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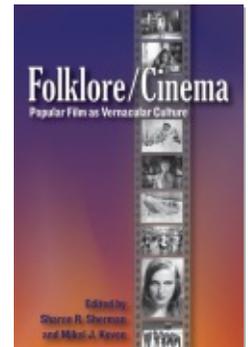
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The Virgin Victim

*Reimagining a Medieval Folk Ballad in The Virgin Spring
and The Last House on the Left*

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TWO FILMS COULD not be executed more differently than Ingmar Bergman's crisp, black-and-white *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*, 1960), and Wes Craven's boldly bloody *The Last House on the Left* (1972), yet both ultimately spring from the same source: a ballad of tragedy and revenge dating to at least the sixteenth century. The plot of the ballad details the murder of a daughter by robbers. Seeking shelter, the robbers unknowingly ask hospitality of the girl's parents and then display her belongings. The parents, realizing what has occurred, kill the killers. The two filmmakers share not only this story but also a strict religious upbringing against which both rebelled; yet their interpretations of the tale suggest very different conclusions about the ballad's significance. For Bergman, the landscape rests uneasily between two harsh father gods: Ingeri's Odin and the Christian God of Karin's father. For Craven, the absence of moral certainty permeates the lives of the parents as well as the killers, and authority appears either nonexistent or ridiculous. The flexibility of the ballad tradition easily encompasses both interpretations despite major changes in details and different production choices.

This should come as no surprise. As G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., noted in his study, *The British Literary Ballad*, the most successful modern practitioners of the ancient form are those who combine "timeless subject matter and contemporary idiom" (1972, 94). While Laws focused on the effect of the broadside on contemporary ballad tradition, it is easy to argue that film provides an even more immediate re-visioning of ballad motifs. The ballad "Herr Truelses døtre" (the English title, "which is descriptive of the narrative content of the type" [Jonsson, Solheim, and Danielson 1978, 20], is "Sisters murder by brothers avenged by Father") proves to be a perfect springboard for these filmmakers. The ballad tradition across Scandinavia shows much variety, yet also considerable

similarities, largely due to the language congruence during the Middle Ages. While many examples may be younger (or older) than this time, "Scandinavian ballads are usually regarded as a medieval genre" because of their oral formulaic qualities (Rossel 1982, 11). While Danish practitioners of the *rímur* maintained this oral tradition, throughout much of Scandinavia (and Sweden, in particular), the ballads eventually became a part of literary tradition (Ker 1909, 18). Thus, Bergman came to the film version of the ballad by way of the novelist Ulla Isaksson, screenwriter for the film. New packaging for the Criterion rerelease, however, implies a more direct link by including a copy of the ballad in the companion booklet.

Ballads based on anonymous martyrs often feature motifs known throughout Europe, specified by locations familiar to regional singers and audiences. Religious stories in Scandinavia often center on particular figures: St. Olaf in Norway and St. Stephen in Sweden (Rossel 1982, 9). "Herr Truelses døtre" does not follow this pattern, however; it is listed as B21 among the legendary ballads in *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Jonsson, Solheim, and Danielson 1978, 55). This comprehensive catalogue gives a definitive outline of the B21 ballad type, but we should keep in mind the authors' caveat that "a ballad is an 'idea' in the Platonic sense...every text is as good as another" (Jonsson, Solheim, and Danielson 1978, 14). Indeed this particular narrative appears in Danish, Faroese, Icelandic, and Norwegian as well as Swedish in more or less comparable forms. Jonsson, Solheim, and Danielson summarize the story this way:

Sir Truels' sons are...stolen away by robbers or...sent away by Truels (because they are told that they will harm their own sisters). Truels' (two or three) daughters oversleep one morning. They...put on their best clothes and hurry off to church. In the wood they meet robbers (one, two or three). When the girls reject their erotic advances the robbers kill them...(Miracles appear at the place where they die). The robbers go to the Truels' house and display the possessions of the murdered girls. Truels understands what has happened...Truels has the robbers executed or kills them himself...Truels comes to understand that the robbers were his own sons...he commits suicide or...does penance by building a church. (1978, 55)

The ballad certainly offers a macabre tale. Though the two filmmakers decided to abandon the motif of the final revelation of the robbers as sons, for the most part, they kept the major elements intact. We might expect more radical changes, given the date of the source. Robert Stam

argues, "The greater the lapse in time, the less reverence toward the source text and the more likely the reinterpretation through the values of the present" (2000, 57). However, both filmmakers seem to want to maintain the folkloric ambience of the tale while updating the setting and reflecting the "values of the present." Bergman does so by maintaining the authoritative setting of the medieval past; Craven instead capitalizes on the salacious appeal of the urban (or contemporary) legend, a phenomenon Jan Harold Brunvand identified several years after the film's release. As Brunvand puts it, "Urban legends gain credibility from specific details of time and place or from reference to source authorities" ([1979] 1989, 3). Craven sets the ballad narrative in the present day to provide specific and believable details, while Bergman invokes the ballad itself as an authority. Both make changes but often with the same aim: connecting the audience emotionally to the narrative.

Rossel argues that "a study of such changes in the ballad text...which create[s] the variants is extremely valuable in order to map out and analyze the tradition of a certain text" (1982, 14). Changing the robber sons to robber strangers seems appropriate to reflect the complexities of the modern world and proves typical of the appropriation of medieval stories in general. As Greta Austin writes, medieval-themed films "usually tell stories not about the Middle Ages, but about modern Western life in a period dress" (2002, 137). Bergman takes this tack, using the medieval setting to express his ambivalence about the role of divinity in his life, while Craven discards the pretence of the medieval setting altogether to depict a world bereft of divine influence.

Both use the miraculous tale to question the role of and attention to the divine in their characters' lives, while maintaining the horror of the original ballad. The folkloric inclusion of the transformative forest, where significant action takes place in both films, strengthens the overlap between the two narratives and creates a sense of verisimilitude. As Jack Zipes argues, "The forest *allows* for enchantment and disenchantment, for it is the place where society's conventions no longer hold true. It is the source of natural right, thus the starting place where social wrongs can be righted" (1987, 67). Because of the ballad, we have these transformative expectations in mind, but both filmmakers use the chthonic power of the forest to destabilize society, not to right wrongs. Thus, as Zipes also argues, the forest encompasses all possibilities for it is "unconventional, free, alluring, but dangerous" (1987, 67). For Bergman, the divine power of the father god must impose his will upon the freedom of the forest; for Craven, the absence of that power assures that the forest remains a dangerous place.

The moral choices presented by the filmmakers provide the sharpest contrasts between their films. According to Philip Strick, Bergman had apparently been searching for the right material to recapture a sense of certainty. Bergman himself noted, "I needed a severe and schematic conception of the world to get away from the formless, the vague and the obscure in which I was stuck. So I turned to the dogmatic Christianity of the Middle Ages with its clear dividing lines between Good and Evil" (2002, 2). The screenplay by Ulla Isaksson mirrors that stark morality, just as the black-and-white imagery of the film reflects it. The harsh father god, whether Odin or Yahweh, maintains an iron rule without sympathy. There are no doubts about the rules, just as there are no doubts about the consequences of breaking them, whether the crime is lust, pride, avarice, or anger.

If Craven lacked Bergman's desire for moral certitude, it was no doubt due to his upbringing: "I wasn't allowed to see movies when I was a child. It was against the religion I was raised in, Fundamentalist Baptist. I didn't go into a commercial movie house until I was a senior in college, and that was on the sly. It wasn't until I was in graduate school that I immersed myself in films. Then, I went to see all the films by Bergman, Fellini, etc." (Lofficier 1999). Beginning filmmaking at the bottom as a messenger boy, Craven found modest initial success working with producer Sean Cunningham. The two were offered fifty thousand dollars by Vanguard, a small film company, to make a horror film. Craven describes their guiding principle: "Our agreement was that we would just hold nothing back. We would do the most outrageous things we could think of" (Lofficier 1999). Craven's recollection on the commentary of the DVD release is that the film was based "roughly on *The Virgin Spring*, where you had a girl who was middle class and her father was a doctor and she went off on a pilgrimage, and there was a serving girl who was a friend of hers and actually knew much more about the world and helped her get through the rougher parts of the world when disaster started to strike."¹ His recall of Bergman's film is, of course, wildly inaccurate. Karin and Ingeri are far from friends, and Ingeri certainly does not help Karin when disaster strikes, but rather watches from afar. The girls are not really on a pilgrimage in the medieval sense, more of an errand. Töre is not a doctor but a farmer.

Unlike Bergman's film that begins with the hopefulness of spring, *Last House* takes place in autumn as if the world itself is dying. The voice of authority is at once ever present in the voice of the radio and TV news and the uniforms of the postman, sheriff, and deputy, but also distant and usually ineffectual. Craven's aim was not to seek an absolute moral

victory; rather, he “wanted to show violence how it was, nasty and ugly and protracted,” capturing the reality where you “didn’t have a cutaway or a fade to black.” In essence, he wished to deconstruct any notion of true authority or morality, to problematize the categories of good and evil, and to leave the audience adrift in a shaky conundrum. He explained later, “My whole intention was to show murder in a film that was as I would imagine it to be, rather than as it was depicted in films normally at that time. That is, the person delivered the killing blow, and the victim died, maybe with a few gasps, but not always. They would never fight a protracted fight, and would [never] suffer clearly in front of the camera” (Lofficier 1999). Craven hoped the ugliness would make viewers acknowledge their participation and complicity in the process, asking them “Were you hoping to be amused?” by all the violence in the film. He says it was the “academic in me” that made him want to compel the audience to consider all the violence in the past, the background against which history to date has unfolded.

The daughters form the center of the moral questioning. For Bergman, the split is particularly poignant. Not only are the two girls stepsisters but they are also openly hostile to one another. The family has taken in pregnant Ingeri (Gunnel Lindblom), while the favored daughter Karin (Birgitta Pettersson) glows in pampered luxury. Bergman’s stark black-and-white palate, aided by the preternaturally beautiful cinematography of Sven Nykvist, seems always to cast shadows upon Ingeri while bathing Karin in light, even in her small, close room. She assumes her status as special and beloved and also assumes that no one is immune to her charm. The antagonism between the two girls goes beyond simple sibling rivalry—they are representatives of the warring gods, Odin and Christ. Bergman uses the girls to reflect the lingering hold of paganism within the Christian realm of late medieval Sweden. Ingeri’s knowledge that it is the family’s Christian charity that gives her a place on their farm only magnifies her resentment. Her furtive prayer to Odin that opens the film calls curses down upon her benefactors, particularly the privileged Karin, whom Ingeri later admits to hating because she has become pregnant. She secretes a toad within a loaf of bread for Karin’s trip as a silent curse upon her privileged state, unaware that she will accompany her to the distant church to take candles for the virgin.

In *Last House*, the two young women are best friends rather than sisters. The friend, like Ingeri, is considerably more morally ambiguous than the virtuous heroine. The free-spirited ambience of the 1960s infuses the opening of the film with a deceptively lighthearted tone, as nostalgia inducing as Mari’s peace-sign necklace. Our first view of Mari

Collingwood (Sandra Cassel) is through the frosted glass of her shower, then nude from the waist up before a fogged mirror. She clears it with a towel and then smiles at her reflection. She is openly proud of her figure and comfortable with the image of her naked body. In the previous scene with the postman, he comments upon her "pride," saying, "she's not the first girl to turn sixteen." Even when dressed, Mari is transparent: as Craven remarks, "This was still the time when going without a brassiere was considered incredibly risqué." Doubling the scene in *The Virgin Spring* when Karin's mother frets about the beating she would have received if she had had Karin's stubbornness, Mari's mother tries to talk about how different things were when she was her daughter's age, but neither daughter wants any curbs on her enthusiasm. In Craven's film, the friend, Phyllis Stone (Lucy Grantham), is the more experienced of the two, taking the lead in their conversations and adventures and, eventually, attempting to shield Mari from the worst assaults. Yet despite her edge of world weariness, it is presumably Phyllis who suggests they stop in the city for an innocent ice cream before the concert. Though Phyllis and Mari are not actual sisters, the bond between the two is stronger and more sustaining than the blood between Karin and Ingeri.

The parents in the two films are likewise contrasted against their respective moral backdrops. The ever-anxious Märeta (Birgitta Valberg) in *The Virgin Spring* first appears before her giant crucifix. The shot cuts directly from Ingeri's call to Odin to Märeta, thereby emphasizing her piety. Märeta suffers, but it is not immediately clear from what. Prayers are insufficient to slake her guilt, though. Despite her husband's protesting reaction, she pours hot wax from her candle onto her wrist to mortify her flesh. We later discover that Märeta's other children have all died, and consequently understand better why she spoils Karin. She "is all I have," Märeta repeats. Together the two dress Karin in her finest for the journey: the shift embroidered by fifteen maidens, the white stockings, and the blue shoes with pearls. While Märeta cannot help worrying about all the boys Karin danced with the night before, her daughter is unconcerned. Karin knows her fate is not to marry a mere farmer and ignores the prophecy in her mother's "evil dream." Yet Märeta's distress suggests that, in reward for her faith, her God seeks to warn her of impending doom.

Her husband, Töre (Max von Sydow), seems to have tired long ago of Märeta's painful mortifications despite his concern for her pain. He has dealt with their losses by becoming stern and withdrawn. He makes his pronouncements with the gravity of an Old Testament prophet, except when it comes to scolding lazy Karin. In a rare moment, he lifts her in

his arms, and amidst their joshing banter, we see the child she no longer is and the man he can no longer be.

The Collingwoods in *Last House*, in contrast, are themselves sensual and affectionate with one another. The lighthearted scenes of the couple at home, both with Mari before she and Phyllis go off to the concert and while preparing for Mari's birthday celebrations, show their intimacy and genuine affection; the fact that these shots are intercut with the increasingly tense scenes of the girls in the thugs' apartment heightens the contrast. Unlike Bergman, Craven only sketches in the characters. While the two films run nearly the same length, Bergman uses much more of his time setting up the characters' positions across the moral spectrum; Craven, on the other hand, stretches out the violent episodes. The running time of *The Virgin Spring* is eighty-nine minutes, while *The Last House on the Left* (depending on the cut) runs anywhere from eighty-two to ninety-one minutes, but these running times are close enough to be comparable. We know that John (Richard Towers) is a doctor and that Estelle (Cynthia Carr) is not a professional baker (as the lopsided birthday cake demonstrates), but other than the fact that they are loving, permissive, and middle class, they are not given any moral standing. John gives Mari the important peace-symbol necklace, but the focus seems to be on his affection, negating the symbol's original meaning. Although Estelle and John seem a little surprised by their daughter's "new" ideas, they are not at all alarmed. That complacency, though, is precisely what Craven hopes to attack: their assumption that a moral structure guides behavior, yet there is no need to invoke it, explain it, or maintain it. While Bergman examines the effects of harsh morality, Craven dissects the results of the all-too-vague morality of the early 1970s.

The other important characters are, of course, the robbers. In *The Virgin Spring*, they initially claim to be goatherds, which potentially aligns them with demonic forces according to Christian mythology and Thor on the pagan side, as he drove a pair of goats which remain popular as the omnipresent Swedish holiday decoration, the Julbok. (The goats also prove to be their downfall—Karin recognizes the mark on one goat as her neighbor's and begins to grow suspicious.) The folkloric number of three remains; one is mute (Tor Isedal), but his companion (Axel Düberg) makes up for his inability to express himself by having a tongue more than ready to deceive with volubility. The third, however, is a small boy (Ove Porath) that again suggests the possibility of brothers: given their ruthlessness, why else would the two others allow him to tag along? The child's innocence offers the audience the possibility of sympathy and hope. Of all the characters in *The Virgin Spring*, the robbers are the least

well developed. They seem to stand for the ideas of hunger and aimlessness, lacking sustenance and direction both literally and spiritually.

We see a lot more of the robbers in *Last House*, in part due to Craven's stated intent to problematize our notions of good and evil. While they are initially presented as types, we come to recognize—if not sympathize—with them as individuals. Most disturbingly, the leader "Krug [David Hess] was based on my father," Craven claims, "who always scared the shit out of me." Although his father died while Craven was young, he used the film to explore the frightening father figure, commenting, "So I guess Junior [Marc Sheffler] is a little bit of me, too." Rather than brothers, we have the father and son play out a painful Oedipal dynamic. As if to emphasize this archetypal relationship, Krug is almost always chomping on a phallic cigar. The third robber, Weasel (Fred J. Lincoln), initially resembles another stereotypical tough guy but gradually reveals some surprising nuances. Craven adds a fourth—Sadie (Jeramie Rain), a female, as if in ironic recognition of the strides women were just beginning to make during the growing second wave of feminism in the early seventies. In Craven's film, women's equality extends to violent criminal activities. When Krug and Weasel converge on her for a sexual encounter, she fights them off with "I'm my own freakin' woman" and demands that they get "a couple more chicks" to handle the sexual burden. It is Sadie who points out the phallic symbolism, although in a nod to her criminal ignorance, she pronounces it "p-hallus." Craven and Cunningham acknowledge that they exploited the issues of the time like emerging feminism and sexually explorative films.²

Key to both narratives are the rape scenes. In *The Virgin Spring*, Ingeri sees the encounter as fulfillment of her prayer to Odin. The slap Karin delivers just before they reach the river seems to have sealed her fate. A cut to a cawing raven brings a dark ambience to the journey of the wrangling girls. If the raven is an ambiguous sign of Odin, the immediate cut to the one-eyed bridge keeper (Axel Slangus) is far less so. The man under the cloak is unmistakably Odin, and a terrified Ingeri recognizes him at once. As if to assure our connection between the god and his familiar raven (Huginn or Munin), a longer shot frames both as the raven continues to cry. Karin blithely takes no notice, but Ingeri's gaze is fixed and suspicious. Impulsively, she runs across the river and begs Karin not to go on because "the forest is so black," but Karin, unafraid, dismisses her sister's fears and convinces Ingeri instead to remain behind "to rest."

The bridge keeper begs Ingeri to enter his home, claiming he can help her. Asking his name, Ingeri receives the typically noncommittal answer

of gods in human disguise: "These days, I have no name." He continues answering her direct questions with prevarications: "I hear what I will, and I see what I will. I hear what mankind whispers in secret..." He suggests that Ingeri can share his power, and she hears a thundering sound which he declares to be "three dead men rid[ing] north." His mocking laughter frightens Ingeri, and she seeks to avoid his apparently amorous intentions. His bench is carved with likenesses of the gods, and he displays before her amulets with various powers. When she accuses him of blood sacrifice, he growls, "I recognized you at once" and promises to give her strength if she is not afraid. Yet she cannot bear his embrace and rushes off in time to witness—but not prevent—Karin's rape and murder.

While Ingeri struggles with her god, Karin plays the princess. Intrigued by the jaw harp one herder plays, she stops to talk, then decides magnanimously to share her meal with the hungry travelers. Clearly the mute robber is ready to forcefully take her wealth immediately, but his partner seems to be looking at the long-term possibilities, and they sit down to eat, somewhat annoyed by Karin's insistence on prayer first. Her bragging about her wonderful (and imaginary) wealth and prominence whets their other appetites, and Karin begins to fear for her safety, capturing a kid in her arms as if to shield her innocence with another's. The reappearance of the toad presages the sudden attack by the two men, which is stark and violent, the two fighting even between themselves to be the one to rape her first, while the wide-eyed boy looks on. Ingeri, watching from a distance, picks up a rock but helplessly lets it fall. It is what she wished for. The despoiled Karin clutches her torn shift and staggers toward the camera as if to seek aid from the audience, then gives up and turns away. Frightened by their own actions, the robbers panic, and the mute robber strikes her down with a single blow from a branch, causing the blood on her forehead to mirror the shadows of the branches above her. Recovering from the shock, the robbers hastily strip her body of its finery. They leave the boy behind to gaze mutely upon her body as a light snow falls.

The encounter between the robbers and the girls in *Last House* lacks all innocence because the two are in search of marijuana on the Lower East Side, the place where Craven says he "lost his virginity" and became "cynical." Mari seems somewhat reluctant to wander the city streets, calling the area "dirty." Phyllis avers that it is only "funky," and thus no threat, because she remains determined to buy some drugs. Spotting Junior, they decide to ask him where they can score some drugs. Initially he repulses their question, then seems to remember Sadie's desire for a "couple more chicks" and brings them back to the flat. The turn to

violence here is also sudden and scary. The rape scene is drawn out in full horror, extended as if to prolong the hope that something, anything, will happen to stop the final outcome. Phyllis is raped first to force us to watch Mari's initial loss of innocence and denial. The tender scenes between the Collingwoods offer a stark counterpoint to the violence of the thugs, ganging up on Phyllis and punching her in the stomach to subdue her. The couple's fond embrace, between civilized tumblers of scotch, fades to black in a genteel recognition of propriety, and then cuts to stark daylight outside the crumbling building where the thugs dwell. The harsh morning light highlights the removal of one body down the fire escape, leaving the viewer initially in suspense as to both the fate of innocent Mari and the state of both girls, who wind up in the trunk of the Cadillac. Recalling once more the ballad narrative, the car happens to break down just in front of the Collingwood house.

The narrative should move at that point to the revenge scenario, but instead we get a prolongation of the rape and murder. One focus is humiliation: "piss your pants," Krug demands of Phyllis, which she does, then unconsciously tries to shield herself. Next they demand that the two girls perform lasciviously before the eager onlookers. Phyllis tries to protect and comfort Mari, repeating, "It's just us," as if she can ignore the horror surrounding them. Phyllis's escape attempt proves a dead end, but Craven manipulates the audience expectation that, so close to home, the girls will survive the ordeal and get away. Mari's frantic bargaining with Junior—whom she rechristens Willow, perhaps in the hope that he will bend to her weeping—offers momentary hope and allows the passing of the symbolic—and telling—peace-symbol necklace. Weasel shows concern for the injured Sadie, which is "one of the set of mindfucks of this movie," Craven remarks; "these people doing horrible things, somehow, in their perverse way cared about each other so that the audience had to feel their humanity." He notes, "People hated you for it," but his aim was to throw the "whole moral compass...out the window." He deconstructs the moral absolutism of *The Virgin Spring*. Even the use of handheld cameras mirrors the omnipresent (in 1972) handheld camera footage of Vietnam, the war that still divides Americans into opposing factions more than thirty years later.

The carnage continues. The sound of a car nearby encourages Phyllis, but she is betrayed by the sight of a grim cemetery. Its dappled sunlight breaks with the sudden thrust into the frame of Krug's machete. Her murder is the realism Craven sought to reproduce, the desire to "hang on to life, try to crawl away," while the brutal flat expressions of the killers, as we now know them to be, surround her. In contrast

to Karin's death, there is no single blow of violence. Instead, we have an orgy of blood on the victim's body and the killers. Interspersed with the gore are shots of Phyllis's exposed underwear as she is once more stripped before her tormentors, who all take pleasure in penetrating her flesh. As if afraid we may not be flinching sufficiently, Sadie reaches into Phyllis's gut and caresses a length of bowel. Even the killers seem shocked by their daring. Without boundaries, they seem uncertain and cowed before the awesome universe opening before them.

The subsequent rape of Mari becomes a necessity because, as Craven argues, "they [the robbers] don't have any authority anymore" and need to reestablish it. This action is punctuated by Junior/Willow's single tear, his last vestige of humanity. It remains "a powerful depiction of rape," Craven acknowledges, with man as animal while the woman "has more dignity than he will ever have in his life." Her captors exchange looks of—if not guilt—confusion. Mari retches behind them, then launches into the whispered prayer of a child: "Now I lay me down to sleep." The ineffectuality of their bid to reclaim power shows as they attempt to wipe the blood off their hands, then follow Mari as she shambles down the water's edge as if to wash the horror off herself. The killers at last resort to shooting her submerged body, unable to bring themselves to once more meet her flesh to flesh.

Vengeance for his daughter's death seems destined already in *The Virgin Spring* when we see Töre, fully dressed and standing implacably before his door. It almost seems a surprise that he graciously offers the robbers sanctuary from the storm and, later, the possibility of work. But we believe much more easily in offered hospitality because of the medieval setting of Bergman's film; much of northern Germanic literature eagerly applauds the man who gives freely of gifts and readily offers hospitality. It is telling that in the midst of their anxiety—Märeta can only wring her hands wistfully and repeat, "She's all I have"—they hold firmly to their views of Christian charity and allow the killers at their table. When the boy, still sickened by the violence, cannot eat the food put before them, both Märeta and Frida (Gudrun Brost) suggest helpful healing remedies for the child. A fallen priest (Oskar Ljung) even makes an attempt to heal the boy's soul with warnings about hell and stories about the power of faith.

In *Last House*, credibility is stretched thin by the desire to stick close to the ballad's plot for the first time, not so much by the bizarre coincidence of the robbers finding Mari's home but by their seeking sanctuary there. It is telling that the most antiquated aspect of the film is the offering of hospitality. Craven mentions the original scene in *The Virgin*

Spring, noting how a storm forces the robbers to take shelter in “the house of the parents of one of the girls that they’ve just killed.” He also gives the killers his own remembered awkwardness in dealing with a more sophisticated lifestyle. In a reversal, it is the robbers who discover first that they have fallen upon the home of Mari, pondering aloud (as Craven says, no doubt echoing the viewer’s incredulity), “Wonder what the odds are on that?” He is conscious, too, of using the “*Psycho* technique” (having the main characters killed off in the middle of the film) to leave the audience at sea without a clear trajectory.

While in *The Virgin Spring* Märeta receives Karin’s torn shift from the hands of her killer, John the father puts together some of the clues in *Last House*, noticing the bite mark on Krug’s hand, the bandage on Sadie’s head, while the spaghetti sauce reminds the uneasy audience of the bloodbath barely completed. The increasingly ill Junior, fighting withdrawal, moans aloud, tortured by the crimes in a series of flashbacks. It is Estelle’s compassion for Junior’s late-night retching that leads to the revelation about Mari’s fate, when her mother catches sight of the peace-sign necklace around Junior’s neck. Suspicious, she surreptitiously examines the robber’s suitcase and finds the girls’ bloody clothes, which Craven notes “is what happens in *The Virgin Spring*, too.”

The reactions of the parents differ, though, because of their entirely separate moral universes. When the truth becomes plain, Töre prepares ritually to extract his revenge; while Märeta locks the robbers inside, Töre puts the guilty Ingeri to work stoking the bathhouse fire while he goes out to gather birch whisks. His only break in composure during this ordeal comes as he struggles with the birch; unable to contain his rage, he knocks down the entire tree before chopping off small branches. After he ritually cleanses himself, he orders Ingeri to get his butcher knife. Although he has originally removed a sword from a trunk in their bedroom, Töre now seems to realize that this is no duel but a slaughter. There is no moral ambiguity here; Töre seems assured that he is doing his God’s work. Bergman’s narrative harks back to the roots of the ballad and signals a decision in favor of Märeta’s God, despite the apparent power of Ingeri’s father god.

Armed with the knife and covered by a butcher’s apron, Töre goes to work. He first sits at his immense chair, which displaces the image of the bridge-keeper’s pagan bench, and glowers like a god in judgment at the three thieves. As if to signal his decision, he throws down the knife, awakening the doomed men. They are quickly and efficiently dispatched, even the boy, despite Märeta’s attempt to shelter him from the vengeful Töre. The aim is not revenge but dispassionate judgment.

The mute robber ends up splayed cruciform upon the chair, the voluble one stretched across the hell-like fire, and the boy crushed by Töre in a parody of the priest's promise of a hand of salvation reaching out. Only when the family has carried out divine justice do they seek Karin's body.

The impulses are reversed in *Last House*. Here the parents' first compulsion is to find their daughter. Unlike Karin's parents, who take it on faith that their daughter is dead (a faith that is rewarded by the miracle at the end), Mari's parents want tangible proof and quickly locate their dying daughter for one final tearful reunion. Craven seems to suggest that the audience needs to see the family reunited on the physical plane, for neither he nor the parents trust in an afterlife. The simultaneous dream sequence, where Weasel imagines the pair operating upon him with chisel and hammer, reveals the very human remorse even the monsters feel—and consequently forces the audience to flinch in sympathy with the metallic hammer blow. Craven relates that he learned from his lover of the time, a Ph.D. student in anthropology, that "having your teeth broken" is "one of the most primal dreams." Whether Craven sees the current cultural climate as a movement beyond the era of faith, or a reversion to a more primal and primitive era, is difficult to tell.

In contrast to Töre's ritualistic preparation, Mari's parents surreptitiously ransack their home for possible weapons. Their actions are devoid of the sureness of divine judgment. John proceeds to booby-trap the house against the sleeping robbers, using techniques, Craven reveals, taken from a Green Beret handbook on improvised battle. Estelle convinces Weasel to stroll outdoors, presumably for a passionate encounter, leading him away from the barely concealed body of Mari on the couch. Once outside, the shy housewife convinces the criminal of her hidden desire for bondage. So eager is he for the encounter that Weasel insists that she tie him up, assuming the house's neat suburban exterior is incapable of concealing malicious intent. Craven expects the early 1970s audience to identify with the reality of this early "desperate" housewife, having been awakened to the sexual desires of the "girl next door" by porn star Marilyn Chambers, star of the contemporaneous *Behind the Green Door*.

Craven plays upon the expected sexual politics in his attempt to show the reality of violence in all its true ugliness. Turning the tables of sexual violence on men seldom happened in films at this time. The first warning of Estelle's vengeful objective comes when she manages to catch Weasel's trouser zipper on his delicate flesh. "How did I do that?" the seemingly innocent, but calculating, housewife asks her

suddenly regretful paramour. "Aw, poor little fella," she comments as she sees his no-longer-proud member. Weasel responds to the humiliating criticism with an avowal that "you just scared it, that's all," and predictably doubles his determination to continue despite the warning signs. Our next clear signal of the coming violence is Estelle's hand tearing up the grass as she clamps down upon his penis with her teeth. The spectacle of revenge has become as elaborate as the initial orgy of rape and murder. Craven equalizes the crimes in our eyes and dares us to look away.

Similarly, when John and Krug meet at last, skin to skin, they exchange blows, but there is no decisive victory—if anything, it appears that the guilty killer will not succumb to the vengeful father. Craven overturns the expected revenge scenario and the resolution it would offer. Without the clarity of a moral connection to a powerful father god, John lacks the ability to wield his weapon in judgment. All that saves John is the interruption of Junior, who fires a pistol at his father, whose only response is to taunt and ridicule his son in what Craven calls "my worst nightmare of a father." He adds, "My father was not that bad, by the way. I didn't kill myself." But this is exactly what Krug convinces his son to do. His horror is not the one the audience shares; according to Craven, Krug's true horror is that his own son disappoints him by actually committing suicide. The earthly fathers have the final say in Craven's universe. The denouement continues the unpredictable moral reversals. There is no one to save the family from their attackers; there is no one to offer an ethical compass. All the trappings of the righteous have disintegrated in Craven's moral vacuum.

The final return of authority, in the person of the sheriff, ineffectually seeks to hold back the "good" parents from the brink of murder. Arriving on the bloody scene, the police officer shouts, "John! For God's sake, don't!" but there are no gods in authority here. Accompanied by the whine of the chainsaw, Estelle charges across the lawn, phallic knife in hand, while John's face freezes in a rictus grin. Sadie falls into the pool, blood streaming from her mouth. The impaling of Krug spurts blood even across the face of the sheriff. No one remains unsullied, presumably even the audience, whom Craven notes should be left "completely enraged and befuddled, and not knowing who they are or what they can do, except to try to go out and kill the filmmakers," he adds sardonically. Moral certainty has been erased and authority questioned; morality has become dumb.

The Virgin Spring, of course, ends with the title miracle. Töre, in despair, wonders how he can ever be reconciled to his murderous hands

and offers to use them to build a church on the site of Karin's murder. During his wrenching appeal, his back is to the audience, but when the miraculous spring is revealed, he turns and rejoins his remaining family and, in so doing, seems to heal the disruption caused by his angry outburst. All are reconciled, including the priest, who had lost his faith, and even Ingeri, who, bathed in sunlight, seems to have changed gods and been received into the Christian light. No such reconciliation is possible in *Last House*; the parents are left without a method to appease their suffering or guilt, with blood literally on their hands. There is no one even to avenge Phyllis, no one to claim her body. We are adrift in a world where both technology and authority (such as the sheriff or deputy) are mostly absent or ridiculed, mocked by teens and defied by the sole person of color. For Craven, there is little to hope for and nothing to hold onto in this world of uncertain morality.

The medieval ballad offers a stable form. The rhyme, the rhythm, the tune all work to maintain the story's shape and impact, although the world around it continues to change. Reimaginings are inevitable. Yet the variety of interpretations tells us more about the adapters than it does about the original ballad. While both filmmakers strayed from the original ballad, both also used it to define a moral center from which they diverged. Just as Umberto Eco describes, the general appropriation of "the Middle Ages as a *pretext*...a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters" operates here, too (1986, 68). Bergman remains closer to the ballad's origins but creates a narrative of (then contemporary) religious questioning. Craven uses the ballad structure and audience expectations to show the malaise of American culture in the 1970s and the void created by the absence of the father god(s). This characterization fits neatly into Arthur Lindley's second type of medieval film: "the Middle Ages as shorthand for the-spirituality-missing-in-our-lives" type (1998,17). Craven's vision focuses upon a deficiency in contrast to Bergman's uncertainty.

Certainty is the key: Bergman simply does not know and wishes he did, while Craven seems sure that there are no gods, no rules. His use of the horror genre highlights this loss. If we agree with Bruce Kawin that "one goes to a horror film in order to have a nightmare—not simply a frightening dream, but a dream whose undercurrent of anxiety both presents and masks the desire to fulfill and be punished for conventionally or personally unacceptable impulses" (1999, 680), Craven knows that members of his audience expect a final moral solution. They can vicariously enjoy the horror but anticipate a resolution that restores balance, just as the medieval audience knew the ballad would restore balance

through divine control. Craven, however, denies them the expected comfort and restoration of order. His film mirrors the malaise and moral uncertainty of his time, just as the ballad reflected the known universe to the medieval Christian audience. Unlike Bergman, he cannot bring himself to offer the illusion of order in a chaotic world. While Bergman clings to the ballad's world of black-and-white morality, Craven resigns himself to a stark, disordered planet where the ballad and its morality have been forgotten.

Notes

1. All quotes from Craven are from the director's commentary on the DVD unless otherwise noted.
2. This period marked the advent of the "new" pornographic features like *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door*, both made in 1972.

Filmography

Behind the Green Door (1972). 72 min. Artie and Jim Mitchell
Deep Throat (1972). 61 min. Gerard Damiano
Jungfrukällan [The Virgin Spring] (1960). 89 min. Ingmar Bergman
The Last House on the Left (1972). 85 min. Wes Craven

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