



FILMS: **THE SEVENTH SEAL** (2.8)
WILD STRAWBERRIES (3.0)
PERSONA (2.6)

FDG RATING (average): 2.8



Ingmar Bergman: *Director*

(We discussed 3 Ingmar Bergman films)

DATE: October 23, 2016

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE SEVENTH SEAL, WILD STRAWBERRIES, PERSONA**

To fill the void that happens every year as the Oscar hopeful films precariously delay their release to be closer to the big event date, we decided to watch and discuss three Ingmar Bergman films. This was like condensing a semester masters class into a few hours. The themes are heavy and obtuse resulting in perplexed viewers but very intense discussions.

Bergman, a renowned Swedish director, writer, producer, is recognized as one of the most accomplished and influential auteurs of all time (according to reference notations in wikipedia) and is most famous for films such as *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Wild Strawberries* (1957), and *Persona* (1966), which are the three films we selected for our discussion. His work explores the depths and mysteries of religion, faith, death, betrayal, bleakness and insanity. The themes are dark, introspective, and overshadowed with loneliness. Filmed in black and white, with minimalistic backgrounds, the heaviness of each scene is intensified.

The Seventh Seal

The Seventh Seal takes place in a Swedish village suffering from the devastating plague of the 14th century. A disillusioned crusader, Block, returning home after 10 years in the holy land, is being followed by the persona of death enshrouded in a black cloak. To forestall his ultimate fate, Block challenges Death to a game of chess in which, if the knight won, death would leave him alone. As Block moves through the village, he sees the horrors of the plague while villagers struggle to understand how their faith could allow such impending doom. It's the fundamental question people continue to ask.

But our group had more questions as an impulsive impromptu discussion erupted over our tea and coffee following the film. We politely argued about the omniscience of religion, probed atheism and agnosticism and momentarily tip-toed into Wicca. At our official discussion meeting, one astute reviewer simplified the thematic questions into 3 points: 1) we can never remove the idea of God from our consciousness (which met with a flurry of opposite views), 2) If there is a God, are the idiots, who run the church, servants of God? And 3) If God does care, why is there a horrific plague? Bergman is dissecting the tension between his childhood faith in a strict Lutheran upbringing and his adult skepticism. Having lost his faith in God, Bergman is at the same time haunted by the horror of existence without God which would mean death is simply annihilation. Lacking this insight prior to watching the film, some viewers dozed off. Despite our inability to fully appreciate this film, we recognized that it has the attributes of a superior film and humbly rated *The Seventh Seal* 2.8 on a scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

Wild Strawberries

We quickly moved on to our next Bergman film anxious to forget the gloomy aspects of the *Seventh Seal*, however, more sophisticated film critics noted that although Bergman's medieval drama of the soul can be difficult to watch, it is considered one of the greatest films of all time.

Even the title of Film number 2, *Wild Strawberries*, was more appealing. We welcomed the entertaining, accessible storyline that featured a likeable old man as the main character. 76-year-old Professor Isak Borg, a distinguished medical scientist travels from Stockholm to Lund with his daughter-in-law to receive an honorary doctorate. On the 400-mile car journey the old man remembers his past - the girl he loved who married his brother instead, and his own bitterly unsuccessful marriage. The film includes dream sequences and imagery that has become iconic and found its way into many films by other admiring directors.

We can sit back and enjoy the scenes filmed in the Swedish countryside as we empathize with the Professor. During one of his flashback memories, we meet his admired and respected mother who is slowly revealed as hard and mean-spirited. How does life with so many beautiful possibilities become sterile and repeat undesirable attributes generation to generation? It's a deep philosophical question but overall this

film has a kind hearted tone which we could relate to, resulting in a compassionate score of 3 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

(Woody Allen's 1997 film, Deconstructing Harry, includes similar flashbacks as well imagined interactions with fictional characters from his own writings, as he drives with 3 passengers to a university to receive an honorary degree.)

Persona

Film number 3, Persona, is the most Freudian with invasively close facial shots probing the depths of the two main character's psyches. (Mr. Bergman has written, "Our work in films begins with the human face.") Elizabeth, a famous actress who is recovering from a mental breakdown (beautifully portrayed by Liv Ullmann), and Alma, her pretty young nurse, develop an intense relationship that is psychologically entwined. Several visually compelling scenes show one face merging into the other's to convey the transformative melding of their psyches.

Elizabeth had stopped speaking in the middle of the performance and has been silent ever since. But she intently listens to Alma who almost uncontrollably continues to confide in Elizabeth, speaking non-stop, revealing her entire subconscious longings and despairs.

Persona is a moody, psychological study that seems consistent with the 60s when dream analysis and Freudian psychoanalysis was the rage. The film explores the questions of identity, how we view ourselves and how others view us, how we project our own thoughts on someone else. Bergman uses minimal background in the scenes so the focus is exclusively on the character.

Along these same lines, the film has a very strange start that many of our viewers didn't realize was the actual beginning of the film and didn't pay attention to the flashing symbols, ideographs, a cartoon character, a hand being pierced by a spike, and other weird images. And the sounds we hear are a film reel chattering and a hissing noise that continue for several minutes before we see the first character, a boy, looking at an enlarged female face (possibly his mother) projected on the wall. The fragmented elements reflect the Modernism trend of the 60s.

Maybe if we time travelled back to the 60s and were immersed in all that was happening at that time, we would enthusiastically appreciate this Bergman film but given that it is 2016, many of our viewers were perplexed and thought it was a bit too bazaar. Our collective psyches could only offer a repressed 2.6 for Persona on a scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



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See you at the movies!

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