

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# THE SILENCE 1963

## Ingmar Bergman

### OVERVIEW

*The Silence* is the third of the three Bergman films concerned with faith issues—*Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1962), and *The Silence* (1963)—and is in theme a companion piece to *Persona* (1966). From a broader perspective, however, and depending on what one means by faith and the religious dimension of life, many of Bergman's films are concerned with faith issues. Wherever Bergman deals with personal-psychological issues—from *Port of Call* to *Wild Strawberries* to *Persona* itself—he places the audience in the existential hot seat of the protagonist. He makes us feel the intensity of being-here as a created presence. While his professed credo is in general to maintain the absence of God, Bergman never settles for a default position in which the presence of God is unworthy of consideration.

### STORY

**The Setting.** As in many Bergman films, the action begins and ends in a railway car, a confined and intimate environment—especially in its continental rail system form—in which conversations can develop and emotions intensify. In the present instance the car before us contains two sisters, in their thirties and late forties, respectively, plus the ten-year old son of the younger woman.

**The Journey.** The threesome is on a train journey through post-war continental Europe. They pass through dark streets charged with military equipment, and through towns in which the signs are in a language unknown to the passengers. Just why these passengers are taking this trip—they are in any case 'on their way home'—or just where they are is unknown to us. What is clear, though, is that the elder sister is a translator, and that she is quite ill, and that the younger sister, who breathes eroticism—unlike her sibling—is impatient with her sibling, and is in fact stopping along the way, as they do, simply so that her sister can recover some strength and energy.

**The Hotel.** The trio stops at a classy old-fashioned hotel in a largish city. They rent a two bedroom apartment where Ester, the older sister, can recuperate, so that they can complete their journey. Ester, who is ill, goes straight to bed, and begins to live off of vodka and cigarettes. (Chain smoking, incidentally, seems to define the fingers and hands of all Bergman protagonists.) Johan, Anna's son, begins to roam the halls of the once elegant hotel, where he makes the acquaintance of a courtly and sensitive hall porter, as well as of a band of Spanish performing dwarves, currently employed as the entertainment component of the hotel.

**Anna goes out.** Anna herself, complaining about the heat in the hotel rooms, heads out to take a walk in the streets, stopping in a bar where she manages to get herself interestingly felt up. This is after she had stopped in at a downtown theater, and been both turned on and repelled by a young couple making out a couple of seats away from her.

**Ester and Anna.** Upon Anna's return from her excursion in the city, Ester is eager to understand what is driving her sister, and in particular the explanation for the soiled spot on her skirt. Learning that her sister intends going out with the same barman again, that very evening, Ester begs that Anna will remain with her, to keep her company. We recognize the blend of pathos and hostility which joins the two sisters. We are also made aware that Ester scorns/hates/ envies her sister's animalistic sexuality. (We are given one glimpse of Ester's own sexuality through a scene of masturbation, in which she fantasizes her sister as her love partner, a wedge into that rich absence—of male genital love, of her own sister's physical love—which is part of the Silence of the film's title.)

**Johan.** Johan returns to the trio's hotel suite, reporting to Ester that he has seen his mother entering a hotel room with a man; Johan wants to know, from Ester, why his mother doesn't want to be with him and his aunt. Ester changes the subject. satisfies Johan's desire to know something of the unfamiliar language spoken in the strange country, Timoka, in which they find themselves. The Silence of the film is further reinforced by the absence of communication between our protagonist trio and the country they are in, which they cannot understand.

**Sibling despair.** After Johan goes to sleep, Ester feels a great longing to see her sister, and to have her company. She knocks on the door of the room where the groaning Anna is thrashing with her lover. When the door does not open Ester begins weeping, then suddenly opens the door and turns on the light, so that Ester can stare on the sight of the two lovers having sex, and torturing Ester with the drama of it. Anna lashes out at her sister and her scorn for sex, calling her a morally elevated fake, and before long driving her out of the room. Ester protests that she loves her sister; she caresses her hair, and calls her 'poor Anna,' while Ester, leaving the room, hears Anna's curses turn to sobs.

**Departure.** The next day, Anna announces that she and Johan are departing for home, leaving Ester—who is increasingly sick—to remain in Timoka until she is well enough to travel. After Anna leaves, Ester weakens further, talking in no language with the elderly porter, and expressing her contempt for sexual contact. Anna, meanwhile, rides on with Johan, on the train bound for home. To cool herself she opens the train car window and lets the rain fall on her bare arm.

## THEMES

**Sexuality.** Anna and Ester represent two opposite sexualities. Anna is carnally hetero, while Anna, who proclaims her scorn for male sexuality, sweaty erectile tissue, etc., is masturbation hetero, and from that standpoint isolates herself from everyone except her sister.

**Absence.** In a broad sense, God is absent from the world of this film. Communication—the basis of the bringing together of God's creation—is reduced to a minimum. Not only is the land where the trio is travelling incommunicado, but the trio's relations to one another have been almost eliminated.

**Communication.** The film is set in a nation unknown to the protagonists, and thus with a language unavailable to those people. Furthermore, the two sisters can barely communicate with one another, as they are deeply estranged from one another. It is as though the expected norms, that hold people together were lacking, and taken over by the absence of meaning.

**Estrangement.** The two sisters go so far, at one point, as to abandon all respect and love for one another. In the end, though, their interrelation is the deep alienation of siblings, who are fundamentally bound to one another. Ester remembers her father with particular fondness, but she is closest to Anna when Anna shares the memory of their father with Ester.

## CHARACTERS

**Ester** is the older of the two sisters who are returning home through an unfamiliar land. She is seriously ill, makes no effort to care for herself—self-medicates on vodka and cigarettes, eats barely at all—and by film's end she has a brief and harsh life prognosis.

**Anna** is Ester's younger sister, the opposite to the neurotic, intellectual hysteric, who eventually drives Anna out of the hotel. Anna is aware of her body, and curries herself for men. She is promiscuous, impatient, and erotic even with her ten-year old son, with whom she sleeps naked. Her pleasure in anal sex was fascinatingly in your face on screen, and made of this Bergman film an unusual box office success.

**Johan** is Anna's curious, amused, and disoriented ten year old son, in whom the trip through an unknown land provokes a new sense of the wide world. He is intrigued by the little he can learn—with Ester's

help—of the language spoken in Timoka; and he is appropriately bemused and bewildered by the assortment of baroque characters he meets in his hotel.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### ESTER

**Character** Ester is the older of the two sisters who are traveling across the post war land of Timoka, and who stop in a Timokan city for Ester to rest and recuperate from a bad, and potentially fatal, respiratory condition. Esther is by profession a translator, and an intellectual, who has decided to limit her sexual life to masturbation, and to proclaim her disgust for the male's sexual organs. There is an element of lesbian love in Ester's complex attitude toward her sister, as well as an Oedipal fascination with her own father, with whom she shared, apparently, the best times of her life. As a victim of that 'silence,' which gives its name to the film, Ester has no one on her side except young Johan, who senses her vulnerability and illness, and touchingly reaches out to bond with her.

#### Illustrative moments

**III.** From our observation, we conclude that Ester is voluntarily out to kill herself. She seems addicted to alcohol and tobacco, and lets herself go, on several occasions, to fits of virtually fatal hysteria. She has very little control, over her relations to her sexuality, which apparently can find no outlet more gratifying than masturbation.

**Curious.** While Anna makes no effort to learn the Timokan language, which would provide the only channel for understanding the world she is in, Ester makes brief lists of words in Timokan, which she has picked up from the hotel porter. As a translator, she is professionally alert to the nuances of language.

**Dependent.** Though estranged from her sister, and often contemptuous of her, Ester is tortured by jealousy of her sibling. When Anna refuses to allow Ester into the room, where Anna is sexually involved, Ester beats on Anna's door, sobbing, begging not to be shut out. From their arrival in the hotel, Ester is eager to be kept aware of all Anna's movements.

**Lesbian** Ester's dependence on Anna is sexual as well as psychological-social. She masturbates while fantasizing the presence of Anna. Her body movements, toward and around her sister, are frequently erotically suggestive.

### ANNA

**Character** Anna is the younger of the two women who find themselves briefly way stopped in a hotel suite in Timoka, a country unknown to them, through which they are traveling by train. The mother of Johan, Anna adopts even to her son an erotic manner, fondling even his hair and face, sleeping naked with him, while when it comes to sexual relations with grown men she is firmly predatory. Anna proudly displays herself to her horrified/envious sister, Ester. In the deepest sense, Anna relates to herself as to a body, while her sister, the translator, is an intellectual. At the end of the film, as Anna and Johan are returning home on the train—Ester having remained behind for more recuperation—Anna opens the train window, and lets the soft rain, which is falling over the landscape, cool her arms. The erotic she is composed of requires tempering and silence, and she gives herself to it.

#### Illustrative moments

**Predatory.** Anna cannot remain long in the hotel room with her sister and son. Though she knows nothing about Timoka, cannot understand a word of its language, she ventures out into the busy streets, to rub her body against the crowds of working men, and to subject herself to any scenes that turn her on.

**Animalistic.** Anna not only throws her sexual anality in the face of her sister, but she does so with furious vitality. Though at the end of her erotic display, in the

Hotel room where Ester finds her, Anna's pleasure has turned to weeping, she has enacted a bestial display which leaves her foul and indulged.

**Susceptible.** It is typical Anna to be turned on by others' erotics. When she goes out to walk the streets, shortly after arriving in the unknown city, she wanders into a local theater; in the box next to her she sees a couple making out, and then having sex, which is enough to set Anna on fire.

**Isolated.** Anna inhabits her own body, powerfully, but, unlike her sister, makes no effort to penetrate the silence that separates her from the inexplicable city she is in. Other people are simply other bodies, to her, and if they are not related to her, by an erotic charge, they do not exist for her.