

Shame

Film review

Dennis Raymond

1969

When the heroine of Ingmar Bergman's great movie "Persona" turned on a television set and saw the atrocities of the Vietnam war, we in the audience experienced something close to cultural shock—a medievalist had crossed the time barrier. One of the severest and most frequent criticisms of Bergman has been his renowned social indifference.

His most recent movies, from "Through a Glass Darkly" to "Hour of the Wolf," have been tight, introverted studies of the human psyche, and the question has often been asked as to whether they held any relevance for today's audiences. Bergman was too preoccupied with the workings and limitations of the mind to be concerned with "social consciousness" and such.

Therefore, it seems only right that Bergman should be the one to make the definitive film on war and its effects on those who insist on remaining indifferent. We are hardly aware of the magnitude of the author-director's concept until we are caught up in the horror of it, and there is no turning back.

In "Shame," currently at the Studio North Theatre you will find the greatest film artist working in the medium today at an exciting new peak. It is an icy, flawless work, really startling to encounter in the Bergman repertoire because it's so unlike anything we've come to expect from him.

The first thing that strikes you about it is the scope and universality of its themes. But more important, "Shame" is so direct, lucid, and thoroughly accessible that I'm afraid some may consider it too obvious.

There are no Reality versus Illusion enigmas to ponder and puzzle over here. Everybody and everything is exactly what they appear to be so we can observe the genuine depth and reality of what they are. And by the end of the film you know precisely what Bergman said.

Part of the excitement that comes from watching a film artist develop—seeing his new films the way one reads the new books of a contemporary writer—is to discover that he has taken everything he learned from his previous efforts and renewed himself by striking out in new directions.

This was the excitement I felt back in 1967 when Bergman finally put aside Godly things to concentrate on the condition humaine of the artist in "Persona" and it is the excitement I feel once again upon seeing "Shame."

Bergman has finally taken on death itself for his theme, and no one could say that he hadn't prepared. When he got to this vision of man's last days on earth, he looked at his subject with astonishing purity and objectivity.

In order to project us just a little beyond our current situation, "Shame" is set a tiny step in the future, yet we feel we have already known this time.

This world of the future has been at war long enough for events to have become confused, and, like the characters, we are the civilians in the middle of it even though we feel out of it. All we know is that the action occurs on a large island, though no places or armies are named. It is all so exactly detailed that it seems to be war as we have always known it—a war that is so familiar from our fears that it is normal, everyday total war.

There's nothing really startling about it; even the weapons are conventional. It doesn't, after all, take a hydrogen bomb to finish us off—a rifle can do the job. This is just degrading, ordinary old war, and it takes a while before

we realize that Bergman has put us in the position of the Vietnamese and all those occupied peoples we have seen being interrogated and punished and frightened until they can no longer tell friend from enemy, liberation from extermination.

“Shame” is just too exact and too strongly simplified to be merely realistic; the details register upon us with an intensity beyond realism.

Liv Ullman and Max von Sydow become the survivors of this war. As Eva and Jan Rosenberg, married seven years and childless, they are violinists who have retired to a small cottage on the island because the war has broken up their orchestra and he has a faulty heart.

At the opening they are a couple with wrinkled, well-worn domestic patterns: he has his morning heart pill, she has her morning domination; he is too lazy to shave, she has to do the accounts and get the car ready; he is a bit weak, she is a bit cruel. But they really do love each other—periodically, at any rate.

The couple have accepted war as the natural state of affairs: they hear its percussion, observe troops and tank movements, but are left alone. For the Rosenbergs, it is an incomprehensible war. They are sensitive, humane people, cultivating their, at times, neurotic attachment to each other and growing berries as a means of livelihood. But on any issue outside of their love of nature, art, and home pleasures such as good food, good wine, good talk, they hold no position.

It is a Friday morning, with the everyday irritations and petty disputes encroached on by strange signs. Church bells are heard ringing—mysterious for a Friday. The phone rings incessantly, but whenever Eva picks up the receiver, no one answers. They hear rumors that troops are advancing in their area, but their radio is broken, and Jan thinks it best that they don’t know about such things anyway.

Unexpectedly, the Rosenbergs come under fire of low flying bombers while enjoying the freshness of the outdoors. Here Bergman employs some of his finest imagery as Eva and Jan run from the shelter of a tree to their greenhouse to their cottage like terrified children. When captured by paratroopers, they quite honestly disclaim any loyalty toward one side or the other. But their disclaimer is used against them, twisted for propaganda purposes.

The point is that there is no such thing as noninvolvement. It just doesn’t work, Bergman is saying, and we can suppose that no one would know that better than Bergman. The more the Rosenbergs attempt to protect their insularity, the more their shame deepens, the more degraded they become.

By the end the couple have reversed roles; he dominates. The man who could not kill a chicken for food has killed a military friend and a young unarmed soldier for the boy’s boots.

Eva accepts these killings; had slept with that friend in order to protect their lives; has retreated for refuge into dreams of the child the marriage has not produced. The civilized, cultured people of the opening have become little more than animals whose chief ethic is to survive. Detachment becomes the ultimate shame.

The remaining few minutes of the film contain a fantastic, almost surreal image that is hard to forget. Eva and Jan finally make their way to the sea and escape from the island in a small fishing boat. Days pass and the food is low, but one morning they run aground on what proves to be a huge floating island of dead men in full fighting gear and life belts. The boat creaks as if in pain, moving among the clinging corpses.

What’s really fantastic about this image is that it doesn’t come as a surprise to us at all. “Shame” unfolds with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy or a common dream.

“Shame,” it is true, “says” nothing new, but it says it better than anyone else has been able to ‘til now. If “Shame” is banal, it’s the most powerful banal movie ever made—the obvious redeemed. The novelty and terror of “Shame” is in its depiction of just how incredibly mundane the end can be. It is in this realm that “Shame” is a great, original work.

It is, in many ways, Bergman’s equivalent of Godard’s extraordinary “Weekend”—also an account of what people do to survive. There is, in fact, a sequence that comes remarkably close in conception to that notorious 17-minute tracking shot in “Weekend”: In the midst of a surprise bomber attack, Eva and Jan head towards the seacoast, oblivious to the death and destruction around them.

The dead lie in horrible, undignified postures and groupings—the camera catches a fleeting glimpse of a lifeless face frozen in an expression of terror, a house bursting into hideous balls of fire, the corpses of children lying by

the roadside. A tracking shot moves relentlessly forward, and the Guernican images it captures are tossed aside as quickly as they are picked up.

Bergman is much more subtle here than Godard who rubs your nose in the carnage. It is precisely because these images are subliminal that the total vision is more infernal than that of "Weekend." Each shot explodes not on the screen, but, like delayed-action bombs, in your mind. The effect is devastating.

But artists of different temperaments see the destruction of the world very differently. Bergman does not possess Godard's daring wit, but this is not to say that "Shame" is totally void of humor. In the past, it was a weakness of Bergman that although he can do comedy and he can do tragedy he could not combine them in one film. When he tried, it was disastrous.

In "Shame" you can see Bergman equipping himself with an essential humor, and the result is sometimes surprising. There is one tender scene in particular of beautiful bedroom comedy, fondly reminiscent of the sardonic "Smiles of a Summer Night": just as Jan settles down to make love to Eva, he gets a cramp in his foot and jumps out of bed. It is a lovely, inspired moment.

But the prevailing mood is one of gnawing tension and approaching doom, and this is achieved solely through film technique, without even the time-honored crutch of music. Bergman uses the sound of war percussively—war becomes a monster beating and wailing at the door. His economy of style is superb, proving the maxim of the saying that "less is more;" there's not one unnecessary shot or cut in "Shame," and it is this austerity that works so well towards creating the tension.

Bergman can look at a flat, empty Swedish landscape, photograph it, and turn it into a thing of frightening, evocative beauty.

One of the film's most haunting images consists of nothing more than the Rosenberg's station wagon rolling across the naked terrain, from screen left to screen right, into a long shot of great and disquieting mystery. Not only does the car glisten ominously, the whole landscape has a strident, metallic quality as if you could cut yourself on the light it reflects.

Bergman is a master at creating such effects of dislocation and surrealism by rendering the real unreal, and vice versa. Sven Nykvist's crystalline photography is so straightforward it's like an unblinking eye on the universe; the imagery is extremely sharp, crisp, ripe with textures and chiaroscuro. And the scenes of violence are shot with a handheld camera, to punch us with immediate shock.

Together, Bergman and Nykvist have achieved some fantastic, powerful passages that are as unforgettable as anything in the previous Bergman films: Eva and Jan marching through a landscape of scorched tree skeletons, even more horrible than the landscape with dead bodies because now it seems that nature herself has been exterminated.

Out of the corner of our eye we see a pitifully small, black funeral procession heading for a bombed out church. Long leaping tongues of fire climb up slender, virginal birches and ravish them while the Rosenbergs stand incredulously before the devastation around them.

With "Shame," Bergman demonstrates that he has become a master of physical, as well as mental, violence. But more significant is his mastery of what is perhaps most difficult of all in film—the simple domestic scene. The way a husband and wife sit together, the way a musician might handle his violin, the way lovers will gaze at each other—the pleasures and amenities are plainly stated, without emphasis or atmospheric touches.

The leading performances, of course, are perfection. Max von Sydow doesn't know how to make a false move, and he makes the true moves so fluently that the skill and design in his acting are easy to overlook. As for Liv Ullman, whose third Bergman film this is, she is never less than extraordinary. The more I see her the more I am impressed by her depth and range in her art.

When I first saw her two years ago as the refined, mute heroine of "Persona," I thought, "What a remarkably handsome actress." When I saw her again last year as the earthy, loving wife in "Hour of the Wolf," I marveled, "What a remarkably exciting woman!" And now, in "Shame," I see that Miss Ullman's great beauty merely stands second to her tremendous talent.

I was about to praise the shattering scene in which she encounters the body of a dead child, but that moment is no better—simply more dramatic—than those in which she bitches at her husband or loves him or realizes what is happening to him and her or begins to go morally numb.

Bergman knows exactly how much and how far to rely on her. The opening scene of “Hour of the Wolf” consisted of Miss Ullman speaking to us for some minutes in close-up, a scene that was a triumph of her ability and his judgment.

In “Shame” there is a similar scene when she speaks at length to von Sydow about her desire to bear a child. Watching over his shoulder, we see her wistful unsatisfied maternity to immediate physical desire. Again she plays the long scene well; again Bergman shows that great direction sometimes consists of not intruding, of allowing the right performer and the fact of film to come together.

There has always been something about the eclectic medium of movies that attracts artists of Promethean temperament who want to use the medium for scale and scope as well as depth—men like Griffith and Abel Gance and Eisenstein and Fritz Lang and Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick who thought big, men whose prodigious failures could make other people’s successes look puny.

This is the tradition in which Ingmar Bergman’s “Shame” belongs. Rich with countless characters and chaotic incidents, “Shame” is a massive achievement, but it is the chaos of wartime as seen through an ordering intelligence. Bergman has an almost magical control over his material, and this control has given way to one of his most linear, logical, and beautifully thought-out dramas.

As an indictment against war, it is, in my opinion, unparalleled. Films like “The War Game,” “Paths of Glory,” “How I Won the War,” and “Les Carabiniers” pale beside it because the war they depict seems so far removed from us.

The horror in “Shame” is war as we have always imagined it; it is the semi-documentary war we know from the television coverage of Vietnam. And Bergman has the ability to keep an aesthetic distance between himself and his material—to remain objective—and it is precisely because “Shame” is so cold and ruthless, without false emotions, that it hits us with such impact.

“Shame” is Bergman’s vision of the End, his ultimate personal statement on the human condition, and it ranks with the visions of the greatest.

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