

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Prof. Isak Borg (in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, 1967) open-aware

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 that regularly generate 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. 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.

Character 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. With his pregnant daughter-in-law he undertakes the full day's drive to Lund, on the way finding himself either seductively, or forcibly, drawn into touching experiences, which arouse his memory, awaken old hurts and guilts, and begin to transform him. He returns to a childhood summer home, and is infused with memories of eros and jealousy; he picks up three hippy youngsters, who bring vitality and danger to the auto trip; and he and his daughter-in-law struggle with a feisty-wild couple who nearly collide them off the road. 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.

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

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.

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.

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?