

WILD STRAWBERRIES (1957)

Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)

OVERVIEW

Wild Strawberries was first released in 1967, and lies at the peak of the prolific filmmaker's creative life—obviously giving Bergman a place for taking stock of his own life and personality. Dr. Borg is that side of Bergman which is forever probing into the memories and dreams of his own past, and working inside the guilts he has accumulated in that past; guilts based on his grumpiness, his jealousies, his irreconcilabilities with others, guilts that generate his depression and even insanity. One has only to consider some of this auteur's masterpieces of the period of *Wild Strawberries*—*The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Persona* (1966), *Cries and Whispers* (1972)—to see how pervasive these themes are in Bergman's major period of creativity. (Even 'lighter' films, like *Summer with Monika*, 1953, touch dark places and refuse any easy opportunities for pleasure.) Yet in the end, and that is why we call the doctor open and aware, the beset central character of *Wild Strawberries* takes responsibility for his own past and comes to terms with it. The end we see is content, and constructive.

STORY

Professor Isak Borg, nearly eighty and long widowed, lives in ironic comfort with his coeval housekeeper, until an invitation to accept an honorary degree at the University of Lund, tears him away from his routine. He is beyond being honored by the invitation, but he is open enough to encounter the world as it meets him, full of dreams, memories, and frank statements of interpersonal conflict, as with his daughter in law, Marianne.

With Marianne, who is pregnant, he undertakes the full day's drive to Lund, touring down main highways in his old fashioned limousine. On the way he finds himself either seductively, or forcibly, drawn into touching experiences, which arouse his memory, awaken old hurts and guilts, and begin to mellow him. From the start of the trip, the Professor is conflictual toward his son's wife who is sitting beside him, reminding him that his son thoroughly dislikes him, and, near the end of the trip, confiding to him that she is in bitter struggle with the doctor's son, who knows she is pregnant and who hates the idea of a new baby. On the trip the doctor returns to a childhood summer home, and is infused with memories of eros and jealousy; family fun; the imminence of nature and youthful uncertainty.

At another waypoint he picks up three hippy youngsters—full of life and arguing about the existence of god-- who bring vitality and energy to the auto trip; and who clash with a self destroying couple, whose little car runs into the doctor's limousine, and who find themselves stranded and at the doctor's mercy for a continuing ride down the highway. Not long after this energizing hippy addition to their caravan, the doctor and his daughter-in-law struggle with a feisty-wild couple who nearly collide them off the road. It takes a visit to the doctor's aging mother, now ninety five years old, to bring more balance to the mood of the trip. Finally, of course, the doctor reaches his destination, receives his honor, and relaxes into the hospitality of his son and daughter in law, to whom, remarkably, the elderly man's presence seems to bring a much needed respite. Somewhere on the far side of this trip, the Professor regains the calm he once had, and makes serious and benign peace with his past.

The journey When we meet the doctor he is in process of writing about his own life and experiences. His housekeeper, his late in life mate in fact, enters the room to tell him that breakfast is ready. She is both his 'servant' and his intimate, and is prepared, as he is, for a day of travel, to the University (Lund) where he is to receive an honorary degree. The two elderly folks have been preparing for this outing, and are soon joined by the doctor's daughter in law, who is also on her way to Lund, where her husband and she live: she will ride to Lund with the doctor, while the maid will go by plane. The setting is as for an outing, but there is tension and complexity among the three travelers.

Nostalgia Near lunch time the Professor takes his daughter-in-law off road to a summer house where the Borg family spent its summers throughout the first years of the Professor's life. He finds a patch of wild strawberries, like those patches he used to cherish as a kid, and slips into memory, in which the delights, conflicts, and pastel innocences of his youth swarm over him. He reenters the setting in which he and his brother—who finally married her—are rivals for the same girl; yet without betraying those moods in the melt of memory, he smiles through his wrinkled features at what he still is.

The Encounter with other people on the road During the first half of the drive to Lund, the Professor and Marianne argue pretty steadily about private matters—their long term tension with one another, her troubles with his son, as husband, and his own general irritability. Along the highway, at midpoint, they come on three hitchhiking hippie teen angers whom they pick up, beneficiaries of the latent joie de vivre nestling in the grumpy old man. The young girl, sassy and flirtatious-mocking toward the doctor, sits in the back seat, flanked by the two sparring (and eventually fist fighting) guys, who are engaged in a heavy argument about whether there is a god. The three are also heading to Lund, from where they will pick up further rides, south into Europe; but while they remain with the doctor and his daughter in law—and remain they do, through the visit to the doctor's mother, through the academic ceremony at Lund, to a final send off of love toward the doctor—they serve as a leitmotif for the younger generation, and for the doctor's susceptibility to the world growing up around him.

Reconciliation As he stretches comfortably in his familiar bed, after a long and meaningful land drive, through memory, loss, fear, and joy, the Professor speaks with his stubborn and uncomfortable son, and with the pregnant daughter-in-law with whom he has driven; he recognizes himself, his own marital struggles and his contentiousness, and feels a certain peace in accepting himself. He even goes so far as to banter with his housekeeper, suggesting they should, after all these decades, call another by their first names. She declines, of course, but responds with as much of a twinkle as she can, to the Prof's impish suggestion.

THEMES

Aging From the outset the doctor is taking notes on his life, provoked by the event ahead of him, an academic ceremony in honor of his scientific achievements. This event takes him back to his past—he is a widower, well past the time of his achievements, living tamely with his housekeeper. The trip he is to take, to his childhood home and to his aging mother, reinforces the doctor's sense that the past has taken him over.

Peace By the end of the day, the doctor is relaxed, notes with pleasure that his son and his daughter in law are at least speaking with one another, and banter with his sparky housekeeper. He has come to terms, of a sort, with his own fleeting life, and been stimulated by the present of the hippies, and by the deep past of the visit to his mother. He is ready for a night of relatively composed peace.

Discord The most startling discord in the film is introduced by the couple whose car runs into the doctor's vehicle. The doctor takes them in, gives them a ride in the middle row of the large car's seats, and then shudders at the family feud which is consuming these two midlife fighters. When the wife can take it no more, she slaps her husband, who violently returns her contempt. The doctor asks them to leave, which they do.

Memory The doctor moves through memory on two prominent occasions: in the return to the mood of his childhood home, where the wild strawberries grow, and in the visit to his aging mother, who laments that no one visits her anymore. Memory, for the doctor, is the entire theme of his award reception, which is entirely about his past accomplishments.

CHARACTERS

Isak. The professor is an eminent bacteriologist, who is on his way to receive an honorary academic award at Lund University.

Housekeeper. The saucy aging buddy of the professor. She has replaced his long-deceased wife.

Daughter in law. The wife of the professor's son; currently in bitter dispute with her husband, over whether to bring to birth the fetus she is currently pregnant with.

Son. The professor's son who no longer cares for life, and is sharply opposed to his wife's pregnancy.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ISAK

Character The professor is an eminent retired medical doctor, long widowed, who lives alone with his housekeeper in Stockholm. On the day stressed in the present film—one thinks of Joyce's *Ulysses*, set on a single day in Dublin—the professor is traveling to Lund University, to receive an honorary degree for his scientific work. Along the course of the trip, the professor engages in much disputation with his daughter in law, picks up hitch hikers of diverse brands, visits his mother, visits his childhood home, and finally receives his honorary degree. He has completed a kind of review of his past, and come to peace with it.

Parallels The growing self-acceptance of Prof. Borg, which culminates in the quiet smile on his face at the end of the day, reminds us of the maturing self-assessment of Nestor, in Homer's *Odyssey*. The doughty Pylian gent, who no longer has the power to lead battalions, basks in the sense of what he has accomplished and been in his long life. Many films enter this senior self-reflective territory, where Prof. Borg comes home. *Grumpy Old Men* (1993)—Lemon and Matthau's improvement on their TV sitcom *The Odd Couple*—brings together a neurotic and a slob who have grown old together, and are obliged to understand the human condition. Watanabe, in Kurosawa's film *Ikuro* (1952), is a dried up bureaucrat, near the age of retirement, when he realizes that he has stomach cancer. He devotes his remaining year of life to building a children's playground, an act of creative joy which transforms him as a person. The inspiring text, behind Kurosawa's great film, is Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* (1886).

Illustrative moments

Bantering. The professor banters regularly with his housekeeper. They tease one another about maintaining the formality of their master-servant relation. He even goes so far as to banter with his housekeeper, suggesting they should, after all these decades, call another by their first names. She declines, of course, but responds with as much of a twinkle as she can, to the Prof's impish suggestion.

Ebullient The Professor starts off his day trip to Lund, where he will receive his honorary doctorate, in a high mood, quarreling/teasing with his housekeeper, who is his age and knows him in and out. He sets out foxily on the highway, in his stately limousine, with his pregnant daughter-in-law at this side. The two of them banter critically, she telling him she doesn't like him, because he is cold and selfish, and he pocketing that stylized attitude with an ironic quiet of his own. He is in his own skin, confident, and up for his trip.

Waylaid Near lunch time the Professor takes his daughter-in-law off road to a summer house where the Borg family spent its summers throughout the first years of the Professor's life. He finds a patch of wild strawberries, like those patches he used to cherish as a kid, and slips into memory, in which the delights, conflicts, and pastel innocences of his youth swarm over him. He reenters the setting in which he and his brother—who finally married her—are rivals for the same girl; yet without betraying those moods in the melt of memory, he smiles through his wrinkled features at what he still is.

Empathy The Professor picks up three hitchhikers en route, a gal and two harshly rivalist guys who both adore her. The prof fits flexibly into the seating and banter of his now full vehicle. He will bond with the young college fry, from this point on; the youngsters attending his honorary doctorate ceremony, then following him back home again—celebrating him at his house, as they make their final take off for a student trip south. He charmingly accepts their hugs and waves below his window, assuring them he will

remember their love for him. They are emblems of the Professor's willingness to accept his own past as it is.

Considerate. Though grumpy, the professor is sensitive to others. As he drives along, eventually picking up two sets of hitchhikers, he worries that the three hippies should not be exposed to the vicious marital fight being carried on by the middle aged couple. He asks the couple to get out.

Reflecting. The professor is concerned throughout the day with the written record he is making, of his past. This nostalgic frame pervades the film, and sets a reflective trademark on the prof's aging mindset.

Reconciliation As he stretches comfortably in his familiar bed, after a long and meaningful land drive, through memory, loss, fear, and joy, the Professor speaks with his stubborn and uncomfortable son, and with the pregnant daughter-in-law with whom he has driven; he recognizes himself, his own marital struggles and his contentiousness, and feels a certain peace in accepting himself.

Relaxed. In the end the professor is satisfied enough with the memory of his life, and with the behavior of the actors in it, that he can close his eyes for a good night's sleep. His journey to Lund has been a successful journey into his own past.

MARIANNE

Character Marianne is the Professor's sole accompaniment for the first half of his drive to Lund. Her first gesture is to light up a cigarette, which immediately sets off a conflict with her father in law, who hates cigarette smoke—and perhaps her too. She has a heavy burden on her mind, as she makes this trip, and the result is argument between her and Isak Borg. She is pregnant and her husband refuses to accept a new baby; her husband is in fact turning against life of any sort, and seems ready to get rid of himself. Marianne travels heavily, at this point, but by the film's end she seems to have come to peace with her husband.

Illustrative moments

Appearance. The professor's daughter in law, Marianne, who is going to ride with him to Lund, appears for the first time in the professor's study, on the day of the trip to Lund. She is radiant and fresh.

Disputative. As Marianne and the professor ride to Lund, she instinctively starts to light a cigarette. He rebukes her, saying he can't stand cigarette smoke. Their conflict takes off from there.

Conflict. As the daughter in law argues with her father in law, the stakes get higher. She tells him that his son hates him, a crushing attack.

Confession. Marianne confesses to Isak, her father in law, that she is pregnant, that his son refuses to accept a new baby, and that she and the prof's son are going to divorce. A heavy conversational blow.

Discussion questions

Bergman and Fellini are both classical auteur film-makers. Can you see what they have in common, to win them the title of auteur?

What special uses does Bergman make of the flashback, in *Wild Strawberries*? Is he skillful at passing in and out of memory?

What is the importance to the doctor of his encounter with the quarreling couple whose car nearly runs him off the road? Does their dreadful marriage speak to him of where he has been himself in life?