

“I think I have made just one picture that I really like, and that is *Winter Light*. ... Everything is exactly as I wanted to have it, in every second of this picture.” -- Bergman, in *Ingmar Bergman Directs* by John Simon, 1972 (later, he said he also quite liked *Fanny and Alexander*, 1982)

Winter Light (*Nattvardsgästerna*, 1962) B&W. Running time: 81 minutes

This is the second film in Bergman's famous trilogy, sometimes called a “trilogy on the silence of God.” The first is *Through A Glass Darkly* (1961), the third is *The Silence* (1963). The literal translation of *Nattvardsgästerna* is “The Communicants.”

Plot

A doubt-ridden and angry pastor, Tomas Ericsson, goes through the rituals of worship, tries to console a parishioner, and recoils from his former mistress of two years.

Commentary

** I won't quote it here but I recommend Pentecostal pastor Jonathan Martin's thoughtful, straightforward blog entry on this film at Incarnation.

“*Winter Light* is a film about futility, and on first viewing can be as depressing as that sounds. No longer convinced that he can love God -- since no longer convinced that He exists -- the widowed village priest rejects human love at the same time. It is as if the larger model of love crushes the smaller as it collapses. -- ['Whatever Happened to Ingmar Bergman'](#) by Harlan Kennedy, *Film Comment*, 1998

“The talkative school teacher Märta, in love with Tomas, sees it as her obligation to free him from his unhappy state. Ironically enough, one might think, since she does not believe in God and he is a member of the clergy: it ought to be the other way round. And yet it does seem that she -- or something at least -- succeeds.” -- [Ingmar Bergman Face to Face: The Son of a Preacher Man](#)

“Of the ending of *Winter Light*, Bergman has remarked: 'He goes through with his service for no other reason than that Märta Lundberg is present. If one has religious faith, one could say that God has spoken to him. If one does not believe in God, one might prefer to say that Märta Lundberg and Algot Frövik are two people who help raise a fellow human being who has fallen and is digging his own grave. At that point it doesn't matter if God is silent or if he is speaking.'” -- [Ingmar Bergman Face to Face](#)

“Max von Sydow's brief appearance [as a parishioner] in *Winter Light* seems the epicenter of it all. ... In so much of Bergman's cinema, anxiety has broad social as well as existential resonance, and here it is through fear of global apocalypse (the film was made during the Cuban Missile Crisis). What is most personally and culturally striking is this almost mute man's total incapacity to go along with even a threadbare performance of hope -- in ourselves and in this world, both physical and metaphysical. From the first time we see him, he seems on the other side of an important line to the others. Yet they themselves barely sustain their veneer. -- ['The Radical Intimacy of Bergman'](#) by Hamish Ford

“[Cinematographer Sven] Nykvist and Bergman make the chapel's large southern window and its sickly, glaring, leering light seem like a suture in the whole comfort-system of Christianity.” -- Kennedy

Asked if he categorically denied the Christ symbolism in the figure of Märta in *Winter Light*, Bergman responds: “No, I don't deny it. But, it's a complete post facto rationalization. Märta is something of the stuff saints are made of, i.e., hysterical, power-greedy, but also possessed of an inner vision. All that business about the eczema on her hands and forehead, for example. I'd pinched that straight from my second wife. She used to suffer from it and went about with big pieces of sticking plaster on her forehead and bandaged hands. ... But that it had anything whatever to do with stigmatization -- that's utterly wrong. For me, Märta is something furious, alive, intractable, pig-headed, troublesome. A great and -- for a dying figure like the clergyman -- overwhelming person. When she writes him a letter, it isn't three pages, but twenty-seven pages which flood his desk. At every moment her whole way of speaking to and being with him is overwhelming. When they sink down at the altar-rail she doesn't kiss him once. No, she kisses him twenty-seven times. Slops her kisses all over him. Not for a moment does she reflect that if there's one thing he really has no wish for at that moment, it's kisses. She won't give him up. At the same time I believe Märta constitutes the clergyman's only hope of any sort of life. For me she's a monstrosity, a primitive natural force. But the poor clergyman's on the way out.”

“Is [Tomas] a hypocrite, or a giant of faith, trying to do God's work amid his own personal doubts and failings?... Bergman does not know, nor does the pastor himself, nor do we. It is a perfect image of the messiness of faith that we tend to think is a modern phenomenon, but which has probably vexed Christians since the Last Supper.”-- ['From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a Spirituality of the Movies,' Richard Blake](#)

Bergman recounts: “So we drove about, looking for churches, my father and I. My father, as you probably know, was a clergyman -- he knew all the Uppland churches like the back of his hand. We went to morning services in various places and were deeply impressed by the spiritual poverty of these churches, by the lack of any congregation and the miserable spiritual status of the clergy, the poverty of their sermons, and the nonchalance and indifference of the ritual.

“In one church, I remember ... Father and I were sitting together. My father had already been retired for many years, and was old and frail. No one was there but him and me, ... the churchwarden; and I suppose a few old women had turned up too. Just before the bell begins to toll, we hear a car outside, a shining Volvo: the clergyman climbs out hurriedly ... and says he feels very poorly” and that he will be dropping the part of the service that takes place at the altar. “Whereon my father, furious, began hammering on the pew, got to his feet and marched out into the vestry.” In the end, there was a complete service, with Bergman's father at the altar. ... In some way I feel the end of the play was influenced by my father's intervention -- that at all costs one must do what it is one's duty to do, particularly in spiritual contexts. Even if it can seem meaningless.”

some Things to Consider

Which characters are attractive (sympathetic, compelling) to you, and why? Which not?

What is the predominant mood of the film?

Tomas can be described as both hypocritical and as faithful. Is one description more apt? How else would you describe him?

Where is mercy and grace in this film, if anywhere?

Olivier Assayas has said: "Any filmmaker trying to get into the texture of human relations ends up in Bergman territory. What I learned from Bergman is that you can explore human relationships with a certain level of brutality and crudity as long as you love your characters." Does Bergman seem to love his characters? How does he show it?

Tomas tells Jonas (the parishioner) that things make more sense if we deny the existence of God, because then our cruelty needs no explanation, and life would be understandable. Does a belief in God explain life (even human cruelty) for you? Does *not* believing in God make life more understandable for you? Why (if we do) do we strive to understand life?

The sexton says that Christ's real suffering wasn't the physical pain he suffered but the suffering of being betrayed, of being unheard, of being misunderstood, of his father's silence and absence from him. What do you think causes humans the most suffering?

Who is silent in this film, and when, and who doesn't hear?

Bergman said that Märta – described by him as: hysterical, power-greedy, possessed of an inner vision, furious, alive, intractable, pig-headed, troublesome, and overwhelming -- is the clergyman's only hope. How so?

How does the landscape reflect or enhance the plot or theme of the film? How does the structure of the film do so? (The film has a mirror-image structure; it begins and ends in a church service, the second and penultimate scenes are in the vestry, and the middle section is set outside the church.)

One reviewer notes that "made aware of his bottomless selfishness, Tomas ends the film by intoning those barren supplications once more. Only this time he has accepted the void both inside and outside, which may paradoxically be the first step towards genuine liberation." Do you agree?

Another reviewer has said: "Existential non-believers will argue that in the final scene of *Winter Light*, the priest who knew he could not honestly help a man about to commit suicide, lamely continues his vocation without conviction. Believers will interpret the same scene to mean that the wretched priest realizes that silence from God does not mean that God does not exist but that he has to toil and suffer with added conviction and begin once again with a single worshipper to populate the near empty church." Does either of these match your feeling about the ending?

If you think that Märta and Algot are "two people who help raise a fellow human being who has fallen and is digging his own grave," do you then agree with Bergman that "it doesn't matter if God is silent or if he is speaking"? Are Märta and Algot a kind of salvation for Tomas? Are they God's voice?

'We must live', says the pastor, to a man contemplating suicide. 'WHY must we live?' retorts the man. "This question occupies a central place in Bergman's art and life. ... In answer to this question, the pastor in *Winter Light* says nothing and lowers his eyes, indicating in this way the impotence of faith to supply the answer to this most important question." Does faith answer this question for you? How do you answer the question, Why must we live? How essential is hope for you?