

## 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.

### STORY

**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. 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. This is a movie that proposes that the world's meaninglessness would be of no value: it would raise a vast question—is human life of value? But it would find no answer to that question, because only a God could answer that question, and there is no God. *Birgitta, imprisoned in her own self, without liberator, is the supreme example of the hellishness Paul imputes to the world.*

The main character, 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.

**Birgitta's cell** 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. Observing the police, and fearing their charges, Birgitta runs into the cellar of her house, where she meets a young boy hiding a knife—a knife which will appear later in the film. (Bergman, we see, makes free with such pretensive, and unexplained, structural devices—all of which play their parts in the construction of a world—Paul's hellish place. The cellar, we might say, is Birgitta's prison cell in hell.

**Birgitta's nightmares** Peter and Birgitta are arrested, then released by the police, then as they are walking home Birgitta takes advantage of the opportunity to ditch Peter and run off with Tomas, a plot redirection as brusque as the initial transition from Paul's proposal to the test-case world presented by the film director Martin. (*Birgitta, like prisoners at all times, is looking for a safe haven, a way out.*) Tomas and Birgitta rent a cheap flat and start living together. Among the mind events that throb through their rented flat—and arguably the key development of the film-- 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.* With this dreadful nightmare we realize at its most forceful *Birgitta's awareness of life as the imprisoning hell that Paul initially described.* Not long after this

dream occurs the most harrowing torture to be imposed on the film's only lighthearted and inspirational figure, Birgitta; her pimp, whom we knew from the outset, tortures her with a lighted cigarette or lighter, converting whatever joy she had felt into blinding pain.

## 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.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### BIRGITTA

**Character** **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. Her boyfriend—not Tomas—talks her into having an abortion—illegal in Sweden—the aftermath of which will torment her, while the judicial ramifications put her in danger with the police, and raise the specter that she will be indicted for murder. Her abortion, through which she has lost what she most needed, will haunt her to the end.

### Illustrative moments

**Flirtatious.** When we first meet Birgitta she is reclining on the sofa in her sitting room chatting with Tomas. She has flirtatious and good natured eyes, and makes it clear that she likes the job of prostitution. Even these values add charm to a world in which most of the shades are gray and gloomy.

**Distressed.** Birgitta's boyfriend and his sister, upon discovering she is pregnant, gang up on her with the demand that she should get rid of the child. 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.

**Alarmed.** When the police come to the flat of Birgitta and Tomas, they are looking for evidence of the murder of Birgitta's baby. Peter, Birgitta's boyfriend, urges her to disavow Tomas, so that she can disassociate herself from the murder/abortion of the baby. *She flees into hiding in a cellar room, her prison within a prison.*

**Subconscious.** In the cheap flat which she and Tomas rent, Birgitta finds herself susceptible to depth dreams, in which she delights in the great happiness she had known as a child, and derived from her mother; she looks in horror on the frozen rigidity of a forest of human beings.

**Horrified.** At the end of her dream, Birgitta has to endure the vision of her pimp, Peter, drowning her baby, evidence that she will never transcend that loss. We leave her in a wounded condition, though she is the only character inside Martin's film who is capable of love.

## TOMAS

**Character** Tomas is a writer and aesthete. It is to Tomas that Martin, the film director and student of Paul the mathematician, first explains Paul's proposal for a film script. Tomas sees a connection between Paul's idea of hell on earth, and an article he has been writing, about a teen age prostitute he has encountered. (This prostitute is Birgitta.) Tomas has responded, to Paul's script, by explaining how charmingly and insouciantly Birgitta has played along with the fallen world. She is an example of the beauty of evil. Tomas' own collusion with the dark side becomes apparent shortly after, as his drinking and cynicism lead him into bitter quarrels with his wife. We realize, in the midst of these quarrels, that Tomas is considering killing himself, with Sofi. He is perhaps rescued from this desire, when Birgitta meets him roaming the streets disconsolately, and runs away with him to live in the cheap flat where they are for a while able to hang out. Tomas is finally left behind, by a Birgitta who has been convinced that she must leave him, lest her association with him excite suspicion that she shares guilt for the death of her baby.

### Illustrative moments

**Intellectual.** Tomas, the brother of the film director, Martin, is the one to whom Martin describes the narrative Paul has proposed to him. Tomas is intellectual, can deal with new ideas, and is a writer.

**Sensual.** Tomas is concerned with the case of a seventeen year old girl, Birgitta, whom he has met, and who represents, for him, evil's presence in the world. This girl, as Tomas sees and finds fascinating, enjoys prostitution as part of her late teenage life. She loves her body and some of its pleasures, and Tomas, with his personal world-view, is very happy with that attitude.

**Addicted.** We see Tomas and his wife, Sofi, engaged in bitter argument, and realize that he is an alcoholic subject at times to dangerous loss of control, and unable to escape momentary suicidal wishes. His own life style, and its dangerous threats to him, is beyond his ability to combat it, and makes him the prime candidate, in the film, to represent the meaninglessness of life.

**Whimsical.** While hiding out with Birgitta, in a cheap flat, Tomas finds a slapstick film in the attic, and runs it to the amusement, even hilarity, of the two roommates, a seventeen year old girl-prostitute, and an alcoholic married intellectual. Tomas, intellectual as well as off-center, is open to the craziness of the random moment.

**Loving.** After Birgitta awakens from her extensive dream-nightmare, in the flat with Tomas, she is overwhelmed with a sense of guilt—chiefly because of the abortion of her child. Tomas, sensing the gravity of her mental state—his own is volatile enough—calms Birgitta and brings her lovingly back to an even level of self-assurance.

## **PAUL**

**Character** Paul is a former math teacher of the film's producer, Martin. He has been released from a mental asylum, where he has had time to dwell on the nature of his world, and of topics for films. He is present to suggest, to the film director, Martin, an idea for a film. The center of the film will be the question, is it possible to make a film about a world (it is our world) which is run by the Devil, and which has no plan, in which, to be more precise, the plan is chaos? This philosophical question is the guiding motif of the film in question. In other words, the film itself, proposed by Paul, is a film about the possibility of its own existence, a self-reflexive intellectual enterprise. Paul is an intellectual and a cynic.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Self-reflexive.** Paul has come to propose, to the film director and in the movie studio itself, the idea of a film dealing with the issue of its own possibility. That is can a film be made about a world ruled by chaos and meaninglessness?

**Existential.** Paul is proposing an idea for a film, and he is doing so in a film studio itself, in which the viewer is surrounded by huge cameras and other noisy pieces of film industry equipment. That is, Paul is challenging the existence of a film constructed out of the raw materials of human ingenuity.

**Dark.** Paul's proposal for a film is virtually undercut by his own cynical attitude toward the film; no one understands his position as well as Tomas, brother of the producer, who is writing an essay on a teen age prostitute, whose life seems to confirm the insights into darkness that characterize Paul's film proposal.

**Grim.** Paul concludes, in a final conversation with Martin, that a film illustrating the meaninglessness of the world would invalidate itself. No one could answer the conundrum posed by the film—can you write meaningfully about non meaning?—except God, and unfortunately, as everyone knows, there is no God.