

Exploring the Aesthetics of Stream-of-Consciousness Movies Through the Philosophical Lens of Rationality and Irrationality: An Analysis of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*

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Abstract: Stream-of-consciousness movies are a peculiar style of movie influenced by stream-of-consciousness novels, which are characterized by their emphasis on inner thoughts. These movies usually adopt techniques like non-linear narrative, dream, flashback, and free association, to express the deeper workings of a character's psyche. Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* is a masterpiece of stream-of-consciousness movies. It reflects many characteristics of stream-of-consciousness films. This paper analyzes *Wild Strawberries* from both rationalist and irrational philosophical perspectives, with a focus on three main aspects: the aesthetic interpretation of the film, its content and characters, and the narrative structure and threads. It delves deeply into the artistic attributes of stream-of-consciousness films.

Keywords: Stream-of-consciousness; *Wild Strawberries*; Bergman; Rationalism; Psychoanalysis

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1. Introduction

The term "stream of consciousness" was first introduced by an American functionalist psychologist, William James, in his paper titled "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology"^[1], which was published in 1884. It refers to the continuous flow of information, emotions, and desires from both the external world and the internal unconscious that enter and exit our consciousness. James developed this concept based on his understanding of the human mind's activity, which he saw as a continuous and uninterrupted flow, much like a never-ending river. He believed that the mind is not composed of static fragments but rather a constantly flowing stream. The concept of stream of consciousness emphasizes the continuous nature of the human thought process. It is not limited by time and space or objective reality, but it is purely a subjective existence. This concept was then quickly absorbed by the art world and it revolutionized the literary field, influencing the creative practices of many writers and thus giving rise to many stream-of-consciousness literary works. The 1920s and 1930s were

the golden years of stream-of-consciousness literature, with novels dominating the genre. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* are all classic masterpieces of this literary style.

Inspired by stream-of-consciousness literature, stream-of-consciousness films began to emerge. In the 1950s and 1960s, many films started to incorporate characters' memories, fantasies, and dreams. Stream-of-consciousness is in a sense not a genre or type, but rather a technique and style. It inherits the expressive techniques in Western modern literature and art, presenting a unique form of Western modernist literature and art through the language and expression methods unique to film art. Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* is regarded as the pioneering work of stream-of-consciousness film, in which Bergman used the stream-of-consciousness technique to present to the audience the offer viewers a glimpse into the reflections and self-examination of Isak, a medical professor in his twilight years. It is as if Bergman uses a lens to reveal the complex and intricate thought processes of the elderly protagonist. The best parts of the movie are the four dreams of the main character, which are often associated with irrationalism due to their bizarre and surreal nature. This paper compares stream-of-consciousness films with surrealist films and finds that stream-of-consciousness films are not dominated by irrationalism but they feature a blend of rationality and irrationality in terms of aesthetics, plot, characters, and narrative structure and threads.

2. Aesthetics: Emphasizing the “inner reality” but not pursuing irrationalism exclusively

Influenced by Schopenhauer's voluntarism, Bergson's intuitionism, Freud's psychoanalysis, and other irrationalism, a unique view of aesthetics appeared in the literature and art of the early twentieth century. This shifted the focus of literature and art from the “outer reality” to the “inner reality. The most typical representatives of this form of art in the film industry are surrealist films and stream-of-consciousness films. Under the influence of irrationalism, these films emphasize the “inner reality” over the “outer reality.” They aim to depict the intricate psychology, subtle emotional shifts, and irrational unconscious processes of complex characters on screen, striving for an accurate portrayal and presentation of their innermost thoughts and feelings ^[2]. However, unlike surrealism's rejection of reality and rational aesthetics, stream-of-consciousness films do not pursue the same aesthetic. Instead, they establish a clever connection between rational reality and irrational unconsciousness, seamlessly blending inner reality with immediate reality. This allows inner thoughts and emotions to become the driving force and foundation for realistic actions, while realistic experiences in turn provoke self-reflection. Although *Wild Strawberries* aimed to portray the inner world of the protagonist, Professor Isak, as a subjective, unknowable, and unstable individual, the film did not focus entirely on his dreams. The intermingling of reality and dreams not only creates a narrative bridge but also reflects each other thematically. This means that dream scenes no longer serve merely as narrative insertions and flashbacks to reveal the genesis of a story or to provide the audience with context for the plot. More significantly, they add depth to the inner world of the characters, acting as a lens to refract their profound emotions and intricate inner workings. In addition, what is revealed in the dream further influences and drives the behavior of the character in reality, providing the motivation and basis for the growth and development of the character.

At the start of the movie, Isak's first dream reveals his fear of death. The premonition of death in the dream aligns with his advanced age. Despite his successful career in medicine, he is burdened with personal regrets, making it difficult for him to accept death. During the conversation with his daughter-in-law on the road, he may have displayed a condescending and indifferent attitude, all the while wearing a mask of hypocrisy to conceal his selfishness. However, upon hearing his daughter-in-law express sympathy for him and even claim

that his own son despises him, Isak is deeply moved. This prompts him to alter his plans and bring his daughter-in-law to the location where he spent his teenage years. There, he experiences a second dream in a meadow teeming with wild strawberries.

The dream's content reflects his fond memories of his teenage years and his regret for losing his first love. It is a bittersweet feeling, just like the title of the movie *Wild Strawberries*, which represents a desired yet regretful part of life. Thanks to this dream, which was a mixture of good memories and regrets, Isak began to experience some imperceptible changes. He chatted with three young people and expressed his sincere admiration for their courageous pursuit of love and youthful energy. During lunch, he even recited a touching poem and expressed his desire to visit his mother, who resided in the area. At his mother's, he sees the clock without hands that he saw in his first dream, which is apparently another reminder of the impending end of life. As he sits in the car, he falls into a melancholic state and enters a third dream. In this dream, he is forced to confront his own ego and reflect on his actions. Despite his fear and resistance, he yearns for redemption and forgiveness. Upon waking up from his dream and returning to reality, he takes the initiative for the first time to inquire about his son and daughter-in-law's marital problems, apologizes to the housekeeper, and begins to show concern and empathy towards those around him.

As he fundamentally confronts his shortcomings of selfishness and indifference and tries to change them, the lonely soul begins to acquire relief. One night, he dreams about returning to his teenage home and his cousin appearing to tell him that the "wild strawberries" are gone, which represents his inner relief. His cousin then brings him to the river, and he sees his parents sitting by the river and finally makes an emotional connection with them, which fundamentally addresses the cause of his selfishness and indifference - the lack of love from his parents in his childhood. The movie returns to reality at the end, ending with the old man waking up from his dream with a delightful smile, representing the perfect ending to his self-reflection on life. He no longer has any regrets in life and can finally face death with open arms. Upon careful examination, it becomes apparent that the sequences of dreams in the movie and the reality depicted are intricately intertwined. The seemingly disordered and illogical dreams are rooted in the old man's reality and his deepest desires, which stem from a rational thought process. However, the film presents these elements in a partially irrational manner.

3. Content and characters: Reality and dreams are intertwined to build a complete personality that unifies rationality and irrationality.

In terms of content, stream-of-consciousness films differ significantly from other films. They incorporate not only realistic elements but also utilize memories, fantasies, dreams, and other "real" representations of inner activities. According to Freud, human mental activity covers a wide range of complex forms such as emotional fluctuations, desires, fantasies, and thinking, and these different forms of mental activity unfold at different levels of consciousness. If the levels of consciousness are categorized according to their depth, they can be divided into the conscious, preconscious, and subconscious, which together form the complete structure of a personality. The mental activity that takes place at the conscious level is intuitively perceivable; when we concentrate, we can discern the constant flow of ideas, imagery, and emotions in our thoughts. However, not all mental activity is easily recognizable. Certain instinctive impulses and desires, which may be suppressed by societal norms or personal rationale, reside in the subconscious realm, often escaping our conscious awareness. These hidden thoughts or intentions are usually buried in our subconsciousness. However, in situations where human rationality is compromised, such as during drunkenness, hypnosis, or dreams, these subconscious contents can sometimes break through the barrier and become temporarily perceived by the individual at a conscious level. The preconscious mind lies between the conscious and the subconscious. It holds mental

activities that may not always be active but can be triggered by certain factors to become conscious, which is typically represented by the human memory.

The way Freud layers the mental structure reveals the richness and complexity of the human mind, making it of great significance to the field of psychology. At the same time, the theory of psychoanalysis has an extremely important influence in the field of art. Many artists and genres use this theory as the cornerstone of their creations, the most typical of which is surrealism. However, in surrealist films, the primary emphasis is on delving into the deepest and most concealed aspects of the human psyche. For example, *An Andalusian Dog* brought two dreams of its two main creators, Dalí and Buñuel, onto the screen. These three levels of mental activity are represented in different ways in stream-of-consciousness movies, both in the conscious rational thinking part of the person and the irrational subconscious part. The characters' rational thinking and actions are controlled by their self-consciousness. While some of these thoughts and actions may be expressed through their words and behavior, there are often details and complete thoughts that are not fully conveyed in this manner. Therefore, stream-of-consciousness movies often use inner monologues to give the audience a clearer picture of what the protagonist is thinking. The movie *Wild Strawberries* begins with a scene of Professor Isak sitting alone in his study, writing in his diary. He delivers a lengthy monologue that provides the audience with a glimpse into his thoughts about his life and his lonely heart. In addition to this, the film also features Professor Isak's inner monologue in several scenes, all of which reveal more of his own perceived conscious activity in certain situations, allowing the audience to resonate with him.

According to the theory of psychoanalysis, human consciousness is just like an iceberg, of which only a small portion is visible above the surface of the sea. The submerged part represents the preconscious and subconscious mind of a person, which is hidden yet very important. Therefore, the "inner reality" can only be unveiled through certain ways to depict a person's pre-consciousness and subconsciousness accurately. In response to this, stream-of-consciousness films illustrate the submerged part of the icebergs in the form of memories, fantasies, dreams, and other elements. Among them, the shallow part of the iceberg, located at the interface between the iceberg and the undulating water surface, often represents the pre-consciousness of the human mind. This aspect is intermittently submerged by the water's surface and can be perceived by individuals when triggered by specific factors. Human memories reside in the preconscious mind, and they can be so deeply buried that we may think we have forgotten them. Other times, they resurface unexpectedly, vividly marking our past experiences. For example, in the movie *Hiroshima, My Love*, multiple memories of the heroine are interspersed throughout the narrative. These painful recollections of her first love, which she had buried deeply within her subconscious, would unexpectedly surface in her consciousness. They would intrude not only into her dreams but also overwhelm her with memories upon the slightest touch of the hero's hand while he was sleeping during the day^[3]. The film *Wild Strawberries* portrays both the preconscious and subconscious, with a greater emphasis on the latter. The subconscious is depicted as dreams, while the preconscious is represented through the memories of the protagonist, Isak. There are memories of Isak's first love, his marriage, his family life as a teenager, and so on, which appear from time to time in the realm of his consciousness, either in the form of dialogues or interspersed with dreams, and influence his thinking. The four dreams are direct manifestations of the subconscious mind, and the content of the dreams has a distinctly irrational coloring, built entirely in imitation of a person's real dreams, with many uncanny and surreal elements. In the first dream, for example, the only person Isak encounters on the cold streets turns out to be faceless, who falls to the ground and dissolves into a puddle of blood when he taps him on the shoulder. In the third dream, Isak has just diagnosed the patient as dead, and she immediately bursts out laughing in high spirits. The dream's content is absurd because it projects or displaces his deepest sins and repressed desires as archetypes of the things that appear in

the dream. The symbols and representations of these desires are perceived in a camouflaged and distorted way.

4. Narrative: Breaking the barriers of time and space while implicitly rationalizing the narrative

Many viewers can be reticent about stream-of-consciousness films, often finding them seemingly obscure. The root cause is mainly due to their anti-traditional narrative concept. The primary reason for this is their departure from traditional narrative concepts. Stream-of-consciousness movies draw heavily from the techniques of stream-of-consciousness novels, placing the characters' inner psychological activities at the forefront of the narrative. They aim to capture and present their continuous feelings and thoughts. Such films often achieve the flow of the plot through the narrative technique of free association, breaking away from the traditional structure based on time and space sequences. They cover significant spans of time and space and may include large jumps in the storyline.

However, upon closer examination, stream-of-consciousness movies often employ a polyphonic structure, weaving together multiple threads in a progressive manner to complete the narrative. Through this approach, the films offer a layered analysis of the character's psyche, gradually unveiling the complete personality of the protagonist. Analyzing such films based on traditional time and space structures may lead to a sense of chaos and disorder. However, by examining them through the lens of the protagonist's mind, one can discern that the films follow a unique logic of thought constructed by the protagonist's ever-changing and subtle inner feelings and conscious activities. This logic constitutes the narrative backbone of the film as a whole. The movie *Wild Strawberries* skillfully blends reality, memories, and dreams, which on the surface seems to be logically confusing and layered. However, beneath this seemingly disorganized surface, it profoundly describes Isak's contemplation of his own life and his journey of redemption. This process has clear ups and downs and changes, which Bergman implicitly expresses in the film through intricate details and the symbolism of dreams. As a result, the film revolves around four seemingly distinct and eccentric dreams, yet possesses an underlying logic as elusive as grey grass and hidden snake threads.

The movie has three main threads, the first of which represents the reality of the experience. In the morning, Isak and his daughter-in-law embark on a drive to Lund. Along the way, they encounter various individuals and scenes, including three young men entangled in a love triangle, a middle-aged couple hitchhiking, a contented couple at a gas station, and midway through the day, they visit Isak's elderly mother before eventually arriving at his son's house. The main storyline of the entire movie revolves around a one-day experience, from morning to night. The narrative follows a realistic chronological order, with the entire journey serving as the present moment in time, and as a reference point for other narrative threads. The second thread illustrates an emotional shift, primarily observed in the relationship between Isak and his daughter-in-law. They progress from being distant to forming a close bond, with the daughter-in-law initially highlighting Isak's selfishness and coldness, but eventually expressing her respect and love for him. This not only unveils Isak's character but also depicts his transformation following self-reflection. Lastly, the third thread, the highlight of the movie, symbolizes the awakening of consciousness. Its main components are Isak's four dreams: the dream about death, the dream about first love, the dream about the trial, and the dream about his parents. These dreams intertwine with reality and memories, serving as catalysts in the protagonist's subconscious to initiate action and transformation in the real world. Meanwhile, Isak's reflections are fueled by the experiences of his actual journey^[4,5]. The middle-aged couple hitchhiking, for example, whose poor marital relationship reminds Isak of his own marriage, and in his third dream, he acknowledges the pain and hurt he has caused his wife and longs for spiritual redemption. As a result, in real life, he starts to demonstrate greater care and concern for those

around him, thereby becoming a more compassionate individual overall.

The three threads mentioned above are interconnected and progressive, not only portraying the protagonist's real-life situation and emotional changes with the people around him but also delving deeply into the process of his consciousness transformation and awakening.

Wild Strawberries is not only about Isak's real-life journey to Lund to receive the honor, but it is also about his spiritual journey of self-reflection and recognition. The film is structured in a polyphonic manner, with three threads intertwined to construct both the physical journey of reality and the emotional journey of the heart. From the perspective of consciousness, the four dreams are not independent of each other but represent different plot elements, constituting a complete and rational narrative logic of the movie. Specifically, the first dream serves as the opening sequence, featuring a clock missing an hour's hand, a person transformed into blood, and another self lying in a coffin, all symbolic of death. This dream instills a fear of death in Isak, prompting him to confront his unfinished business in life and embark on a journey of self-discovery. The journey of the heart and the journey in reality mirror each other in both light and darkness, serving as the driving force behind the beginning and development of the entire story. The second dream is part of his development, and the presence of his first love Sara, his mother, and other siblings subconsciously indicate his longing for affection, love, and every kind of positive emotion. He might have possessed these feelings in the past, but he has lost them over the years, and this has become one of the greatest regrets of his life. As a result, Isak begins to reflect and get closer to his true self one step at a time, paving the way for further self-judgment later on, advancing the development of the external storyline and internal perception. The third dream is the climax: in the dream, his cousin Sara holds a mirror up to him, and despite his pain and inability to escape, he must confront the darker aspects of his personality that he finds most challenging to accept. Afterward, he heads to the courtroom to undergo a trial and listens to his wife's accusations against him. Her words subtly expose his selfish and cold nature, ultimately leading to his punishment of loneliness – the very state he currently lives in. In this dream, Isak undergoes a re-examination and critique of himself, marking the culmination of personal consciousness activity and the climax of the entire film. The fourth dream is the ending section. It is the final dream that Isak has after arriving at his destination, Lund, and accepting the honor that marks the end of his journey to reality. Throughout his journey, he comes to the realization that selfishness and indifference have been inherited within his family like a genetic predisposition. This familial trait has led to suffering and loneliness for not only himself and his wife but also his parents and his son and daughter-in-law, all experiencing the misery of married life and the torment of loneliness. Therefore, he tries to change himself and his relationships with the people around him. After recognizing his flaws and trying to change them, he also receives a positive response from his housekeeper and daughter-in-law, and he once again experiences the warmth of human relationships before finally falling into a peaceful and solid sleep. In this dream, he smiles as he watches his parents fishing by the river, signaling his inner relief and peace. This moment brings his spiritual journey, and indeed his entire life, to a successful conclusion. It is evident that despite the seemingly loose structure of the movie, it actually conceals the logic of the flow of one's consciousness. Through the intertwining of subconsciousness, memories, and reality, the protagonist gains a deeper understanding, improves his behavior, and finds peace of mind ^[6].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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