

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

SECRETS OF WOMEN 1952

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Bergman's consistent interest in women, their love lives, their struggles for self-definition, their emotionality, is in its developing phase in the present film. What we face here is the raw material of a fully formed romantic comedy, like *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), placed in the simplest of frames, a conversation among three sisters in law, who are waiting for their husbands to join them at a summer home beside a lake. While waiting, the women gradually unfold stories about their love lives with their husbands. The stories they tell are episodic, for the most part focused on particular details. In the end we gain substantial insights into the three women's personalities, and, at the same time, into the personalities of the men they have committed themselves to. We might say this is a kind of social psychology written in personal episodes. The insights given here, into middle class lives, are samples of the kinds of harvest made possible to the human species, by the introduction of film techniques which can show and tell at the same time, exploring both the language and the 'real time appearance' of human actors, all of it encased in the imaginative over-presence of the auteur, that novelist with a camera in his or her hands.

STORY

Situations are the name of the game, in this film's juxtaposition of three sets of 'situations,' all teasing us to consider the perplexities of a married lady's private life.

Sharing The stories unpacked here are all flashbacks into the past, yet constitute the present reality of their tellers, as it would be if we were looking at documentaries in which past events were retold by 'real people' sitting across from us, or addressing us from a screen. With characteristic directness, Bergman simply lets his characters to break the silence by giving some account of their relation to their husbands. One can presume, as the real driver for all such social situations, the kind of universal human desire both to confess and to overhear; a desire which makes possible the instinctive interest we all feel, in getting inside others' lives—and what teller-listener relationship could better draw hearers together than sister in law hood. (The American sitcom, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, exemplifies a taste for gossip-sociology today, which harnesses en masse the curiosities of a late morning audience as avid for misadventures, especially erotic or marital, brought to a single buzzfeed). Is it partly that this creative artistic strategy provides the hearer or watcher with the always seductive pleasure of overhearing what is half way supposed to be concealed?

Affair and post-affair The first confiteor springs from Rakel, who makes it clear that she has an 'unusual' relation to her husband. Rakel is a settled forty year old woman, of considerable youth and charm, who is visited, on a fateful sunny afternoon in her husband's absence, by an old beau, her big past affair. Old desires are awakened in her, as she tells it, and there and then she gives in. Her fatal move readily makes itself known to her husband, upon his return, and his reaction is strong—as his ego, apparently, is weak. She confesses to her husband. She knows, of course, that as their confrontation escalates, and as each brings up deeper grievances against the other, Eugen, the quiet scholar of the history of fashion, will inevitably act out. This time, though, she has misjudged the depth of his insecurity, and learns that he has holed himself up with a shotgun, down by the water.

She tells her friends that she turned to an elderly neighbor, who was able to talk Eugen out of his suicide threat, and to throw away his gun. She then pulls back from her deictic, show and tell, mode, and talks out what she sees as the takeaway from the experience she has been presenting. She has, she says,

adopted a new relation to Eugen and he to her. He has, in his acting out, surrendered any position of strength in the marriage, admitted his inability to assert himself, and acquiesced in a reversal of roles, between himself and his wife, who has now taken over a mothering role. One indiscretion, on her part, has led to a psychological chain reaction in her relation to her husband. a tale in which we learn how Rakel becomes virtually the psychological caretaker of her deeply wounded husband.

Unsupported pregnancy Marta contributes another kind of love-recovered narrative. She has an affair with Martin in Paris. Martin is a painter and lives in his imagination. Marta gets pregnant, anticipates a permanent union with Martin, only to find that Martin's own history precludes such a solution. Martin, who has been part of a large commercial family, but who has been taking his own direction, art, finds himself excluded from the inner circles of privilege that go with such compliance as attending his dad's funeral. In order to comply with family protocols, Martin momentarily abandons his interest in Marta, only—much later—to rejoin her in marriage, having missed out the birth of their child.

Rekindling Love in Marriage It is up to Karin to offer a counter tale which is simply, as she puts it, a 'comedic episode.' An elevator is all that is needed, and a couple of too long married individuals—Karin and her husband Fredrik—who have lost at least superficial interest in one another. She narrates an episode where an elevator that has stalled. She and her husband are trapped and as their imprisonment lengthens, she (and her husband) grow increasingly disclosure-ready, letting out wisps of what may be either their real pasts or past indiscretions they are disclosing in order to keep their spirits up. The lubricious between old partners is triggered, here, by confinement to a malfunctioning elevator, which deposits the vulnerable pair in an overnight dark imprisonment, and reengages them potently with one another.

THEMES

Narration. At loose ends, waiting for their husbands to return, the women in the lakeside cottage gravitate naturally into the primeval story telling mode. Narration becomes the film; the film is about story telling, which fills time and makes new time. In film, the story is also the picture, which means that the impact of the tale is great, and the more indirect recourses of written symbols, say in the novel, are minimized.

Care. Each of the three woman narrators is caring toward her mate though each expresses exasperation with that same mate. (The war between the sexes?) Rakel truly loves her husband after his threatened suicide, though her love now is that of a mother. Karin finds her embarrassed husband charming, for the way he fumbles to sustain his dignity in the elevator. Marta is from beginning to end charmed by her husband's whimsy and inner passion, and is glad to keep him, even after he has temporarily ignored her pregnancy.

Tolerance. Each of the three women has a lot to put up with: career absorption (Martin); jealousy (Eugen); and false macho pride (Fredrik): and each is in the mood, while narrating, to include that side of herself which is able to put up with obstacles.

Hope. Each of the women is living with a man who gives her less than her dreams, who is lovable to her, perhaps, because of the way he requires her care and attention. In this sense each of the women lives in hope that her husband will more nearly approach the ideal she has of him. Her disappointment is held within bounds—none of the three women is heading for divorce court.

CHARACTERS

Rakel. Rakel is the fond middle class housewife who falls for an old beau, and finds that her husband's meteoric response, to this indiscretion, threatens to topple her entire life.

Marta. Marta is up for love, from the outset of her visit to Paris, and she falls hard for Martin, a painter with a volatile ego. Her love brings him back to her, after she gives birth to his child.

Karin. Karin is long married, and clearly out of touch with her feelings for Fredrik, with whom she gets trapped in an elevator. She good humoredly brings him back into her life again, until, at the episode's end, she must put up with his effusive prioritization of his business life.