

THE MAGICIAN (ANSIKTET), 1958

"The movement itself is the only truth."

Credits:

director and screenplay: Ingmar Bergman; cinematographer: Gunnar Fischer; cast: Max von Sydow (Albert Emanuel Vogler); Ingrid Thulin (Manda); Gunnar Bjornstrand (Dr. Vergerus); Bengt Ekerot (Spegel); Bibi Andersson (Sara); Erland Josephson (Consul Egerman); Toivo Pawlo (Starbeck)

Background:

The son of a country parson with whom he had a lifelong uneasy relationship, Bergman began his career in the theater and continued directing plays throughout his forty years of directing films. By the time The Magician (also entitled The Face) was released, he had already secured an international reputation for films like Sawdust and Tinsel, Smiles of a Summer Night (which later inspired Woody Allen's A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy), The Seventh Seal, and Wild Strawberries. Reviews of The Magician were generally less favorable, and Bergman himself was disappointed in the film, although Peter Cowie has argued, probably correctly, that it is his most personal film of the fifties.

Vernon Young has suggested that the film may have been inspired by G.K. Chesterton's play Magic, about a conjurer forced to entertain some doubting guests at a nobleman's home. Bergman himself has written of his strong identification with the magician's art: "And even today I remind myself with childish excitement that I am really a conjurer, since cinematography is based on deception of the human eye. I have worked it out that if I see a film which has a running time of one hour, I sit through twenty-seven minutes of complete darkness--the blankness between frames. When I show a film I am guilty of deceit. I use an apparatus which is constructed to take advantage of a certain human weakness, an apparatus with which I can sway my audience in a highly emotional manner--make them laugh, scream with fright, smile, believe in fairy stories, become indignant, feel shocked, charmed, deeply moved or perhaps even yawn with boredom. Thus I am either an imposter or, when the audience is willing to be taken in, a conjurer. I perform conjuring tricks with apparatus so expensive and so wonderful that any entertainer in history would have given anything to have it" (Four Screenplays).

Stylistic Qualities:

The Magician is deliberately "stagey": minimal camera movement and limited editing; exaggerated makeup, costuming, and lighting effects; histrionic, literary dialogue. The director is trying to "trick" us, not through verisimilitude but through a confidence game in which he displays the theatrical artifice of the performance in order to demonstrate his own virtuosity and also to set up his finale. Note the prominence of various mirrors and screens within the diegesis that serve to underscore the mediated nature of reality.

1. close-ups: Above all, Bergman is interested in the physiognomy of the human face. His films are marked by extended closeups of the actors' faces, often in unusual arrangements.

2. sound: Bergman introduced reduced, non-melodic sound tracks; consider the use of offscreen sound effects to create atmosphere in the opening forest sequence, and contrast the general restraint of the non-diegetic sound with the march music in the ending.

3. composition: many of the film's frames are as carefully composed as Renaissance paintings and portraits, adding a sensuous beauty to the intellectual screenplay.

4. screenplay: Bergman's scripts were among the very first to be published as works of literature.

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. The Magician may be regarded as a meditation on faith, taken either in its religious dimension or as Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." Consider Vogler as a Christ figure or a representative of the artist.

2. Compare The Magician to Bergman's The Seventh Seal (1957), in which von Sydow, Bjornstrand, and Ekerot play approximately the same roles. Or compare the film to Persona (1966) as an exploration of the natural antipathy between the performer and the audience.

3. Analyze the ending of The Magician, an extraordinary example of the deus ex machina borrowed, according to Bergman, from Gay's The Beggar's Opera.

4. What points does the film make about the relation between reality and illusion, being and role-playing?

5. How are the comic sequences (which Bergman had intended to expand) related to the melodramatic parts of the film? Is The Magician best understood as a comedy, a thriller, a tragedy, or some combination of familiar movie genres?