

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

WINTER LIGHT 1962

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Winter Light, which Bergman referred to as his best film, is frequently judged together with two other films—*Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) and *The Silence* (1963)—as a trilogy of ‘faith-related films,’ or, better put, films that concern the issues around the possibilities of religious faith. Taken in that broadest sense, faith in the meaningfulness of life, we might say that from the start—think of *Port of Call* or *Summer with Monika*—Bergman has been working the question of the value and direction of life. In the above mentioned trilogy, however, he addresses the form the faith-question poses as it arises in organized religion, especially in the guise of a rather stark North European Protestantism which Bergman was amply familiar with—his father, after all, being a Lutheran pastor.

Bergman brings his finest attention, to this formal faith issue, onto the thinking and acting of Pastor Tomas Ericsson, who is a living embodiment of the issue of religious faith. (Pastor Tomas, interestingly enough, strongly reminds us of Miguel de Unamuno’s *San Manuel Bueno Martir*—1931, a gripping analysis of the dilemma of a Spanish pastor, who loses his faith, cannot bear to share this discovery with his congregation, and whose martyrdom consists in having to pretend belief which he does not feel.) In *Winter Light* Bergman probes the behaviors of a pastor who—like Bergman himself, by his frequent account—does not ‘believe in god,’ but who lives in a setting where such simple negation constantly butts up against needs and expectations of mere human survival.

STORY

The Opening Scandinavian winter provides a cold gray-black-white shifting of light tones, and when the reflector is the stone walls of country churches, and the severe—although infinitely modulated—faces of pastor and parishioners, the thought-mood cannot fail to be severe. And indeed the opening mood is characteristically—for Bergman’s faith-trilogy—unyieldingly stark. (So stark, one astute critic has observed, that one senses even streaks of humor, not out of the question for the serious but never heavy Bergman.) As we open, the Pastor is just completing his noon communion service, pronouncing the liturgical lines that precede the moment when the parishioners will advance to the communion rail in order to consume the body and blood of their savior. There are very few worshippers in attendance: fisherman Jonas and his pregnant wife Karin; pastor Tomas’ ex-mistress Marta, who is an atheist. At the end of the service Tomas, who is coming down with a bad cold, hurries into a corner to prepare his next homily, which he will present in a nearby town at three in the afternoon. One more over busy pastor, conscientiously working to show his faith. Or is that the case?

Jonas’ Worry As Tomas is preparing his homily he is interrupted by the arrival of the Perssons, Jonas and his wife. Jonas is depressed, for he has recently heard the news that the Chinese government is developing an atom bomb, one more world-threatening manifestation of man’s cruelty to man in the Cold War period. It seems to Jonas that mankind is simply out to destroy mankind, and that there may be nothing left to live for. The pastor asks Jonas to take his wife home, then to return; and while Jonas goes out, Marta—who is a substitute teacher—comes in, and begins to comfort the pastor, whose cold is getting worse, who is overworked, and who—to make matters much worse—is losing his faith. Marta attempts to console Tomas, then asks him whether he has had a chance to read the letter she sent him. The pastor explains that he has not yet read the letter, and that he may find himself unable to help Jonas—for he himself, the pastor, is far from sure that there is purpose or meaning to man’s life on earth. Marta, a declared atheist, has no trouble understanding him, though she sees his predicament, as an active pastor. She understands that he is too preoccupied to return her love.

Pastor's Freedom On opening Marta's letter, the pastor finds that she no longer needs him. He has been of no use to her during a recent outburst of her rash, which he found disgusting, and for which his prayers did no good. In the letter she reflects on her own family, which though not religious was happy and well adjusted. After reading the letter, Tomas falls asleep, and when he wakes finds Jonas before him. The two men talk, and after a brief effort at making sense of the world, for Jonas, Tomas gives up and admits the power of his own faith-problem. Long ago, when he was serving in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, Tomas had been horrified by the atrocities he had observed, and on which God seemed to look down disinterestedly. The perspective Tomas offers, to Jonas, is that these bad things that agonize mankind make more sense if we abandon the idea that there is a god, and simply accept life as it is, without justification. Jonas departs, and Tomas faces the crucifix, saying to himself, I am free! No longer does he need to worry about elaborate justifications for a supposed God's behavior.

Pastor's Suffering For Tomas, the first extraordinary breath of freedom is not long-lasting. The ground would seem to have been laid for a genuine love between Marta and the pastor, who now seems to share her view of God. Marta herself, who has been eavesdropping on the conversation between Jonas and Tomas, is overjoyed, and assures Tomas that the path is now open for true love between them. Tomas, however, does not respond to her feelings. Suddenly Magdalena, a local widow, arrives with the terrible news that Jonas has killed himself, leaving a desperate wife and children. Tomas drives to the scene of the suicide, helps the police cover the body, and then, quickly processing what has been happening, Tomas lashes out at Marta, taking his vengeance against a person who steadfastly supported him. Matters quickly grow worse between them. Tomas berates Marta for talking too much, for lacking the sensitivity of his first wife, the only woman he has ever loved. Despite the widening rift, Marta goes with Tomas to the fisherman's house, where they inform Karin of Jonas' suicide; leaving the woman completely alone and in despair—which Tomas can hardly bring himself to alleviate. The pastor's new found freedom has had the effect, so far, of leaving him without direction or moral center.

Pastor's Passion Tomas and Marta go together to the second church, for the afternoon three o'clock service. They find the church empty, except for Fredrik, the organist, and Algot, the handicapped sexton. Algot inquires why Christianity puts so much stress on Jesus' physical sufferings, which were relatively brief, and much less stress on the indifference shown to Jesus both by his disciples and by God. Algot asks Tomas whether the worst silence, in the face of suffering, was not God's, and Tomas concurs that the silence of God was the worst. Fredrik, meanwhile, advises Marta that she should move away from the small town where they live, rather than remaining, and losing her dreams. At that point the question rises whether the afternoon service should be held, and Tomas says yes, proceeding to ring the bells. The service opens, with Tomas intoning the ritual phrases: *God is all holy and the earth is filled with his glory.*

THEMES

Doom. The doom theme was strong in mid-20th century global culture. In the middle of the Cold War there was no confidence that nuclear weapons could be prevented from destroying us all. (The Russo-American conflict was at the center, in this regard, but by 1964 the Chinese had successfully exploded their first atom bomb, the dreadful event about which Jonas asks Pastor Tomas. Global hostility seemed to be intensifying.)

Hope. Hope is largely present by its absence in this film. We are not sure why Tomas loses hope in God, and in the order of the Universe, but we must conclude that Tomas' defiance of God plays a role in turning him back into God's neighborhood. Would Tomas have conducted the second service, if he had truly abandoned all hope?

Suffering. The person most afflicted with physical suffering, in the film, is the handicapped sexton, Algot. (The fisherman brought his own suffering onto himself.) He has had to drag out his life with a handicap. And yet Algot penetrates to a deeper understanding, than any other character, of the power of patient acceptance, which he ascribes to Jesus Christ.

Passion. The richness of the concept of passion, in Christian theology, is illustrated by the irony of passion in the present film. Tomas' discovery, that he no longer believes in the fundamentals of Jesus

Christ's revelation, is the move that drives him back into the affirmation which concludes the film. Bergman, with his painful grasp of his own religious tradition, is keenly aware of the Christian bond between loss and salvation.

CHARACTERS

Tomas is the pastor of a small country church. He is feeling the weight of loss. His first wife has passed away. The weather is cold, he has a cold, his girl friend rejects Christianity, and he himself, furthermore, has begun to doubt the validity of the religion. It takes a jolt to bring him back. He reveals his own doubts to a man, the fisherman, who is badly in need of a boost, and who kills himself when he fails to get from Tomas the world view help he needed.

Marta is Thomas' mistress, who mocks him for his religious convictions, assuring him that she came from a happy and well adjusted family, where no one needed the myths of an orderly cosmos, in order to value life.

Jonas, the fisherman, is the parishioner who asks Tomas to explain why God will accept human beings' highly calculated destructive attitudes toward each other. Having been bitterly discouraged by his pastor's explanation, he kills himself.

\CHARACTER ANALYSIS

TOMAS

Character Thomas is the pastor of a small country church, which is bleak in setting and has minimal attendance. He is losing his conviction, of the truth of the Christian religion, and when asked by one of his parishioners, whether there is order and meaning in the universe, he is unable to provide an encouraging response. When that parishioner commits suicide, out of despair, the pastor is transformed into a bitter loser. Instead of rejoicing, in his new freedom from the yoke of his Savior, he finds his personality disintegrating, and his own bitterness tearing him apart. In the end, as his life appears to be at stake, he chooses to continue reciting—and believing?—the central Christian creed.

Illustrative moments

Doubting. Tomas is asked by the fisherman, Jonas, to help understand a world in which great nations, in this case China, continue to take measures to destroy one another. The pastor is unable to come up with a satisfying explanation, finally admitting to Jonas that he does not believe in a merciful and providential god.

Confused. Tomas faces all around him the destructive consequences of his gradual loss of faith in the order of the world. He must accept the fact that Marta, a happy atheist, no longer finds any love in him, and that she sees no future in their relationship.

Stoic. Joining the police, to perform the last rites for the fisherman, who has killed himself, Tomas adopts a Stoic manner, which is the crucial indication that he can no longer, at that moment, carry out the rites of the church with conviction.

Believing? At the end of the film, Tomas intones the Nicene creed, the traditional Christian affirmation of the glory of God in his universe. Does he believe what he is saying or is he repeating familiar words out of habit? Bergman leaves us to decide for ourselves.

MARTA

Character Marta is Tomas' mistress. We see her first at the end of her lover's noon service, at which as pastor he has ministered this day to a small handful of parishioners. Marta approaches Tomas, after the service, to tell him that she loves him, and to make sure that he has read the letter she sent him, a

letter in which she says that she is sure that he does not love her. In her letter, which Tomas goes on to read, she complains that Tomas is incapable of faith or helping others—as he proved unable to assist her when she had a total-body rash that he found disgusting. She explains that she has come from a happy and well adjusted family, which was not harmed by its total lack of religious belief, while Tomas' religiosity seems to bring with it only discouragement and fatigue.

The conundrum posited here is modified in the second half of the narrative, which finds Tomas turning against his beliefs, looking on the crucifix as a forgotten relic of his past, while Marta, despite Tomas' turning against her in every way, maintains her love of her former pastor, and gives in, herself, to the claims of the crucifix. Her path to compassion and prayer is laid out for her by the sexton, at the church to which Tomas goes to preach that afternoon. The sexton, handicapped, enters the mind of Jesus, who was betrayed by those he trusted and beaten both in body and spirit; while Marta kneels to pray in the back of the church, during the service, and seems by the end of the film to have acquired the living spirituality the pastor no longer finds available.

Illustrative moments

Loving. Marta opens the film by approaching her lover the pastor, at his noon day service; she wishes both to assure him, that she loves him, and to make certain that he has read a letter she sent him, explaining that she knows he no longer loves her. Her love for Tomas will remain steady throughout the film, though he will reject her harshly.

Critical. Marta is not simply loving toward the pastor, but is critical of his coldness, and in particular of his inability to mitigate a total body rash which has been plaguing her, and for the conquering of which she has been praying. Her love for the pastor is not simple.

Decisive. In the afternoon service, at a small church, the organist and especially the handicapped sexton urge Marta to leave the small village where she lives, and where her own life is sure to be thwarted. She rejects this idea, and turns to praying in the back of the church. She has come through into a new faith, after having been temporarily rejected by her pastor himself.

Tolerant. In mid film, Marta accompanies Tomas to the home of Jonas, a fisherman who has committed suicide—in part because he could not find any comfort or explanation from the pastor. In the course of the painful visit the pastor tells Marta he is sick of her. For all that Marta goes with him to the afternoon service. It is there that her prayer lifts the whole film to power and meaning.