

# **THIRST (Three Strange Loves)** 1949

Ingmar Bergman

## **OVERVIEW**

*Torment* (1944) was Bergman's debut as a screenwriter---he was already accomplished in playwriting skills---and *Thirst* (In Britain *Three Strange Loves*) was already, although he was only thirty one years old, Bergman's ninth film. The tale is a loose narrative of three personal dramas, in which three types of loving are interwoven. In each case woman's living of modernity--- freedoms, new styles, new intra-feminine bonding---is at the center of the action. From *Crisis* (1946) through *Port of Call* (1948). Through *Prison* (1949), all the way to the high maturity of *Persona*, in 1966, the analysis of the world lived by intense women is central to Bergman---and that analysis includes the three odd panels that constitute the present film, *Thirst*. Bergman's consistently developing sense of production values---lighting, sound, scenery, props---at every stage brings out the moral center and narrative of this particular film. The shifting of light and shadow, the noir tenacity, the flamboyant intrusions of music and light to shift the emotional center of the work---all these byproducts of Expressionism laid out Bergman's uniquely forceful path to the auteurship rapidly being formulated from within New World film. It is not that narrative falls by the wayside, in this world-picture Bergman is creating, but that narrative is built directly out of feeling.

## **STORY**

*Thirst* is based on a book of stories written by Birgit Tengroth, a Swedish actress and writer who was part of the Stockholm artistic community, to which Bergman consistently turned, for his loves, actresses, and texts. (It is noteworthy that this is one of the few texts used by Bergman, which he did not himself co-write---and it is worth emphasizing that Bergman was a prolific writer of essays, aesthetic studies of the arts, autobiography; a self-critic whose comments, on his own film scripts, regularly featured insights into the moods, gestures, and anxieties of his major 'characters.')

It is noteworthy that, perhaps in compensation for not writing his own script this time, Bergman gave Birgit Tengroth one of the leading roles in the film itself; not to mention consulting her regularly on the direction of the film.

**Hotel Room Flashback** The film opens with a married couple (Rut and Bertil) waking in their hotel room, in Basel, Switzerland, at the end of their vacation. The room itself is dark and shadowy, the windows allow in the early light of the dark foreign city, and visible tension bathes the anxious partners. One of the first shots is of Rut walking anxiously around the room, tense as a tiger, occasionally passing by the inert form of her stubbornly sleeping mate: the scene bristles with volatility, and anticipation. (The shot lasts two hundred seconds, prolonging our sharp impatience. This kind of sustained following, of an Individual moving nervously in a confined space---a living room, an hotel room, a train compartment---is a Bergman signature. We have to imagine, inside the visual strategy Bergman employs here, a startlingly intuitive choreography of angle changes and light investments.) After her nervous pacing, Rut sits down on her bed, and becomes the site of a flashback; already, very shortly into the film, diverting it into another narrative channel, a typical instance of the calculated speed with which Bergman controls the viewer's attention. This first flashback returns us to a scene on a lake, in which Rut is frolicking and sex playing in the water with a man next to whom she scampers into the forest for love making.

**Shock** We are shocked by the man's comments, in the course of foreplay, that he will have to be getting back to the wife and children---and particularly startled by the segue into a flat in the middle of the city. In that flat we see a stark inner lighting, and in that light the intersection of a middle-aged woman (the guy's wife) and Rut herself, who is being assaulted for her brazen intrusion into another woman's settled

middle class life. *Thirst* as rapidly plunged us into an emotion-rich narrative, full of implications for all its characters, inside of which the driver is the mind of the nervous, catlike woman pacing in her hotel room.

Little time has been required, at the outset of *Thirst*, to launch a complex series of events, involving the emotional lives of three women, in this film's fast unfolding set of three panels. That Bergman can move his emotional tale forward, at high speed, is evident in the richness of events that unfold, from within the tense launch of this initial film sequence. We rapidly realize that Raoul, the married man on whom Rut has intruded, is a macho military officer, with little sympathy for the complexities introduced by his frolic in the woods. We are about to see this same man in action, during the four-minute sequence, during his wife's hostile visit to Rut's flat; for Raoul returns to Rut's flat during this tense female interview. The man's lack of feeling for Rut is rapidly exposed.

**Pregnancy** Rut makes clear to Raoul that she has been feeling pregnancy symptoms, and Raoul immediately stomps down her dangerous implications, making every effort to establish a self-saving benchmark, by which the date of impregnation would be established for a time when Raoul himself was absent on maneuvers. Raoul's rapid refusal to exculpate himself, from any responsibility for Rut's pregnancy rapidly breaks open, for Rut, a panorama of implications for her own life—and in fact the consequences for Rut, of an afternoon of folly, arguably become the guiding thread through the private woman-sufferings of the following panels of the film. If any event-sequence holds together the entire film, it will be the consequences, for Rut, of Raoul's refusal to stick with her. She will be obliged—as she sees it—to have a late-term abortion with serious damaging consequences for her legs, consequences which, in turn, generate a sterility which dogs her future, and ruins the ballet career on which she is launched. The whole tragically personal story of Rut, which snakes through the multiple panels of the entire film, hangs in the anxious mind of the woman whose nervous pacing confronts us in the first moments of the film.

**Two interlocking story continuations** The story of Rut and Bertil interweaves with other stories. Rut and Bertil continue to quarrel throughout their tale, each endlessly reminding the other of a past flame. In Rut's case, it is a question of Raoul, while Rut's complaint is that Bertil cannot forget a certain Viola, who comes into her own as the protagonist of the second story in the sequence. Viola has suffered mental problems since the death of her husband, and in the course of treatment has come under the care of a psychiatrist, who has sinister plans for seducing her. As we are involving ourselves with this relationship, we tale-switch to the interior of a railway car taking Bertil and Rut home from their vacation, still quarreling, and under intense camera scrutiny, as they move through several- minute close ups in their swaying train car. The darting consciousness of Rut now takes her mind back to dancing school, and to an intimacy she formed there with a fellow female student named Valborg.

As mind slips one rung into another, Rut reflects on a recent meeting with Valborg, whose feelings for Rut are warm, unchanged, and as it turns out—shockingly for Rut—Lesbian. Three pairs, three loves, the first of them a story of bickering and dissatisfaction, the second of sadistic seduction, the third of (an approach) to lesbianism. On the train again, at the very end, Bertil grows exhausted with Ruth's temper tantrums and flashbacks, and (in a dream) murders her, only to find her alive and well, when he wakes, and to embrace her in a closing shot.

## THEMES

**Conflict.** Each of the three loves, in this film, is full of conflict: the conflicts of jealousy, deviance, and sadistic seduction. There is no violence-free transition from one lover into another; each of the three pairs of lovers—or would be lovers—represents a grinding together of imperfectly matching gears.

**Pastness.** Between Bertil and Rut, in particular, the greatest source of pain is each lover's fantasy of the other lover's romantic past. Recriminations, between the two, usually spring from imaginings of what the other one is dreaming about.

**Hostility.** Conflict abounds here, and is in the nature of human pairing. Downright hostility also exists: that of Bertil and Rut for the hidden sides of one another; that of Dr. Rosengren, the psychiatrist, for the Viola who is rejecting him.

**Fun.** Fun is largely present by its absence; nonetheless, the fun component of sex is sufficient to guarantee a certain joy to the performers in this odd drama. Rut is having fun in the sun, when she splashes onto the shore with Raoul, while the psychiatrist is taking his morbid pleasure in the prolonged effort to go to bed with Viola.

## CHARACTERS

**Rut.** Rut is the lead off character, whom first we meet as she paces up and down in her Basel hotel room, waiting for her lover to wake up. For the entire film we know her as nervous energy, romantic volatile moods, envy, dissatisfaction.

**Bertil.** Rut's husband. From the outset, Bertil is annoyed by Rut, as well as jealous of her and her former love for Raoul. Their conflict over the case of Raoul—does she still love him?—nags at the pair throughout the film, and undermines his efforts to enjoy her youthful beauty.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### RUT

**Character** Rut herself is the character to whom most developmental attention is given, in this film, yet even at that she is far less developed than, say, female characters like Nelly or Bertha in earlier Bergman films—in part because *Thirst* is a film about sexual desire (thirst) rather than about the people it feeds on. Rut is all nerves, desire, frustration, impetuosity. (All these traits, no doubt, will have been just what was required for the ballet career she was deprived of by her late-term pregnancy.) Like Bertil she cannot free herself of jealousy, in her case of Viola, whom Bertil may still be fond of. It is after prolonged bickering, along lines like this, that Rut and Bertil truly begin to drive one another crazy, on the train ride home from their vacation. Bertil dreams that he murders Rut, but then wakes to find, to his joy, that his wife is alive. He rushes to hug her. It is then, once again, that we recall with pity the shrunken space that Rut's life has become; capable of delight, as she had once been as a child dancer, then again as a lover of sun and sex—the place where her first flashback finds her. Like the other women in this film—and in a film like *Secrets of Women* (1952)—Rut is locked into relationships which are fundamentally prison bars to confine her in herself.

### Illustrative moments

**Nervous.** From our first glimpse of Rut we are made uneasy by her constant pacing through her hotel room. She is trapped in her signature anxiety, caught between her present commitment to Bertil, and her sense of ideals and hopes she will never realize. Later, in the train ride back to Sweden, Rut is like a caged animal in the small train compartment, so befuddled by her own sense of unfulfilled dreams—career, child—that Bertil is driven (in dream) to put her out of existence.

**Rememberer.** From the time of her first hotel room flashback, onto the scene of love making with Raoul, Rut is constantly prey to a haunting from her past, which is full of benchmarks of failure or loss. She seems mistakenly convinced that in love she should be able to compensate for the difficulties life has accumulated around her.

**Fierce.** In her initial hotel room flashback, Rut replays the scene, from her sexual games with Raoul, in which Raoul's wife invades Rut's own flat, and berates Rut for breaking up a marriage. Rut shows her steel at this point. No trace of an apology. No complexity of response. She is hungry for her man, and has won him.

**Wounded.** Underneath her high-strung anxieties Rut remains a wounded child at heart. One might say these wounds are inflicted from the earliest of her flashbacks, to dance class as a child. The dance mistress' quirky sadism red alerts Rut, deep inside, to the perils of psychological abuse.

## **BERTIL**

**Character** From the film's outset, when we see him sleeping in the Swiss hotel room, with Rut nervously walking back and forth, Bertil wears an air of withdrawal and annoyance. The couple will be returning this day to Sweden, from their holiday in Italy, and we feel a discomfort about and around them, as if they had just survived a not happy married person's vacation, and were returning to nothing better. This tone, around the figure of Bertil, will persist whenever Bertil and Rut are together. The loveless world in which Bertil and Rut live is mirrored back at them by the post-WW II land and cityscape they pass through on their return by train to Stockholm.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Sour** Shoulders hunched, body visibly uncomfortable, Bertil comes back to wakefulness slowly, in no hurry to regain his co-presence with Rut, in their Basel hotel room. It is time for the couple to resume their journey by train to Sweden, but the human mood in the room is sour.

**Trapped.** Both Bertil and his wife, Rut, are trapped in themselves by previous affairs, Rut by the harms done her, in her rough relation with Raoul, Bertil by the presence to him of his former relationship with Viola, whose seduction by a sadistic psychoanalyst forms the nub of the second tale in **Thirst**.

**Raging.** In the train to Stockholm, Bertil dreams that he is murdering his wife. His pent up fury toward her—a fury which is undefined, like a vast thirst—seems to rise from the deep frustration of his marriage, and the lack of any way out of the guilt of his past, the story of Viola.

**Desperate.** Rut and Bertil are the drivers of the present film, which is about the history of private passions and the available avenues for reaching beyond imprisoning guilt. When Bertil wakes from the dream of murdering his wife, he is overwhelmed to find her alive and well. He rushes to embrace her, in that desperate joy we feel when pulled back suddenly from the brink of disaster.