

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# PORT OF CALL 1948

Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)

### OVERVIEW

*Port of Call* was released in 1948, when Bergman was only thirty, and yet this fifth film under his direction already shows trademarks of the mature director. For one thing we see that eye for working people's neighborhoods which we will see in *Summer with Monika*, or which we can find in the contemporaneous work of a fellow European like Fellini, who is on the tip of the Neo realistic film of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Themes like abortion and reproductive rights enter *Port of Call*, as they will in the later *Wild Strawberries*. Juvenile disaffections, all over the scene in *A Summer with Monika*, will be central to *Port of Call*, for Berit is a modern dysfunctional teen ager—and much more.

The tenor of the entire film is encapsulated in the initial scenes, where we see an ordinary seaman coming to land after eight months at sea, and a teen aged girl—no connection between the opening scenes—throwing herself into the harbor, in a suicide attempt. The movie itself traces the meeting of these two very down individuals—one sick of life and sea, eager for a stability he is hardly prepared to earn; the other a much tossed around victim of a hating and fatherless family, years in and out of reformatories, and a love life which has caused and will cause her a lifetime of indiscretion. It is only thanks to adroit transitions, during the almost self-destroying finale of the film, that something like love and purpose finally declares itself between Gosta and Berit.

### STORY

Not long after her attempted suicide, Berit finds herself at a local dance hall, where she meets Gosta, and takes him home with her. Gosta, still pretty much a bumpkin of the sea, is introduced to Berit's bitter and abusive mother, and begins to intimate the harshness of his lover's previous life. The inevitable next stage, in their relationship, is Gosta' growing realization of Berit's heavy earlier misery, including many sexual foolings-around. The rough world Berit brings with her is exemplified by the arrival of her reformatory school friend Gertrud, who needs help getting an abortion. A number of scenes thread the narrative, which leave no doubt of the squalor on the edge of which Berit has been struggling to try to find value in life. Nor is she exempt from the immediate consequences of Gertrud's plight. Abortion is illegal in Sweden at the time, and Berit, who has taken Gertrud to the back alley abortionist, is called on by the police to identify the location of the criminal. While she is debating this demand—she ultimately caves, to avoid three more years in reform school—Gosta loses it, reflecting on Berit's chequered history with men, and tears his flat to pieces in a blind and drunken rage. As he recovers from this fury, the narrative steers the two lovers closer to one another, and ultimately conducts them shakily out onto the path of love.

**Abortion.** Gertrud's desperate need of an abortion leads her friend Berit to accompany her down the dark back alleys of Stockholm. This noir adventure eventually leads Berit to divulge the address of the abortionist, a decision she is at first very reluctant to make, for it promises heavy penalties for herself. In the end she makes the crucial decision to provide the address, and thereby to say yes to her own life, rather than to return to the reformatory. Berit hereby makes the crucial move she needed, in order to safeguard that part of her life which henceforth she will be able to share with Gosta.

**Confession of her past.** Gosta enters the film handicapped by his socially crude background, a merchant seaman just returned from eight months at sea, and with no cultural or educational background. (It is noteworthy that he is a reader of books, a habit derided by one of his sailor roommates.) His self-confidence has been badly undermined by his growing relation to Berit. At first he was underconfidently flattered, to find that she would go out with him, then gradually he grew more confident and aggressive toward her. It was at this point, after he had taken her to a hotel, and they were about to make love, that

she confessed all to him about her past with other men. Her revelations struck him a powerful blow, and it took him some time, and a session of violent acting out, before he could rejoin Berit in a common purpose.

## THEMES

**Fate / Coincidence.** It is coincidence that Gosta arrives home in Gothenburg, at just the time when Berit is in the act of trying to drown herself. In fact the film as a whole can be seen as a tribute to fate, which only gradually, and in incremental stages, brings the two protagonists together. It is part of Bergman's genius, to combine this kind of coincidence and destiny, and to build the two states of affairs into one another. At the end, what began as coincidence has left room for Gosta's decision, that he and Berit should remain at home, and not flee on a merchant ship.

**Underconfidence.** Both of the protagonists come onstage with a wounded self-image, Berit because of her sexual misadventures and Gosta because of his lack of exposure to anything like urbane social relations. The struggles the couple face, before they are able to work in concert together, at the end of the film, are required for them to learn even a little of the arts of compromise, which enable them to work together.

**Abuse.** Berit, in particular, has suffered from youthful abuse. Her absentee father has been away at sea during most of her life, while her mother has ruled the family with an unremitting hatred of her father. The result is that Berit enters life with the expectation of being badly treated.

**Intelligence.** Both Berit and Gosta meet each other under crippled circumstances, he on the defensive because of his social-sexual frustration, she because to this point all efforts to better her situation have failed her. Near the end of the film, when mere reaction-emotion is about to lead the pair to run away, a few moments of intelligent reflection convince the pair to remain and develop their lives where they are.

**Labor.** Bergman gives us glimpses into the nitty gritty of industrial labor, Gosta doing heavy shoveling in the shipyard, Berit bent over the heavy mass-production machine line—forced, as she was, to leave her primary skill, millinery, for a heavier assignment, which was causing serious damage to her fingers. Heavy machinery forms the visual background of many scenes in the film.

## CHARACTERS

**Berit** is the most developed and inspiring figure in the film. From the first clips, when we see her trying to drown herself in Stockholm harbor, she gradually gains in self-confidence and insight.

**Gosta** is a returned merchant mariner, whose desire is to be a landlubber for life. He is sexually driven, but lacks social skills and confidence with women. He is a book reader.

**Berit's mother.** Berit's mother is an embittered and hard-boiled midlife lady, who can see no problem in taking out on Berit the bitterness she feels toward Berit's absentee dad.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### BERIT

**Character.** Berit, a milliner by trade, is a young woman whom destiny has forever thrown this way and that. Attractive enough, she has been the object of repeated sexual exploitation, as well as of job site mistreatment. She has been sent to reformatory more than once, and at the present, although she is 'free' to live at home with her mother, she is precariously unsteady in her life. She cannot believe in herself as a candidate for love, which she badly needs. When she joins up with Gosta she has no faith in their relationship, and must above all confess to him 'all her past sins,' so that she will not later be attacked for having hidden her past. Interestingly enough, and after many twists and turns of rejection from Gosta, she

prevails with her honesty, and is by film's end on a stronger, and potentially growing, relation with her lover.

### **Illustrative moments.**

**Volatile.** Like Gosta, Berit is subject to powerful emotions and even to despair, which has brought her to the suicide attempt with which the film opens. Her childhood has removed all stability from her personal relationships, and the volatility that often accompanies abusive development sucks all self-confidence out of her.

**Attractive.** It is Berit's fate, her despair and her advantage, that she is attractive. Men have harassed her, insulted her, all her life, but because she is open hearted and feminine she continues to draw male attention to herself. She waits for some guy self-confident enough to entrust himself to her.

**Caring.** Berit is there for Gertrud, when her old reformatory friend needs an abortion, and she is there for Gosta, after his desperate drunken rampage, when she finds him curled up under the stairs. She is big hearted, and may eventually find room in herself for Gosta.

**Abused.** Berit is at her most vulnerable when her father returns from sea, for that is the trigger for terrible fights between her two parents, who use her as a pawn, and literally fight over her.

### **GOSTA**

**Character** Gosta is a merchant sailor, who at the film's opening has just returned from half a year at sea. He is eager to become a landlubber again, and though he doesn't know it, he steps off the boat at just about the moment when his destiny, Berit, is throwing herself into the harbor. In what will be his search for love, now that he is home, Gosta will have two strikes against him: he has the look of a rather handsome bumpkin, dresses clumsily, has few social graces and little self-control; a mixture of qualities which may, by the film's end, have begun to coalesce into a somewhat attractive package. He has to pass through the fire of self-doubt and rage before he can begin to put himself together.

### **Illustrative Moments**

**Underprivileged.** Gosta comes to us as a guy without parents, without any loving context, and with only a rude sense of community; although, interestingly enough, he is a book reader. He has not benefitted from any training in social skills.

**Wild.** After learning as much as he can endure hearing from Berit, about her past with other men, and in the reformatory, Gosta goes wild with distress, jealousy, and self-scorn. He gets desperately drunk, tears up his living quarters, and is barely able to survive, until Berit brings him back to life.

**Reckless.** As the film nears its conclusion, Gosta is called on to give shape to the budding love which is growing between him and Berit. He decides that the pair of them should flee Gothenburg, and take a ship out of that familiar city. It is a reckless attempt at a quick solution to their unstable lives.

**Conscientious.** At the very end of the film, when he has rejected the temptation to flee with Berit, Gosta—remember the maturing of Harry in *Summer with Monika*—decides that the pair of them, himself and Berit, should remain in Gothenburg, and build at least the start of a stable life together.