

# MCLUHAN AND BERGMAN'S FILM *WILD STRAWBERRIES*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Bergman's film Wild Strawberries (1957) has received many interpretations, several of them from a psychoanalytical point of view relating to the problem of dreams and nightmares. Such an approach pays no attention to what we think the point of the film is, namely Bergman's rendering of family life suffering under the pressure of capitalist modernization or rural life. The period between 1930 and 1960 was marked in the First World by middle class men beginning to work not just for sustaining their family, but rather for personal fulfillment. At that time, men began to look for interesting jobs, that is, for jobs that are engaging as well as interesting, so the family was no longer the only or absolute dominant concern for men; increasingly personal and private fulfillment began to be more important for men than family – as two decades later, and up to present, for women as well. We can address this problematic resorting to McLuhan's thesis of modernization as originating a new structure of experience. We will show that such a transformation, namely, the individual exploding family life, is the theme Bergman is concerned with in Wild Strawberries.*

**KEYWORDS:** Family, career, involvement, individualism, consumer, disposability, interchangeability.

*The literate man or society develops the tremendous power of acting in any matter with considerable detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement that a nonliterate man or society would experience. McLuhan*  
*Separateness of the individual, (...) prime mark[ ] of literate and civilized societies. (...) Tribal cultures cannot entertain the possibility of the individual or of the separate citizen. McLuhan*  
*If Western literate man undergoes much dissociation of inner sensibility (...), he also wins his personal freedom to dissociate himself from clan and*

*family[,] freedom to shape an individual career (...).*

McLuhan

SUMMARY OF THE FILM FROM WIKIPEDIA

“Grouchy, stubborn and egotistical<sup>1</sup> Professor Isak Borg is a widowed 78-year-old physician who specialized in bacteriology. Before specializing he served as general practitioner in rural Sweden. He sets out on a long car ride from Stockholm to Lund to be awarded

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<sup>1</sup> Emphases using italics are ours.

*the degree Doctor Jubilaris 50 years after he received his doctorate from Lund University. He is accompanied by his pregnant daughter-in-law Marianne who does not much like her father-in-law and is planning to separate from her husband, Evald, Isak's only son, who does not want her to have the baby, their first. (...) During the trip, Isak is forced by nightmares, daydreams, old age and impending death to reevaluate his life. (...) He is confronted by his loneliness and aloofness, recognizing these traits in (...) his middle-aged physician son (...). (...) [H]e is praised by a small-town merchant who remembers him. (...) Borg finally arrives at his destination and is promoted to Doctor Jubilaris (...). As he goes to his bed in his son's home, he is overcome by a sense of peace, and dreams of a family picnic by a lake."*

#### SOME KEY SEQUENCES FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE FILM

The following sequences are very telling about the problematic of the film and directly related to the emphases in italics in the summary above:

*First sequence* (0:39 sec – 2:39 min): Aloofness + specialist enjoying professional fulfillment + the son, also a specialist concentrated on his work (no children) + stubborn pedantry.

*Second sequence* (14:40 min – 15:34 min): The daughter-in-law does not like Isak + Isak and his son are modern men, situated above the filial ties.

*Third sequence* (40:48 min – 42:51 min): Isak enjoys admiration, and gratitude from people of the district due to his work as medical doctor.

*Fourth sequence* (46:31 min – 47:34 min): The life with his wife was conflictive + the daughter-in-law does

not play the traditional role bearing children and being at her husband's side. *Fifth sequence* (1:20:53 min – 1:23:14): A great homage, Isak is a really successful and recognized scientist.

#### INTRODUCTION

Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries* (1957) has received many interpretations, several of them from a psychoanalytical point of view relating to the problem of dreams and nightmares. Such an approach pays no attention to what we think the point of the film is, namely Bergman's rendering of family life suffering under the pressure of capitalist modernization or rural life. The period between 1930 and 1960 was marked in the First World by middle class men beginning to work not just for sustaining their family, but rather for personal fulfillment. At that time, men began to look for interesting jobs, that is, for jobs that are engaging as well as interesting, so the family was no longer the only or absolute dominant concern for men; increasingly personal and private fulfillment began to be more important for men than family – as two decades later, and up to present, for women as well. We can address this problematic resorting to McLuhan's thesis of modernization as originating a *new structure of experience*. We will show that such a transformation, namely, the individual exploding family life, is the theme Bergman is concerned with in *Wild Strawberries*.

#### ISAK, THE INDIVIDUALIST PROFESSIONAL

Bergman's film shows the medical doctor, Isak Borg, who in his youth began his career working to sustain his family, but soon after that he developed

a deep love for medical science, what went hand in hand with an eroding family life. On the whole, Isak developed what McLuhan calls “extreme individualist patterns” (McLuhan 23) of behavior, which, in fact, are anything but extraordinary for a modern individual engaged and successful in his profession in any sphere of modern life. Furthermore, Isak’s son, Evald, is also an individualist, and Isak holds him, together with his wife Mariane, “responsible and accountable for their ‘private actions’” (39). As both Isak and his son see things, individual responsibility is above any kinship; for this reason, as both Isak and his son see it, the son has to pay the loan he took out from Isak, even if Isak has money enough and does not need the lent money back. We do not consider the film in detail, but the depicted situation is that Isak is a doctor appreciated by the people of the rural district in which he lives and works as well as by the academy of the University of Lund. Yet, this successful professional life is the other side of the coin of a disastrous family life. Additionally, some sequences in the film show that not only men, but also young women, including Isak’s daughter in law, begin to follow individual, purely personal inclinations.

#### INDIVIDUAL STANDPOINT VS. INVOLVEMENT

McLuhan distinguishes between the “oral societies” (50) and the “mechanical age” (26) or society; in the former, human relationships are corporative; the total involvement of the individual in social activities and tasks is the rule. On the other hand, in modern, “mechanical” societies, corresponding to the

“fragmented man” (50), obtains “a private subconsciousness or individual ‘point of view’” (108, 113) in every respect of life, fostering “complete detachment” (4) toward almost any concern as “a posture of noninvolvement” (4). McLuhan uses the term “corporation” (23) to refer to the tribe, to the family, or to any other social structure characterized by the involvement of the individual in it. On the other hand, what most theoreticians call Modernity corresponds to McLuhan’s “mechanical age,” characterized by the figure “the individual out of the grip of Nature and out of the clutch of the tribe” (115) or, just, out of the clutch of the family as a specific type of corporation; in fact, such societies “(...) subordinate[ ] family life to individualist stress in business (...)” (300) and career. At any rate, Modernity “(...) break[s] the individual out of the traditional group (...)” (172) whatever, destroys his “involvement in the communal” (216), since it destroys “(...) the depth participation that erases the boundaries of the individual awareness (...)” (238), leading, thus, to “intensely individualist” (240) ways of live. Put in McLuhanian terms, the “specialist fragmentation” (29), as a new structure of experience, explodes the traditional, corporative family life with its dominant involvement of the individual in it, particularly it leads to “the nonorganic separation of production, consumption, and residence” (104). That is the normal situation one faces “[i]n our intensely individualist and fragmented Western world” (234).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Even if the “mechanical fragmentation” is not equal to capitalism, McLuhan is well aware that

It may be that the best way to grasp the problematic we are dealing with here is to remember how the life of peasants was or still is in broad areas of the undeveloped world.<sup>3</sup> It is in principle the same situation and structure in all societies before Modernity, which were rural societies, what for McLuhan amounts to “oral,” “nonliterate cultures” (31) or “oriental societies” (18), societies in which “(...) social existence is an extension of family life (...)” (300) as a non homogeneously, but intensely patterned structure according to highly differentiated and complementary roles.<sup>4</sup>

THE FAMILY BEFORE MODERNITY: UNTIL PARTED BY DEATH

A medieval peasant family was an integral unit of production and consumption, including upbringing and amusement, since there were no separate, specialized institutions such as having a job or doing housework, nor the institutions of formal education and entertainment. The family lived in a very a rustic housing and the male members of it worked in the field in close proximity to the housing; commonly the labor field surrounded the housing, so male and female members of the family were always close together. Certainly, children were allowed to play, but most of the time they stayed involved in the productive activities of the juvenile and adult members of the family; that

substituted for education proper. The whole family was nonliterate and deeply religious, imprisoned in superstition and permanently being prey of anxiety, and its members had many reasons for permanent anxiety, including they did not understand, affecting humans, cattle or both, drought, fires, inundations, and other natural catastrophes, not to mention the always returning plunderer, who killed men, raped women, and took young males away. The housing did not have tap water or restrooms; instead, rats, fleas, bedbugs, and many other such niceties inhabited it. There were no mirrors, women could see themselves never – excepting pale reflection on puddles –, there was no make-up; women bore children each year, and very frequently the newborn, the mother, or both died; in any case, the general life expectancy was around 30; being 25 years old, woman and everybody else was already overworked and aged. Clothes were rudimentary and scarce, and like any kind of appliances they were hard to produce, used and repaired up to uselessness. Productivity was very low and people always lived at the verge of starvation. People had no chance at all to travel; they were bound to the land and to the village and whoever walked too far away automatically became an outlaw. Everybody knew everybody and to be single was no real option; people had to be married, not because they loved each other, but because there was no other way of life since any farm required the complementary work of women, men, and even children.

Nevertheless, the “good part” of all that was that people, woman and man, the parents and the children, and even the family and the neighbors, were

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Modernity is capitalism (cfr. 234) and that capitalism is the height of “individualist society” (235)

<sup>3</sup> Or in “(...) what Joseph Conrad called ‘the Africa within’ (...)” (111), that is, the undeveloped areas in the First World. Also McLuhan uses the expression “the Africa within” (156).

<sup>4</sup> McLuhan: “(...) the fragmented man created the homogenized Western world, while oral societies are made up of people differentiated (...) by their unique emotional mixes.” (50) That is the opposite to the “literate, fragmented Western man” (50).

always together, next each other, really until parted by death. Women cared for men and men defended women. More interesting in our connection is that the same relationship obtained the objects. The family females produced some things for all the family members and males produced another set of things for the family; in particular, men built the housing and the wood or stone fences around the family's land. In fact, the family was attached to the instrumental environment until parted by death, too; the same was true for the farm and the village. Neither persons, nor material goods were interchangeable or disposable; especially persons were not interchangeable. Everyone was bound, attached to the others in their vicinity, but also to the housing, to the land around it, and also to the village. The housing, the land, the livestock, and all the appliances linked to them constituted a framework of unique, interdependent entities in which nothing was disposable nor simply interchangeable since each element conveyed deep emotional investments the members of the family and even their ancestors had; each piece of clothing, bowl, mattock, etc., incorporated the efforts of those nearest and conveyed the involvement to them. In fact, a vast array of interdependences resting on differentiated and complementary roles – not on individuality or what nowadays is known as gender equality – was the glue holding everything and everybody together. That is the main point, the peasant family was by no means a stable undifferentiated togetherness of abstract individuals; as a matter of fact it was stable because it was an absolutely differentiated corporation (McLuhan).

An absolute differentiation yet complementarity of roles, McLuhan's definition of corporative life, was the cement holding everything together – that was, as McLuhan puts it, a “(...) so cohesive and so profoundly unified [form of life] as to resist every kind of change.” (147) In fact, the nonliterate man “(...) live[s] in a much more tyrannical cosmic machine than Western literate man has ever invented.” (156) The traditional, cohesive family was a basic part of such a tyrannical machine, holding the individual in its grip until parted by death.

#### INDIVIDUALISM AND CONSUMERISM

On the other hand, modern individual conceives himself as a free person, able and entitled to make choices on almost anything, that is a person who must be considered as independent of any array of fixed interdependences. To choose, personal freedom, has to do particularly with individualism as consumerism; individualism and consumerism are the two sides of the same coin.<sup>5</sup> Interesting is that nowadays humanists criticize consumerism without being aware that *consumerism is the very realization of individualism*. Naively, consumerism is equated to using and wasting many things, yet, consumerism is a structure of experience implying a “psychic transformation of the inner life” (300) and amounting to individualism.

The antimodernist Heidegger pointed to “disponibility,” “calculability,” and “manipulability” together as making up the structure of

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<sup>5</sup> At this point we depart from McLuhan's analysis. We explore the ties between individualism and consumerism, since consumerism is a key to interpret McLuhan's ideas of “detachment” and “private point of view” (19).

experience, just the phenomenality guiding the understanding of reality, characteristic of Modernity.<sup>6</sup> Such phenomenality implies a secularized relationship to things that can be further specified. We add *consumerism* to the phenomenality proper of Modernity; consumerism is the phenomenality constituted by *disposability* and *interchangeability*. Consumerism and individualism mean, above all, detachment both from things and people; more precisely, detachment from the mediatic environment, including all kind of appliances, housing and land, but also from any kind of kinship and neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> The modern individual is ready to move to almost any town in his country and the most educated and modern ones are ready to move to almost any city worldwide; not to say that the modern individual, male or female, is ready to interchange housing, car, appliances or whatever, as soon as it is *convenient* and affordable. To like a place and a neighborhood is not to be involved with them; it is simply a kind of *convenient* sympathy that can be put aside as soon as there are other, more convenient and affordable possibilities. *Convenience* for the individual is the general frame for interchangeability and disposability of anything and, not the least, of other individuals, as the high divorce rates in the western world teaches us.<sup>8</sup> Convenience is the frame for

consumerism and it amounts to “individual isolation and irresponsibility” (301).

Convenience as mere personal advantage is the practical form of detachment, and in conditions of detachment there is no “involvement,” neither with things nor with people. Involvement in McLuhanian terms lacks the personal moral dimension proper of commitment as the last one is based on the individual’s decision about something relying on convenience – be it selfish or altruist. A modern individual can be profoundly committed to marriage, to the family, to his neighbors, for instance, because he decides to be. An American farmer in the far West, a medieval or Chinese peasant, a medieval villager, that is, a medieval artisan, all of them did not commit to family or neighborhood since they automatically belonged to them. That belonging was by no means a matter of personal decision, but a spontaneous way of being and behaving, moreover, since that kind of belonging did not depend upon any individual decision whatever, it was as spontaneous as an emotive attachment. Unconditional, spontaneous, and emotive togetherness between persons each other and to their mediatic environment, including housing, land, and neighborhood, are the marks of involvement as McLuhan conceives it.<sup>9</sup>

The modern individual is a person lacking any involvement as the

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<sup>6</sup> Heidegger develops these ideas in many works, for instance, *Die Frage nach der Technik*, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*, *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, *Nietzsche I – II*, and *Beiträge zur Philosophie*.

<sup>7</sup> McLuhan emphasizes “the nonorganic separation of production, consumption, and residence” (104) proper of Modernity, that is of “mechanized production” (104)

<sup>8</sup> Above we used the expression “cohesive family” to denote the family before Modernity; now

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we can use the expression “loose family” to denote the modern family that is no corporation at all since it lacks involvement as defined by McLuhan, but is based on the always renegotiable agreement between free individuals. Nowadays nobody believes the family will automatically remain together until parted by death; even wishing it, is by no means believing it.

<sup>9</sup> McLuhan: “Privacy, like individualism, is unknown in tribal societies (...)” (119)

one described, he is a new kind of personality, the one fostered by Modernity, and such a personality does not appear from the old one out of the blue; on the contrary, the becoming of the modern, detached individual, committed above all to his convenience, supposes a long and deep “psychological conditioning” (136) given by the slow development of the commodities and consumer markets.<sup>10</sup> In a full-developed consumer society based on the division of labor and industry, buying and selling any kind of goods and services nurtures not merely individualism, but creates the very individual, the one detached from things and persons since both things and persons are functional and interchangeable or disposable according to personal convenience. As a matter of fact, detachment and involvement are two completely opposed structures of experience; veritable mental sets guiding human understanding and behavior.<sup>11</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In the end, individualism is correlative to detachment, for which things have no value beyond their usefulness or function, and relationships to persons – even the nearest ones – are not an unquestionable given, but always negotiable and renegotiable. On the contrary, involvement with things means the person is bound to any thing as conveying a set of interdependences

including the ones to other people and even to sacred entities, what we could term a “moral dimension” proper to the thing. Involvement with people means to live in the dimension of an emotive belonging to them given necessarily, what excludes any kind of questioning – making up “the cosmic tyranny” of the group. Such involvements to people and things go together, one assumes the other, and they are contrary to disposability and interchangeability, that is, to convenience and consumerism. A consumerist, or an individualist, is absolutely able to leave anything behind, things and people; he is able to sell anything, “leave the town” and settle anywhere, given convenience and affordability. The one who consumes things, also “consumes” people since he interchanges people, exactly as he interchanges things. He is an individualist. An individualist decides to whom he belongs and for how long and how, he renegotiates belonging when he wants, what is no belonging at all. Belonging can be neither decided nor questioned; it is *fate*. Remarkably any critical humanist and intellectual criticizing consumerism is not only not prepared to give up individualism, but he is a consummated individualist, since he is a consumerist. A consumerist changes smartphone, computer, clothes, auto, housing and place, village or city, but also partners, wife or husband, when “needed” or convenient. A consumerist, that is, and individualist, is very able to let everything behind. McLuhan defines modern man, that is, the individualist, by being detached; in other words, the phenomenality corresponding to him is consumerism according to personal convenience.

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<sup>10</sup> It is well known that McLuhan’s explanation resort to both the invention and spread of the alphabet and of print. Without denying such element, we prefer here to resort to the development of the goods markets. McLuhan also considers such markets and money, but we emphasize them more than McLuhan does.

<sup>11</sup> McLuhan: “The literate man or society develops the tremendous power of acting in any matter with considerable detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement that a nonliterate man or society would experience.” (79)

The scientist and doctor Isak Borg and his son Evan are modern men, liking and engaged in their careers they incarnate the detached, individual point of view, for this reason they are successful in public life, yet they have a crumbling family life. The traditional family is a McLuhanian corporation exploding under the pressures of modernization generating private individuals, leading first men and then women to seek personal fulfillment in their careers. With *Wild Strawberries* Bergman foresees the crisis of family life in modern, highly individualist environments, where both man and woman seek their own professional fulfillment.

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