

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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TORMENT 1944

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Torment is the first film Bergman directed. In 1943 Bergman was appointed 'assistant director and screenwriter' by the Swedish Filmindustri (SF), on a one-year contract. During the winter of 1942-3, while Bergman was down with illness, he wrote the screenplay for *Torment*, basing the figure of Caligula on Sjoegren, the Latin teacher in a 1942 film by the director Hasse Ekman. There was, therefore, an already present model against which Bergman was creating his new story—a story which, like Hasse's, takes off from the experience of a boys' private school in Stockholm.

He transmutes experiences from his own high school life, not more than a decade into his own past, into a scary study of compulsion and sadism. While the emotional depth of characterization, which later we will see in 'Wild Strawberries' or 'The Seventh Seal,' is missing, there is a rich insight, in *Torment*, into say the girl Bertha, or into Caligula, which is unpredictable and attention-grabbing.

STORY

Social and educational critique, film noir, and novel of adolescence: all these cinematic trends find expression in this first Bergman-directed film. The central figure is Jan-Erik, 'a good boy from a responsible but law and order strict family,' who is no friend of gymnasium (high school) discipline, and whose rebellion against family and school, which has very vicious consequences, is deeply generated by the work he is being obliged to carry out in his Latin class, as well as in the preparation for a major series of tests which are looming ahead of his whole form. In Jan-Erik's case this conflictual situation is greatly exacerbated by one particular class, Latin, and by the Latin master, whom the boys call Caligula—and who has it in for Jan-Erik.

Classroom terror The fearful foundation, of this entire film of torment, is laid in the classroom of Jan-Erik's high school, in downtown Stockholm. All of the boys take Latin, and all fear the dreadful inquisitions of their master, who will pin them down with a glance, and demand they translate on the spot from passages in the previous night's assignment in Caesar or Cicero. The anyway formidable task, of reciting Latin and translating it before the class, becomes, under the loving attention of Caligula, a perfect forum for the master to torture the student. The primal reference of torment, in this film, is to the sadistic attention Caligula gives to Jan-Erik's translations from Latin, during class recitation. The master accompanies his nerve-wracking commentary, on Jan-Erik's recitation, by snapping his small whip, and grinning with pleasure at the pain he is causing.

First Love Jan-Erik comes to us as an intelligent but 'bohemian' middle class youngster, conscientious but more interested in finding real life with his friends than in concentrating on school. One night he is walking home after an outing with buddies when he sees a drunk woman staggering up a flight of stairs on her way home. Jan-Erik accompanies her to her flat, sees to it she can make it to bed, begins to make out, then leaves. He promises to return. Time passes, Jan-Erik falls in love with Bertha. It is a fateful decision on his part.

Rival Jan-Erik becomes aware that Bertha is not only an addict, with a weakness for men, but that one particular man is hounding her, threatening her, and giving her no peace. That this man is Caligula himself we increasingly suspect, until, after a series of coincidences and disclosures of plot, Jan-Erik returns one night to Bertha's room to find her lifeless. As he emerges from her flat, desperately looking for help, he finds Caligula hiding under a pile of clothes. He accuses the cowardly man of murder, but is ultimately unable to prove his assertion, and Caligula is released from suspicion. Matters advance

to the point that Jan-Erik strikes the cowardly Caligula in the face, in the presence of the school's humane headmaster, then the school expels him from the school.

Guilt and Absolution Caligula himself arrives begging for some kind of absolution, but receiving none, as Jan-Erik immediately rejects him. At this point, rather than absolve evil, or take revenge, Jan-Erik turns and walks out into the day, viewing a wide panorama of the whole city.

THEMES

Sadism. Caligula represents the sadist Latin master at his most rigid. All the boys fear him, and fear his one on one whip wielding approach to class recitation. Jan-Erik, though a capable and intelligent student, becomes the particular object of Caligula's inquisitorial methods—for, as we don't at the time know, the two men are rivals for Bertha's affection.

Addiction. Bertha is evidently an alcoholic and addictive to men. Though she survives as a petty shop girl, she has little prospect beyond survival, and her abandonment to her vices defines her.

Humanism. The Headmaster of Jan-Erik's school is a beacon of humanism, in the rigid atmosphere of the school. He recommends to Caligula that this over strict master should take pity on his Latin students. He particularly defends Jan-Erik.

Horror. An element of Gothic horror pervades the film. Bertha is beset by the harassment from Caligula, and she hallucinates at the thought of him. The shadowy scenes of her flat increase our sense of the gothic dread which overhangs her life.

Characters

Jan-Erik is the son of a caring middle class family, in Stockholm. He is a twenty-year old student at a classical gymnasium, with a strict curriculum, and though a basically serious lad he is thrown off by the aggression of his hostile Latin master. In the end, expelled from school, he is just opening to the new possibilities of his life.

Caligula is a loser type Latin master, in a private school in Stockholm—and incidentally the rival of Jan-Erik, one of his students, for the love of Bertha.

Bertha. Bertha is a girl of the Stockholm streets, a clerk in a petty boutique, and the lover of Jan-Erik and Caligula—and of how many other men we have no idea. She comes to a bad end, ultimately to death in her bed, in her small flat—perhaps murdered by her lover, Caligula.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

JAN-ERIK

Character Jan-Erik the leading figure of the drama, if only for the reason that he himself moves into the future after the drama, seems to be part of the growing and breathing world. We feel his promise, as he stands in the new dawn, facing a huge panorama of Stockholm. His pathway through the high school years, however, has been paved with difficulties. His parents are strictly conscientious, and worry about their young man. He does so, deepening into youthful love his attraction for Bertha.

Illustrative moments

Convivial. From the time we first meet Jan-Erik, late for school and racing up the grand staircase of his gymnasium, we observe that he is lively and sociable. His family background is supportive—until the headmaster complains about him. He is good looking and smart.

Romantic. Jan-Erik is feeling the strong pinch of sexuality, as we meet him in class, squirming under the sadistic discipline of Master Caligula. Jan-Erik fell hard for Bertha, herself a sex addict, and in that way took on the burden of love—at an early age, and while still struggling with the disciplines school required of him. A heavy package!

Protective. Not only is Jan-Erik physically hot for the beautiful Bertha, but he is deeply disturbed by the thought that she is being harassed, and perhaps violated—by some third party. He cares for her, at least in part because she is a social loser.

Aggressive. Toward the end of the film, when the Headmaster is attempting to mediate between Jan-Erik and Caligula, Jan-Erik lets go with all his fury toward this creepy Latinist, and cracks him hard over the jaw. The lewd sadist crumples under the blow.

Awakening. At the end of the film, after having been expelled from school, Jan-Erik stands outside his house in the rain., and looks out on the city. He welcomes a new life, He is open, at last.

CALIGULA

Character Caligula is the scornful name given to their Latin master, by the boys Bergman presents, in building the image of his old classical high school in Stockholm. Caligula is in fact a mid-life Latin master, who knows his texts, from Roman writers like Caesar and Cato, but who has no idea how to bring these ancients to life in modern times. When he asks the boys to recite from their translations made the previous night, he stands over them menacingly, waving a whip for reinforcement; each boy feels that Caligula is out to make him look foolish.

Caligula grows menacing and harassing toward Bertha, until the tale ends when Bertha is found dead in her bed, and Caligula is discovered in her flat hidden under a pile of clothes, where he is hoping not to be noticed. Jan-Erik discovers him, declares his suspicion that Caligula is the murderer. The two men meet, in the office of the headmaster, and Jan-Erik fells his nemesis with a right to the jaw. For lack of evidence, Caligula is released from custody, but our remaining glimpses of him confirm that he has been reduced to a sniveling coward, by his fear of indictment, for the murder of Bertha.

Illustrative moments

Sadistic. Our initial views of Caligula show him very in your face toward the boys in his Latin class. He circulates through his classroom, forcing this or that terrified boy to recite. With the passage of time his hostility toward Jan-Erik grows increasingly intense.

Unyielding. After a particularly bruising class session, the headmaster calls in Caligula for a discussion. The headmaster urges more leniency toward the boys in the Latin class. Caligula is unyielding, refusing to change his teaching strategy.

Spooky. We learn, partly directly from Bertha and partly from one of Jan-Erik's visits to her flat, that Caligula has become a real threat to Bertha. He is, however, a genuine rival to Jan-Erik, thus clearly a lover of Bertha.

Ridiculous. While capable of nastiness, and a harassing suitor, Caligula is also a figure of ridicule. Knocked out by Jan-Erik, hidden under a pile of clothes, laughed at behind his back by his students, Caligula is on the whole a ridiculous (dangerous) character.

Pitiful. At the end of the film, Jan-Erik rejects Caligula's request for forgiveness, and can be heard weeping, down the stairs leading to Bertha's old flat. Gone is the tormenting Latin master, present is the obsessed chicken.