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Screen Memories: A Video Essay on *Smultronstället* / *Wild Strawberries*

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Abstract

Screen Memories is a short split-screen video about Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film *Smultronstället* / *Wild Strawberries* and its connections with the Freudian concept of 'screen memories' that began as a piece of free-associational audiovisual exploration. Rather than an explicit work of scholarly exposition, explication or argumentation, it is an instance of creative practice as a mode of enquiry: a concise compilation made to perform or frame a new audiovisual encounter — in this case turning on a technique of gentle defamiliarisation (*Ostranenie*) — in order to engender new material thinking and feeling. The video is accompanied by a detailed written exegesis and contextualisation that aim to expand on its central topic, to make more manifest its audiovisual methodology, and to situate it as practice-led research, that is, as a work attempting to produce new knowledge, both through its particular form and through the reflections generated by this.

Keywords: video essay; screen memories; Freud; psychoanalytic film theory; multiple-screen video; Ingmar Bergman.

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Screen Memories (<https://vimeo.com/251838111>), A Video Essay by Catherine Grant.

[*Screen memory*]: a recollection of early childhood that may be falsely recalled or magnified in importance and that masks another memory of deep emotional significance.

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Screen Memories is a short split-screen video that began as a piece of free-associational audiovisual exploration. Rather than an explicit work of scholarly exposition, explication or argumentation, it is an instance of creative practice as a mode of enquiry:¹ a concise compilation made to perform or frame a new audiovisual encounter — in this case turning on a technique of gentle defamiliarisation (*Ostranenie*) — in order to engender new material thinking and feeling. As film historian and theorist Pam Cook has noted, in relation to her own practical exploration of videographic film and television studies, audiovisual forms like this

can produce a ‘writerly’ experience à la Roland Barthes in which viewers / readers / essayists generate their own meanings. The video essay constitutes an event; it transforms existing material to fashion an open-ended process of re-reading and re-writing. (Cook 2014)

Given this open-endedness, what follows is a written exegesis and contextualisation of the video that aim to expand on its central topic and to make more manifest its audiovisual methodology. I provide this in order to situate the video even more clearly as practice-led *research*, that is as a work attempting to produce new knowledge, both through its particular form and through the reflections generated by this.

Screen Memories is one of a number of videographic works of spatial montage that I have made about Ingmar Bergman’s films to be screened at events to mark the 100th anniversary of the Swedish director’s birth on July 14, 1918. Each of these works uses its multiple-screen form in the service of a poetic analysis through synchronous performance, a playing together of cinematic motifs, similarities, repetitions or variations that would otherwise only be meaningfully apprehended as such *sequentially* in the audiovisual time-based medium.² In their double unfolding, across screens, of the already “profuse simultaneity of signifiers” (Burch 1981: 29) in any

1. “Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry” is the subtitle of a 2018 book on this scholarly area by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan. *Screen Memories: A Video Essay on Smultronstället / Wild Strawberries*, by Catherine Grant, is online <https://vimeo.com/251838111>.

2. See, for example, *Lesson* (Catherine Grant, 2018) <https://vimeo.com/257277668>; and *Persona Non Grata Sonata* (Catherine Grant and Amber Jacobs, 2018) <https://vimeo.com/251331908>. I am currently working on a monograph about these and many other works of spatial montage, in the context of digital cinephilia (forthcoming Caboose Books, 2019), which will expand on some of my earlier written reflections on this topic (e.g. Grant 2013; Grant 2015).

single collection of frames from Bergman's cinematic sequences, these videos also explore, as a compositional principle, art historian and theorist Roger Cardinal's notions of the "haptic mosaic" in pictorial culture (Cardinal 1986: 127). They issue an invitation to the "mobile eye" of the viewer to engage in intensified processes of "peripheralized attention" (Cardinal 1986: 124, 114), in an accretional method of meaning-making through "seesaw scanning of the text, compelled by the very duality of the signs" (Rifaterre 1980: 165–6).³ As Cardinal argues, such "decentered scanning can constitute a refreshing alternative register of filmic experience" (1986: 112). I will return to reflect on these aspects, but first will offer some notes on the production method of the video.

In the *Screen Memories* montage, the sequence of shots that comes to be shown in the left-hand screen is taken from the beginning of the first of two day-dream *cum* 'flashback' scenes in Bergman's 1957 film *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*). I silenced the soundtrack and slowed down the image track. The right-hand screen sequence plays out, in its entirety, the later of the two *reverie* scenes, the one that takes place at the end of the film. While reproduced in its original duration, this sequence is also partially silenced, with source sound only at its beginning — some contextualizing voiceover from the film's protagonist Isak Borg (played by Victor Sjöström) — and at its end, when we hear Isak's relaxed breathing followed by some chords played, extra-diegetically, on a harp, in the film score, after the screen turns black. The juxtaposed film sequences are seemingly anchored in directorial biography by my addition, in the middle part of the video, of an extract from an audio recording of Bergman's comments about the conception of his film, which I sourced during the making of the video from an online copy of Melvyn Bragg's 1978 *The South Bank Show* interview with the Swedish director. The video montage is accompanied for most of its length by my doubling of a short melodic, looping musical track by digital composer and artist Podington Bear, which I also encountered online during the making of the video.⁴ As that music concludes, the harp cadence from the original soundtrack of *Wild Strawberries* sounds out (its source the sequence in the right-hand screen), accompanying (in the left-hand screen) the shot of Isak slowly making eye contact with the camera/audience/us, breaking the 'fourth wall'. At the same moment (and while Isak's image, with its direct stare, slowly fades to black), in the other screen space, the viewer is finally presented (before the credits sequence) with some manifest scholarly thinking in the form of an epigraph — a free-floating quotation from the 1899 essay which lends its title to the video, Sigmund Freud's "Screen Memories": "It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood" (Freud 1899: 322). It only becomes clear that Freud *is* the source of these words, though, as the first entry in the credits sequence appears. The viewer may otherwise confuse them with discourse issuing directly from *Wild Strawberries* given that their presentation mirrors the style of subtitling of Isak's speech earlier in the video. Freud's culminating words are intended to work as a kind of retroactive prism, or belated framing device, through which to *re-view* what has preceded them. With their contradiction of the video's other verbal content, they may prompt a moderate re-examination of (at least) the *naturalness* of the 'screen memories' that we have just experienced, and possibly even a challenge to their apparent 'truthfulness' and the comfort they may have generated.

The second part of Freud's sentence from which the climactic quotation is taken, which doesn't appear in the video, reads: "memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess" (1899: 322). This presents, possibly even more clearly than the first part, the radical challenge of Freudian thinking on 'screen memories'. That perhaps before a certain age, and perhaps after that, too, *none* of what we remember is reliable or straightforward, even if it appears to be — an unsettling notion in many ways.

Although I had certainly come across Freud's concept before encountering film scholar Elizabeth Cowie's book chapter on *Wild Strawberries* in 2003, I don't recall ever properly *comprehending* its radicalness, which might explain why reading her analysis and arguments, in which she connects this concept to Bergman's film for the first time, provoked my interest to such an extent.⁵ Cowie refers to this concept by name in relation

3. Aylish Wood has usefully posited the notion of 'distributed attention' (Wood 2007: 11), following the work of phenomenologists such as Vivian Sobchack, to discuss digital interface culture, including multiple screens. Wood's book has been important in my general research into spatial montage, but I won't discuss it here as she doesn't refer to the art-historian, semiotic and communications studies research context that I am foregrounding in the particular video method under discussion (e.g. the work of Cardinal, Burch, Rifaterre, and van Leeuwen, among others).

4. From the Free Music Archive online at <http://freemusicarchive.org/>.

5. Cowie's chapter is one of quite a large number of studies of *Wild Strawberries* that foreground its related, prominently figured acts of

to the film on two occasions in her chapter, each focusing on my favourite sequences (the ones I gather in my video), one early in the film and the other, as I have said, its closing moments:

Early in this journey [from Stockholm to Lund, the film's protagonist Isak Borg] revisits his family's summer home where he spent his childhood holidays, and where he experiences a strange reverie whereby 'the clarity of the present shaded into the even clearer images of memory'. Although prompted by memory, he was never in fact present at the scenes he now witnesses; they are in fact imagined, or a screen memory. (Cowie 2003: 192)

These interactions motivate a sense that Isak has in some way redeemed himself in that, through the course of the past twenty-four hours, he has acquired a self-knowledge and also a new concern for others in his acceptance of his responsibility for the unhappiness of others. As a result we can enjoy with Isak the film's concluding restitutive scene in which, as he lays down to sleep, Isak daydreams an encounter he has returned to many times, he tells us, although it appears to be a screen memory: he is again back at the summer house with the strawberry patch. (Cowie 2003: 195)

My appropriation of these sequences in order to juxtapose them in a video can be viewed *manifestly* as a work of scholar-fandom: I wanted to bring together these beguiling segments in a lyrical and hopefully captivating, synchronous two-screen montage in order both to pay homage to them, as well as to understand them even better in the light of Cowie's discussion of them — but not without *transforming* them in the process. In some ways, even as a transformative work attempting to free-associate audio-visually from the feelings and memories attached to what it compiles, *Screen Memories* turned out nonetheless to be a very literal-minded piece of remembering, repeating, and working-through of its sources. One of the readings that it offers up is quite straightforward: the video presents us with the similarities, in its spoken verbal content, between what both writer-director Bergman, in his 1978 interview, and his 1957 film protagonist Isak thought from the perspective of their respective locations about the conscious recall of childhood memories as a form of comfort or escapism — a pacifying *technique* (to use Bergman's choice of word in the interview) for use in times of anxiety and insecurity. The video might itself *appear* comforting or escapist as it showcases this technique in action in a lyrical way that chooses not to depart (very much) from the tone, or affect, of the film's 'happy ending'. Nonetheless, as I worked on the editing, I realized that I actually regarded the emerging audiovisual form as a kind of mini "mind-game film" (Elsaesser 2009), a *rebus* ("Freud's epithet of the dream", as Cowie puts it [2003: 199]). I understood materially that I was producing a collection of found elements not simply to enjoy, but to *puzzle over*, and potentially also to generate forms of belated or deferred understanding, especially in the light of the element (central to its mix, for me) from which I *don't* explicitly quote: Cowie's reading of these recollections possibly as 'screen memories' in the psychoanalytic sense.

As fellow film theorist Mary Ann Doane writes of Freud's concept of "falsely recalled or magnified in importance" *cover* memories,⁶

The screen memory is a detail, a contingency, which is nevertheless richly vivid and sensuous in its cognitive opacity. It stands out in a scene and constitutes itself as the marker of specificity itself. Screen memories are characterized by their intensity; they are, in Freud's words, recollected '*too* clearly' (Doane 2002: 166; quoting Freud 1899: 305).

A memory recollected "*too* clearly" echoes *Wild Strawberries* protagonist Isak's verbal evocation of his first piece of childhood remembering on his journey in the film, prompted by revisiting the wild strawberry patch

dreaming (including Arlow 1997; Bach 1975; Botz-Bornstein 2007; Coates 2010; Extence 2008; French and French 1995; Greenberg 1970; Petrić 1981; Steene 1965; and Williams 2012). Yet it was the first work to argue for the relevance of Sigmund Freud's concept of 'screen memories' in analyzing Bergman's film. Beyond what Cowie writes, very helpfully and informatively, in her specific passages on this concept, and in her general, very suggestive treatment of the repressions, displacements and condensations of dream-work which, by extension, clearly echo those of 'screen memories', she doesn't completely define for her reader what these kinds of 'screen memories' might be, or what Freud said about them, specifically. Neither Freud's 1899 essay "Screen Memories" nor his later revisions of the concept in subsequent work (for example: Freud 1900; 1914; and 1920) are discussed directly.

6. To cite again part of the dictionary definition with which I opened. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/screen%20memory/>.

of his family's summer house: "the day's clear reality dissolved into the *even clearer* images of memory that appeared before my eyes with the strength of a *true stream of events*" (my emphasis). This voiceover segment was substituted (silenced) in my video, as I have described above, by the deployment of an extract from a recording of Bergman's own voice recounting (in a late 1970s British television interview) his frequently repeated story of how the origins of *Wild Strawberries*' script resided in noting his ability to summons detailed — "*almost photographic*" — childhood memories of his grandmother's Uppsala apartment as a calming technique at times of anxiety and insecurity. This origin story was always presented as 'true', in auteurist dialogues with Bergman, until later in the Swedish director's life when he revised it rather bluntly:

In [my earlier autobiographical interviews gathered in *Bergman on Bergman*, 1973], I relate in some detail an early morning trip by car to the city of Uppsala. How [...] I wanted to visit my grandmother's house at Trädgårdsgatan. How I stood outside the kitchen door and, for a magical moment, experienced the possibility of plunging back into my childhood. That's a lie. (Bergman 1994: 21–22)

When I came across the recording of the Bergman interview of the 1978 *The South Bank Show* episode online, I was fascinated by the hesitations in the Swedish director's account of this teleology of the film on which he had been drawing — possibly, "*too clearly*" — for twenty years.⁷ These pauses (inarticulacies, uncertainties?) "invited and disturbed my understanding in terms of symbolization", to use Cowie's words about "hesitation in relation to" dream-work images (2003: 199). In my video editing process, I began to notice and explore more fully a number of vivid or sensuous details, or contingencies, to use Doane's understanding of cover, or screen, memories. Of these, one of the most striking (also discussed by Cowie) is, of course, the placement of old man Isak *in* the childhood memory, not only as an aged bodily presence, impossibly witnessing an event at which he wasn't in attendance,⁸ but also as a vocal observer (and *guarantor*) of the scene. My video associates from this to Bergman's own aging voice, which I now placed in the scene as an equally overdetermined, authoritative presence, evoking not only his actual 1978 age of 60, or the fictional child self of whom he speaks, but also the younger man who made the film at 38, now speaking over the images of Isak/Sjöström as an 80 year old grand/fatherly avatar in the film⁹ (as well as over the images of fictional cousin Sara [Bibi Anderssen]) — all the while discussing, in this new context *opaquely*, his real-life grandmother.¹⁰

With these moves, my video may be re-performing something that Cowie has compellingly noted of Bergman's film itself:

The continuous reworking of parallels and symbolism in *Wild Strawberries* through reversals, transformations and doublings which dissolve into differences produces an unintelligible inter-connection, that is, its sense-making is only for the moment, for in the next it is disrupted by another, associative, connection. The imposition, or discovery, of causal logic is made problematic so that no unified subjectivity — either of the son or the father, of Isak or Ingmar, can be discovered behind the imagery. In the gap between Bergman as Isak the father, and Bergman as Isak the son, lies the navel of the dream and which the film and its crafted dreams both point to and dissemble. (Cowie 2003: 198)¹¹

7. Including in Bergman's *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography* (1988).

8. In the first reverie, old Isak is actually in the place he dreams of, or revisits in memory — the *smultronstället* (wild strawberry patch); in the second reverie, he wills his virtual return from his bed back in Stockholm.

9. Another presence in this intersubjective relay for me is the 84-year old Ingmar Bergman of 2003, the year of publication of Cowie's chapter and also when I first read this work by her. Bergman died in 2007. Victor Sjöström died in 1957 shortly after making *Wild Strawberries*.

10. The grandmother of whom Bergman speaks in *The South Bank Show* interview is the only family character (corresponding or not to Bergman's own family) not directly figured in the reveries. Isak does visit his mother on his journey, which somehow recalls Bergman's anecdote about his grandmother.

11. A further excellent point about doubling was suggested to me by the first of the two anonymous peer reviewers of my video and article, to whom I am indebted: "The projective elements of the dream-memory addressed in *Screen Memories*, in their function both as revelation and concealment, can be found in many other doublings in the film: the simultaneous presence of past and present, external and inner reality, lies and truth. On these aspects there are copious references: by way of example, one could mention [...] Jacques Aumont (2003:158), according to whom in Bergman this doubling game is necessary in order to express what otherwise would be neglected."

Aside from the detail, or contingency, of Isak's presence in his 'memory', the other element of these scenes which is "nevertheless richly vivid and sensuous in its cognitive opacity" (Doane 2002: 166) is the textural aspect of Bergman's *mise en scène*.¹² In my videographic processing of these sequences, the synchronous side-by-side placement of them enabled me to experience these aspects afresh, as did my kaleidoscopic play with slowing down (in the left hand screen) the black and white cinematography and editing choices: the beautiful shots and dissolves of the sky, the dappled light, the trees, the branches, twigs, stalks and blades of grass, and the strawberry patch itself. I was fascinated by the continuity of the patterning across the two screens in the finished video.

In his study of the benefits (and pleasures) of peripheralised spectatorship and its consequent generation of a fresh space in which to pause over details, Cardinal discusses the distinction that emerges between two "divergent strategies of viewing": a "literate" mode, which is drawn to the "obvious *Gestalt* or figure on offer" — as directed by the intention of the artist or by our familiarity with classical image conventions — and a "non-literate" or haptic mode that "instead roams over the frame, sensitive to its textures and surfaces — to its *ground*" (Cardinal 1986: 124).¹³ One of Cardinal's most compelling sets of examples (the one that immediately follows the above assertions) is cinematic: "a kind of inchoate, tangled sampling" of undergrowth and other flora stirred by the wind in a number of Tarkovsky films. He continues:

I find the phenomenal density of such passages of film to be strangely alluring [...]. They appeal to the non-visual senses as much as they appeal to the eye, to the extent that the gaze seems capable only of dyslexic fumbblings in search of a secure *Gestalt*, falling instead into a kind of euphoric, unfocused swoon. (Cardinal 1986: 125)

In *Screen Memories*, *Wild Strawberries*' phenomenal density is doubled, and potentially defamiliarised as a result. But this shifting of perspective back and forward between Figure (the conventionally significant or meaningful aspects of an image-based text) and Ground (a background or context we might more usually take for granted, and not read for meaning) is also played out in other aspects of my video. As an *audio-visual* essay it became an experiment in the anchoring or persuasive effects of music and sound (and other verbal content) in the multiscreen audiovisual experience.¹⁴ Even though, as Ian Garwood writes in his brilliant study of sound in the multiscreen film (2008), "[a]dvances in soundtrack technology such as Dolby Stereo and Dynamic Digital Sound also allow sound to circulate within and around the frame in new ways", I chose not to use any spatialising techniques in the soundtrack design of this video. There is, thus, no spatial distinction between the sound sourced from the material in either of the two screens and the other sounds I added to the video.¹⁵ Sonically, the video works as a single-screen experience. The voiceovers (both Isak's and Bergman's) most likely operate 'centrally' and *conventionally* — as Figure — to help stabilise (and contain) the dense and ever shifting visual content of the video, drawing us back — on semantic track — from an "unfocused swoon" (Cardinal 1986: 125), and working together with the (semically complementary) music as an additional form of "sonic glue" (Garwood 2008). This may be why Freud's climactic words, casting doubt on the veracity of what we have heard *if not seen*, may come as a (not altogether pleasant) surprise at the end of an otherwise comforting audio-viewing experience.

In her examination of Freud's 1899 "Screen Memories" essay, and especially in her treatment of the flowers and meadowland imagery in the case-study he analyses in that work (which turned out to have been his *own* memory), literary theorist Naomi Schor writes,

Because of their hyperclarity and signification these details [...] act to blind the reader, hypnotizing her so as to prevent her from noticing other equally important details, in particular (all) those

12. For reasons of space I won't refer directly, in any detail, to Lucy Fife Donaldson's brilliant 2014 book-length study of texture in film, except to recommend it strongly to anyone thinking through these kinds of questions.

13. I first came across Cardinal's work through its citation and exploration in Christian Keathley's groundbreaking 2006 book *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*, to which my present study is also heavily indebted.

14. In this respect, my video took up some aspects of Ian Garwood's compelling application to multiscreen works of certain insights from the work of Dutch-Australian scholar of multimodal communications Theo van Leeuwen in which the latter identifies the positions of *figure*, *ground* and *field* as crucial to the creation of aural perspective (Garwood 2008; van Leeuwen 1999).

15. In fact, only the right-hand screen material has any sync sound; the material in the left-hand screen has been silenced, as I indicated earlier.

that might reveal the identity of this talented patient [Freud himself]. (Schor 1987: 89)

Freud's floral disguise, his rhetorical flowers, are a *mimesis of the falsification-work* which repression carries out on childhood recollections: by a process of mise en abyme, Freud has produced a true-false cover-memory, or better yet has re-forged an already counterfeit childhood memory. (Schor 1987: 90, my emphasis)

This phrase, the *mimesis of the falsification-work*, describes very well, it seems to me, what is (re-)performed in my video *Screen Memories* — *re-performed* because my video discovers, or posits, that this kind of mimesis of a cover memory is what may be being performed in the original sequences from *Wild Strawberries* themselves (the ones I have appropriated). If not an exact copy, my associative remix is an exploration (in miniature), a 'dreaming again', of Bergman's film's intrinsic deceptiveness, its temporal and semantic displacements (to paraphrase Doane 2002: 166).

As Cowie writes of Bergman's film's dream-work, and, in a *deferred* way, of my video essay,

The dream is 'dreamt' again as a hermeneutic requiring not the recovery of meaning hidden in the dream, but the discovery of the meaning of the dreaming, of the selection and juxtaposition of elements, the transpositions — the work of the displacements and condensations. The dream-work is not a distortion of a message or meaning fully formed prior to and discoverable behind and before its deformation, but a process or encounter involving a production in which a symbolizing representation emerges. (Cowie 2003: 188)

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