

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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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.

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.

MAIN CHARACTERS

RAKEL

Character Rakes 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 him, adding in that she simply cannot stand him. 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. She has, as her narration reveals to her listeners, walked into a minefield sowed by his traditional male perspective, and at first, as he stalks out, she is pretty sure that he will gradually take the news in stride. 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.

At this point, as Rakes observes and shows, she feels she must intervene. (What we call the 'character' of Rakes, in writing these notes, is of course Rakes's reconstruction of what she thinks she is, not an objective condition.) 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.

Illustrative moments.

Susceptible. Bergman uses his light-dark camera skills to stress the sunny and seductive setting of Rakes's yielding to her old boyfriend. The day, and the smooth flowing waters below their bath house, establish the perfect mood of fall.

Reminiscent. The reminiscent mood, in which Rakes falls to rethinking her past, and her grievances against her boring, studious husband, establish a setting for more than seduction, for inner revolution, in which she will realize that she finds Eugen intolerable.

Confrontative. Rakes grows into a confrontative mood, during her erotic rearousal, and by the time Eugen returns, she is ready to reject her marriage to him. She hits him hard with criticism, but pulls back when she realizes how deeply he is reacting.

Desperate. When Eugen overreacts—instantly speaking of their final financial settlement—Rakes feels desperation growing in her. She soon follows him out of the room, aware now that he is acting out dangerously.

Conciliatory. Rakes's immediate concern, when learning that Eugen has holed himself up with a rifle, is to keep him from killing himself. She calls in a neighbor, an older man who serves as an effective mediator, and disposes of the gun.

Motherly. As Rakes explains to the women at the table, the sequence of powerful events, which ripped her from Eugen, then brought her back to him, have left her reconciled to a life with Eugen as child, as a figure under her protection.

MARTA

Character Marta is a beautiful and passionate dark-haired Swedish woman, who finds herself in Paris. Susceptible to the romance of the 'city of love,' she falls for a familiar Swedish face, a painter who is charming, whimsical, and romantic. It is all Marta needs, to open herself to her passions, and to find commitment. She needs her commitment, for her partner, devoted to his painting as well as to her, is not one mindedly devoted to her, though he impregnates her, and she is deeply directed toward motherhood. Distracted by financial concerns, and inheritance issues within his family, Martin temporarily loses interest both in Marta and the baby, establishing—for Bergman the cinematographer—the opportunity for powerful birth giving scenes, in which we relive, with the deep in pain Marta, flashbacks that bring back her over intense love affair, and the psychologically anguishing high points. That Bergman is able to extract a happy ending, from this tumultuous tale, shows how complex he is able to find any significant happiness.

Illustrative moments

Enchanted. Marta arrives from the cold north, and falls in love with the City of Love, Paris, whose sights and sounds, and orientation toward outdoor life, delight her. It is not long before she meets a man she likes, a Swedish painter full of whimsy and romance. City and love meld into one delightful whole, and Marta is in heaven.

Love. The Swedish painter is a charmer and Marta lets herself get impregnated, on the strength of the guy's charm, but when she comes to tell him of her pregnancy it turns out he is far more interested in his role in the family business, and could not—at this point—pay attention to her thrilling news, which she keeps to herself. (On a date that night, in fact, the painter confides In Marta that he thinks they should break up.) Only after giving birth does Marta tell her lover about the infant; interestingly enough, the couple stay together.

Birthgiving. Marta's birthgiving is dramatically presented by Bergman, who employs the camera to drench us in the actuality of the event, seen both from the outside, as a pageant of physical pain, and through the flashbacks and hallucinations through which Marta completes this personal journey. Mustn't we guys be startled, once again, by Bergman's ability to reach toward the profundity of the woman's experience?

Union. The two sisters-in-law, seated at the table listening to Marta, are displeased to hear that Marta went on to stay with her lover, after the baby was born. It seemed to these listeners that Marta should rather have left the guy, who when the chips were down proved more interested in his cash flow than in her.

KARIN

Character Karin presents herself through a 'comedic episode.' She is a midlife wife, long married to an upper echelon business type. They are returning from a reception for the crown prince, when their elevator breaks down, and they are obliged to spend the night together in the small dark cage. There Karin begins to tease Fredrik, reminding him that he has had shaving cream in his ear, all evening, and that his top hat is ludicrously crushed. He responds in kind, and the back and forth teasing leads to inevitable love making, as well as to the opening up of a relationship which had become dulled by time and habit. It is true Bergman, however, that the conclusion of this 'comedic episode' turns around the whole question of newly refound happiness in marriage. Upon freedom from their cage, Karin and her husband rush to their hotel room, full of plans for togetherness travel in the future. They will go here and there together. They will do this and that together. As they are indulging this afterglow planning, her husband receives a call from his office. His secretary announces the arrival of a major business representative from Brazil, with promises of big deals to strike. Fredrik is excited beyond measure, and immediately forgets the new life he and Karin are planning for their future.

Illustrative moments

Reception. Karin and her husband attend a formal reception for the Crown Prince, and are deeply immersed in their formal marital relationship, pretty tepid, and with little room for change and imagination, when they run into a contretemps which demands special attention.

Break-down. On their way home from the reception Karin and her husband, take the elevator down. Unfortunately, thanks to a mechanical failure, the elevator stalls, the doors cannot be opened, and the couple is obliged to spend the night together in the cabin.

Reminiscing. In the elevator, in the dark, it was inevitable that the two would make love—next item—but as foreplay it was essential that the couple would tell stories about their past, reminiscing. This they do, chuckling and relaxing for the first time in a while, recreating in a narrative the tales of how they met and the funny things they have done together.

Love. One thing leading to another, and the opportunities for diversion being limited, the couple fall into love making, just the thing to wake them up to one another. By the time the mechanic has come to open the doors, in the morning, the energized couple is ready for life together again.