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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Virgin Spring* by Ingmar Bergman, Allan Ekelund and Ulla Isaksson

Review by: David NearySource: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (FALL 2018), pp. 56-58

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26532854>

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The Virgin Spring

Produced by Ingmar Bergman and Allan Ekelund; directed by Ingmar Bergman; screenplay by Ulla Isaksson, based on the medieval ballad "Töre's Daughter at Vänge"; cinematography by Sven Nykvist; production design by P. A. Lundgren; edited by Oscar Rosander; costume design by Marik Vos; music by Erik Nordgren; starring Max von Sydow, Birgitta Valberg, Gunnel Lindblom, Birgitta Pettersson, Axel Düberg, Tor Isedal, Ove Porath, and Allan Edwall. Blu-ray and DVD, B&W, Swedish dialogue with English subtitles, 90 min., 1960. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterion.com.

In his November 1960 review of *The Virgin Spring* for *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther lamented the "barrenness of plot and perplexities" of Bergman's latest film, following the "intellectual complexity" of his previous critical hits, *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, and *The Magician*. Across the pond, the *Cahiers* crowd were equally underwhelmed; two years after Godard had written his paean to the Swede, "Bergman-orama," Godard himself was now the groundbreaking director du jour. Jean Domarchi wrote that December: "Bergman and our Bergmania will pass like the scoubidou and hula hoop." Bergman, who scholar Birgitta Steene says tended to internalize criticism on a deep level, came to be embarrassed, perhaps even ashamed, of it. The film is barely mentioned in either of his autobiographies. Looking back now, nearly sixty years later, it's funny to think how wrong they all were.

Apart from this brief blip in his critical capital, *The Virgin Spring* marked many other turning points for the filmmaker. It had initially been planned as the first film in the trilogy that became his lineup from 1961 to 1963—*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*—but ultimately was cut as he rebooted the series. Steene's assumption is that its critical reception made *The Virgin Spring's* ties a liability. But while questions of faith permeate all these works, the latter three represent the chamber drama style that made up so much of his subsequent filmography. Similarly, *The Virgin Spring* is his last period drama to stretch beyond his or his parents' lifetimes (excluding his stagebound *Magic Flute*), and as such serves as a capstone to the first half of his career, of which the similarly medieval philosophical conundrum, *The Seventh Seal*, remains the defining work. The somewhat redemptive, miraculous ending of *The Virgin Spring* also contrasts sharply with the

darker works that would follow for the next two decades, as the tortured Lutheran revealed himself a tortured agnostic. Beyond that, it marked his first major collaboration with Sven Nykvist, the patron saint of cinematography, who would sculpt in light the look of almost every film he made for the next thirty-five years, and also netted Bergman the first of three competitive Oscars, which helped to fund many decades of filmmaking, and make him one of the few household names of world cinema.

On one of the rare occasions when Bergman deigned to direct a screenplay he had not himself written, *The Virgin Spring* was the second of two collaborations with the author Ulla Isaksson, who had written his 1958 film *Brink of Life*. Like Bergman, she came from a strict Protestant family, and her work dealt with religious dilemmas similar to many dramatized in the director's best films. The source material was a thirteenth-century Swedish poem, "Töre's Daughter at Vänge," about the gruesome rape and murder of a virginal young Christian woman, and her father's terrible revenge and repentance before God. Like many works of the era, it serves as an origin story for a local church, in this case at Kärna, in southern Sweden. Bergman had wanted to adapt the story for some time, and chose Isaksson to undertake the task, perhaps

because he felt a female voice could help expand what is a horrific tale for a woman but one framed from a very masculine viewpoint. (The pair's *Brink of Life*, adapted from her own short story, features three pregnant women torn in deciding whether or not to give up their children for adoption.) Isaksson does a remarkable job fleshing out the story—the ballad could fit on the back of a cereal box—especially in terms of crafting real female roles out of the virgin and her mother, and the addition of the jealous servant girl, Ingeri. Even the title change shifts the focus from the male character, Töre, although the film never feels fully certain of who its protagonist is.

The film opens on Ingeri, played with sympathetic impudence by Gunnel Lindblom, setting a hearth ablaze as she invokes the heavenly father in morning prayer—in this case the Allfather, the Norse god Odin. Her paganism is not long for this world, though, as a cut reveals her masters worshipping a grim effigy of the crucified Christ. The farmstead's matriarch, Märeta (Birgitta Valberg), is devout; her husband Töre (Max von Sydow), likely a recent convert, appears affably to join her. The true subject of his worship is their daughter, Karin (the cherubic yet impish Birgitta Pettersson), upon whom he dotes, a love returned with cheeky adoration. Märeta's



Karin (Birgitta Pettersson), on her way to make an offering at church, is assaulted by three goatherds, in Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

love for the girl perhaps surpasses that of Töre, but Karin does not wholly return it—Nykvist continually frames the mother apart from father and daughter; when she asks for a kiss, the young girl lovingly, humiliatingly, kisses her own finger and boops her mother's forehead.

Forgiven for oversleeping as growing teens are wont to do, Karin is dressed in her finest clothes—including a shimmering silk dress sewed by fifteen maidens, as in the poem—and is sent to church with an offering of candles. “Proud Karin,” as she is referred to in the poem as many as four times, sets out with only Ingeri for company. Ingeri, visibly pregnant and perpetually slut-shamed for it by all but Karin, retains bitterness toward the girl. Fearful of omens that portend a doom she regrets she wished for, Ingeri abandons Karin in the woods, and is nearly assaulted by a creepy, nameless bridge keeper, whose paganism still bears trademarks of human sacrifice. Karin, naively unaware of danger, encounters three goatherds—they first see her, angelic, drenched in sunlight, and the two adults in their party are overcome with desire. Taking advantage of her innocence and good nature, they manipulate her into having a meal with them. In a tableau echoing a bastardized “Last Supper” (*Viridiana* would follow the next year), the four eat in a glade, but soon the men's intentions become clear. While the young boy helps block her escape, the two men rape her, in a scene still difficult to watch today, but unremittably shocking for 1960. As she sobs afterward, one goatherd grabs a branch and clubs her from behind, killing her like an animal.

The rest of the film takes place at the farmstead, where the goatherds, coincidentally and unaware of any family connection, ask for shelter for the night. The boy is the first to realize their error, but is unable to warn his brothers before they try to trade the dead girl's blood-flecked dress. Aided by his wife and Ingeri, who feels responsible for the hell unfolding, Töre massacres the trio, even tearing the boy from his wife's protective embrace, fatally flinging him against a wall. Remorseful for his unchristian vengeance, Töre declares he will build a church on the site where his daughter was slain, whenceforth a new spring gushes from the ground beneath where her head lay.

The holy waters now flowing, we come round once again to the “barrenness” of the film's themes, as once argued by Crowther. While one might believe the themes to be simple, they are actually as fertile as the valleys of Dalarna where the film was shot. At the forefront is the clash of old and new religion, a tension recalled throughout, right down to the art design—Töre and the bridge keeper both sit upon wooden thrones, carved with unignorably Christian and pagan motifs, respectively. Ingeri pranks Karin by placing a toad in her cake—a Norse symbol of the demonic—which



Karin (Birgitta Pettersson) with her adoring father Töre (Max von Sydow) in *The Virgin Spring*. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

leaps forth during her lunch with her killers-to-be; after the murder, one goatherd leaps on the candles Karin was carrying, in an act of sacrilegious vandalism. Over morning prayers, Märeta attempts to show her devotion through mortification by pouring candlewax on her arm; Töre prevents her from acting.

But it is Töre who sacrificially prepares himself for revenge, self-flagellating with the branches of a birch tree—a tree he tears down, felled in its prime like his daughter, with more ferocity than he shows her killers. The young women represent this dichotomy best of all. Virginal Karin, fair-haired, smiling, and plump of face, is a Christian ideal, compared to the pagan Ingeri, raven-haired, scowling, with sharp, catlike cheekbones. They are to one another a funhouse mirror of contrasts, presaging the mirror-image fusion of *Persona* some years later. The film opens to Ingeri's pagan fire, and ends with her baptism in the hallowed waters flowing from a spring beneath Karin's corpse.

Like *The Seventh Seal*'s wrestling with concepts of life and death, *The Virgin Spring* is riven with moral turmoil. Struggling with questions as old as Epicurus, Töre screams to the heavens over the body of his daughter: “An innocent child's death and my vengeance. You allowed it to happen! I don't understand you.” The questions of God's willingness and ability to prevent evil are abated, but not answered, by the miracle of the spring. In her commentary on the Criterion Blu-ray, Steene says Bergman considered the close a “cathartic necessity,” which it certainly plays as. Our human need to believe that good things must come of bad makes martyrs out of many after the fact. In a series of compositions of devilish

irony, the goatherds meet their ends in different evocations of martyrs' ends; the first is stabbed until his body rests in crucifix pose, the second is burned alive on the hearth.

Bergman gives all three of the goatherds a degree of pathos in their deaths, that sets it apart from most films in the rape/revenge subgenre that was born of it. This recalls Kurosawa's *Rashomon* a decade earlier, which centered around justice for a rape, but dared to make the attacker its most fascinating figure. After *The Virgin Spring*, this would all change—in his unlikely (but largely successful) 1972 remake of it, *The Last House on the Left*, Wes Craven has the parents of the victim enact far more gruesome, bloodlust-satiating kills on the rapists: one is torn up with a chainsaw; the other has his penis bitten off by the mother during a faked seduction.

Works from B-movie fare like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) to mainstream-adjacent thrillers such as *Elle* (2016), or even the art-house genre deconstruction *Irreversible* (2002), owe a great deal to Bergman's medieval drama, but perhaps less in how he framed the vengeance, than how he framed the tragedy that triggers it. What stands as only two lines in the ballad—“The herds-men three took her to wife, And then they took from her her life”—is an extended ordeal in the film, however sympathetic it remains to Karin (and to Ingeri, watching from a distance but unable or unwilling to help). Largely for worse, Bergman's ambition has forced filmmakers to up their game, often creating more graphic and violent scenes without compunction, showing neither sufficient respect for their fictional victims or their real-life audiences.

Faith and the unknown are questioned throughout the film, as when the beggar character, a wandering savant staying at the farmstead, whispers to the panicked goatherd boy: "See the smoke trembling under the roof as if with fright? Yet when it gets out in the air, it has the whole sky to swirl about in. But it doesn't know that, so it huddles and trembles in the soot under the roof. It's the same with people. They quiver like a leaf in the storm, afraid of what they know and what they don't know." What seems within the text to refer to a pagan uncertainty toward the rewards of Christianity, feels for Bergman like an examination of his Christian background, and a fearful breaking from it.

As a production, *The Virgin Spring* rivals *The Seventh Seal* in its period detail; however anachronistic or even invented some of it may be, there is a tremendous sense of a lived-in past throughout, from Ingeri straining fresh milk through pine leaves, to the lead goatherd's boinging mouth organ that first attracts his victim. As he prepares to slay his victims, Töre calls for "the butcher's knife," which turns out to be a dagger with skeletal ribcage design, adorned with a horned skull; the tunic he wears for the assault resembles a butcher's apron. Bergman was self-admittedly going through a Kurosawa phase at the time, and thus scenes such as this take on an epic intensity that is absent in his other works—perhaps this is why today *The Virgin Spring* is one of his most accessible and rewatchable films. The Kurosawa influence can be seen elsewhere, particularly in the tracking shots of Ingeri and Karin through forests and alongside streams. Nykvist, who replaced Bergman's previous regular cinematographer Gunnar Fischer late in preproduction, did not have much time to prepare, so his signature look of shadowless grays is absent here, instead revealing a tremendous high contrast black-and-white look, where shadows draw emphasis, even divide up the images, such as in the final moments of Karin's life, when the shadows of branches cruelly carve up her terrified face.

Rereleased in a new 2K scan, the film looks exquisite (admittedly, it would look great in a VHS rip viewed on an iPhone 4), but Criterion has underserved it by merely porting over extras from its 2005 DVD release. Birgitta Steene's commentary is great for framing the film within the context of Bergman's life and career, and occasionally draws clever attention to shot composition, but the accompanying interviews with Lindblom and Pettersson add little new. However Bergman may have felt about it, *The Virgin Spring* feels an essential work of his, almost rending his career in two by closing a chapter where faith remained an option. Like the two hitchhiking students in *Wild Strawberries* slapfighting over whether or not there is a God, *The Virgin Spring* would be the last time Bergman would question these matters with either violence or humor.—**David Neary**

Midnight Cowboy

Produced by Jerome Hellman; directed by John Schlesinger; screenplay by Waldo Salt, based on the novel by James Leo Herlihy; cinematography by Adam Holender; production design by John Robert Lloyd; costume design by Ann Roth; edited by Hugh A. Robertson; musical supervision by John Barry; starring Jon Voight, Dustin Hoffman, Sylvia Miles, John McGiver, Brenda Vaccaro, Barnard Hughes, Jennifer Salt, and Bob Balaban. Blu-ray and DVD, color, 113 min., 1969. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterion.com.

John Schlesinger's X-rated *Midnight Cowboy*, a nobody-saw-that-coming critical and commercial success, was a sensation at the forty-second Academy Awards ceremony in 1970, walking into the room with seven nominations and leaving the building with coveted statuettes for Best Picture, Best Director, and Adapted Screenplay. Of course, "rated X" had a different meaning back then—as part of the brand new, post-Hays Code ratings system, the expectation was that the designation would apply to envelope-pushing, ambitious, challenging films that featured material and themes unsuitable for children, previously forbidden terrain that the emerging New Hollywood was eager to explore. (And besides, a sheepish MPAA soon reclassified the film to "R" without cutting a single frame of the picture.)



Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman star in John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Nevertheless, not everybody was pleased. The Old Hollywood and the New were not on good terms in 1969, which was also the year of *Easy Rider*, *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *Medium Cool* (all of which were passed over by the Academy for best picture nods in favor of the family-friendly fare *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Hello, Dolly!*). Bob Hope unleashed a monologue full of vituperative jokes ("Remember when a movie score referred to the music" was a relatively gentle jibe) that did not mask his hostility to those on the other side of the cultural divide. "This is not an Academy Awards, it's a freak out," he lamented, "nothing is taboo anymore"—these lines and others were commonly met with the applause of many in the audience. The comedian closed the show on a more sober note, offering what amounted to an editorial plea for more wholesome screen fare.

Midnight Cowboy was not that. Steeped in a then gasp-inducing frankness unprecedented for a commercial Hollywood film, *Cowboy* tells the story of the relationship between Joe Buck, a dim-witted, would-be hustler from Texas (a then-unknown Jon Voight), and Enrico Salvatore "Ratso" Rizzo, a dilapidated, hanging-on-by-his-filthy-fingernails New York City street grifter (Dustin Hoffman, recently seen looking much more spiffy in *The Graduate*). The movie unfolds in three dispiriting movements: Joe's early struggles, as the naive rube is chewed up and spit out penniless into the gutter by a heartless Gotham City; a slightly more hopeful interlude when the two men become "roommates" and even friends in the condemned building that Ratso calls home; and finally crisis, as their fortunes, always precarious, decline dangerously further as a wrecking ball and winter weather encroach, and the tubercular Ratso's health deteriorates.

Schlesinger's camera is unflinching, lingering on the poverty, pawn shops, blood banks, street walkers, and the general desperation of Times Square, where Joe, who once dreamed of servicing and satisfying high-society ladies, is reduced to participating in the furtive, low-rent, all-male trade (his first customer is a young Bob Balaban in his big-screen debut). And in New Hollywood style, the director shows, even lingers, on the most unflattering moments in his characters' lives, as when Joe savagely beats and robs an elderly trick (Barnard Hughes). Including the scene caused considerable debate during production, but Schlesinger thought it important, though he acknowledged it would not have survived a test audience. Bob Hope surely would have walked out, but it's doubtful he would have stayed much beyond the early flashbacks to the gang rape of both Joe and his Texas girlfriend (Jennifer Salt).

Released almost fifty years ago, *Midnight Cowboy* holds up remarkably well. And as magnificent new Criterion Collection DVD and Blu-ray editions make clear, the stellar product was a collaborative effort. It was also