

## 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.

The first stage of filming of the movie, which involved Bergman as an assistant director, took place both in a well known boys' Latin High School, in downtown Stockholm, and in a film studio north of Stockholm. In this stage the emphasis was on interior scenes, and we can appreciate the original treatment of space—as in the ascent of the grand hall school staircase, at the beginning of the movie, or in the treatment of shadow and light, as in Bertha's ominous quarters. (Already here we touch the genius of Bergman's gift for joining the visual to its proper moods.) The second stage of filming dealt with exterior scenes—cannot one still catch the convincing dailiness of the way Caligula and Jan-Erik converse on their way to school, after Jan-Erik has just left the shop where Bertha is working!

Bergman's rapid and disciplined learning reveals the 'feel for a whole' with which this new director takes control of all elements of his material. He transmutes experiences from his own highschool life, not more than a decade into his own past, into a scary study of compulsion and sadism. (Interesting newspaper correspondence remains, between Bergman and the principal of Bergman's high school, which Bergman later called hellish. According to the principal Bergman was a dreamy bohemian, without discipline, while Bergman responded that he had always been bored by chores and duties laid on from outside, and that he was at his best when creating something from imagination.) 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. 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 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 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.

To make matters much worse, the master and the student Jan-Erik, fall for the same girl. A perfect storm of punishments arises when Jan-Erik protects a lovely girl who is making her way back through the night to her apartment, but who is unable to make it because she is dead drunk and can't walk straight. Jan-Erik helps her into her flat, takes care that she is able to get to bed, then leaves her—having let her extract his promise that he will return to see her. As he fulfills his promise, regularly in the next days and

weeks, he becomes aware that she 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. Meanwhile Caligula has gone ahead. 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 goes on to stay in Bertha's apartment. The headmaster himself then comes to the apartment, offering his help to Jan-Erik, with whom he has felt sympathy, and after the departure of the headmaster 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

**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. Jan-Erik, who though still without knowing it has become Caligula's rival for Bertha, comes in for increasingly ruthless class room interrogation, until the two men's rivalry ultimately ends in the expulsion of Jan-Erik from school.

**Meeting with Bertha.** 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. It is a fateful decision on his part.

**The discovery.** Time passes, Jan-Erik falls in love with Bertha, and yet she is subject to great anxiety, and he knows that some other man is harassing her. (Little does he know that it is his sadistic Latin master, Caligula.) One day, intuitively alarmed at his girl friend's anxious situation, Jan-Erik hurries to her flat to check on her, and finds her dead in her bed. In the hallway, covered with a pile of clothes, is Caligula, who is trying to make his escape. Jan-Erik accuses Caligula of murder—though as it turns out, he lacks the necessary evidence.

## 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.

### **BERTHA**

**Character** Bertha is a shopgirl whom Jan-Erik and one of his classmates regularly see, as they go and from their gymnasium. (We never see these boys, or the world, from Bertha's standpoint, nor are we given much insight into her personality, though we are aware, from the start of her relation with Jan-Erik, that she is used to being ignored or devalued by others; just the mindset to bring out the compassionate-sentimental in Jan-Erik; another brilliant page from the score of *La Boheme*.) Bertha's existence takes place, for us the audience, either in her candy shop, or in her digs, a dark and spooky apartment full of heavy curtains and shadows, and fading away corridors. It is in this corner that the film noir existence of Bertha plays out.

Cursed with the need for strong drink, Bertha is reeling toward her flat, one evening, when Jan-Erik, passing by, spots her and identifies her, and makes the urgent move to help her back to her apartment. Fascinated by his intervention—Bertha seduces the young man, who, as a young idealist, truly helped her out for humanitarian reasons. Sexual pleasure, however, will go only so far, to release her from her painful psychological-sadistic bondage to another lover—in fact Jan-Erik's cruel Latin teacher, Caligula. Bertha, who is at a dead end in her life—with no significant work or marital prospects—lets herself get ever more deeply drawn into love with Jan-Erik, with whom she is soon spending most of her time. The love affair is decidedly counter-productive for the schoolboy, who gets helplessly sucked into moral decay.

Things cannot get better for Bertha, and Jan-Erik is conscious of the degeneration of their relation, as well as of the looming background presence, in Bertha's life, of the sadistic, and psychotic person of Caligula.

One day, it seems inevitably, Jan-Erik has the sense that something tragic has intervened in his relation to Bertha; he rushes to her room, and finds her dead. The poor girl's history ends here, for she has (apparently) suffered a fatal heart attack. The vicious Caligula is found in a pile of laundry, by the shocked Jan-Erik, as he exits from Bertha's flat, but to the end there remains some doubt about the actual cause of the girl's death.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Undeveloped.** Bertha, as said above, is one of the masses, who is casually seen by many, but rarely initiates thoughts, developments, or changes from the view point of her own world. People and alcohol rule her life, as does her physical passion—for a short while, but in the end she succumbs early to the shapelessness of her own existence.

**Drunk.** Bertha relies on alcohol to dull the pain of her existence, and under that influence Jan-Erik first finds her staggering home, dangerously out of control. We are not aware of the antecedents of this alcoholism, in Bertha's earlier life, but by the time we meet her she is a wreck, torn between two men—one of whom is a psychopath.

**Beset.** Bertha is permanently harassed by the psychotic Caligula, who haunts her jealously, though she is deeply attracted to the younger Jan-Erik. The dark ambience in which Bertha lives is a natural habitat for the brooding and invasive presence of the sick school teacher.

**Dead.** Bertha is unable to survive the squalor of her circumstances or the pressure of daily life—overworked and harassed as she is. Whatever the overt cause of her death, we can concede that she is ultimately the victim of despair and abuse. Even Jan-Erik, a middle class kid with good intentions, is only a lover to Bertha, while within himself he has hardly begun to seek a life path.