment. Vocations put iron in the soul. For instance: 'Only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say "In spite of all!" has the calling for politics' (Weber 1921: 450. Quoted here from Gerth & Mills 1948: 128). Meanwhile science as a vocation offers a chance to stand firm against the very world science has produced. As Weber famously said science cannot answer questions of meaning, but to embrace the absence of meaning is, in a paradox worthy of Camus on suicide, itself a kind of meaning. Science as a vocation is a way of coming to terms with 'the fate of the times like a man' (Weber 1922: 555. Quoted here from Gerth & Mills 1948: 155).

A similar temperament runs through the nearest thing Bauman has ever made to a sustained argument for sociology as a vocation. In his Inaugural Lecture at the University of Leeds, Bauman identified sociology as a discipline dialectically—and difficultly—placed between art and science. From science it took the commitment to reason, and from art the commitment to human creativity and the explosion of apprehensions of 'what must be'. Consequently, the conflict of contemporary life runs through sociology itself, threatening it with dissolution. On the one hand reason can crush the human, and on the other human creativity can deny reason. It is the Borgesian dialectic. Both alternatives point to a kind of meaninglessness if they are not pulled together. In this way Bauman identified a chance for the salvation of the promise of each. It can be achieved through the calling of sociology to occupy the middle ground between reason and creativity. A long quotation makes the point very clearly. Using terminology which is extremely anachronistic given his subsequent work, but outlining a position from which he has never substantially departed, Bauman said:

In this critical turning point in the history of civilization, sociology, the one area of human intellectual endeavour which can bridge the gap between cultural and natural, subjective and objective, art and science, has a crucially important function to perform. It must strive to re-marry masses and reason, human life and rationality, humanity and efficiency—the couples whom modern civilization separated and whose divorce the learned priests of this civilization have sanctified (Bauman 1972: 202).

He said, 'our vocation, after all these unromantic years, may become again a test-field of courage, consistency, and loyalty to human values' (Bauman 1972: 203). Bauman's position was one stressing how sociology as a vocation may become a way of withstanding science evacuating all values from the world, and the fashions of unmoored creativity destroying everything reason has bequeathed to it. It is about the embrace of possibility whilst knowing that possibilities can only be glimpsed in the circumstances of their evident impossibility. Leszek Kołakowski once put the conundrum very neatly, albeit in a different context, when he announced: 'the impossible at a given moment can become possible only by being stated at a time when it is impossible' (Kołakowski 1969: 92). Consequently this is no escape from the world; rather it is confrontation with it. For the sociologist this means a determination to stand in the middle which is ambivalently situated between the necessary and the possible,

withstanding assault from all directions, yet saved by a sense of vocation making him or her do it again and again.

Indeed the vocation needs to be reaffirmed continuously. As Bauman said when talking about his teachers, Stanisław Ossowski and Julian Hochfeld: ‘What I learned from them was that sociology has no other—and cannot have any other—sense... than of an ongoing commentary on human “lived experience,” as transient and obsessively self-updating as that experience itself’ (Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 20). The work consequently never ceases, one’s understanding is never complete, and one must have the humility to return day after day. Similarly Bergman said one must always hold one’s communion. It is not enough to have held communion once or, indeed, to refuse to hold it because of more personal considerations. It is not good enough to have held communion *yesterday* because today requires its own actions. Tomas Ericsson held communion regardless of his illness and was saved, and a parallel theme can be found in Bauman. Vocations, he said, are not a ‘one-off feat. Vocations, unlike other pastimes, tend to be lifelong’ (Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 158). Commitment to a vocation therefore makes it possible for life to be saved from the blasts of transient *experiences* through the iron of cumulative *experience*. Vocation is about Benjamin’s *Erfahrung* and a repudiation of what he called *Erlbenis* (Benjamin 1973). The vocational principle of always holding one’s communion makes it possible for life to be a demanding confrontation with the fate of the times.

It is completely beside the point whether anyone is in the congregation to hear the words to which they are invited to listen. The vocation demands one always holds one’s communion, and if the calling has been upheld today that is as much as it is possible to ask. At least today the vocation has been reasserted and there has been a statement of the possibility of salvation from the times. In this way a commitment has been made to be for the other. Just as a religious service is held for the congregation, a book is written for its readers. Yet whether or not anyone comes to these communions is their decision to make. All Tomas Ericsson and Zygmunt Bauman can do is extend to others the possibility of receiving the communion they continue to offer.

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