

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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PRISON 1949

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Prison is the first Bergman film based on his own screenplay—he was very much a writer as well as a film director—and he enjoyed full control over the direction of this film. Bergman was on a low budget and had only eighteen days to shoot the film. The production values of the film—of the film within the film—are widely considered to be of high quality.

Paul's proposal In a clanking, industrialized film studio we are watching the wind up of the day's camera shoot, when an elderly man enters, introducing himself to the director, who turns out to be the former student (in math class) of the elderly guy, who has hasn't been seen for some time, as he has been in a mental institution. The former teacher, it seems, has been creating a film narrative, which he wants to try out on his former student. an extended argument that life is hell, hellish, has no meaning, is basically cruel. The story inside the Math teacher's gloomy narrative is about life as a prison. For Paul, the math teacher, there is no meaning to the world the Devil creates; the Devil has no plan. 'Life hoods itself like a cruel and sensual arc, from birth to death.

STORY

The film itself, an effort to substantiate the idea that life is hellish and has no meaning, is centered around a late teen-age girl whose life is basically carried out like that of a prisoner, a prisoner of the way others treat her, and of the way she dreams about herself.

Birgitta is a flirtatious and life-loving young woman, who is pleased with sexuality, and delights the writer, Tomas, who meets her in the course of an interview. Birgitta is the chief example, in the film, of the 'bad things that can happen to good people,' thus of the power of Hell to imprison us.

Baby In one of the scenes the film moves ahead six months to the scene of Birgitta lying in bed after giving birth. Her lover (Peter) and his sister urge Birgitta to get rid of the baby, which she at first refuses but later consents. By this stage she is exhausted and submissive and gives in. But this is the beginning of her struggles with herself, to maintain any stability and good nature.

Nightmares In the film, there is a long dream sequence in which Birgitta cascades from one inner encounter to another: her pain and uncertainty punctuated by scenes like forests of stone people, or the rediscovery of the most precious jewel, happiness, which once her mother gave to her—highlighted inner dramas scarred with her sexuality, and with the irrecoverable loss of her baby. *One scene explicitly involves Peter drowning Birgitta's baby.*

Police We move, subsequently, back to Birgitta and her boyfriend Peter, and to a visit from the police, who are investigating the evidence for Birgitta's prostitution, which was illegal in the Sweden of the day, but also for the possible murder of Birgitta's child. Peter and Birgitta are arrested, then released by the police.

Torture After returning to Paul's home, Birgitta's pimp tortures her with a lighted cigarette or lighter, converting whatever joy she had felt into blinding pain.

Dying In the final scene Brigitta collapses down probably after taking drugs.

THEMES

Artifice. The entire film, *Prison*, is wrapped up in an artifice. The first part of the movie proposes a film narrative concerned with the dominant role of evil in human society, while the second part of the film is an illustration of the issues proposed in the first part. At the end Paul, the former math teacher of the director, Martin, returns to accept the conclusion that the film he proposes won't work, because it poses the question of whether there is meaning and value in the universe, while in fact there is no one, like a god, to whom such a question could be posed.

Meaning. Paul's initial proposal, for a film about a universe run by the devil, raises the question—answered in the negative—whether there is meaning in the universe. The film Martin produces seemingly leaves no room for meaning or value in the universe the Devil has created. Abortion, addiction, cynicism, suicide, mental instability—all these conditions dominate the world in its 'prison.'

Dreams. It is in dreams that Birgitta remembers the precious jewel of happiness, that her mother has given her, as well as the frozen and rigid ocean of human forms, that greets her through her unconscious. Birgitta's dreams are the point where she gives herself over to a deeper state, and from that state, in which we initially met her reclining innocently with the writer Tomas, she finds her way to the capacity to love, to make love.

Love. *If we look for love in this film, it will be found in the behavior of Birgitta, if anywhere.* Tomas was, from the outset, charmed by Birgitta's readiness to follow her own sensuality, enjoying physical pleasure in whatever form it assumes, as part of the transaction of prostitution, or as part of spontaneous sex play. Bergman's universe, in this film, is full of darkness and doubt; Birgitta has the capacity, in certain moments, to turn the world mood around.

CHARACTERS

Birgitta. Birgitta is a twentyish girl who is lending herself out to prostitution, as a means of supporting herself, but also loving for love's sake, as she loves Tomas—for a while..

Tomas. Brother to the film director, Martin, whom we meet at the outset. He it is who is interested to hear the film proposal of Paul, which generates the thinking of the present film. Tomas is a writer, with a serious drinking problem. He is married to Sofi.

Paul. Martin's old math teacher. He has come to the studio to visit Martin, and to propose a film script about the devil. He agrees, by the end of the film Martin produces, that his own script will not work, for there is no one to whom the film's questions can be posed.