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SECRETS OF WOMEN

(Kvinnors Väntan) Scenario and direction: Ingmar Bergman. Photography: Gunnar Fischer. Music: Erik Nordgren. Svensk Filmindustri. With Anita Björk, Maj-Britt Nilsson, Eva Dahlbeck, Gunnar Björnstrand.

Ingmar Bergman's *Secrets of Women* (released in England under the more accurate and modest

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title of *Waiting Women*) is concerned with what to Bergman is the never-ending combat between the sexes. Its tone is comic, which may come as a surprise to viewers who prefer to notice only the somber side of Bergman—what James Baldwin calls his “weird, mad Northern Protestantism.” But as Vernon Young pointed out, Bergman “has essentially a comic intelligence—in the sense that with the glaring exception of *Hets* (*Torment*, 1944) he strives always to reconcile contradictions—[which] is not usually stressed in criticism.” [*Film Quarterly*, Fall, 1959.]

Dating back to 1952, *Secrets of Women* is not one of Bergman's best films. Although it can be appreciated for its own merits, I think that in the perspective of Bergman's recent films it can best be seen as a kind of notebook whose “entries” suggest and define some of the themes and images which will later receive major expression. The setting is a country house. Four vacationing sisters-in-law are awaiting the weekend arrival of their husbands. To pass the time they sit around the kitchen table and, rather than the usual gossip, they relate in turn their deepest “secrets” from the past—which, after wordy introductions, are told through flashbacks. The film, then, is a collection of three loosely connected stories. (The fourth woman never gets to reveal her past.)

The device of gathering the women together is arbitrary and forced: it's highly unlikely that even Swedish women would reveal their “secrets” quite so readily—except for Ingmar Bergman! The exposition is dramatic rather than cinematic, reminding one of Bergman's stage roots—but, surprisingly, in terms of Scribe rather than Strindberg. The conservative, “well-made” first scene does define a major element of Bergman's film style—the importance of camera placement instead of camera movement. The faces of the women are seen in close-ups; the same shot is held for what seems like minutes. There are few cuts. What make the scene static—even boring—is the sameness of the lighting and the absence of any sense of atmosphere,

or of the chiaroscuro lighting which makes similar indoor groupings in other Bergman films more interesting (such as the kitchen scenes in *The Magician*).

In the first flashback, Rakel (Anita Björk), no longer in love with her husband Eugen, has a fleeting encounter at their summer home with Kaj, a childhood friend who is also married. The selfish, narcissistic nature of their affair is symbolized by Bergman's characteristic use of mirrors: when Kaj enters her bedroom, Rakel is looking in the mirror and the first stages of their love-making are photographed in the mirror.* Those who complain about obscurity and ambiguity in Bergman will find some solace in this film: the symbolism is nothing if not obvious. In the next scene Kaj picks up a naked and headless baby doll, which was stuck grotesquely—feet up and apart—in the shallow water by the boat house, where their adultery is culminated. He empties the water from the broken doll, symbolizing the “emptiness” and meaninglessness of their imminent sexual union. In the boat house Kaj looks down into a pool, and as if his narcissism was not yet explicit, Bergman shows him tenderly kissing his own hand!

Later Rakel confesses to Eugen. Greatly upset, he locks himself in a cabin and threatens suicide. Here the film's comic tone becomes apparent. Eugen's “suicide attempt” is ineffectual. His melodramatics are made comic by his older brother, who disarms him and then tries to throw the rifle in the nearby water, only to miss the mark, the rifle falling ridiculously into the bushes. His comic ineptness underlines that of his brother. Rakel and Eugen are re-united, contradictions are resolved, and the older brother provides the story with a comic

* The mirror is a recurrent image in Bergman's films. In *Smiles of A Summer Night*, the mirror into which Anne looks is seen as sensuous and romantic, while the bathroom mirror in *Three Strange Loves* complements the neurotic intensity of the young wife. In *Naked Night* a seduction is seen in a mirror and when the circus owner attempts suicide, he shoots his reflection. A closer study would show how Bergman's use of the mirror lifts it from the category of cliché.

"moral": "It is better to have an unfaithful wife than no wife at all."

The second story is perhaps the least successful. Bergman here seems mainly concerned with experimenting with and developing his technique. The story of Marta's (Maj-Britt Nilsson) love affair with a painter in Paris, her resulting pregnancy and eventual marriage, has a certain academic interest for Bergman admirers, for Marta's flashback recalls the last hours of her pregnancy, which are filled with the basic ingredients of later Bergman—forebodings of doom, dark interiors, ominous bells, the inevitable face of death (behind a frosted-glass front door), the girl walking from bright sunlight into and through massive shadows, and empty city streets infused with the sense of surrealistic isolation which looks forward to Borg's dream in *Wild Strawberries*—all in contrast with the over-all comic tone of the film. She arrives at a Kafkaesque hospital, and Bergman's rendering of her delivery seems like a rehearsal of *Brink of Life*. Bergman tries a bit of broken-field running, inserting a flashback-within-a-flashback: her delivery-room delirium takes her back to a nightmarish can-can danced at a Paris club before her pregnancy; a hocus-pocus seduction by the artist (his hand of Eros reaching out for her from the darkness), and finally, at the end of the scene, a cumbersome crescendo of all the motifs from the sequence—a sort of film lab final exam for Advanced Montage 121. (Bergman's use of flashback is clumsy and in some places confusing; its use in this sequence almost makes one long for the flashback technique of a slick, commercial film such as Joseph Mankiewicz's *Letter to Three Wives*—so artless, so straightforward, so comprehensible.)

If in the latter story Bergman falls victim to his devices, then the third vignette is the most successful because it attempts the *least*, technically. It offers the viewer no labored symbolism and utilizes one of Bergman's most expressive kinds of settings—a cramped, prison-like elevator. "Hell is other people," says one of Sartre's characters in *No Exit*, and it is in this

spirit that Bergman utilizes a room with "no exit." Some of Bergman's most powerful scenes are enacted in crowded, claustrophobic enclosures which are metamorphic for the tensions, hostilities, and anguish of the characters within them—such as the fight between the husband and wife in Borg's car in *Wild Strawberries* and the attic scene in *The Magician*. In *Secrets of Women*, an elevator serves this purpose, but comically. Karin (Eva Dahlbeck) and her husband Frederik (Gunnar Björnstrand), a rich businessman, have been deceiving one another. They get stuck and spend the night in their elevator ("I hate being locked up," says Frederik). Forced together, they cannot hide nor avert the truth about each other—significantly, the elevator is lined with mirrors. Björnstrand, who suffered at such length as Borg's son in *Wild Strawberries* and as Egerman in *The Magician*, is here a comic delight: on the way home earlier in the evening, sitting pompously in the back seat while his wife drives; conveying all of his self-satisfaction with one boorish yawn; and later, sitting bolt upright in the elevator, trying to preserve his dignity, his top hat collapsed on one side, all the while maintaining an icy deadpan expression—like a sort of Scandinavian Buster Keaton. The couple reconcile their differences and convert the elevator into a conjugal bed.

The film comes to too abrupt an ending. The fourth woman doesn't tell her story and Marta's younger sister, who has listened to the "secrets," suddenly decides to elope with her boyfriend. No one stops them. "Let them have summer," says the eldest brother, "time enough for wisdom." Their boat goes off on the shimmering water for one summer of happiness. Perhaps the idyll of *Monika* is in some ways a sequel to this tag ending.

The film may be second-drawer Bergman, but then, there is "time enough for wisdom"—or *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, *The Magician*, and so on. As the minor work of a major film artist, *Secrets of Women* does manage to shed some light on Bergman's subsequent development.—ALFRED APPEL, JR.