

FROM THE LIFE OF MARIONETTES 1980

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Bergman created the present TV production in Germany, where he used the outstanding acting resources of the *Residenztheater* in Munich. For Bergman, this cinematic effort, which was distributed in Germany before its appearance in Sweden, was a way of dealing with his own pain concerning his nation, Sweden, and his current need to live in exile. (The pain concerning Sweden derived largely from his humiliation and confusion after having been arrested on a tax evasion charge, a charge which may probably be attributed to inattention on the producer's part.) The foundation of the work lay in a 1973 miniseries *Scenes from a Marriage*, but in the German film Peter and Katarina were reimaged as a German couple unrelated to the two main figures in the Swedish presentation. The job of Peter and Katarina, in *From the Life of the Marionettes*, is to leach off some of Bergman's sense of the seductive but intolerable relations marriage (and perhaps the 'human condition) invokes onto the head of adults who should be able to do better for themselves. Bergman wants to dig into the chosen darkneses of modern midlife and come out of the investigation stronger and self-controlled.

STORY

Murder The present film opens with hands and faces, a prostitute caressing the face of a client, Peter, is soon thrashing around on the floor in a wild animal sex chase that fuses brutality with lust. We follow the girl, who makes her way to the huge whorehouse bed, and crouches there, waiting for whatever comes, which not surprisingly turns out to be strangulation. The film opens with sexual murder, but does not settle for that, as Peter proceeds to take the pleasure of sex on the corpse. The film opens with necrophilia.

Investigation The coroner turned to Peter's friends, for an investigation of this murder, which seemed, on the surface, so unlikely and out of character for Peter. A psychiatrist who knew Peter well—supposedly—had in the past told Peter that there was no reason for him to fear his homicidal impulses. Peter was married, seemingly happily, to a career woman, Katarina, and though the couple had no children the psychiatrist had insisted that the action in question would not be feasible. He had told Peter the same, in an inquiry in which Peter confessed that he had long held homicidal thoughts (impulses?) toward his wife. Peter had been alarmed at the possibility that he might act on these feelings, and he had asked the psychiatrist for advice.

Advice The shrink claimed to find Peter's alarm unjustified, and had recommended exercise and a few glasses of cognac, as the best way to resist the impulses in question. He had gone farther than that, though, calling Peter's wife, advising her to get out of town for a while, for her own safety. (It is part of Bergman's convoluted bitterness toward human nature, in this film, that at this point he provides us a window onto the relation between the shrink and Katarina, as they are arguing not over what to do about Peter but whether to go on a vacation together, 'to have fun they deserve.' Katarina decides against the proposition, not because she considers it immoral, but because it is a busy season in her business office.

Suicide attempt In one of a number of flashbacks, by which the film's present is 'enriched,' Peter has already contemplated suicide, and has gone out onto the rooftop outside his flat. There Katarina had discovered him, calling a friend to force him back from the brink, and thus opening to the watcher a brutal scene, in which Peter's wife—speaking from the view point of their open marriage—mocks Peter's fruitless efforts to have sex with her, as well as his overall inability to sustain a satisfying sex life. (We will not be surprised to realize, at the end of the film, that it is fundamentally about Peter's impotence.)

Tim The investigator of the prostitute murder turns to Tim, Katarina's business partner, in a continuing effort to understand the murder. Tim, who is gay, makes clear that he has a complex relation to Katarina, who above all makes him regret that he is himself not capable of any relationship of sustained intimacy. Tim is attracted to Peter, as he makes clear to Katarina, and takes a complex pleasure in the idea that he might seduce Peter and might in the action inflict a serious wound on Katarina. It was his own homosexuality, declares Tim to the investigator, that led him to introduce Peter to the prostitute Ka, Katarina's namesake, and to promote Peter's simulated murder of his wife through murdering her virtual namesake. And it is thus ultimately Tim who enabled Peter, with his problems about heterosexual intercourse, to slay his wife through a surrogate.

THEMES

Homosexuality. Bergman, as we recall, was in this film trying to dispel the pain of his exile, and the inevitable complexities which derived from his own multiple marriages. Peter, in some sense a Bergman surrogate, is haunted by the fear of impotence, and may well have imported, into the film, what would then have been called a 'doubt about his own sexuality.'

Suicide. Peter's impulse toward homicide, especially of his wife, cannot fail to root in the contempt their open marriage authorized. Katarina pours scorn on Peter's efforts, just after his would-be suicide, to beef up the narrative of his own virility. In stepping toward suicide Peter declared the penalty he was paying for his own insecurity.

Intimacy. Intimacy is critically present through its absence. Tim, the business partner of Katarina, laments that he is unable to sustain a lasting intimate relationship—whence, probably, comes his desire to destroy any marital stability Peter might enjoy. Peter and Katarina lack any intimacy in their marriage, which is open; they have no secrets which they cannot share.

Potency. Potency, like intimacy, is present in this film by its absence, or by the threat of its absence. Peter and Katarina are childless, and that condition becomes a very vivid absent presence. Peter is unable to have effective sex with Katarina, and that weakness in achievement becomes a life-shaping marker in his relation to his wife.

CHARACTERS

Peter Peter is the protagonist of the film, the person most driven in the direction of death, and the most plausible image of Bergman himself, who was at that time in German exile, and swimming among dark thoughts. In essence, Peter suffers from underconfidence in his powers, and by haunting fear of his own homicidal tendencies.

Katarina is the wife of Peter—a business woman, upper middle class and contemporary, like her husband—who lives in an open marriage with her husband. While 'open' might imply free and easy, it is a condition which, between these two people, lends itself to ready abuse and scorn. Katarina is free with her contempt for her husband's sexuality, and especially in her details of complaint. (She makes it clear that Peter seldom brings her to orgasm; that she needs to visit the bathroom, and masturbate, after each incident of intercourse.)

Tim Tim is a gay, middle aged business associate of Katarina. He is a complex middle man in the conflict of Peter with his wife—whom Peter is tempted to murder, and 'murders' in the sense of murdering a prostitute, Ka, with a name resembling Katarina's. Tim's problem is that he longs to have a steady intimate relation, which can sustain him. He is drawn to men, for his relationships, wants to seduce Peter to his side, and rather likes the idea of punishing Katarina for having Peter all to herself. Out of this brew of motivations emerges a subtle and manipulative personality, who breathes both trouble and charm.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

PETER

Peter, as the murderer, the psyche of greatest interest and import, and the suicide-vulnerable, is the 'main character' in this film, in the sense that he seems to be some kind of reworking of the producer himself. (Bergman writes that 'in *From the Life of the Marionettes* found a way, a form, a very definite and distinct form, to which I could transfer my pain, my anguish and all my difficulties and reshape them into something concrete.' Bergman turned in other films—like *Through a Glass Darkly* or *The Silence*—to homoerotic weaknesses; in both of which cases, incidentally, the homosexual and the 'spiritual' figure as mutual parts of a single personality structure..) By entitling the film for its salute to the puppets, Bergman moves toward an interpretation of Peter's behavior as almost mechanically driven, and in the terms of classical psychiatry. The shrink to whom Peter is sent, to talk out his initial homicidal impulses, is a 'classical Freudian,' who interprets Peter's darkest impulses in terms of biology, and attributes them to malign environmental forces which make Peter their puppet. To this psychiatrist it seems that what Peter needs is a break, some exercise, and a good night of sleep.

Illustrative moments

Homicidal Peter appears to us first in a sex and homicide scene with a prostitute named Ka, short for Katarina, the name of Peter's wife. We later understand that Peter is fulfilling his desire to kill his wife—a fleeting, intermittent desire—by killing Ka in her name. We suspect that Peter's suicidal temptations, too, are related to his impulse to kill his wife. The questioning of his own potency prompts him to strike out at others' (and his own) life.

Sadistic. Ka becomes the screaming victim of Peter's desire to kill her. That desire, necrophiliac in the end, becomes a wish to have anal sex with her corpse, reducing her to the ultimate in helplessness. He longs to remove her, even as a potential resistance, from his repertoire of reminders of his own weakness.

Self-debasing. In a frenzied dialogue with his wife, after his suicide has been thwarted, Peter indulges himself in the pleasure of hearing his wife degrade his sexual potency. This wallowing in self-abuse turns Peter on, and, we want to add, speaks from the film producer himself, who is turned on by pre-empting society's reprimands. Peter is teaching himself internally, to tell his society I told you so, and thus to sidestep its opprobrium.

Infantile. The final chapter of the self-annihilation of Peter is devoted to his infantilism. He is in the end confined to a mental institution, which can comprehensively assume control over all the areas of his life to which he has surrendered his active personality. He now belongs entirely to the powers that organize and establishing him. He sleeps cradling his teddy bear.