

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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ALL THESE WOMEN 1964

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

All these women opens with a musical comedy display—this is Bergman's first color film, one of only a few not highlighting his trademark shadings of gray and twilight. We are looking at a lineup of model-type glamor girls, who are in sequence observing the coffin with the last remains of what we must assume is some central heroic figure in their lives; each woman expostulates on the last view of Felix—for that name, The Happy One, is the misnomer that has bestowed itself on the now degenerate person who has been one of the world's greatest cellists. The ladies' final reactions range from adulatory to contemptuous, but clearly the object of their observation—whom we in the audience cannot here and will almost never see—is a central player in all of their lives.

The movie itself, which is part of an experiment with comedy which had earlier led Bergman into *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), gets seen through the eyes of a too-too trendy and dandified critic and biographer, a know-it-all man about town who is writing a biography of Felix the cellist. Our critic, Cornelius, has come to spend a few days at Villa Tremolo, the summer estate of the famed cellist, and the harum scarum horseplay, of his efforts to interview the great man, occupy the film itself, which has (incorrectly) been depreciated by most of *its* critics.

The secret here is the discovery that *All these women* is basically a satire. It is a satire on the cult of the celebrity star, (In contemporary America the equivalent of Felix would be a great cinema impresario like Cecil B. DeMille or a great entertainment icon like Aretha Franklin or Clint Eastwood). It is equally a satire on the celebrity critic—Oprah? Larry King?—who is, like the celebrity him or herself, a creation these days of the media industry, but who in Bergman's place and day was the creation of the newspapers and intelligentsia buzz.

STORY

Cornelius has come to Villa Tremolo to interview, and to get to know, the famous cellist Felix; his goal is to write a biography of the man, who, unfortunately, will die four days after the critic's arrival. The visual story opens just after the death of the great man, when we are confronted by a sequence of Felix's widows, who are passing his coffin to review his remains, and to make largely snide remarks about what's left of the guy. A flashback returns us to the moment of Cornelius' arrival, and his introduction to the household full of lovely starlets and a reclusive great man. In fact one of the first episodes of unfold around Cornelius illustrates precisely the odd reality of the Villa world, a splendid Mediterranean marble mansion, around whose chilly columns one after another of the harem of Felix is forever just disappearing or scooting by. Felix is at the center of a harem. As Felix is slowly giving up his aesthetic to his erotic life, he is growing increasingly furtive, and eventually dies, shot dead by one of his beauties. Thus will be destined to end, this musical comedy morality play which, though often said to be a parody on Fellini's *8 ½* is in fact a light hearted piece of basic ethics. Thus will end this musical comedy morality play that exposes the hollowness both of the critic and of his target.

Search for Felix Cornelius is bewildered, when he first enters the Villa. He has been escorted into the luxurious precinct, by Jillker, Felix's artistic manager, and by the musician's chauffeur, but once into the almost surreally shiny and marbled environs, he finds himself unsupervised and at large. He is relieved when he sees, in the distance but just disappearing—like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*—someone he takes (correctly) to be Felix. Assuming that the lady accompanying Felix is the musician's wife, he learns to his surprise that she is only one of Felix's several wives.

Murder Attempt Cornelius soon enjoys a second surprise. Still looking for Felix, or at least for Felix's true wife, Cornelius comes on a self-proclaimed official mistress of the great man. This Ms. Bumblebee willingly stops off with Cornelius, goes to bed with him, and is as shocked as is Cornelius, when, in the midst of sex, a woman with a pistol enters the room, firing several shots. Cornelius is shocked, believing the bullets were intended for Felix. What a matter of concern! What kind of biography of the maestro can Cornelius write, without even a subject to interview?

Murder Cornelius' concern for Felix is to be unexpectedly resolved, by mother Nature. The group in the Villa—the lovers, Cornelius—has gathered to hear a concert from the maestro. In the midst of the gathering, one of the women—we can't identify which of the lovers it is—pulls a pistol out of her purse and fatally shoots the Great Man. Cornelius will after all have no interview, and will have his first face to face meeting with Felix across a coffin.

THEMES

Celebrity. The celebrity cellist, who is virtually unseen throughout the film, is an image of the emptiness of the celebrity himself. It is not that he has not made beautiful music, in the past, but that he is at present nothing more than the byproduct, almost invisible, of what he has done in the past.

Criticism. Cornelius is a kind of mockery of the biographer/critic, perhaps more nearly a celebrity biographer—cf. Chris Nickson or Ellis Amburn today—who feed off the lives of celebrities who are themselves partly media creations.

Lust. The villa Tremolo is basically a ritzy harem, with the great cellist, Felix, at its center. Around him swarm his several paramours, witty and high style part time wives. Lust and desire pervade the complex, but little ease or cordiality. Even Cornelius, basically a self-centered socialite, is drawn into the sex network.

Competition. Cornelius alerts us to the danger in the Villa, when he interprets the gunshots which ring out in the bedroom where he and Ms. Bumblebee are having sex. Since Ms. Bumblebee promotes herself as wife # 1 it seems plausible that one of the other wives is trying to knock off Felix. Cornelius deduces this, and fears for his interviewee's life.

Beauty. While it is true that the Villa itself is coldly beautiful, and the women who populate it are coldly beautiful, the most beautiful element of the Villa world is Felix's music, which periodically wafts across the screen. Classical cellist, Felix plays chilly and organized music, islets of form and control in the chaotic world of the Villa.

Corruption. What we can know of Felix indicates that, though talented as a cellist, he has become increasingly corrupt as a human being, and has degenerated to the point where he is fading away from the capacity even to make music. There is not much left to mourn, when the bullet does away with his body.

CHARACTERS

Cornelius. Cornelius is a society critic and biographer, eager to interview and 'get to know ' the great cellist who lives at the Villa. He is a parasitical culture-hound, who in his own way anticipates the paparazzi who in our day cluster around the great of the culture industry. His efforts, though, are in vain, for the cellist is murdered before Cornelius can enjoy a face to face with him.

Felix. The great cellist, virtually unseen, surrounded by a harem of beauties, who adore him for what he can give them. Felix is virtually invisible—appears down a hallway, getting ready to play, at the end; but never face to face.

Ms. Bumblebee. The self-appointed 'official' wife of Felix. She it is who waylays the critic with a sexual episode, on his way to find Felix.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

CORNELIUS

Character Cornelius is a society biographer, a specialist in the lives of the great and famous—would we say, today, in the lives of the Kardashians, or perhaps the Kennedys? (Unlikely that this critic would in America be chasing after a celebrity cellist, but that fact illustrates the perspectival change from the 1960's in Sweden to today's America). He is himself, appropriately for his profession, a fashion plate, a dandy, and an astute observer of the social environment. He is the one, for instance, who takes an interest in the danger to Felix posed by the individual who fired off shots in the bedroom where he was having sex with Ms. Bumblebee. Cornelius is also willing to allow himself to be played with, as himself part of the social comedy; he can get trapped in unconscious comedy, as when he finds himself under over and around a statue bust, whose fall is going to come crashing, noisily and revealingly, down around his head; or when one of the harem women talks him into cross dressing so that he can fool Felix into giving him an interview. In the end

Illustrative moments

Alert. Cornelius arrives all eyes at the Villa. He sees every detail of this swanky summer estate, and we see it with him, taking him as the roving eye of perception into this high octane cultural world.

Curious. It is Cornelius who gives us a glimpse of Felix furtively crossing through the marble colonnade in the distance. Immediately, this social observer is asking himself who is who, and who is going where, in the hard to interpret mansion.

Concerned. Cornelius takes a concerned interest in the life threatening shot that is fired in the bedroom where he is having sex with Ms. Bumblebee. He cares for the life of Felix, the probably intended target of the attempted murder.

Erotic. Cornelius finds time to make out with Ms. Bumblebee, in the course of his searches for an interview with Felix. Their intercourse is abruptly introduced and almost, as it were, bodilessly consummated; we flow in and out of it as though the film was simply a sudden breeze.

Hollow. Like most by products of the social celebrity industry, Cornelius lives off of the gestures and dramas of other people. In this case it is also high music that captivates lovers and Cornelius alike. Bach's *Orchestral Suite # 3* both belittles and ennobles Cornelius and the other listeners.