

¶ Philip and Kersti French. *Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)*. London: BFI Film Classics, 1995. Pp. 77.

¶ Margareta Wirmark. *Smultronstället och dödens ekippage*. Stockholm: Carlssons, 1998. Pp. 194.

Though critics have analyzed the oeuvre of Ingmar Bergman (b. 1918) for many decades, individual films have not, as a rule, been treated in monograph form. *Smultronstället (Wild Strawberries)*, one of the canonical films of the 1950s and a perennial audience favorite, is the subject of two recent books, one in English, aimed primarily at a non-Swedish audience, the other in Swedish, a mark of renewed interest in the director's homeland.

The British Film Institute has designated *Wild Strawberries* one of 360 key films in the history of cinema, and the brief overview by Philip and Kersti French was commissioned in conjunction with that distinction. It is intended to provide background information and a general introduction to the film rather than a comprehensive critical analysis. Given these inherent limitations, it is largely successful.

The volume is subdivided into four chapters. "Sjöström and Bergman" summarizes highlights of the respective careers of the featured actor (himself, of course, a major director of a previous era) and the scriptwriter-director. "A Swedish Odyssey" describes the film scene by scene, with explanatory interpolations as needed. This section serves both to refresh the viewer's memory and to contextualize the film by elaborating on geographic, cultural, and linguistic matters that may be unclear to a non-Swedish audience, such as the distance and traveling time between Stockholm and Lund, the meaning and associations of the Swedish title, and the precise nature of the honorary degree Isak Borg receives. Occasionally, however, such information seems excessive: does the viewer of the film really need to know that the actual ceremony would have taken place on May 31 rather than June 1, the putative day of Isak's journey, or that it would have been held at midday rather than in the early evening? Undue attention is likewise paid to the make and model of Isak's car (the authors point out that this 1937 Packard

Twelve 7-Passenger Limo is distinguished from the 1938 model, which had a split windshield); surely what matters is that the vehicle is, as Isak himself ironically notes, “antik, liksom ägaren” (antique, like its owner) and that it resembles a hearse and thus calls to mind the opening nightmare. Similarly, it is hardly significant that the Almans are driving a Volkswagen Beetle or that, as the authors point out, this was “in those days the most common car in Sweden.”

After briefly discussing the actual filming and the central importance of Sjöström’s characterization of Isak Borg, “The Background, the Foreground” traces various influences on Bergman’s film. Though much of this material is familiar to Bergman scholars, it is not likely to be common knowledge to the general audience the book addresses. The discussion ranges widely while remaining succinct and persuasive. The authors are especially good on Bergman’s debt to the silent films of Sjöström, not only the obvious antecedent, *Körkarlen* (known variously as *The Phantom Carriage*, *The Phantom Chariot*, *Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness*, and so on), but also *Karin Ingmarsdotter* (*Karin, Daughter of Ingmar*), in which a watch without hands is a recurring motif. A link between Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and *Wild Strawberries* is established through the Selma Lagerlöf novella *Körkarlen*, on which Sjöström’s film is based.

Inevitably, Strindberg is also considered. The authors note parallels and allusions to *Ett drömspel* (*A Dream Play*) and to the marital hell so prominently featured in plays like *Dödsdansen* (*The Dance of Death*), as well as more ephemeral echoes in the film of *Spöksönet* (*A Ghost Sonata*) and *Stora landsvägen* (*The Great Highway*). Assuming a connection between Bergman’s film and theater work, they comment on similarities with regard to theme and characterization between *Wild Strawberries* and plays he had directed in the immediately preceding year. These include not only Scandinavian classics—Strindberg’s *Erik XIV* and Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*—but also the American playwright Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. More obliquely, the suggestion is put forth that Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, though never directed by Bergman, may have contributed to the film’s structure and to Sjöström’s interpretation of Isak Borg; his portrayal of Willy Loman a few years before had been widely acclaimed.

Turning to a different medium, the authors give a concise and illuminating account of the film's antecedents in the Scandinavian visual arts, notably the idealized domestic scenes of Carl Larsson, evident in the film's namesday celebration, and the tortured expressionism of Edvard Munch, traceable especially in the central nightmare sequence. Precursors in German expressionist film are also noted.

The last chapter, "The Times, the Reputation," discusses the film in the context of Sweden in the 1950s and other Bergman films of that decade. Concerning the reception of *Wild Strawberries*, the authors focus primarily on the response of British critics, though they also examine the reserved or lukewarm reaction of many Swedish reviewers. The volume concludes with a retrospective assessment of Bergman's critical reputation and the significance of *Wild Strawberries* in the history of cinema as well as its impact on later directors, with particular emphasis on intertextual references in Woody Allen's *Another Woman*.

A number of minor factual errors mar the otherwise effective presentation. Though Bergman attended the University of Stockholm (then called Stockholms högskola), he did not, as the authors state, earn a degree. The director's Hitchcockian cameo appearance in a train corridor occurs in *En lektion i kärlek* (*A Lesson in Love*), not *Kvinnors väntan* (*Waiting Women*). The modern Sara in *Wild Strawberries* is not wearing shorts, but long pants rolled up to just below the knee. Such mistakes are hardly earth-shattering, but their presence in an otherwise carefully researched account is puzzling.

Occasionally the authors falter on small matters of interpretation as well. When Marianne goes off for a swim, they note, "the suggestion is that she wants to wash this old man right out of her tightly knotted hair." However Marianne feels about her father-in-law at that particular moment, the allusion to Mary Martin's famous song in *South Pacific* seems singularly inapplicable. Much later, Marianne confides her marital dilemma to Isak, following which he gives her permission to smoke. As the authors observe, this gesture is "the first explicit sign of his change of heart"--but they then qualify the statement by adding that ". . . there are sinister echoes here of the young Oswald being allowed to puff on the pipe of his diseased father in Ibsen's *Ghosts*," a claim that in no way

is supported by the scene in the film. More tantalizing, though unproven, is the suggestion that the giant spectacles with staring eyes in the opening nightmare may be a deliberate reference to the “terrifyingly judgmental eyes. . . hanging above the oculist’s store. . . which the characters in Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* pass on their journeys to and from Manhattan.”

Minor quibbles aside, the volume is a helpful guide to Bergman’s masterpiece, well organized and elegantly written. Though clearly directed toward a British audience, it may serve as a useful introduction to the film for non-Swedes and Swedes alike.

Margareta Wirmark’s *Smultronstället och dödens ekipage* (*Wild Strawberries* and the Carriage of Death) is both more ambitious and less satisfying than the overview by Philip and Kersti French. Wirmark’s goal is to examine the most significant artistic influences—literary, theatrical, and cinematic—on Bergman’s film, and to that end she systematically analyzes the impact of Strindberg, Hjalmar Bergman, Victor Sjöström, Ibsen, C. J. L. Almqvist, and the Bible, concluding with a short discussion of the visual arts. Such an exhaustive consideration, both of a single film and of Bergman’s artistic antecedents, is long overdue. In particular, the fact that his films draw eclectically on Scandinavian literary tradition has frequently been glossed over by critics writing in English for a non-Swedish audience; the director’s own tendency to downplay the connection between film and literature as well as the deeply personal concerns of many of his best-known films have also mitigated against the type of approach Wirmark employs. Her in-depth knowledge of Scandinavian literature and detailed familiarity with Bergman’s work in the theater enable her to explore the sources of Bergman’s film in strikingly varied contexts and to open up new avenues of investigation. The value of her ground-breaking study is nevertheless partially controverted by the tendency to draw inferences or even conclusions based on shaky evidence.

The opening chapter on Strindberg establishes the validity of Wirmark’s approach while simultaneously illustrating its pitfalls. Unlike most previous critics, Wirmark does not focus on specific borrowings from Strindberg’s texts. Instead she elucidates Bergman’s compositional

method and its analogies to various post-Inferno dramas, in particular *Ett drömspel*, but also *Pekikanen* (*The Pelican*), *Kronbruden* (*The Crown Bride*), *Spöksонатен* (*The Ghost Sonata*), and *Till Damaskus* (*To Damascus*), with special attention to Olof Molander's seminal production from 1937, which Bergman had seen and has repeatedly mentioned as a source of inspiration. Wirmark demonstrates that Bergman's debt to Strindberg functions at many levels and is more allusive than has generally been assumed.

However, Wirmark also overstates her case. Citing Strindberg's famous preface to *Ett drömspel* as a model for Bergman's technique, she asserts that reality and dream are blurred or coexist at two crucial junctures in the film, the scene at the gas station and the encounter between Isak and his mother. Both, she believes, function at two levels: they simultaneously fulfill the conventions of realism and may be interpreted as emanations from Isak's subconscious mind. Though it is impossible to disprove this claim, elsewhere in the film Bergman makes it explicit when dreams, nightmares, or memories begin and end, and there is no logical reason to suppose that he is deliberately fudging the distinctions here. Wirmark's reading of the scene at the gas station seems especially strained. Isak's demeanor when the proprietor proclaims him "världens bästa doktor" (the best doctor in the world) does not suggest a feeling of triumph or validation, a projected wish fulfillment, as Wirmark asserts, but rather vague embarrassment tinged with nostalgia and regret for the path not taken.

Along similar lines, Wirmark sees Isak's daughter-in-law Marianne and both the past and present manifestations of Sara as individualized characters who at the same time gradually acquire allegorical dimensions, becoming Sapientia and Veritas respectively. The latter interpretation is supported by the pivotal scene leading into the central nightmare sequence when the Sara of Isak's memories forces him to examine himself in a mirror. It is difficult, however, to regard the modern hitchhiking Sara as an allegorical figure. According to Wirmark, Sara's declaration of undying love for Isak should not be interpreted realistically, but instead as Veritas' affirmation of the new, truer human being he has become during the course of the journey; one can just as well view it

solely as a gesture demonstrating Sara's self-conscious awareness of her own charm. In this scene Sara clearly becomes, for Isak, a stand-in for her namesake, the love of his youth, and in that capacity is stripped of individualized features as she helps to reconcile him with the past. Equally apparently, Sara and Marianne play important roles, both directly and indirectly, in leading Isak toward greater self-awareness, but that does not establish them as allegorical figures in quite the way Wirmark claims.

More convincing is Wirmark's presentation of the film's relationship to Hjalmar Bergman's *Farmor och vår herre* ('Grandmother and our lord'; translated as *God's Orchid*). Though the endings are vastly different, both works examine the mechanism of repressed memories, and in both a forced reassessment of the past causes psychological upheaval. Wirmark is nevertheless stretching the point when she asserts that *Wild Strawberries* contains a direct reference to the earlier narrative. Isak's mother--unlike the title character of the novel--does not appear to nurse secret hopes that her grandchildren will visit. Instead she notes the lack of attention from her numerous descendants with apparent indifference.

Wirmark also points out parallels between the film and two Hjalmar Bergman plays the director had staged in Malmö, *Herr Sleeman kommer* (Mr. Sleeman is coming) and *Sagan* (The Saga), though the ties become more tenuous when established through actors with important roles in the respective productions. Sjöström may have been famous as the fictitious Nobel Prize winner in *Swedenhielms*--a play Bergman did not direct--but the similarity to his portrayal of Isak Borg is far from obvious. Like Philip and Kersti French, Wirmark also discusses, in an extended parenthesis, *Death of a Salesman* and Sjöström's Willy Loman. Thematic and structural parallels between the play and *Wild Strawberries* are apparent, but it is hardly accurate to state, as Wirmark does, that both protagonists are men "i övre medelåldern" (in late middle age), since the film explicitly gives Isak's age as seventy-eight. This is, to be sure, a minor point, but it illustrates Wirmark's tendency to undercut her own argument by making specific comparisons that cannot withstand scrutiny.

Though Bergman has given at least two mutually contradictory ac-

counts of the genesis of *Wild Strawberries* and the stage at which he decided Sjöström should play Isak Borg, it seems likely, as Wirmark posits, that Sjöström and his films were present in Bergman's consciousness from the inception. Wirmark does not provide an analysis of the structural parallels between *Körkarlen* and *Wild Strawberries*, though the complex sequence of flashbacks in the earlier film undoubtedly contributed to the chronological arrangement of Bergman's narrative. Given her willingness to venture speculative interpretations elsewhere in the book, Wirmark's reading of *Körkarlen* is strangely literal: she assumes that David Holm actually dies in the cemetery and then returns to life again through an act of grace, whereas a more plausible explanation, made explicit at the end of the film, is that he has merely been knocked unconscious. This interpretation, furthermore, underscores the film's parallels to *Wild Strawberries*, since many central events of the narrative are retroactively revealed as having occurred in a dream-like state. It also seems odd that Wirmark apparently is unaware of Sjöström's extensive experience in front of the camera after the advent of simultaneous sound and image recording, since she gives Bergman credit for teaching him not to overact in the style of silent film.

Bergman directed Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in Malmö in the spring of 1957. The chronological proximity to *Wild Strawberries* and the appearance of several important actors in both productions serve as a springboard for Wirmark's analysis. Focusing largely on Act V of the play, she notes that both Peer and Isak are forced to reassess their lives when confronted with their own imminent death; the film's counterpart to the various characters who may be seen as projections of Peer's psyche may be found, she reiterates, in the gas station scene, which is also compared to the final scene of Act IV, when Peer is crowned emperor in the asylum. Though loose analogies between play and film are apparent, the attempt to find such specific parallels seems forced. Occasionally Wirmark fails to establish any meaningful connection at all: the statement that both Peer and Isak are dreamers leads to an extended analysis of the central nightmare scene of the film but sidesteps the fact that dreams and dreaming often have entirely different functions in the two works. A similar problem dominates the discussion of Almqvist's *Det går an*

(trans. *Sara Videbeck/ Why Not!*). Wirmark's premise is that Sara Videbeck of the novel and Sara the hitchhiker of the film are both embodiments of the modern woman (albeit of different eras), but the two characters and their functions within in the respective narratives are not similar enough to argue persuasively for a direct connection.

The last two chapters of Wirmark's book, on Biblical motifs and visual imagery respectively, widen the perspective considerably. The analysis of the polyphonic recitation of Wallin's psalm and of cross-cutting in the scene in the forest glade effectively illustrates the religious and metaphysical underpinnings of the film. Though the discussion of the visual arts draws heavily on previous scholarship, it provides a concise overview of sources and models from other related media.

Perhaps inevitably, when read cover to cover Wirmark's book becomes repetitious, since each succeeding chapter revisits aspects of the film covered previously. The text is refreshingly free of jargon and eminently accessible to the general reader or viewer, as Wirmark clearly intended. However, in avoiding the pitfalls of abstruse critical terminology, the author has strayed too far in the opposite direction, instead falling into colloquialisms that seem mannered and overworked. The text abounds with superfluous rhetorical questions, and the repetition of phrases like "som vi minns" (as we recall) becomes cloying. Wirmark is nevertheless to be commended both for her attempt to engage non-specialists in the discourse and for her effort to expand film studies across disciplinary boundaries.

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