

Summer 2016

# Toward "What Bleeds or Trembles": Reflections on Bergman's Wild Strawberries

Paul Eisenstein  
*Otterbein University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/eng\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/eng_fac)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Eisenstein, Paul, "Toward "What Bleeds or Trembles": Reflections on Bergman's Wild Strawberries" (2016). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 10.  
[http://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/eng\\_fac/10](http://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/eng_fac/10)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact [shickey@otterbein.edu](mailto:shickey@otterbein.edu).



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Toward “What Bleeds or Trembles”: Reflections on  
Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries*

Paul Eisenstein

American Imago, Volume 73, Number 2, Summer 2016, pp. 229-234 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2016.0011>



AMERICAN  
**IMAGO**

PSYCHANALYSIS AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES  
VOLUME 73 • NUMBER 2 • Summer 2016

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/621886>

## Toward “What Bleeds or Trembles”: Reflections on Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries*

It is an axiom of psychoanalysis that something like a truth can emerge when extant or accepted knowledge is suspended, when the answers given to questions of identity and desire become unsettled, permitting us to ask them anew. Ingmar Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* stages in an exemplary way this dynamic in the figure of its protagonist Isak Borg (Victor Sjöström), a seventy-eight year old professor who, over the course of a single day, will be made by Bergman to confront the losses that he has encrypted from his past and the price he has paid for such encryption—his own psychic deadening.

From his well-ordered, book-filled study, Isak delivers the film’s opening voice-over, wherein he confesses to a pedantry that characterizes and visually frames the introduction he makes to the viewer:

In our relations with other people, we mainly discuss and evaluate their character and their behavior. This is why I have withdrawn from nearly all so-called relations. This has made my old age rather lonely. My life has been full of hard work, and I am grateful. It began as toil for bread and butter and ended in a love of science. I have a son, also a doctor, who lives in Lund. He has been married for many years. They have no children. My old mother is still alive and is very active, in spite of her age. My wife Karin has been dead for many years. I am lucky in having a good housekeeper. Perhaps I should add that I am an old pedant, which at times has been rather trying for myself and those around me.<sup>1</sup>

On their surface, Isak’s comments are simple and sympathetic enough: wanting to avoid the extent to which human relation-

ships expose one to the evaluation of one's character or conduct, Isak lives a withdrawn and lonely existence as a widower. Isak's pedantry, however, is clearly of a piece with the protective dividends of repression. Such dividends depend on a kind of daily vigilance—what Freud calls “a persistent expenditure of force” (1915, p. 151).<sup>2</sup> As if to signal this point, Bergman has even placed, in the opening scene, a giant guard dog of sorts in Isak's study. However “trying” he may claim his pedantry to be, Isak cannot mask the ego ideal it serves. In his relations with flesh-and-blood others, the possibilities of pleasure and acceptance are inseparable from the risks of judgement or humiliation, and so must be forsworn. But in his relationship to his ego ideal, Isak reaps no small share of narcissistic satisfaction.

In his reading of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, Jamey Hecht explores the risks against which Borg seeks to shield himself, the painful memories he tries (but fails) to avoid. These have mainly to do with experiences in which inhibition prevents him from securing the desire of a loved Other—first his fiancée Sara (Bibi Andersson), who goes on to marry Isak's brother, and then his wife Karin (Gertrud Fridh), whose sexual affair Isak witnesses directly. Hecht builds on Freud's insight that “sublimation is a way out, a way by which [the demands of the ego] can be met without involving repression” (1915, p. 151). Hecht's psychobiographical suggestion is that the making of *Wild Strawberries* is, for Bergman, “a massive sublimation that depicts an equally massive failure of sublimation.” Failed sublimation, in this case, leaves Isak only with the demands of the ego—demands that begin to collide with the return of the repressed, occasioning crisis. According to Hecht, *Wild Strawberries* may be a work of art that “itself is the missing solution to the problem it depicts,” since it “does for Bergman what Borg cannot do.”

Hecht's conclusions here have affinities with Milton Viderman's claim that *Wild Strawberries* is an “ode to life over death”—a moment when repression's failure loosens the fixity of one's neurotic commitments to an ego ideal. The very division Bergman executes in the opening scenes of the film—between ordinary, everyday social reality, and the world of one's dreams, the latter with its own singular and striking *mise-en-scène*—already announces the constitutive shakiness of

such commitments. It is on the basis of his dream, and the ego's lack of mastery writ large in it, that Isak begins the car journey to Lund that will change his life, the journey that will enable him to confront and avow his losses. In these confrontations, Bergman stages Isak's (and his own) ability to break from ossified ways of living dominated by the avoidance of unpleasure and catalyze new desires capable of arresting intergenerational cycles of repetition.

Two key, linked scenes from the film are pertinent in this regard. The first transpires as Marianne (Ingrid Thulin) sits in the driver's seat of the car, Isak beside her, while their "children" (Sara, Anders, and Victor) pick flowers. Isak awakes from sleep and tells Marianne that he has been having "weird dreams" and that it is "as if I must tell myself something I won't listen to when I'm awake." Bergman shoots their conversation in a medium shot. Marianne asks, "What's that?" As Isak responds—"That I'm dead. Although I'm alive—Bergman cuts to a close-up of Marianne, for whom the words echo directly something said to her by her husband (and Isak's son) Evald (Gunnar Björnstrand). Marianne tells Isak that her husband said something similar. In a series of alternating point-of-view close-ups, the two pursue the meaning of Isak's remarkable syntagm: "I'm dead. Although I'm alive." Isak assumes Evald said it about him, but Marianne corrects him: Evald said it about himself. Isak invokes Evald's age (his son is only thirty-eight), as if psychic death had some proximity to biological agedness. Marianne asks if she might tell Isak the story, and Isak responds that he would be grateful. The camera draws closer and closer to Marianne as she begins her narration.

For the first time in *Wild Strawberries*, Bergman allows Marianne to command the film's story-world. That is to say, cinematic space and time will be cleared for a memory of someone *other than* Isak. Bergman cuts from Marianne directly to a close-up of Evald, sitting a few months earlier in the same car in the seat Isak had occupied. She tells Evald that she is pregnant, and he tells her she must choose between him and the child. For Evald, Marianne's desire is a "hellish desire to live and to create life," while his (Evald's) is to be "stone-dead." At this utterance of Evald's, Bergman cuts back to a close-up of Marianne

and pulls away to include a devastated Isak. Marianne speaks of the child she is carrying and of the generational lineage of coldness he or she will inherit. Her words have a transformative effect on Isak: even as “the children” return with their flowers and cheer him for the wisdom and experience which they understand his honorary degree to recognize, Bergman ends the scene by giving more and more of the frame to Isak’s look of accountability, with the rest of the scene’s diegetic reality almost entirely removed (sound, lighting, even most of the seat of the car on which Isak sits). In this scene, Bergman opens his film to Marianne’s desires—at the level of form as well as content—and suggests that Isak has heard *while awake* something he wishes to tell himself.

The propitiousness of this scene is realized in the film’s penultimate one. In a bedroom at Marianne’s and Evald’s home, Isak lies in bed. The day has ended. Isak has been awarded his honorary degree, but the narcissistic dividend of his ego ideal has lost its libidinal force. Marianne and Evald have gone to a formal party. The three “children” return to serenade Isak from beneath his window. Sara even declares to Isak, “It is you I really love.” Viederman, for his part, sees this love as “most transformative” for Isak. Sara is, however, somewhat of a fantasy figure, something that Isak perhaps begins to recognize. It is to the flesh-and-blood others in Isak’s life, however, that Bergman directs our attention. Marianne and Evald return for her to get a new shoe (a heel had broken). Evald checks on his father and wishes him a good sleep. Isak asks to speak to him. The staging of the scene evokes an analytic encounter: Evald sits in a chair, facing away from Isak, who is reclined on the bed. Here, however, it is Isak who asks the questions, and Evald who, having consented to becoming a parent and having declared that he cannot live without Marianne, evinces signs of a renewed capacity to risk something for love.

Isak raises the matter of Ewald’s debt, seeking to forgive it. Though Evald may not properly hear it, Isak’s gesture is significant in that it signals a fundamental change in the way he relates to his son. Here, Bergman invites us to see the economic motif as symbolizing a wish to rework an economy of desire, in keeping with Freud’s claim that the removal of repression

“results in a saving from an economic point of view” (1915, p. 151). Here, in short, is an intergenerational *freeing up* of energy that had been directed to repression. Evald departs, and Marianne enters. Isak confesses that he likes Marianne and she returns his declaration of affection. She leaves, and Bergman does what he did in the scene in the car: he gives more and more of the frame to Isak, removing most of the *mise-en-scène* that had been in the scene (the bed and the room’s furnishings). In this way, Bergman stages how the affinities between two, separate speech-acts—Isak’s gloss on his dream, “I’m dead. Although I’m alive,” and Ewald’s declared wish to be “stone-dead”—can create an opening for a human being to begin to enjoy the company of others. And perhaps to sleep less fitfully.

At a point earlier in *Wild Strawberries*, in the dream sequence that closes with Isak at the spot of his wife’s infidelity, Isak asks his attendant, the Examiner (Gunnar Sjöberg), what happened to Karin? In the dialogue that ensues, the Examiner distills the exchange that has guided Isak’s existence:

*Examiner:* Gone. All are gone. Removed by an operation, Professor. A surgical masterpiece. No pain. Nothing that bleeds or trembles.

*Isak:* How silent it is.

*Examiner:* A perfect achievement in its way, Professor.

*Isak:* And the punishment?

*Examiner:* I don’t know. The usual, I suppose.

*Isak:* The usual?

*Examiner:* Loneliness.

Bergman’s psychoanalytic achievement in *Wild Strawberries* is to show us the high price for avoiding constitutive features of desire—how the avoidance of pain ultimately produces a kind of living death. To make one’s peace with these constitutive features is instead to open oneself up to living as well as to dying, to accept the pains and joys of what “bleeds or trembles.”

## Notes

1. All quotations from the film are from *Wild Strawberries* in The Criterion Collection.

2. As Freud wrote: "The process of repression is not be regarded as an event which takes place *once*, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force, and if this were to cease the success of the repression would be jeopardized, so that a fresh act of repression would be necessary." (1915, p. 151).

### References

- Bergman, I. (Director). (1957). *Wild strawberries* [Motion picture]. Stockholm: Svensk Filmindustri. [DVD: The Criterion Collection.]
- Freud, S. (1915). Repression. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 14, pp. 141–158). London: Hogarth Press.