

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# THE RITE 1969

## Ingmar Bergman

### OVERVIEW

Bergman's personal life impacted the creative mood of the present film. He was, as often, under considerable stress. A few years earlier he had quit his directorship of the Royal Dramatic Theater, furious with lack of recognition from audiences and the bureaucracy of the institution—for which he worked tirelessly as manager, film and theater writer, and public face. He had been forced to flee Sweden, to avoid tax evasion charges—the handling of which, by the Swedish police, had caused severe humiliation and anxiety to Bergman, who after a brief hospitalization went into exile in his remote island hideaway on the island of Faro. And he was well on his way to having five wives, and nine children by six different women—a huge investment in alimony payments. (And all that in a country heavily strapped with a high progressive taxation on personal income.) Hardly a wonder, then, that in discussing *The Rite*, a panel of four aggressive misfits, Bergman remarked that 'there's always a tension in me between my urge to destroy and my will to live. ..every morning I wake up with a new wrath, a new suspiciousness, and new desire to live.'

**Riten**, *The Rite*, was created out of these conditions, and out of a genius for letting the magic of the photographic image translate anxiety, loathing, lust. We are confronted, in the present translation, with the face to face intensity of four characters, one a judge, three suspects under interrogation. (Bergman's pronounced fascination with the face gets full play here: from the opening shot, in which we stare through a magnifying glass deeply into the pupil of the face that will be the investigating magistrate of the film.) The film as a whole will play out as a combat of faces confronting each other. Few rays of human sympathy soften the interplay of faces as they bring the weight of their anxieties onto one another.

### STORY

**Setting.** The plot of *The Rite* is both extremely simple and extremely intricate. It takes place in an unknown country. (Bergman's inquiry into the elusiveness of meaning leads him into many aspects of 'the unknown,' the unknown that follows on silences, the 'unknown language' of the mystery country in *Silence*, which belongs to the silence itself, as a mystery within meaning.) In that country a magistrate has issued an order for the interrogation of three individuals suspected of indecent cabaret acts; indecent acts performed by three individuals, a woman and two men, who are present before the judge. All four individuals are to this point present to us only as close up facial shots. We are informed that the continuation of the inquiry will be carried out with each of the three individuals separately.

**Development.** The initial interrogation, of the three cabaret performers, is carried out as a group investigation. The three 'performers' are questioned about such matters as minor past problems with the law, impoliteness toward an officer, speeding infractions. The structural development of the film sprouts here, from these discussions, for it is at this point that the flashbacks—better perhaps to say 'meltbacks' and 'meltins'—begin to permeate the film. The first meltback is into an hotel bedroom in which we find Thea and Sebastian Fischer, who are the hot lovers of the moment, and who are bedrolling in high style, his nose and tongue at the target spots of her panties, and legs and arms roiling in the sheets. (These are the rare occasions, in this film, when Bergman frees us from the glare of the face, and from the starkness of face to face dialogue.) We soon realize that the actors in this drama are already deep in trouble.

**Knowing the characters.** From the point we reach with Thea and Sebastian, we realize that the interrogatory, to which the trio will be subject, will only superficially touch the deep level at which the characters are fallen—just as the fall-depth, of the interrogator himself, will only be known at the end of *The Rite*, when he becomes the interrogated. We are not sure what we are to understand, from the

arsonist self-immolation by which Sebastian puts an end to his first appearance, but we can see that we will be moving now into other panels of investigation, and will not be surprised when further investigation simply opens up windows into the enacted past of the other two cabaret performers. An interrogatory session between the judge and Anna—of which Anna's husband is extremely leery, given her hysterical weaknesses—leads to the judge's discovery that Anna is truly a religious hysteric-visionary, and a holy whore willing to act out sexually, in order to divert attention from 'her case'. A meltback into the world of Hans Winckelmann, the seemingly steady and mature member of the trio, helps us measure the personal derangement that links the three suspects under interrogation. Dialogue between Hans and Sebastian follows, in which the former, husband of Thea, but business partner of Sebastian, confesses that he is tired of the two of them. He is far from jealous of Sebastian—is in fact enthusiastically ready to give the volatile and alcoholic younger man instructions on the best ways to give Anna an orgasm—but he is far more interested in the money to be made, even as far as East Asia, from keeping his troupe on the road.

**The Magistrate.** The magistrate, to our surprise, is the chief figure of rite to emerge from the interrogation of our three underworld suspects. We have had reason to suspect the central role that his seemingly staid and severe figure of law has played. In an earlier meltback he has returned to a mind-picture of himself as youngster, and freely opened up to us his insecurity, his fear, and his dependence on the maternal, a key to his femininity. In the final scenes of the film, where we see the rite in practice, we will understand for what we have been being prepared in our earlier encounters with the magistrate. He is eradicated by a heart attack, when faced with the full example of the obscene ritual act for which he had been on guard.

## THEMES

**Lust.** Sebastian and Thea enact lust scenes which remind the audience of the behavior of Anna and her lover in *The Silence*. The whole person is abandoned to physical desire, and the emotions guide feelings into an uncontrolled spiral. Perhaps we can apply this point to the entire film, which terminates in a controlled, but fatal, maelstrom of destructive passions.

**Scrutiny.** From our initial encounter with the gazing eye of the magistrate, we are preoccupied with the spirit of investigation. This scrutiny is disturbing to its targets. Hans begs the magistrate to spare Thea a one on one inquiry, but the force of duty precludes such an exception, even though Hans attempts to bribe the investigator.

**Vision.** Thea is the chief visionary, in the present assemblage. She is volatile and unreliable, in her love affair relations with Sebastian, but when called for interrogation by the magistrate, she is unbalanced and erotic-hysterical, a vehicle for visions like that of the Virgin Mary.

**Violence.** Sebastian is an incarnation of violence. He is the murderer of a former partner of his, and turns demonic in his love making with Thea. His imprecations against the magistrate are savage and devastating, and his sexual passion, like Thea's, is anger as well as desire.

**Obscenity.** The film, as a whole, reeks of the sense of the obscene, that which violates deep social taboos. What else is the final rite, itself, except a yielding to the power of naked eroticism harnessed against the prurient smallness of the bureaucrat? In the fatal final scene, that destroys the magistrate, we feel ourselves drawn to ancient ritual, which is too potent for any man made law to regulate.

## CHARACTERS

**Hans** is the oldest, most under control, of the three cabaret performers. In one of the meltbacks, which centers on business and sex talk between Hans and Sebastian, we discover that Hans' interest in the cabaret project is largely financial. As for his two partners, he is growing tired of them, and although Thea is his wife he is glad to yield her to Sebastian.

**Thea** is the wife of Hans, and lover of Sebastian. She is a sexually live presence, veering within her sexual openness to abusive attitudes toward others and herself. She is hysterical, visionary—ready for hallucinatory encounters with the Virgin Mary—and capable of weeping in the midst of pleasure. She and the multiply neurotic Sebastian are lovers who tear each other apart.

**Sebastian.** The most inwardly tortured of the travelling threesome: we see him, in his initial love scene with Thea, smoking, drinking, raving, self-destructive in every way and yet sharply intelligent. He is a completely unbalanced personality, with erotic and business acumen.

**Magistrate.** The magistrate is a local judge or administrative functionary, who has been given the job of vetting a traveling cabaret show which has been suspected of obscenity. He carries out his job, while flashbacks are enabling us to get into the deep back-life of the characters he is interrogating, and who in the end will be the death of him.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### THE MAGISTRATE

**Character** The magistrate is the first character to meet us in the film, and what we see of him is a close up of the pupil of his eye. We are put on notice that the human face, and here the scrutinizing eye, will be of active importance in the film, which is after a judicial inquiry, and officially concerned with seeing the truth. Immediately after joining with the magistrate, in the scrutinizing of his eye, we become viewers of the three individuals under interrogation. We are all a looking at, with the magistrate.

The unfolding film, which is to see each of the main characters under close juridical type scrutiny, as well as in intricate interrelation with his/her partners, will find the magistrate pass from an overbearing, excessively fussy inspector, concerned with the details of traffic violations, and other minutiae, in the backgrounds of his interogatees, to a wretched self-pitying baby, asking for no more than to be humiliated, psychologically pissed on by three degenerates who can assemble no sense of purpose, among them, more flourishing than the satisfaction of a petty bureaucrat's fantasy life.

### Illustrative moments

**Magisterial.** The film opens with a shot directly into the cornea of the magistrate, who is both facing the audience and microscopically observing his own eye. The leitmotif of the face is being highlighted here. So is the scrutinizing severity which the magistrate wears as a mask—and a disguise of what he truly is.

**Facing.** The judge turns directly, from the examination of his own eye, to confront the three individuals whom he is to interrogate on charges of obscenity While all back, to us, the judge is (we know) all front to the three who are in his gaze.

**Fussy.** The judge investigates the three people before him, in detail, asking them questions about their past driving records, for instance, which cannot bear directly on the obscenity charge for which they are being investigated. It is his fussy way of harassing the group, toward whom, as we see in the end, his attitudes are anything but transparent.

**Mournful.** The judge confesses, during a meditative flashback of his own, that he had a lonely and miserable childhood, and thus lets us see under the mask of bureaucratic formality, that he is tortured and underconfident.

**Passive.** The rite which ends the film, and gives it its title, shows us the magistrate inviting sexual sadism down onto himself, until it kills him. His very existence is so fragile, that the façade of investigator, which he so forcefully projects at the film's outset, crumbles inside the fragile house that he has constructed around this judicial operation.

**Supporting characters** (if that is a suitable descriptor for the following three wounded and angry figures, who in the end perform a rite to wipe away the examiner par excellence, the magistrate.)

## HANS

**Character** Hans is the most socially presentable of the three 'cabaret presenters,' and like Sebastian, he is fully cognizant of the future financial rewards that might greet the troupe, as they extend their performance to other countries, even to Asia. Appropriately enough, then, Hans has lost most of his interest both in his wife, still mired in erotics and showmanship, and in any pleasure-giving the troupe might aspire to, as entertainers.

### Illustrative moments

**Businessman.** His background lost in the shadows, Hans comes forward principally as an ex participant in the cabaret troupe, which he shares with his wife Thea, and his business partner Sebastian. Hans is still, to a degree, solicitous of his wife's welfare, trying to protect her from direct interrogation, and he is quite lucid and forward oriented, in discussing with Sebastian the future game plan of the cabaret company.

**Cynical** Hans is solidary with the ritual tendencies of the troupe, who in all their seemingly archaic behaviors mime stylized expressions of passion, and ultimately sacrificial views of the culmination of life events. This solidarity is the extent of his beliefs, lest one include the sacredness of money, in which he and Sebastian clearly believe.

## THEA

**Character** Thea is the wife of Hans, who is sick and tired of her, and who gladly yields her to Sebastian, with 'instructions for how to promote an orgasm.' As we see from the start, she is hungry for sex and reciprocates Sebastian's angry teeth with a take me leave me alone frolic which drives her lover to excesses. Not surprisingly, this woman at the mercy of her passions, is susceptible to visions and seizures of hysteria, and is more comfortable with the Virgin Mary than with her husband.

### Illustrative moments

**Frightened** As the wife of Hans, who no longer cares for her, Thea has long since turned to Sebastian, and who knows who else, to control—and whet—sexual attitudes. Hans, knowing his wife's propensity for hysterics, begs the magistrate not to interrogate Thea indirectly, not in person, but the magistrate refuses the request.

**Visionary.** In this woman, physical passion and religious passion seem to spring from the same source. The charge against her, and the rest of the troupe, is the suspicion of obscenity, which we form no reason to doubt, and in the obscenity congenial to Thea we are never more than a step away from the religious, that which, like the obscene, is never far from the unspeakable, holy, and sacred.

## SEBASTIAN

**Character** Sebastian is the business partner of Hans, and the lover of Hans' wife, Thea. He and Thea work through a rough patch of sexuality, to launch the film, and yet their erotics seem infused with anger, and loveless desire drives them. We see Sebastian at his viral best, in a later scene in which he turns his anger against the magistrate, thereby tilting the power of the investigative rite to the advantage of the questionees.

### Illustrative moments

**Volatile.** From the outset of the film, as we watch the angry foreplay of Sebastian with Thea, we see that

Sebastian is no loving person, but a highly intelligent sex (and booze) addict. He yells, argues, curses, while at the same time, apparently, giving Thea what she wants.

**Inflammable.** Now and then Bergman inserts scenes from the realm of pure film magic. Such a scene is set by Sebastian, to conclude the ultimate consequence of his angry sexual volatility. After screwing with Thea he turns into pure fire, the disturbing essence of his nature, and the sizzling magic that will underlie the whole transition of this narrative into incandescent ritual.

**Shadowed.** While Sebastian is an astute businessman, and has a macro view of the financial enterprise in which the cabaret project fits, he is himself shadowed by the suspicion that he has in his past been guilty of murdering a colleague. Perhaps because of this darkness in his background, he is the most extreme in his assault on the magistrate, the representative, for this small psychodrama, of 'law and order.'