

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Shame. 1968

Ingmar Bergman. (1918-2007)

STORY.

We encounter snatches of familiar Bergman in this unusually political film. We move through a mysterious landscape of foreign otherness, as in *Silence* or even *Rites*, where the trio of the indicted appear to spring from the experience of other places and lands. And yet the foreign in the present film is something different, aggressive and in your face, military. We are also used to the shattering consequences of marriage in Bergman's work: the debacles of *The Marionettes* or *Three Strange Loves*. Yet the marital pain which stalks *Shame* is not simply the pain two adults seem destined to bring down onto one another, in the course of co-existing and compromising; the marital agony of the two musicians, who are protagonists of the present film, is a pain soaked in war, the breakdown of civil society, and the global failure of trust among humans. The very presence of musicians—talented symbols of social growth—as protagonists, is Bergman's nod to the disciplined and powerful strains he attributes to culture at its best—as in *Autumn Sonata*.

War. Not irrelevantly the film is a product of the hottest years of the Vietnam War (1965-75), which was itself a moment in the global questioning of the possibility of the civilized. The Swedes themselves, whose neutrality in WW II had often redounded to the advantage of the Nazis, were in any case highly sensitized to the sacrifices required by a culture of war. It is no surprise, therefore, that Bergman sets his story where it hurts, in the midst of a Sweden like country in northern Europe, where global and still undefined threats, posed by a foreign invasion, have moved in to overturn the world of Jan and Eva Rosenberg, the musicians who have fled to the shelter of an offshore island, on which, under the wartime circumstances that surround them, they are at film's opening simply surviving on meager market garden produce, and waiting for some kind of normalcy to return. This setting guarantees that, while many familiar Bergman tones course this film, the director is here looking squarely at man, war, and their mutual agony, as he has never before done.

Protagonists. Jan and Eva Rosenberg have come to a tense stage of their marriage, and when we first meet them, they are preparing to take their produce over to the mainland, to earn the few kronur they can to pull them through the harsh economy they are in. (No jobs in music, no cultural activity for four years.) On the ferry to the mainland, the couple meet old friends, also in transit and refugee status, and upon docking they permit themselves to visit a wine shop whose owner, an old friend now about to leave for military conscription, who sells them one of his last bottles of white wine, a symbol here for moments in culture which are being lost on all sides.

Island. Returned to their island, Jan and Eva enjoy some of their increasingly rare chances to bond, to reflect on their marital potential—she wants kids; he wants to wait. While they converse, however, the world seems to be changing. Church bells (of alarm) are ringing on the island, though it is Friday (not Sunday); heavy trucks are passing, carrying military hardware; the telephone lines are down. On the dock, where they had landed on the mainland, refugees are standing around disconsolately. Before long, on the island, the couple notices that air battles are surging up over their village, and when the couple begin to flee they are captured by paratroopers, who immediately set about interviewing them. (The propaganda, envisaged by this interviewing, comes under the film director's sharp depiction and scrutiny, as he reflects on screen about the many cultural changes that are built into these new forms of violent social unrest.

Mayor. The mayor of the island, an old friend of Ewa and Jan, offers to help them, providing essential supplies and sums of money to get them through the war. In exchange this old friend bargains Ewa for sex—cashing in on an old flame he has had for her, and inducing her, for the first time in her marriage, to

be unfaithful to Jan. When Jan learns of what has happened, it nearly destroys him, but though his personal misery is almost too much for him, Jan finds a way to pull a kind of survival out of the humiliating situation, the situation in which the true shame of the entire film, his wife's capitulation, is at the same time only an image of the human shame that has convulsed the world of the film.

Survival? During the shame of Ewa, the Mayor gives his conquered love a wad of money—one of the inducements that has led her to take this humiliating step. She misplaces the money, Jan recovers it, and Jan holds onto it—even when the Mayor, begging for the return of the money, begs also for enough to buy his own life back from the invaders, who are ready to kill him. Jan takes his revenge—another byproduct of course of the degenerating moral climate brought on by the whole war—and in the end buys a way out of the strife in which he and Ewa are barely surviving. He purchases passage on a small rowboat carrying refugees out into open sea, in the direction of a neutral country. Bare survival is all we can say of this effort, for as we last see the lonely vessel it is making its way out into open sea, having wound its way through a Sargasso sea of invader corpses, which have clogged the harbor of the land Ewa and Jan are leaving.

THEMES

Chaos. The world in which Ewa and Jan find themselves is upside down. After investing in significant musical careers—music is Bergman's gold standard for meaningful discipline—the two protagonists find themselves without direction

Conflict. In the midst of social chaos, Jan and Ewa naturally find increased conflict between them. This conflict, which for some time turns around the question of when to have children, is upgraded by the shameful sexual capitulation of Ewa to the Mayor.

Desire. While the Mayor has long had his eye on Ewa, and himself has a very poor marriage, Ewa is essentially buying survival and support, by going to bed with the mayor. She feels little pity for him, when her husband refuses to support him against the invaders.

Hope. As the small boat takes Jan and Ewa to 'another country,' we feel little hope. There is no direction of definition to the journey. There is nothing at the other end.

CHARACTERS

Ewa is the prominent figure in the drama. She is attractive, tough, inventive, and argues throughout for a marriage which will be productive and hold the couple together.

Jan, like his wife a talented musician, is irritable and inflexible in the (admittedly dreadful) circumstances in which the invasion places him. It is he who gets the couple out of the country, but the goal of their escape remains unclear.

Jacobi, Colonel Jacobi is the mayor of the island, and arguably both the salvation and the downfall of Ewa and Jan. He is a weak man, trapped in a dysfunctional marriage, but has some sense of reciprocal responsibility for the residents of 'the island.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

EWA

Character Ewa is the most grounded and persistent character in the film. It is she who plans a direction for the couple's marriage, she who pleads with her grumpy husband to think creatively, she who puts off the paratroopers who question her and her husband, and she who sacrifices herself to the desires of the mayor, so that she can 'feed her family'—for she has no desire for the mayor. May we add that to the end, as she disappears from sight, Ewa is attractive, vital, and leads?

Parallels. Heroines in literature abound, each taking her own path toward meaning, as Ewa does. Lizzy Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* is an independent and inventive woman, who gives strength to all who are around her. Helen Keller, in *The Story of my Life* (1903), speaks for the powers of the deaf/blind, and in that way touches the strength of all mankind. Karen Blixen, in *Out of Africa* (1937), leaves ample evidence of the power of independent women to lead and shape societies.

Illustrative moments

Concerned. Ewa it is who thinks proactively for her marriage, and does what she can, to persuade Jan into making a family.

Vital. It is Ewa who is most determined to make life work for the couple. When she and Jan take their produce to the mainland, it is she who wants most to drop by the wine and salmon shop.

Threatened. When the mayor puts the make on her, it is Ewa who must decide how to support her marriage. She yields.

Indomitable. Ewa and Jan struggle to reach the boat which will take them to 'another country.' Ewa holds out, indomitably.

Discussion questions

The film is called *Shame*. What is the central shame of the film? Are there several kinds of shame? Is the 'war' itself a shame?

Where do the 'invading forces' come from, in the film, and what do they represent? Are there any good guys or sides in the world of the film? What are we to think about the prospects for the restitution of a world in which arts and artists play an important role?