

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

# THE MAGICIAN 1958

Ingmar Bergman

## OVERVIEW

With *The Magician* (1958) Bergman is in the midst of his high career, prolific and in touch, already, with a worldwide audience. He is working with a familiar and recurring set of actors—Liv Ullmann, Harriet Anderson, Ingrid Thulin, Max von Sydow and a variety of team players who have become even better known than the film characters they portray. He continues to profit from superb cinematography—*the Magician* is the last production in which he collaborates with Gunnar Fischer, long the genius of his stony modulated grays and whites, angles and side shots; he is just beginning to work with an equally inspired head cameraman, Sven Nykvist, who will be an important player in the late works of Bergman. And around Bergman assembles itself, now, a corpus of master films, which set a high bar for this continuing work: in 1957 *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*, two of his most memorable and daring works, and, in the immediately following years, works like *The Virgin Spring*, and the three films of God's silence—*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*. Among these films, *The Magician* takes an honorable place, veering away from the religious dimensions of deep experience, to work through issues involving science and illusion, while keeping a region free for bawdy humor.

## STORY

**The setting.** As with so many Bergman films—think of *Summer with Monika*, for example, *A Summer Interlude* or *Through a Glass Darkly*—stark and bare scenes of sky and water, the Scandinavian trademark, accent drama, even melodrama, in the souls of leading characters. The Magician opens on stark wind blown sky, copses and leafy marshes where every kind of traditional herb will flourish, ad does an ancient crone gathering medical potions for the healing of the masses in 1840's Sweden. Close beside her waits the carriage in which her fellow curers of the Magnetic Health Theater await her. We are in premodern Sweden, and at the same time in the archaic past.

**The trip.** The members of the magical healing theater set off through the woods in their carriage—stopping along the way to pick up a dying alcoholic, and to reflect on the mystery, or plain dull fact, of death—and meanwhile we get acquainted with the team, which includes the ancient granny herb gatherer, the master illusionist (Vogler the magician and animal magnetist), and three or four easy going hucksters of which we most notice Tubal, the group's spokesperson and fast talker and Vogler's wife, who cross dresses regularly, to avoid detection by the police. The group clop clops on through the streets to small towns, heading toward Stockholm, where they expect to show their herbal wares and perform healing and magical tricks.

**The interruption.** As the group nears the capital they are stopped by the law and order forces of a local magistrate, who has been informed that the travelling group has some dirty laundry to wash, and had better be stopped. (It just happens that the magistrate and the doctor, who are disputing the relative claims of material science and the supernatural, are interested in what they can learn from this traveling troupe.) After fairly harsh and humiliating interrogation of the troupe, the magistrate decides on a command performance, in which the group will show their skills.

**Night in the magistrate's house.** The travelling troupe is to be housed in the magistrate's compound, and fed in the kitchen, pending a next day performance. In the kitchen area of the house there is room for much sex tom foolery, involving the lusty and tricky Tubal, one of the traveling assistants, who is too innocent to know the love game, and the magistrate's own wife, who does all she can to get the magician into bed with her. (Many bizarreries surround these efforts to communicate with the magician, who for the

first half of the film refuses to speak). This night of hilarity and potential violence sets the stage for the performances of the following morning.

**Show and Tell.** The next morning is D-day for the troupe, who must show convincing magic and healing skills, if they are to be allowed to enter Stockholm and do their thing. (Bergman himself, as we increasingly realize, is throughout the following show self-scrutinizing, looking into that very considerable part of himself which is fascinated by façade, showmanship, and illusion). The following events transpire: a levitation takes place; hypnosis leads the police chief's wife to blurt out the secrets of her marriage; Vogler even submits himself for autopsy, by distributing his body parts—which are really those of the dying alcoholic found en route by the traveling troupe; a hefty coachman is bound with invisible chains from which he cannot break free. In the end we are of course baffled by the interplay of the magical with the seemingly real.

**The point of it.** Ultimately Bergman seems prepared to view his own craft, the skill with which he is making this production about artifice, the surmounting deception of the whole film, thus a symbol of the deception that we must tolerate in order to make our ways through the real. What could better transform the seemingly real, than the absolute last scene of the film, in which the magician, and what is left of his troupe, are summoned to a command performance before the King.

## THEMES

**Illusion and reality.** The dispute between the materialist-scientist doctor, and the magistrate, who is devoted to the possibilities of illusion, is not only central to the story of *The Magician*, but is implicitly the issue outed by the very presentation Bergman is addressing to the audience of this film. Bergman is offering us a story about illusion and reality, and their interrelations, but the story he is offering us is itself an illusion of reality.

**Death and Life.** Whether death is an end or a portal becomes a central question in this film, for it lies across many developments: the analysis of the dying drunk at the outset; the autopsy of the magician, which the doctor wishes to perform; even across the levitation, which is all about the raising of weights. The magician himself seems to harbor no illusions about the overcoming of death by life.

**Sexuality.** Once the traveling party has been freed from interrogation, and sent down to the kitchen quarters for dinner, food and sex join in melting the troupe and the help into one mass of sexual humanity, frolicking and cavorting. It is as though the illusionist surface of the film hid, only lightly concealed below it, a turmoil of eros.

**Art and Illusion.** Bergman is a supremely self-aware creator of illusions of reality, and we feel, throughout the film, Bergman's consciousness poking us; he is whispering, that this film about illusion, its properties and its claims, is also the illusion that he himself is working on the audience, by turning a mechanical 'silver screen' into a vehicle for a new life, one in which we believe as though it was real.

## CHARACTERS

**The magician.** The magician is a calculated personality. He refuses to speak, for the first half of the film, as though to become a vehicle of that personal mystery that pervades the protagonist of *Persona*, or of that absence of speech that separates the two sisters in *The Silence*. Vogler's mask like visage--Christlike or rite inspired—gives him the appearance of a miracle worker, which is of course the effect he wants, and which—it is up to us to decide--may convey some truth.

**The old granny.** The two-hundred year old granny, as the herb collecting, love-potion cooking granny depicts herself, adds humor and bawdiness to the troupe of healer quack magicians. She takes delight in the bawdiest kind of match making.

**Vergerus**, The Royal Medical Counselor. This believer in the most materialist view of 'science,' with its powers to 'penetrate all mysteries,' is the most dubious and contemptuous of the authorities who cross examine and humiliate the magician and his troupe.

**Tubal**. The huckster spokesman for the traveling troupe, and the fast talking ladies' man, after the troupe has been detained and dispatched to the kitchens. His crass volubility helps to sharpen the dark edges of the magician's own spirit.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### THE MAGICIAN

**Character** The magician is a gaunt, non-speaking mystery man, whom we first meet as he is rumbling through the woods in a carriage, with his band of Magnetic Healing associates, an inscrutable caravan of a half-dozen hucksters, spiritualists, and an old granny who seems to incarnate all the herbal and potency wisdoms of the ages. Our first view, of the magician in action, plays out when he hears a cry in the woods, from what turns out to be a dying alcoholic, begging for vodka. Taking the man back into the carriage, the magician observes the advent of death on this abandoned face, and speculates on the meaning of this impending change of conditions. The magician is inscrutable but curious.

In the subsequent narrative, the magician turns out to be deeply impenetrable, a mountebank with real pretensions to perform miracles, a charmer when trying to promote the activities of his troupe, but at the end of his demonstrations, at the magistrate's house, a tired and ragged old man, whom nothing could restore to his mysterious vitality except what happened, a miraculous summons from the King. Although by this time the magician will long before have 'recovered' his voice, his aura has sadly shrunk. He has indeed performed some miracles. By hypnosis he induces the police chief's wife to tell all about her marriage; he convinces a hefty coachman that he is truly being bound by chains—though the chains are only in his mind; he tricks Dr. Vergerus into thinking that he has performed an autopsy on the magician. The sceptics of these events, however, remain on the whole unconvinced; the autopsy, allegedly performed in a bolted upstairs room, is written off by them to deceptive hypnosis, which would have us believe that tricks in the mind could reassemble a cadaver.

#### Illustrative moments.

**Compassionate.** The magician is the one who hears the cries of the expiring alcoholic, as the carriage rolls through the woodland. Curious and caring, he brings the fellow back to the carriage, and while the life slowly goes out of the dying man, the magician pays particular attention to the diminution of the life fire, in the weakened face.

**Silent.** For the first half of the film, the magician withdraws into complete silence, a silence which aggravates the magistrate who detains him, and which draws to itself the mystery of refusal. (The inscrutable in the magician resembles that of Dionysus in the *Bacchae* of Euripides, which so infuriates the ruler Pentheus.) Bergman proves a master of silence in *Persona*, too, where the muted stage actress wields her refusal to speak like a power tool, and spreads fear over others.

**Furious.** We have not yet heard a sound from Vogler, the magician, when the troupe is detained. We can only guess his emotions, and suppose him chiefly a careful charlatan. When the magistrate's wife tries to seduce him, he is enraged; to our surprise, it is he who seems befouled by the hanky panky taking place in the magistrate's house.

**Exhausted.** At the end of his performance, in which he has performed both as a kind of hypnotic genius (the autopsy) and as a flop (in the levitation scene), the magician and his few remaining colleagues are exhausted, shabby and worn. He looks like the sham we thought he might be, but in the end consider one more illusion.

## **Supporting characters : Vergerus and Tubal**

These two exaggerated characters can be taken as examples of grounded realists who put the Magician to the test, by espousing views sharply different to those which seem to activate the mysterious fakir-healer at the center of the film.

The film opens onto characters of mysterious intent and ability—a voiceless magician, his bisexual wife, a dying alcoholic, a ‘two hundred’ year old crone—who are rattling along in a weather beaten carriage; we soon see that complex issues of fraud, magic, and spirituality penetrate Bergman’s presentation. As the carriage rattles forward, toward the Stockholm which represents, for Swedish culture of the time, access to the Enlightenment of the previous century, we realize how uncertain we are, we of the great Age of Reason, of the message the film is conveying.

We have been traveling with a loud mouthed realist, Tubal, who might be taken as a huckster advance man for the magician’s magical healing theater, but who is at the same time as ‘meat and potatoes’ realist as you can get. His metaphysic: ‘the head is on the neck, and the rump is on the back. That’s the kind of truth I like. Absolute truth!’ It is Tubal who settles the Magical Theatre troupe into their quarters in the magistrate’s kitchen, and encourages the guys and gals to do their thing, with the bodies they have been given.

With Dr. Vergerus, the Minister of Health, the magician and his troupe are faced with another opposition, that of the day’s new rationalism. This is not the lusty, Rabelaisian down to earthiness of Tubal, but the anti-clerical, sanitized rational materialism of a century linking up eagerly to a tradition running from Lucretius through d’Holbach. Listen to Vergerus in conversation with the magician’s sexy bisexual wife: ‘there are no miracles. It’s always the props and the patter that must do the work. The clergy’s in the same sad boat. God is silent while men babble on.’

**Supporting characters?** By calling a spade a spade, and spirituality what Vergerus thinks it is—a noxious gas farted forth by the body—Bergman sets the stage for a heartless undermining of the tricks of a mountebank, the magician. What happens, though, is surprisingly perplexing—after all it is **Bergman** who is creating these characters. Despite his suspiciously fraudulent behavior—a raising from the dead, a staged tussle with imaginary bonds, an hypnotic autopsy—the magician prevails over appearances, and emerges as the puzzling prestidigitator who seems to create reality as he passes. Bergman instills that reality which is semblance, from the moment, perhaps, when the magician begins to speak! Prestidigitation, the trick of **the artist himself**, is enabling the film whose materialist fervors are only, thus, the byproduct of an art which transcends its raw materials.

