

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## **Fear (La Paura)** 1954

Roberto Rossellini

### OVERVIEW

*Fear* is the last of Rossellini's films starring his then-wife Ingrid Bergman. It contains more than a hint of autobiographical content in its story of a woman who has an extra-marital affair (as Bergman did with Rossellini while married to Petter Lindström). The film, however, is more about the woman's mental state than about the illicit affair itself. Indeed, the story, which continues the director's interest in examining psychological rather than sociological territory, is an intense and gripping emotional thriller, complete with blackmail and a stunning plot twist. More *noir* than neo-realist, the film owes a debt to Hitchcock in its storytelling and to German expressionism in its cinematography. While some critics fault it for inadequately explaining the main characters' behaviour, there is no doubt that the film has gripping moments. The basic plot itself is based on a Stefan Zweig's 1920 novella *Angst (Fear)*. Rossellini shot two versions of *La Paura*, one in German (*Angst*) and one for an international audience (*Fear*). The director said his intention was to examine the moral state of Germany after the war, which partly explains the undercurrent of political content in the film. When released in both Italy and Germany, the public and critical response was largely negative, which prompted a quickly edited version in which the woman separates from her husband and continues to live only for the sake of her children.

### SYNOPSIS

Irene Wagner, the wife of scientist Albert Wagner, manages a laboratory in Munich, Germany. Just when she wants to end an extra-marital affair with Erich, she is confronted by Joanna, who blackmails her. If Irene doesn't hand over large sums of money, Joanna will tell her husband about Erich. Aside from the money, her motive also appears to be revenge against Erich, who dropped her for Irene. Irene wants to save her marriage and eventually pays Joanna some money, but she is afflicted by fear, guilt and shame. She is near to a mental breakdown when Joanna demands even more money. Then she learns that her husband organised the blackmail plot and prepares to kill herself. She is rescued at this last minute by him and they embrace.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Irene	Irene is married to Albert Wagner.
Albert	Albert is a scientist.
Erich	Erich Baumann is/has been Irene's lover.
Joanna	Joanna was once Erich's lover, too.
Marta	Marta is the Wagners' housekeeper in the country.

### STORY

[Note: Different versions of the film exist with different endings. The description given below is taken from the international print.]

*Marital infidelity* The story opens with shots of dark and slick city streets, lit by garish auto headlights, accompanied by a nervy musical score. The camera follows a single car out of the city centre. It draws up at the curb, and a man gets out followed by a woman. He's Erich Baumann, and she's Irene Wagner. As they argue, it's clear that they are lovers and that she is married. She can't go on with it any longer, she says. She's afraid. He's frustrated. 'Do you love me? Yes or no. Answer!' he demands. 'What do you want me to answer?' she replies. 'I don't know. Really, I don't know.' They embrace and kiss passionately. He leads her to his apartment, but she withdraws, saying she'll call him on Monday, and drives off.

*Joanna* On the front steps of her house, she is confronted by a young woman walking with a cane. She introduces herself as Joanna Schultz and suggests that Erich must have mentioned her name because 'he belonged to' her before Irene took him away. Irene is shaken but denies knowing

anything, pushes some cash into her hand and tells her to leave her alone.

*Albert* Inside her large house, Irene talks with her older husband, Albert, and lies about where's she been. He expresses doubts about the necessity of her working so hard running a factory. 'You've done it all alone,' he says. 'I was useless behind barbed wire, but now...' She cuts him off and changes the topic. They talk about their children and say goodnight, but the tension between them is palpable. Going upstairs to her bedroom, Irene opens a safe and tears up the letters hidden there.

*Experiments* The next day, Irene arrives at the factory and goes to the laboratory where Albert works. He and his colleagues are doing animal experiments for a poison that paralyzes the motor nerves. She watches the machines recording the collapse of the animals' lungs and asks, 'Does the animal die?' Albert says maybe not, that's the point of the experiment. The animal dies and then they inject it with a new drug, which revives it. 'You shouldn't fear poison when used by a doctor,' her husband says to her. 'One poison is an antidote for another.'

*Blackmail* When Irene returns to her office, Joanna is waiting for her and demands 5,000 marks or else she'll tell Irene's husband about her affair with Erich. 'You're out of your mind,' Irene says (for the second time). 'There's nothing between Erich and me except friendship and a mutual interest in music.' But Joanna knows she is scared and only leaves because Albert comes in to the room. Irene and Albert go home early, preparing to visit their children in the country over the weekend, but Joanna calls her on the telephone and demands the money. 'I'm standing across from your house,' she says, threateningly. Irene gives in, makes excuses to Albert and manages to find a large sum by borrowing from her household staff and her husband. Albert is suspicious, but she laughs off his concern.

*Escape to the country* Husband and wife pack up the car and drive off for a weekend at their country house with the children. He tries to persuade her to take a few weeks off, slow down and spend more time with the children. She accuses him of not valuing her managerial skills, but he says he's just worried that she's working too hard. In the peaceful rural landscape, and in the company of their children, they rekindle some of their affection for each other. Their son is overjoyed when given an air rifle, but the daughter pushes away the doll offered to her because she wants a rifle, too.

*Marta* The atmosphere is tense, and the house staff grumble. A young maid complains that Marta, the old housekeeper, scolds her for going out dancing, and Marta complains that there's no discipline any more. Marta mimics Albert's advice and suggests that Irene should take it easy and stay in the country. 'Once you're on this treadmill,' Irene says, 'you can't get off.' Stroking her hair, as she did when Irene was a little girl, Marta puts her mistress to sleep.

*Lies and confession* In the morning, the family discovers that the son's air gun is missing. The daughter is the suspect, but she denies it and her father accuses her of lying. When she confesses, Albert punishes her. Irene says he was too severe because the girl eventually told the truth, but Albert points that she lied until she had no way out. After they argue about his treatment of their daughter, the whole family comes together in a spirit of forgiveness.

*More blackmail* Back at the factory office on Monday, Irene calls Erich and sets up a meeting for the evening but then learns that Albert has tickets for a concert. Joanna arrives late at the concert and catches Irene's eye. In the interval, after Albert goes for a cigarette, Joanna slips into their box and tricks Irene into handing over her ring, which she says she'll keep until she gets another 5,000. Driving home, Albert notices her strange behaviour and begs her to tell him what's worrying her. When he notices her missing ring, she lies about it and nearly breaks down in tears.

*Search* Back in the office, Irene tries to work but is distracted and leaves almost immediately. She goes to Erich's place, informs him about the blackmail and asks him to help her find Joanna. Irene goes to a hotel where Joanna used to stay and learns that she also calls herself Louisa Vidor and that she is a spendthrift who owes money to lots of people.

*Surprise* Next, we watch Joanna get into a car driven by a man wearing sunglasses. He is Albert, who tells her to arrange another meeting with Irene, give back the ring and demand 20,000 marks. Joanna says she feels sorry for Irene. 'So much trouble over such a scoundrel [Erich],' she says. 'Don't you think you're going too far...I'm really frightened sometimes. It's too dangerous.' Albert doesn't agree, and says, 'You've had your revenge. And it's not such a bad deal for you.'

*Painless death* At the factory, Irene joins her husband and other scientists discussing the poison experiments. She listens to them talk about toxicity, paralysis and respiratory contractions, and asks if

the animal died without pain. Yes, she is told, there was no pain. She is summoned to the telephone and arranges a meeting with Joanna for late that night.

*Revelation* Joanna demands 20,000, but Irene refuses and says she'll go to the police. Joanna then reveals that the person behind the blackmail is not Erich, as Irene has assumed, but her husband. Joanna explains that when she found out about her and Erich, she went to Albert, who then thought up the blackmail plan including the idea of taking her ring. After Irene leaves, Albert approaches Joanna, who tells him that she has revealed his secret.

*Finale* Irene drives to the factory, though it is now near midnight. She walks slowly into the building and sits in her office, in obvious pain. She writes a short note, puts it in an envelope and leaves it on her desk. She calls Marta on the telephone, asks about the children and says, 'Tomorrow morning, you must take them in your arms and tell them how much I love them.' She goes to the laboratory and looks at the animals in their cages. Alternating between hysteria and forced calm, she prepares a syringe with poison and is only halted from injecting it by her husband's voice. They embrace and all is forgiven.

## THEMES

1. *Psychology* We don't have to look far to find the primary theme of this film. It's the title itself: fear. But kind of fear? Certainly not the kind that makes a little girl scream in the night. Instead, it is a more invidious sense of doom, of being trapped and feeling guilty because you have created this hell for yourself. Irene's fear clings to her; she cannot escape it, except for the brief weekend in the countryside. Wherever she is, we see her face registering the dread that she carries within. In the opening scene, for example, when she is trying to tell her lover Erich that the affair must end, she says, 'When I have to leave you and go back home, there's such a feeling of guilt. Such fear.' That she would feel guilt is understandable, but why fear? The answer is that Rossellini wants to crank up the emotional intensity, and, while her guilt has a specific cause, her fear does not. It haunts her throughout the story, in her pained facial expressions, her clumsy lies and her erratic behaviour, such as reaching out for the phone and not picking it up. An atmosphere of apprehension is created also by the thriller plotline, chilling score and noirish lighting. Tension rises with every scene because, like Irene, we do not know what to expect next or how she can extricate herself from the noose around her neck. Events are closing in on her, and there's no escape.

2. *Women* The theme of gender is also present in the story, though not so prominently. There are a few obvious examples of gender stereotyping, such as the gifts given by the parents to their children. The boy gets an air rifle and the girl gets a doll. She wants a rifle, too, but is told by her father that 'little girls shouldn't play with rifles.' Irene, on the other hand, is not a typical passive woman. It is noteworthy that the family car is always driven by Irene and not her scientist husband. Also, she is the one who runs the factory, having done so in his absence during the war. Albert, however, is uncomfortable with this role reversal and suggests that she could step down from her managerial role and become more of a mother. But a more sinister element of the misogyny is the psychological abuse that Irene suffers at the hands of her husband. Once the revelation is made that he is behind the blackmail plot, we see that Irene is being tested like a lab rat. Her reactions are observed by the dispassionate scientist in order to determine just how much emotional stress she can take before she confesses to her crime. Albert subjected his daughter to the same kind of test during the incident of the missing air rifle. He bullied her until she cracked. This theme of experimenting with Irene's mental health is made explicit in the final scene, when she goes into the laboratory and stares at the rats and rabbits in their cages. She identifies with them because she is one of them.

3. *Politics* Another, less obvious, theme is that of politics. As in other Rossellini films (such as *The Machine that Kills Bad People*), *Fear* contains subtle but unmistakable hints of Germany's recent Nazi past. Indeed, the director said that he made the film in order to explore how far the country had come after the war. The opening shot of a famous clock tower makes it clear that the story is set in Munich, the centre of Hitler's movement. Then, we see a uniformed man raise his hand, in imitation of a Nazi salute, to direct traffic. The expressionist cinematography also alludes to the Nazi period. From the beginning, then, the film invokes Germany's immoral past as the context for a story of a marriage compromised by infidelity and blackmail. Within the story itself, the chemical factory, which had been running for decades, is another strong link to the past. In the story, the factory tests poisons on rats, but what did it do during the late 1930s and early 1940s? Albert himself is a scientist who was imprisoned after the war, and the suggestion that he was involved in the 'final solution' is strengthened by the fact that he is played by an actor with a known Nazi past.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Irene** Irene is a capable woman who runs a large factory while married with two children. She is a loving mother, but she cheated on her husband while he was a prisoner after the war, and now she lives with that shame and guilt. She has a strong will, but she is unable to cope with the fear that her husband will find out about her infidelity.

**Confused** Irene begins the story in a state of confusion. She has had an extra-marital affair, which seems to have begun when her husband was in prison. Now, she wants to end it but is paralysed by uncertainty. That emotional state is established in the first scene with dialogue, when Irene and Erich argue. When he says that she doesn't love him any more, she tries to explain that she is always happy with him but going home is what she hates. Fed up, he demands an answer: Do you love me or not? 'What do you want me to answer?' she says. She shakes her head and says, 'I don't know. Really, I don't know.' Her voice trembles with anxiety, but then they kiss and he leads her to his apartment. Halfway, she stops, begs him to let her go and she leaves. From this opening scene, we see that Irene is torn between her lover and her family, her loyalties conflicted and confused.

**Frightened** As long as the two parts of her life are kept separate, Irene is not in danger. But that safe distance begins to collapse as soon as Joanna appears. The rising fear inside Irene is dramatised in the second scene involving Joanna, when she comes to Irene's office and blackmails her. At first, Irene keeps up the pretence that she isn't having an affair and angrily orders Joanna to leave. She seems in control of the situation, but everything changes when Albert arrives in the outer office. Joanna dismisses Irene's denial of an affair, pointing out that her hand trembled because she was 'frightened.' And now we can see that Irene is afraid. She panics and is desperate to get rid of Joanna and the threat she poses to her marriage. Joanna does leave, but Irene is shaken to her core. Her guilty secret is no longer safe and she cannot control a determined Joanna. When she speaks to her husband, she tries to hide her feelings, but her fear is evident in her edgy voice and jerky movements.

**Suicidal** When Irene finds out that the blackmail is all her husband's idea, she is devastated. Her fear and guilt are now compounded by despair and isolation. She has been desperate to protect her marriage, to keep her guilty behaviour secret because she doesn't want to hurt her husband. But now she knows that he is the one who has made her suffer. There is nothing left to save because the marriage has been destroyed by the actions of them both. For the final ten minutes, we watch Irene take slow steps to end her life. She goes to her office, writes a suicide note, calls Marta with instructions about the children and goes into the laboratory, where she looks at the doomed animals, again and again. Like a condemned prisoner, she is both calm and hysterical in the face of imminent death. She is ready to kill herself.

**Loving** During her terrifying ordeal—the fear, guilt and then despair when she learns that her husband planned the blackmail—Irene has found solace only with her children. And so, as she prepares to end her life, her thoughts go to them. She calls Marta, the housekeeper, on the telephone and tells her what to do in the morning (after she is dead). 'You must hold the children in your arms,' she says, holding back the tears. 'And tell them how much I love them.' Her voice cracks as she struggles to complete her sentences and to hide her agitation. 'Marta,' she says at the end, 'stay with them always.' She is torn apart inside by the knowledge that she will never see her children again. She just about keeps herself from breaking down completely during this scene. Whatever her confusion about her own life, her love for her children is never in doubt.

**Joanna** Joanna, who is slightly younger than Irene, appears to be devious, vindictive and cruel. Having lost out to Irene for Erich's affections, she wants revenge. She is devious and can be menacing in her demands. However, as we learn later, she also has a compassionate side. Her character is complicated by the fact that she is herself putting on an act.

**Deceptive** Joanna plays the part of a rejected lover, dumped by Erich in favour of Irene, who is prepared to blackmail Irene in order to ensure her silence about Irene's affair with Erich. She plays her role very convincingly, especially in her first scene when she confronts Irene on the steps to her house. Irene denies any romantic link with Erich, and Joanna breaks down in hysterics. She's been abandoned, she says through her tears, and now has nothing. Irene is fooled and hands the poor girl some cash, but when he looks at that scene a second time, knowing that she is playing a part, we appreciate her skill at deception. She appears angry, then outraged and then desperate. The last shot, when she looks at the retreating figure of Irene, reveals a tiny smile on her face. She is satisfied

that she has fooled her and that the plan is working.

**Menacing** At first appearing to be heartbroken and destitute, Joanna can also be menacing. This side of her character emerges during the scene at the concert. Irene looks around the audience and spots Joanna, who is wearing a complacent smile. After Albert leaves for a cigarette (as planned), Joanna slips into Irene's private box and affects a casual friendship with her. 'What do you want?' an agitated Irene demands. 'Oh,' Joanna replies, 'just wanted to say hello.' Irene orders her to leave, but Joanna ignores her and speaks again with nonchalance. 'How do you like my new dress?' she asks. 'I bought it today.' Then she compliments Irene on her jewellery, mentioning a pretty ring, which she deftly slips off her finger. Suddenly, her tone changes. 'You paid very little for your happiness,' she says. 'I want 5,000 more and will keep your ring until you give it to me.' Joanna plays the whole scene with frightening serenity, intimidating Irene with her controlled and menacing presence.

**Regretful** A very different woman is revealed when she finally confides in Irene about what she has been doing. They meet in a local tavern, far from the upmarket places that Irene would formally frequent. The agreement has been that Joanna will return the ring for a second large sum of money. But Irene says no, the deal is off and she'll go to the police. When Irene accuses her of enjoying her little joke, Joanna has a sudden change of heart. 'Let me explain, please,' she cries and then tells her the truth about the blackmail plot. Feeling misunderstood and misjudged, but not wanting to hurt Irene, Joanna hesitates and then says, 'It was your husband.' She speaks softly and puts a comforting hand on Irene's arm when she says, 'I know it was my fault, but everything after that [their first meeting] was your husband's idea.' This Joanna, the real Joanna as suggested by the down-to-earth setting of the tavern, is full of regret for suffering she has inflicted on another woman.

**Albert** Albert is a scientist who works on experiments to develop antidotes for paralysis during neuro-surgery. He spent some years in a POW camp after the war, he appears to be much older than his wife and he is conservative in his social (and possibly political) views. In some ways, he is a more complex character than Irene. For one thing, and like Joanna, the other actor in his clever blackmail plot, Albert is not what he appears to be. He is loving and considerate to his wife, but there is also a streak of sadism in him, reminiscent perhaps of a Nazi past.

**Considerate** The Albert we see from the first scene onward is a kind person, concerned with his wife's worried looks and strange behaviour. Each time she gets nervous or seems preoccupied, he shows his affection by checking that she is alright. A good illustration of that false attentiveness occurs during the scene when they drive out to the countryside. First, he suggests that she should drive slower and that she should stay out in the country with the children. When she pleads too much work, he says she's done more than enough and deserves a rest. When she assures him that she is happy in her work, he smiles at her, squeezes her arm and apologises for being too protective. This is Albert, the mild-mannered scientist who constantly displays concern for his wife's well-being.

**Stern** While he is loving in his interactions with his wife and children, Albert sometimes displays a severity toward them. A telling example is the incident of the missing air rifle. When his daughter denies taking it, Albert subjects her to tough questioning, as if she were in court. When she continues to deny taking the gun, he grabs her by the shoulders and says sternly, 'I'm beginning to lose my patience with these lies.' Having bullied and humiliated her, he finally gets her to confess. Even then, after she's told the truth, he punishes her. As he explains later to Irene, 'I can't stand anyone not having the courage to admit they've done something wrong.' Irene suggests that their daughter might have been ashamed and didn't want to look bad in front of her father, whom she loves. That sympathetic explanation is dismissed by Albert, who says it was better to force her to confess. This scene hints at a streak of authoritarianism in Albert, which would be consistent with his possible Nazi past.

**Cruel** Albert's severity is allied to what we later learn is his plain cruelty. Indeed, this is the crux of his character. A father who wants to punish his daughter and a scientist who kills animals, Albert devises a plot to make his wife suffer until she confesses her misdemeanours. We see all that in retrospect, when the film is over, but we get a good glimpse at the two-thirds point when the secret is revealed to the viewers (but not yet to Irene). The scene begins when an ordinary car (not the family luxury vehicle) stops and picks up Joanna at a pre-arranged spot. The driver is wearing a hat and dark sunglasses, but looks a lot like Albert. That's because he is Albert. Joanna greets him with a friendly smile, but he is grim-faced as he delivers his next set of instructions to his accomplice. 'Arrange a meeting with my wife...demand 20,000 marks.' Joanna reflects that poor Irene is really suffering and that he (Albert) is going too far. An unsmiling Albert merely comments, 'So what?' Here

is the dispassionate scientist, unmoved by his subject's feelings, and only wanting to punish her for her indiscretion.



(Joanna, left, admires Irene's ring at the concert)



(Irene and Albert in the countryside)



(Joanna reveals the secret to Irene)