

“In our relations with other people, we mainly criticize them. I have therefore withdrawn myself from all forms of social contact.’ In these opening lines, Professor Isak Borg expresses his personal tragedy and the theme of *Wild Strawberries*. Man’s inability to communicate with other men has always been an essential part of Bergman’s philosophy, but he has never expressed this theme so strongly or indicated so passionately his belief in the necessity of making a positive attempt.” (Eugene Archer, in *Film Quarterly*, Autumn 1959)

Wild Strawberries (*Smultronstället*, 1957) B&W. Running time: 91 minutes

This film followed Bergman’s most well-known movie, *The Seventh Seal* (1957), another ‘road movie.’

Plot

Isak Borg, a 76-yr-old professor and distinguished doctor, travels the 400 miles from Stockholm to Lund with his daughter-in-law, Marianne, to receive an honorary degree. Borg is played by Victor Sjöström, a major Swedish silent-era film director (“Sweden’s D.W. Griffith”) who was 78 when he made the film, and by most accounts lonely, in poor health, querulous, and prone to forget his lines.

Following a famous nightmare sequence, the rest of the film takes place during the car journey of 14 hours, as we watch Borg from the outside, in his interactions with others past and present, and from the inside, in his memories, reveries, dreams, and internal meditations.

Commentary

“The film I constantly go back to ... is *Wild Strawberries*, which, while scarcely a bag of laughs, has a compassionate view of life that best illustrates the more optimistic side of Bergman’s puzzled humanity.” (Derek Malcolm, in the *Guardian*, 1999)

“Wild Strawberries is the testament, I suspect quite directly personal, of a man who thoroughly understands how terrible it is to be a human being, and who is glad to accept the consequences.” (Robert Hatch, in the *Nation*, 1959)

“The essence of Proust’s image [the madeleines in *Remembrance of Time Past*], and Bergman’s, is the conception that an event assumes its meaning not from the action itself, but from the way it is regarded at different moments in time, and that life is composed of a series of such isolated events, given meaning by their temporal relationship to the memories of the man who experiences them.” (Eugene Archer, in a review of *Wild Strawberries* in *Film Quarterly*, Autumn 1959)

“Isak Borg equals me. IB equals Ice and Borg (Swedish for “icy fortress”). Simple and facile. I had created a figure who, on the outside, looked like my father but was me, through and through. I was then 37, cut off from all human relations. It was I who had done the cutting off, presumably an act of self-affirmation. I was a loner, a failure, I mean a complete failure. Though successful. And clever. And orderly, And disciplined. I was looking for my father and mother, but I could not find them. ... One thread goes through the story in multiple variations: shortcomings, poverty, emptiness, and the absence of grace. I didn’t know then, and even today I don’t know fully, how through *Wild Strawberries* I was pleading with my parents: see me, understand me, and – if possible – forgive me.” (Ingmar Bergman, in *Images: My Life in Film*, 1994)

“Here the crisis of belief is entirely immanent (the God debate's only appearance is through a quaint argument between teenage suitors), in the form of a longing for personal self-acceptance and reconciliation with others and one's past.” (Hamish Ford, website *The Radical Intimacy of Bergman*)

“Some months after the opening of the film, Bergman met a childhood friend, who told him that while he was watching *Wild Strawberries* he 'began to think of Aunt Berta, who was sitting all alone in Borlänge. I couldn't get her out of my thoughts, and when my wife and I came home, I said let's invite Aunt Berta over at Easter.' That, says Bergman, is the best review he has ever had.”

some Themes

forgiveness; lost possibility, loss, and regret; redemption and reconciliation; masks; the durability and clarity of early memories; birth and death; human cruelty and kindness; time's limits and limitlessness, its mutability and immutability, its linearity and its non-linearity; guilt, judgment, and mercy; celebration; the overwhelming nature of nostalgia and desire.

some Things to Watch For

- The role of the natural world: birds, bird calls, landscape, trees, plants, clouds, thunder, etc.
- References to God, godfather, religion, sin, ministers; Biblical names; and Christian images in the film (stigmata, last judgment, baptism and communion?, perhaps others?).
- References to forms of knowledge: being an idiot, stupid, incompetent; not understanding and not knowing; wisdom; instructions, etc.
- References to and instances of forgiveness: who asks and seeks forgiveness of whom, for what.
- Instances of humiliation.
- Instances of celebration.
- Images and references to birth, babies, and death. Confusion about, mis-identification of, and references to who is dead and who is alive.

some Things to Consider

- Why does Borg say that he should have stayed in the community where he was a local doctor? [Was he kinder then -- because he was in a community? --; or does he just wish he had stayed someplace where people saw him as kind instead of as cold and selfish as Marianne does?]
- What is the primary mood or moods of the film? [comforting nostalgia, mild regret, playfulness, haunted by guilt and death, ...]
- How do the elements of the film (Sjöström's performance, the music, the cinematography, etc.) render Borg a sympathetic character, someone we root for, “however damning the accusations” against him. Or if you don't root for him, why not? [Accusations: coldness to his unfaithful wife, selfishness, callousness, ... Offsets: mean-spirited mother and aunt, girlfriend dumped him for his more dashing brother, wife unfaithful, ...]
- Borg is “accused of guilt” by the examiner, moments after being told that a doctor's first duty is “to ask forgiveness”. What do you make of this?

[Professor Isak Borg: What is the punishment?

Sten Alman: The punishment? Well, I guess it'll be the usual.

Professor Isak Borg: The usual?

Sten Alman: Yes. The punishment is loneliness.

Professor Isak Borg: Is there no way out?

Sten Alman: Don't ask me. I don't know anything about these things.]

- Bergman himself says that the film in part addresses “shortcomings, poverty, emptiness, and the absence of grace.” Where and how do you see these elements in the film, or do you disagree? [not sure ...]
- Bergman interviewer Stig Bjorkman avers that Borg “seems to want to justify himself before dying, to gather some spiritual capital by doing at least one good deed ...” (forgiving his son's financial debt). Does that seem a true statement about Borg, or does he make the offer moved by a spirit of compassion, or both? Had Borg done other 'good deeds' in his life? [The little family in his old town seems to think so.] In what ways, if any, is the desire to justify yourself or increase your 'spiritual capital' (or karma?) a motivation in your life? [Do you find yourself trying to defend yourself, make a case for your actions?]
- Consider Borg's profession as a doctor, a healer, a co-birther. To what extent and in what ways is he and is he not a healer in his role as a human being? Where else in the film do we see healing and harming? Is there overlap between the two? [Sara says she has been considerate and that made her cruel, as she holds the mirror up to Isak; Marianne is certainly blunt with Isak about his faults, as she perceives them, and yet her litany seems to free him to review his life, and possibly to transform himself.]
- Evald tells Marianne: “There is neither right nor wrong. We act according to our needs.” In what way, if any, is this your experience? [Evald acts according to his needs in asking Marianne to stay with him even though it's under conditions he doesn't want.]
- Are you reminded of any other films, or novels, or Biblical stories in watching this film? [Proust – madeleines; *After Life* – Japanese film ...]
- Would you say that the film offers an affirmative view of life or not? Why?