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# NOW ABOUT THESE WOMEN

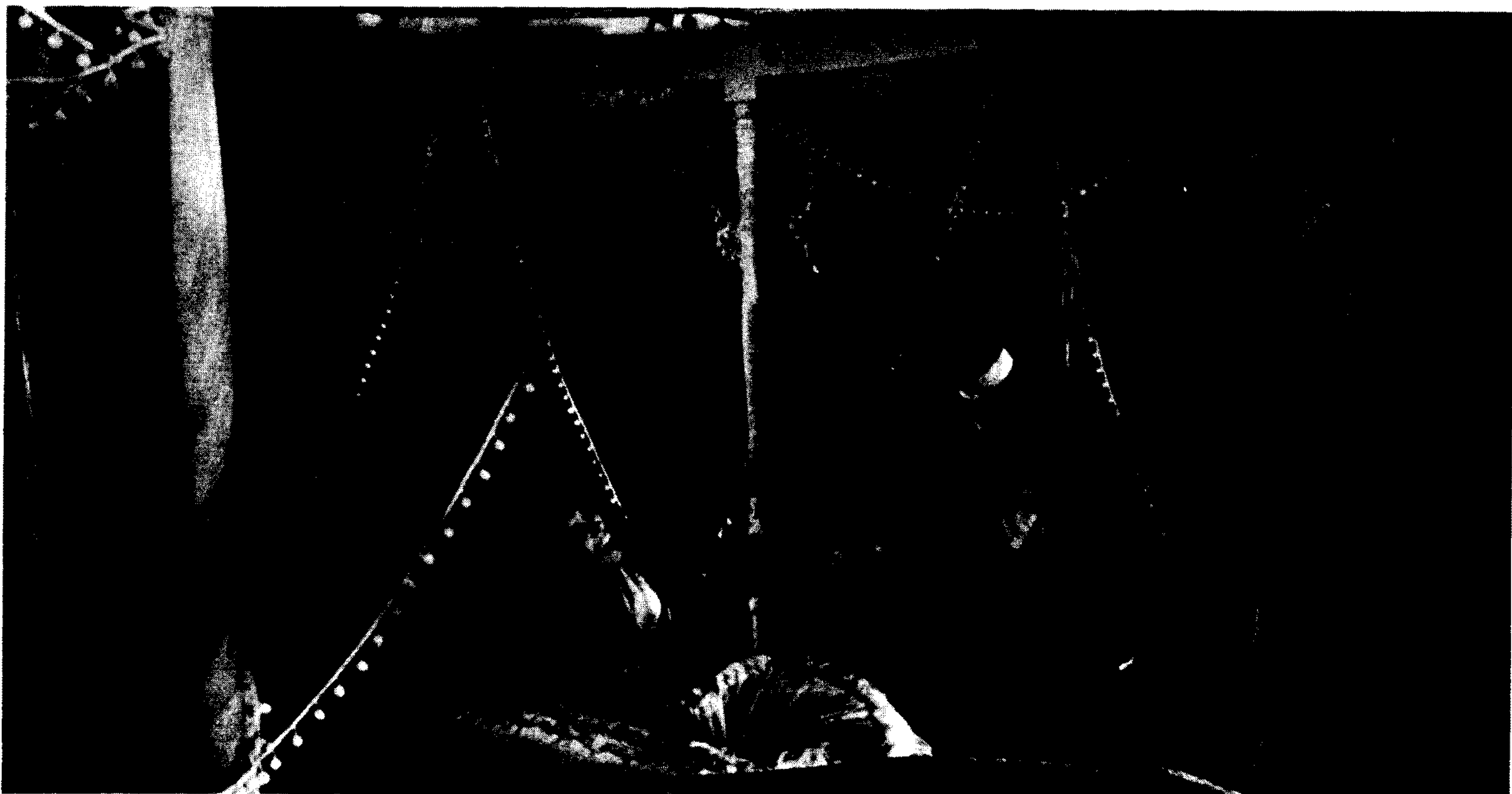
If one is going to sail against the wind of critical opinion, it always pays to quote as an adversary the most formidable figure around as a measure of one's daring. So, as Jean-Luc Godard said to Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman's *Now About These Women* "is a film purely for himself a diversion. . . . It's like someone who's having fun alone in his room playing the fool. Then if you go in, you say—The guy's a complete idiot. But he's very happy to play the idiot in his bathroom". Apart from the sheer name-dropping value of this quote, it provides a quaint cameo of today's personification of intellectual chic talking to yesterday's about the day before's. Godard's comments (which don't necessarily imply rejection of the film) are a more sophisticated version (naturally) of the objections that have led to the general

neglect of *Now About These Women*. In Britain the film has also had to contend with the local feeling that comic is the negation of serious and with the fact that Bergman is out of fashion. Apart from *The Silence*, which was only golden because it was scandalous enough to have 'em scared, Bergman has been dropped from the heavyweight team. When he made *Winter Light*, the best of his later (post 1955) films, no one took much notice.

*Now About These Women* may have been a diversion, but as in *The Trouble With Harry*, its frivolities are meaningful. It is also by far the most self-contained of the later Bergmans. Even before the trilogy, Bergman's films, like Antonioni's, to varying extents had required their predecessors as primers and had conversely acted as keys to them. *Now About These Women*

stands much more alone. Otherwise, as one who has been increasingly cut off from Bergman by an incompatible personality, I would hardly have felt qualified to tackle it in print.

In *Now About These Women*, Bergman, for once being flippant, chooses as his subject the most risible items around—critics. It's hardly surprising that Bergman should pick on the critics, even less surprising that they should dislike the results. Few directors have been built up critically and then torn down as Bergman has been. His obvious intellectuality makes him the easy victim of any slick operator seeking to show off his interpretative brilliance. His consistency of style and subject makes him vulnerable to those who see in singleness of purpose the signs of repetition and staleness, those who are eager to identify



a decline in the absence of spectacular and newsworthy innovations. (How lucky for Ozu's critical reputation that he was not discovered by the critics until near the end of his career). Bergman on the critics is the art house equivalent of Jerry Lewis on a star's entourage. *Now About These Women* is Bergman's *Patsy*; in both films the malice operates at the expense of the laughs.

In *Now About These Women*, many of the gags go on long after they have ceased being funny and continue until they are quite unpleasant—this is true both of the search for Bumble Bee (Bibi Andersson) and of the drag act. The second half of the film contains a number of scenes which obviously have no humorous intentions including the harrowing dialogue between the oldest mistress, Madame Tussaud (Karen Kavli) and the valet, Felix (Georg Funkquist). Bergman has made a film that only looks like a comedy.

*Now About These Women* is aimed against the critics in form as well as content: outside its basic story it is designed to produce disappointment, even outrage in them. Not just a comedy which frequently doesn't even try to be funny, but a first film in colour from a major director which displays almost no interest in colour—Bergman could have been expected to *do* things with colour as Antonioni did. But no, the predominant shades of the decor are white and pale grey, and the only "ambitious" colour effect is used as a joke: the censorship tango, which starts in monochrome goes into colour and back again.

Bergman might have been expected after *The Silence* to echo the strong views expressed by the critics in countries where

it was cut. But Bergman finds censorship, one suspects, merely idiotic. The British critic who took the trouble to contact Bergman and ask who cut the items that had disappeared from the British version of *The Silence* was surprised to find that Bergman didn't know and wasn't particularly interested. It was presumably enough for him to have made it. Bergman's comment on censorship is no more serious than Godard's in *Femme Mariée*, where the one censored shot in the first section—a shot of male hands pulling a pair of panties down female legs—is replaced by a cut-in shot of a low-flying small aeroplane accompanied by the suitably derisive noise from its single engine. Bergman just inserts a card saying "Owing to risk of censorship, the sex act is shown as follows" and inserts his tango, which from its opening chest-to-chest *pas de deux* (he "attacked well", says Bumble Bee later) is a charmingly satisfactory metaphor.

The form itself is deeply anti-critic by telling a very simple story in a switch-back time scheme which is often, and deliberately, confusing—the funeral and its aftermath are presented sometimes in black and white (once this is used to show a thought) and sometimes in colour, apparently in an indiscriminate manner. It is also extremely vulgar on occasion: Isolde (Harriet Andersson) plays with the rose of a watering can as she talks about the master's fingering—"he calls me his gamba, his little lap viol"—and our hero, Cornelius (Jarl Kulle), looks down as he is correcting his manuscript in the bath and, leering at the audience, decides to go off in search of Bumble Bee—as he says later "the need is

urgent". Then he puts his cigar back in his mouth and flicks it into a position of determined erectness. One title—the instruction not to take the fireworks symbolically—is directly aimed at Bergman's interpreters.

The film's main offence potential lies in the character and treatment of the critic himself. Cornelius is conceited, stupid, gullible, cowardly, lecherous, hypocritical, sycophantic, conniving and dishonest. No effort is spared to make him look ridiculous: he makes entrances with the easy, doomed grace of Peter Sellers in *The Pink Panther*. He mistakes the valet for the master's cellist Felix and is putting on a great display of servile adoration when interrupted by the sound of distant 'cello music. Even Cornelius's quill pen rebels against him by twitching in time with a bird's song as he writes under a tree. Looking up to address a few patronising words to the unself-conscious creature, he gets an eyeful of its droppings. "What is genius", he declaims at the lying in state. "Genius," says the impresario Jilker (Allan Edwall), "is making a critic change his mind".

The artist's world with its decor of wedding-cake whiteness that is sometimes tinged with pale candy-coloured lighting, is presented as the critic's dream. (Even for Felix himself, it is something of a dream

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*Stills: Now About These Women. Opposite page: Cornelius (Jarl Kulle) collects material for his biography—the Master's bedroom and the Master's Mistress, Bumble Bee (Bibi Andersson). This page: left, Cornelius and Isolde (Harriet Andersson); right, Cornelius in drag, observed by Jilker (Allan Edwall).*





world, but one he has managed to realise for himself). Cornelius muscles in on as much of the dream as possible. He overcomes his scruples about looking through keyholes to spy on Felix's wife and his official mistress, Adelaide (Eva Dahlbeck) and Bumble Bee, who are fixing the sexual roster for the week. A statue in the foreground of the shot makes a double comment on the hypocrisy of Cornelius and the vulnerability of Felix—a naked girl covers her breasts modestly with her hands. In a spirit of research he is quickly in Bumble Bee's bed—"The Master's bedroom, the Master's Mistress, what material!" To get the master to give him an interview or to perform his work, *The Fish's Dream* or *Abstraction No. 14*, he will resort to any sort of blackmail, even blackmailing the man with posterity. Only by means of the biography, he says conceitedly (and desperately), will Felix be remembered.

In its treatment of Cornelius, the film completely abandons any pretence to stylistic unity, for the part is acted in a

completely different way to any of the other characters. Cecilia (Mona Malm) and Traviata (Gertrud Fridh) may indulge in a Stan and Ollie sequence of mounting violence from hair-pulling through leg-kicking to tea in the hair and cream cake in the face—Cecilia even gives a tiny Stan cry. But apart from Cornelius, all the characters are given at least somewhat naturalistic performances and are acceptable on a normal level of movie convention. Jarl Kulle, however, performs like Malvolio in a bad production of "*Twelfth Night*". A leering grotesque built of broadly mimed movements and burlesqued gestures, he is completely out of place in Felix's little Utopia from the moment he nearly falls in the lake, while standing back to describe the house. Incidents like his early encounter with a huge but unstably mounted bust are presented with lots of semi-skilled slapstick. No need for it to be good—why credit a critic with the ability to do anything well?

Cornelius even falls gormlessly in love with Felix's wife, Adelaide, but this one

piece of sincerity allows the only moment in the film when we feel anything for him. In full flapper outfit, complete with lampshade as hat, he is discovered by Adelaide as he waits for Jilker to show his photograph to Felix. Distraught, he curses the house full of people with fantasy names, and is going down on his knees saying "Adelaide, my love" as she walks away. Just as in *Smiles of A Summer Night* we were twice made to feel sorry for the Gunnar Bjornstrand character—when he sees his young wife elope with his grown-up son and when his face is blacked by the pistol full of soot—even the ludicrous creature impersonated by Kulle can deserve our sympathy, if only for a moment.

While Cornelius personifies critics, Felix is specifically not Bergman: part of Cornelius's blackmail line is that Felix is only a performer. Nevertheless, Felix can be taken as the general figure of the Artist, and, although he is hardly seen, he is as much the subject of the film as Cornelius. Now, the figure of the Artist, for some—in particular Tennessee Williams—is abso-

lutely central to their work, but his appearance in a Bergman movie is something of a departure.

Felix has as much claim as Cornelius to be the central character in the film, which like *Citizen Kane* is a series of testimonies on the great man's life by various witnesses. But whereas the dead Kane played a key role in the Welles' movie, the living Felix is only glimpsed in the Bergman—a back view as he plays, an extreme and grainy telephoto long-shot (like a newsreel of royalty acknowledging the cheers of the crowds from a balcony) during the accidental and non-symbolic firework display, and shots during the recital, either with face blotted out by the microphone or of details like hands playing the 'cello. And again unlike Kane, the various testimonies don't just present various facets of the great man's character, they are directly contradictory: the maid, Isolde thinks that everything is so refined while Madame Tussaud complains that Felix is so ill-bred.

As a counterweight to the attack on the critics, the other side of the film stands as Bergman's comment on the position of the artist, particularly in relation to society, which is symbolised in Felix's position in the film. To the outside world, the public, apparently represented in the picture only by Cornelius but in fact including all of us in the cinema audience who invade the house with him, Felix as a person hardly exists. The eye witnesses even disagree on whether he is short or tall; all we learn is that he is cross-eyed—two girls say so independently. It is significant that the critic attempts to break the privacy of his life and take the public in. Of the four long chapters in Cornelius's book, three are about the man and his private life and only one is about his music. Yet on Cornelius's arrival at the summer residence, he mistakes the valet for the 'cellist but recognises the music (not difficult even for him because at the time he does not know that there are any other 'cello players in the house). Felix can be recognised by his art but not by his person. One feels that this personal anonymity is for Bergman an ideal, which corresponds to his own preferred relationship to the public.

The only people who can break through the anonymity barrier at all are those who love and/or serve the artist: the seven women, the valet and the manager. The biographer is specifically excluded from the circle—Jilker refers to him as a salesman and when Cornelius in a revealing error in his reading of the biography starts saying his own name instead of Felix's, we are left in no doubt of what he is selling.

Even the lovers cannot really know him, as we learn from Isolde (who appears to be a completely sincere witness) but at least

they can get close to him, whatever their motives. Traviata says she goes to bed with him to beg for 'cello lessons (only to be told that he has taught her the rudiments of 'cello-playing: to open her legs) but eventually is shown thoroughly enjoying the sexual experience. Isolde likes it because it's all so refined. Cecilia is there for mercenary reasons, sent by the family to soften up Felix who is bringing an action against his relatives for naming a cigar after him. For Madame Tussaud, Felix, in spite of the humiliation he has brought her, is a source of pride. Bumble Bee likes him simply because she enjoys sex (after all, one of the simpler messages of the film is yahboo, artists are sexier than critics).

The relationships are often complex, even delusory: Felix loves the little nymphomaniac for her purity and calls her Santa Cecilia. But even she brings him something—self awareness. She herself says, "Felix is potty about me. I make him feel old and a failure". Beatrice (Barbro Hiort af Ornas) is almost the opposite of Cecilia—she loves to serve Felix by working as his accompanist. But Felix is not particularly easy to serve in this way, postponing his choice of the programme for the important radio concert until the last moment. Each of the six mistresses, however, believes when Felix comes out on to the balcony to wave in acknowledgement of the fireworks, that he is waving at her.

Only his wife, Adelaide, shows no interest and goes on reading a book. As embodied with statuesque perfection by Eva Dahlbeck, Adelaide is slightly cold, detached and completely self-assured. Apart from Isolde, she is the only one viewed by Bergman with obvious approval. But there is no evidence at all that she loves Felix as a person, only as an artist. All that is vouchsafed to Cornelius about their marital relationship come not from her but from one of Felix's letters to her, which he finds in the firework store. In it, Felix says that he cannot help being unfaithful to her but that if he ever abases his art, she is to shoot him. Completely true to Felix the artist, she uses busts of him for target practice and hits them in the middle of the forehead every time. "You condone your husband's secrets?" asks Cornelius. "They are immaterial", she replies. She alone of the seven women goes under her true name.

Her attitude to Felix is complemented by that of the valet Tristan who serves him even though he hates him. Thirty-two years earlier Felix had beaten him in a 'cello competition and seduced his wife. Now Tristan is attentive to Adelaide, assisting her at target practice and bidding his time. After Felix's death, Tristan steals for her the scandalous chapter of

the biography, evidently to prevent its publication, and is last seen leaving with her on his arm, while the others welcome a young 'cellist to take Felix's place. This unprepossessing young man is an adequate substitute for all of the widows except Adelaide but including Cornelius. ("A genius acquires widows of many kinds", says Jilker at the lying in state.)

The true widow was nearly also the cause of death. She was about to shoot Felix as he started to play *The Fish's Dream*. But Felix died before she had time to shoot him. Felix ("once a great 'cellist", said Madame Tussaud) has compromised by playing Cornelius's awful music to buy a biography and hence posterity. We hear very little of the biography, but are given indications of another form of posterity in the gramophone record which is played before the abortive reading of the biography whose every word is objectionable to the women. On hearing what was to be played, Jilker had resigned as manager, saying "Your moral collapse is complete". The justification for Felix's life lay in his work as a 'cellist. Isolde said in the garden, "He doesn't know himself where it (his talent) comes from, and 'cello-playing is the only thing that matters to him". The personal details were indeed irrelevant, for however unpleasant he may have been, only the 'cello-playing was real to him. Everything else, like the names which he repeated to himself when he was alone with Isolde was for him a fantasy. With the compromise in his art, the artist dies, and the man, living only through the artist, must also die.

In Jorn Donner's dismal book on Bergman, we are told on the strength of the script alone that the film is "a relatively harmless divertissement made with the purpose of entertaining", which "consciously courts the public" (Bergman "has often displayed almost crude, public-attracting features in his films"). Apart from emphasising the dangers of criticising films on the strength of their scripts, Donner's comments could hardly be more totally at variance with the film itself. I can think of no such vehement declaration in the cinema that the artist should take up a position of intransigent isolation from both critics and public. One may argue with the sentiment, but one cannot escape it in the film.

Ian Cameron

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*Still: Now About These Women—the wife, Adelaide (Eva Dahlbeck), with the valet, Tristan (Georg Funkquist), at target practice.*