

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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CRISES 1946

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Crisis was the first film directed by Ingmar Bergman, when he was only twenty seven years old. It is arguably one of his most interesting early achievements.

The story, recreated by Bergman, is based on a Danish radio play, *The Maternal Instinct*, written by Leck Fischer. While the plot is conventional, by usual standards, the major characters, all five of them, relate to one another in intense intersections, which assure the close attention of the watcher. The conventionality derives from the setting. We find ourselves in a small Swedish town, at a still early period of Swedish modernity, and among folks for whom the contrast between the big city, with all its connotations, and the small town or village sums up the major culture binary of the nation. To our day the village in Iowa, the village in Nigeria, relate to the big city as to a hub of dangers, promises, and possibilities, and Bergman is uniquely positioned to dramatize these lasting historical settings.

STORY

The village The center of the vortex of characters, whose interactions constitute the narrative, is Nelly, an eighteen year old country girl. She is just finding her womanhood, and is very interested in the attention that the men of the village are paying to her. In her village Nelly has for some time been receiving marriage proposals from Ulf, an upstanding, strong, but not very interesting swain.

The big city. Nelly's own small-town idyll was over, and, to put it mildly, she was facing a difficult three-party tensions, among herself, her Mom, and Jack. Nelly's downfall is guaranteed from the time she sets foot in the big city, where she is at sea, in love with her mother's lover, and exposed, naked in bed, to her mother. The three-person love triangle, in the big city, is destined to foment every jealousy possible, among mother and daughter, and, as it turns out most seriously, is destined to destroy the Jack who, as we are coming to realize, is not so much imaginative as mentally unstable.

Return to the village. Inevitably enough Nelly returns to the village where she is once again together with Ingeborg—who is herself delighted to be reunited with her stepdaughter. Back in the village, Nelly, Ingeborg and Ulf are the final vestiges of the five characters who form the nucleus of this film. Nelly continues indifferent to Ulf, in whom she has no interest, and Ingeborg grows increasingly disconsolate as she reflects on the limits of her life, and on her own weakness, in the struggle to help Nelly become as deep a person as she can.

THEMES

Village vs City. The film is pervaded with Bergman's sense of the historical period in which he himself was living, in the early stages of Scandinavian industrial urban society. Jenny finds what small towners expected of the city, some economic opportunity—a hair salon which gives her a chance to spend a little on herself--and a far wider range of immoral exposures than she has ever before imagined.

Guilt. There is much room for guilt, in this drama of responsibility. Jack, we might say, is the wild card in the moral realm of the film. In his way he digs deeply into the human condition is prepared to risk his soul on a taboo love, a simultaneous affair with both mother and daughter. Ingeborg feels guilty that she cannot take total care of her beloved Nelly. Jenny ultimately feels guilt for having walked out on Nelly, and determines to share with her the collateral advantages of owning a beauty salon in the city.

Anxiety. The entire film is built around anxiety. No character is at peace—for Bergman ordinary life is fraught with discomfort and incompleteness. The village elders are perhaps the only group with a definable value system, and a basic security in their interpersonal relations. The only youngster who belongs to his world is Ulf, the village suitor of Nelly, and the fist-fight victor over Jack; and Ulf comes off as a comic reject.

Conflict. The film is founded on conflict from the start, as the whole biography of Nelly is built on her mother's initial decision to leave her, in infancy, with a surrogate mother. The natural order of things is being defied, from the start, and takes its revenge on Jack, who commits the harsh sin of loving both mother and daughter, as well as on Ingeborg, who remains to the end afraid that she has been unfaithful to Nelly.

CHARACTERS

Nelly is a central character, in that she is a definer for the lives and actions of the other characters. She is daughter, step daughter, lover, and pursued; she is many things to others, but has a very restricted life of her own.

Jenny is the woman known for her absence--eighteen years away from her daughter--and then for the loss of her boyfriend, Jack, whose suicide was in the cards, in part because he made himself the lover of both a mother and a daughter.

Jack is a cut up and a playboy, very much after the ladies, but with a touch of psychotic melancholy which makes his bad end predictable. He is arguably the most imaginative and thoughtful figure in the film.

Ingeborg is the faithful stepmother who sees Nelly through the first eighteen years of her life, after her mother has abandoned her. With not long to live, she retires and remains in her small town, after Nelly too has returned. She never comes to peace with the incompleteness of her care for Nelly.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

NELLY.

Character. Nelly, the daughter of Jenny, who has left her behind in the village, eighteen years previously, is a quiet and fairly colorless girl, who chiefly defines herself by her wants and dislikes. She wants to get out of the small town where she has been brought up; a place, we gather from glimpses of a charity ball which will take place there, of old-fashioned pleasures, music and dance and sweeping skirts, and mustachios, and of old fashioned moral values. Nelly could—but doesn't—decide to stay in the small town, until some stable opportunity arises, for getting out into the world. What she does, of course, is to return to the city, and into the living nightmare that life with Jack and Jenny will mean. This return is part of the crisis.

Illustrative moments.

Gleeful. Jack, who has returned to the small town with Nelly's mother, is a self-proclaimed city slicker, full of ideas designed to wake up the country folks, and ready to redesign the Charity Ball for which Jenny has returned. Nelly is fascinated by this change in local practice, and welcomes the thought of the arrival of what, she has only indirectly heard, is her mother's lover.

Cutting loose. Nelly welcomes Jack's precedent-shattering move, to arrange an alternate dance in a ballroom adjacent to the traditional Charity Ball Dance Hall. Nelly jazzes it up on the piano, while Jack strums a thrilling guitar in time to the hot new rhythms at the time invading the provinces of a still fairly remote northern Europe.

Exposure. In the big city Jack comes to Nelly's room, looking for 'love,' but wearing ragged clothes, and of an unkempt appearance which is alarming. He is at the same time muttering about having killed someone. Nelly, suspecting it might be a reference to her mother, nonetheless goes to bed with Jack, only to be awakened when her mother, hale, hearty, and angry, appears in the room. The naked daughter cowers under the sheets.