

# Remaking *Scenes from a Marriage*: Social Memory and the Cross-Cultural Representation of the Heteronormative Couple

*Remake de Secretos de un Matrimonio: memoria social y representación intercultural de la pareja heteronormativa*

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## Abstract

This article examines the 2021 adaptation *Scenes from a Marriage*, created by Hagai Levi, as a cross-cultural remake of Ingmar Bergman's 1973 miniseries *Scener ur ett äktenskap*. Through a comparative analysis of their pilot episodes, the study examines the screenwriting strategies employed in adapting the narrative across distinct cultural, temporal, and ideological contexts. Beyond thematic and formal changes, the article highlights how shifting representations of intimacy, gender roles, and emotional conflict mirror broader transformations in social memory and cultural identity. Drawing on theories of adaptation and memory (Halbwachs, Hutcheon, Bazin), the remake is approached as both reinterpretation and cultural inscription, where fidelity to the original intersects with innovation in character construction, narrative framing, and emotional articulation. Particular attention is given to dramaturgical mechanisms such as the reversal of gender roles, the representation of abortion, and the meta-cinematic opening that foregrounds the constructed nature of fiction. By contrasting Bergman's existential, quasi-essayistic portrait of marital collapse with Levi's contemporary reconfiguration, the article situates the remake as a site of negotiation between individual and collective memory. Ultimately, it argues that adaptation operates as a form of cultural thought, shaping the ways intimacy and the heteronormative couple are reimagined within contemporary audiovisual fiction.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural Remake; Heteronormative representation; Social Memory; Screenwriting

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la adaptación de *Scenes from a Marriage* (2021), creada por Hagai Levi, como un remake transcultural de la miniserie *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (1973) de Ingmar Bergman. A partir de un análisis comparativo de los episodios piloto, el estudio examina las estrategias de guion empleadas para transponer la narrativa en contextos culturales, temporales e ideológicos distintos. Más allá de las transformaciones temáticas y formales, se destacan los modos en que las representaciones de la intimidad, los roles de género y el conflicto emocional reflejan cambios en la memoria social y en las identidades culturales. Desde marcos teóricos de la adaptación y la memoria (Halbwachs, Hutcheon, Bazin), el *remake* se entiende tanto como reinterpretación como inscripción cultural, donde la fidelidad al original dialoga con innovaciones en la construcción de personajes, el encuadre narrativo y la articulación emocional. Se analizan mecanismos dramáticos como la inversión de roles de género, la representación del aborto y la apertura meta-cinematográfica que enfatiza el carácter construido de la ficción. Al contraponer el retrato existencial y ensayístico de Bergman con la reconfiguración contemporánea de Levi, el artículo sitúa el *remake* como un espacio de negociación entre memoria individual y colectiva. Finalmente, se sostiene que la adaptación actúa como una forma de pensamiento cultural que reimagina la pareja heteronormativa en la ficción audiovisual contemporánea.

**Palabras claves:** Remakes transculturales, Representación heteronormativa, Memoria social, Guionismo

## 1. Introduction

“Could there be anything more terrifying than a husband and wife who hate each other?”—a line attributed to the Swedish playwright August Strindberg— is invoked by the character Peter during a dinner scene in *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (1973) and serves as a conceptual touchstone for both the original and the remake. Originally formulated in Bergman’s *Scener ur ett äktenskap*, a seminal and quasi-essayistic television miniseries distributed by the SVT2 television network, this question encapsulates the series’ commitment to an intimate and unflinching dissection of conjugal life, exposing the contradictions of love, desire, and emotional dependency within the institution of marriage. Nearly five decades later, screenwriter and showrunner Hagai Levi revisited this material in a new adaptation for the HBO streaming platform, taking on the challenge of translating the dilemmas of marital intimacy into a different cultural, temporal, and formal context.

This article offers a comparative analysis of both versions, approaching them through the lens of screenwriting and the dramaturgical implications of transposing a narrative across temporal and national boundaries. Focusing on the sequential structure of each pilot episode, we seek to identify both the continuities and the thematic and structural deviations between the two, with particular attention to the narrative strategies used in building-up character, the portrayal of conjugal conflict, and the representation of intimacy. Central to our analysis is the exploration of how each version frames and problematizes the heteronormative couple as a social and narrative unit. The relevance of this comparative reading becomes even more pronounced when situated within a broader framework of cultural and conceptual shifts regarding identity, representation, and collective memory.

By the end of the 20th century, contemporary societies underwent deep structural transformations marked by tensions around class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality (Hall & Louro, 2006). These shifts dismantled traditional notions of identity, now seen as fragmented, mutable, and shaped by representation rather than essence (Derrida & Kamuf, 1991; Baudrillard, 1994). Hall and Louro (2006) argue that postmodern identity is “a fantasy of unity and coherence (p.13).

According to Esquenazi (2011), building on Dewey (2005), artworks offer communities a space to reflect on their most problematic practices. Television, as a narrative form rooted in the everyday, has become a vital artistic medium —developing specific tools while remaining closely tied to popular culture and contemporary life. Its commitment to depicting the present calls for a closer look at how it engages with cultural reality.

Such engagement is crucial in screenwriting, particularly in remakes, where reinterpretation becomes a tool to reshape social memory — understood as a collective, evolving reconstruction of the past in response to the present (Halbwachs, 1990). In transnational adaptations, remakes must often revise sociocultural content to fit local sensitivities and avoid controversy (Hutcheon, 2006), navigating the complex expectations of global audiences (Verevis, 2004).

This article explores how dramaturgical shifts in the original *Scenes from a Marriage* and its 2021 remake reflect changes in the portrayal of the heteronormative couple. It investigates how these adaptations, across eras and cultures, reconfigure meaning and contribute to the construction of social memory.

## 2. Social Memory and the Cross-Cultural Remake

The discussion around fidelity is one of the most exhaustive topics in the study of film and TV adaptations. Leitch (2007) suggests that research into fidelity should ask, “Why does this particular adaptation aim to be faithful?” (p.127). Given the current diverse panorama of adaptations —which includes everything from comic books and video games to remakes of films, series, and soap operas (Joye *et al.*, 2017)— it becomes relevant to analyze whether an adaptation intends to remain faithful to the original or to innovate and (re)contextualize the work for a new temporal, geographical, or media context. Although some theorists (e.g. Hutcheon, Naremore) place remakes within the field of adaptation theories, noting that both processes involve innovation and repetition of a pre-existing text, the development of remakes and adaptations presents a distinct process (Cuelenaere, 2020).

In literary adaptation, audiences familiar with the work often see fidelity to the original text as a central criterion for assessing the quality of the film. However, in transnational remakes, the relevance of fidelity to the original is supplanted by the need to reaffirm a specific cultural identity and the spontaneity of this adaptation in thematic, character, and plot structure aspects. According to Burnay (2017), it is up to the screenwriters responsible for adapting the screenplay to recreate plots, add subplots, and auxiliary nuclei to ensure that the transition of borders occurs naturally. The author emphasizes that reaffirming cultural identity in a previously known format provides commercial stability. It allows for reinterpretation of the original work, challenging screenwriters to recreate and expand plots to ensure a fluid transition between cultures.

According to Hutcheon (2006), “adapting from one culture to another is not new: the Romans adapted Greek theater” (p.145). Every cross-cultural adaptation involves recontextualization, an adjustment to new social and geographical paradigms, allowing for a new cultural perspective on the original text (Quaresima, 2003). However, this reframing only sometimes implies a radical restoration of the original text. There is the familiar question of adaptation as palimpsest, where some of the central features of the work must be preserved, which often means choosing to define the narrative elements to be adapted, which in turn implies a cross-cultural reinterpretation of the original text. The screenwriter is, in such cases, faced with several questions: What is relevant to adapt so that a contemporary audience with different cultures, different political and sociological views of the world can see themselves in this text? And is adapting this text to a new political and social context and geography culturally relevant and financially viable?

Corrigan (2017) explains that the concept of adaptation as a palimpsest refers to works that maintain the essential features of the original text while simultaneously creating something new and distinctive. Drawing on André Bazin’s reflections in *In Defense of Mixed Cinema*, Corrigan notes that Bazin, inspired by Baudelaire’s metaphor of the chandelier in the theatre, describes this kind of transposition as adaptation as refraction. Corrigan further relates this idea to Jorge Luis Borges’s short story *Pierre Menard: Author of Don Quixote*, in

which a fictional literary critic attempts to replicate Cervantes’ classic not through direct copying, but by re-creating the exact same text from a different cultural and temporal perspective. As Borges writes,

I did not want to write another Quixote —which is easy— but Quixote. There is no point in adding that he never considered the possibility of a mechanical transition from the original; he did not set out to copy it. His admirable ambition was to produce pages that matched —word for word and line for line— those of Miguel de Cervantes (Borges, 2000, p. 27, own translation).

This case study —the HBO remake of *Scenes from a Marriage*— reveals an intention similar to what Bazin (1967) described as “refraction”, though it diverges significantly in both thematic and formal dimensions. A useful comparison might be drawn with the experimental project by the jazz ensemble Mostly Other People Do the Killing, who re-recorded Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* note for note —a seminal album renowned for its spontaneity and improvisational essence. Similarly paradoxical, Hagai Levi explicitly acknowledged his own point of departure: “I wanted to remain loyal to the original, to remake it —not make a completely new series” (Rico, 2022, p. 125). The existential truth at the core of Bergman’s cinema is arguably irreplicable and resistant to temporal updating. In Levi’s *Scenes from a Marriage*, the formal construction and thematic revision function not as a direct continuation but rather as a reimagining of Bergman’s foundational premise through the lens of contemporary sensibilities. The correspondence between the two works lies not in literal fidelity, but in the dramaturgical exercise of imagining how such a series might be conceived today if guided by the same foundational concerns. This analysis focuses on the following questions: How does this adaptation contribute to reshaping the social memory associated with the theme of marriage? And conversely, how might the individual memory of the screenwriter —his cultural, emotional, and ideological baggage— both inform and bias the dramatic treatment of that theme? Particular attention is given to the representation of the heteronormative couple as a site of both continuity and disruption.

The process of remembering produces an immediate association between the past and the present in a search for a coherent structure of thought. However, integrating the present into this experience can weaken memory as a source of past knowledge since memories are constantly reconstructed in conjunction with our current ideas and information. What is essential to establish in order to distinguish between social and individual memory in this context is not the basic psychological process of retaining, coding, storing, and retrieving information, but rather the exploration of this process in *Scenes from a Marriage* and the dramaturgical process of its realization. In order to carry out the analysis, it is essential to first frame and distinguish the concepts of social memory and individual memory.

According to Maurice Halbwachs (1990), the distinction between individual and social memory is based on the relationship between the individual and their social context. Halbwachs suggests that individual memories are shaped by interaction with the social frameworks we find ourselves in. Personal memory cannot be entirely dissociated from collective memory because it is based on the memory of others, which makes it possible to remember events that would otherwise be inaccessible, “[...] it is because we can rely on the memory of others that we are able, at any time, and whenever we want, to remember them” (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 49). Although there are memories that we believe are exclusively ours, such as those from childhood, they escape us due to our lack of complete socialization during that period. On the other hand, social memory is a collective construction where memories are re-edified through a framework of shared values and ideas. Halbwachs states that individual memory is, in fact, a point of view on collective memory and is constantly adjusted according to the role and position we occupy in the group (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 49). This reconstruction process is shaped by unfathomable external factors, including nationality, economic and social group, gender, political ideals, personal and religious values, and physiological or pathological characteristics, among many others.

Understanding how *Scenes from a Marriage* has been adapted across time and cultures invites a deeper investigation into the mechanisms by which cultural memory is negotiated and reshaped through audiovisual storytelling. As the remake reconfigures

narrative, formal, and thematic structures, it also participates in a broader process of collective remembering, offering not just a reinterpretation of Bergman’s original, but a reframing of the very social frameworks through which intimate relationships are represented and understood. To better grasp how such a reframing operates, it is crucial to revisit the cultural and historical conditions under which the original series emerged, and to contextualize its thematic concerns within Bergman’s broader critique of modern bourgeois intimacy.

### 3. Contextualizing the Object of Study

For the purposes of this analysis, we have chosen to compare the pilot episodes of *Scener ur ett äktenskap* and *Scenes from a Marriage*. While Ingmar Bergman’s original work was later re-edited into a theatrical version, we have privileged the television miniseries—the original format—due to its closer structural and formal proximity to the contemporary remake. Moreover, the so-called theatrical version presents a significantly different narrative configuration, which would compromise a balanced and methodologically coherent comparison between the two objects of study.

This methodological choice is also informed by our professional background as screenwriters, with experience in the development of various forms of adaptation for television, including transnational adaptations<sup>1</sup>. We therefore approach this comparative reading from a practice-based perspective, with particular attention to the dramaturgical mechanisms that underpin screenwriting. Our goal is not to conduct an exhaustive or multidisciplinary study of the broader themes at stake, but rather to offer a transversal reading focused on the narrative and stylistic devices that structure each version’s screenplay.

Through the comparison of key moments in the pilot episodes, we aim to investigate how specific elements of screenwriting—such as scene construction, character development, or the use of subtext—contribute to the thematic treatment of the heteronormative couple. We seek to highlight the formal nuances that emerge from the transposition of the same narrative across distinct geographical, cultural, and historical contexts. To

this end, we undertake a sequence-by-sequence breakdown of each episode, in order to examine the narratological and thematic dimensions that give shape to their respective structures.

This study incorporates testimony from Hagai Levi, showrunner of the HBO remake, as a methodological resource that supplements critical interpretation with creator-driven perspectives. In line with Taylor and Batty's (2015) emphasis on professional praxis, we foreground how practitioners articulate screenwriting through dialogue, structure, conflict, and character, while situating these craft dimensions within the longstanding dialectic of entertainment versus art. Cinema and television, as paradigmatic mass-cultural forms, operate simultaneously as repositories of historical meaning and as projections of futurity; reconciling these functions enables the production of works that remain locally embedded yet universally intelligible. Our analysis privileges the material dimensions of narrative construction —episodic structure, character arcs, and dramaturgical conflict— while locating them within the transnational circulation of audiovisual formats, a critical space where cultural tensions, strategies of recontextualisation, and narratological negotiations unfold. The case of *Scenes from a Marriage* exemplifies the cultural and dramaturgical ramifications of transposition across national, linguistic, and historical contexts, demonstrating how structural, thematic, and symbolic continuities persist through processes of recontextualisation, thereby securing a durable link to the original matrix even as it is refracted through new aesthetic, cultural, and dramaturgical sensibilities.

As Jerry H. Gill (1975) noted in an article for *Theology Today*, "Marianne and Johan can be said to portray the life situation of a large part of contemporary Western culture; to that extent, the growth potential for marriages and married persons seems a bit minimal" (p.91). This observation encapsulates the impact of Bergman's original as a social portrait of a generational affective crisis. The original series challenged the prevailing notion of marriage as the ultimate life goal, an institution traditionally idealised as the culmination of romantic fulfillment and the promise of lasting happiness. At the time of its release, such representations were rare in popular media, and conversations about the complexities of married life were often avoided in the public sphere. Many individuals were unaware

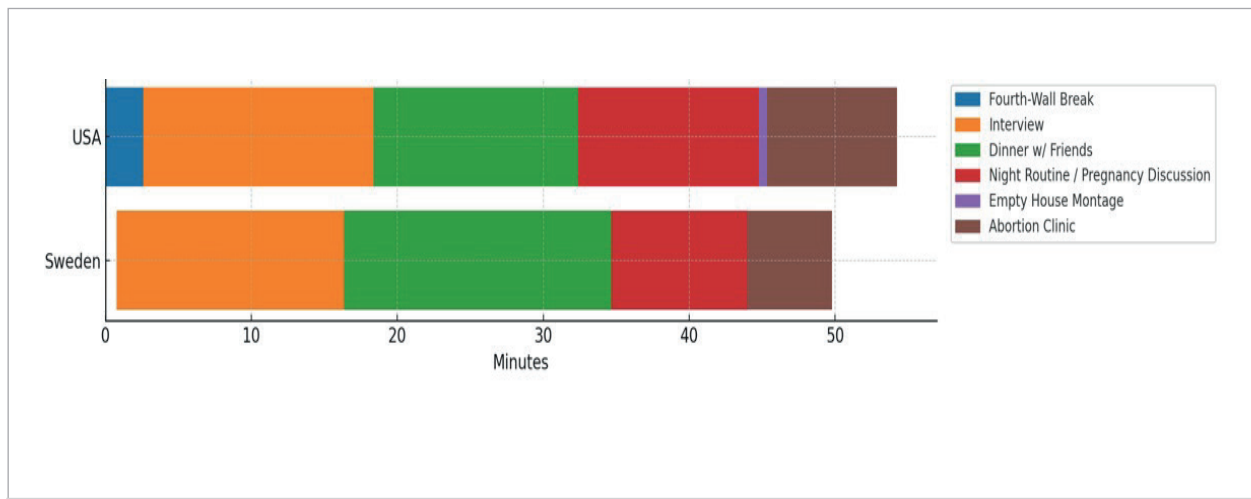
that their marital difficulties were, in fact, widely shared, largely because dominant cultural narratives promoted an idealised and conflict-free image of domestic life. Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* disrupted this silence by exposing the underlying tensions, frustrations, and emotional asymmetries that frequently characterise intimate relationships. The series foregrounded key issues such as gender inequality and the often-unspoken role of economic power within marriage, offering a raw and unfiltered portrayal of a couple's emotional disintegration. In doing so, it not only broke taboos around the discussion of private life but also contributed to a broader cultural reflection on the evolving dynamics of gender, power, and intimacy within Western societies.

If the original series constituted the construction of an affective memory that rarely found space in the television landscape of its time, the new version positions itself as a consciously crafted work of fiction —a narrative construction of an equally fictional memory, projected onto an imagined and dramatized version of America. What is at stake in both iterations is not merely the representation of intimacy, but the way in which such representation inscribes, in distinct historical moments, a model of cultural, affective, and social identity.

#### 4. Description of the object of study

We begin by presenting a detailed, sequential analysis of the pilot episodes. In order to avoid an exhaustive or fragmented approach, we have opted for a parallel comparative reading, rather than dividing the analysis into separate sections for the original and the remake. The chart (figure 1), produced by us for this purpose, illustrates the segmentation of both versions —the Swedish and the American— into distinct narrative sequences. The overall structure of the episodes reveals a striking formal similarity, which, as previously noted, reflects a deliberate choice on the part of the remake's creators. Nevertheless, two key moments of rupture (or narrative transition) can be identified, and these will be addressed in detail later in the analysis. To complement the visual breakdown, we also provide an outline of the main narrative "beats" in each episode, intended to support the reader's navigation through the comparative discussion that follows.

Figure 1: Comparison between sequences



Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1: Outline – *Scenes from a Marriage* (2021, HBO Remake)

Segment	Time code	Description
Fourth-Wall Break	00:00:00 – 02:35:00	Jessica Chastain appears out of character, walks through the studio set, and transitions into the role of Mira.
Academic Interview	02:35:00 – 18:23:00	Jonathan and Mira receive a researcher conducting a study on marriage, who interviews them about their relationship.
Dinner with Friends	18:23:00 – 32:24:00	The couple hosts Kate and Peter, friends in a polyamorous relationship who are experiencing a crisis.
Night Routine and Intimate Conversation	32:24:00 – 44:47:00	After putting their daughter to bed, Jonathan and Mira engage in a conversation about their past, careers, and emotional fatigue. Mira reveals she is pregnant. They agree to continue with the pregnancy.
Empty House Montage	44:47:00 – 45:21:00	A contemplative visual sequence shows the house empty.
Voluntary Pregnancy Termination Clinic	45:20:00 – 54:15:00	Mira and Jonathan attend a medical appointment for a voluntary termination of pregnancy.

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2: Outline – *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (1973, Original Version)

Segment	Time	Description
Magazine Interview	00:47:00 – 16:22:00	Marianne and Johan receive a journalist who asks about their marriage and daily life.
Dinner with Friends	16:22:00 – 34:40:00	Their friends Katarina and Peter visit and engage in a toxic argument that ends with the revelation of their impending divorce.
Domestic Routine and Intimate Conversation	34:40:00 – 44:00:00	As they prepare for bed, Marianne and Johan discuss family matters. Marianne reveals her pregnancy, and they decide to proceed with it.
Voluntary Pregnancy Termination Clinic	44:00:00 – 49:48:00	Johan arrives late at the clinic. The couple has chosen to terminate the pregnancy. Johan tries to comfort Marianne and suggests a weekend getaway.

Source: Own elaboration



## 5. Comparative Episode Analysis

In the pilot episode of the Bergman's series, *Panic and Innocence*, Johan (Erland Josephson) and Marianne (Liv Ullmann) are interviewed by journalist Fru Palm (Anita Wall) for a magazine feature on modern marriage. Johan, more at ease, presents himself as altruistic, respectable, and traditionally masculine, while Marianne, visibly nervous, briefly outlines her role as a family lawyer and adherence to conventional gender expectations (Gado, 1986). They recount meeting after the end of previous relationships, both marked by loss and loneliness.

The remake opens differently: an uninterrupted tracking shot follows the actress Jessica Chastain (Mira) backstage to the set, blurring the line between actress and character. Mira joins her husband Jonathan (Oscar Isaac) in their living room for an interview—not with a journalist, but with Danielle (Sunita Mani), a PhD student researching how gender norms shape monogamy, reflecting a more contemporary and academic framing.

Jonathan and Mira begin the interview by listing elements of their self-definition: Jonathan identifies as Jewish, a father, academic, Democrat, and asthmatic; Mira as a married woman, mother, and tech executive. While Mira downplays her professional status, Jonathan affirms, "She is a big shot, trust me". Danielle, the interviewer, asks about their domestic arrangements. Jonathan handles childcare due to his flexible schedule, as Mira works long hours and travels frequently. In a follow-up conversation, Jonathan recounts how they met in college while both were involved with other partners, and how their relationship began later in Boston. Mira reveals a history of abusive relationships, contrasting them with Jonathan's values and sense of purpose; he, in turn, describes a personal crisis after abandoning his Orthodox Jewish background.

In Bergman's second scene, Johan and Marianne dine with Peter and Katarina, a couple openly hostile and cynical about their marriage. While Johan and Marianne aim to present themselves as an ideal couple, Peter and Katarina expose their own relationship as driven by convenience and mutual contempt—what Gado (1986) calls "a twisted expression of their love". This contrast foreshadows the erosion of Johan and Marianne's facade.

The remake's parallel scene introduces Peter and Kate, friends of Jonathan and Mira, who are grappling with the end of their polyamorous arrangement. Over dinner, emotional tensions rise: Kate confides in Mira, culminating in an unexpected kiss, while Peter vents to Jonathan. The evening closes with emotional disarray, suggesting that, like in the original, the protagonists' reflections on their friends' relationship subtly mirror their own unspoken doubts.

In the original series, the third scene unfolds in the couple's bedroom, where Marianne reveals she is pregnant, but uncertain about keeping the baby. Johan initially defers to her decision but admits he isn't enthusiastic. As doubts and emotions surface, Marianne expresses guilt over losing their first child and views the pregnancy as a moral dilemma. Johan encourages a pragmatic view, and they ultimately decide to continue the pregnancy, finding brief comfort in their mutual ambivalence (Bergman, 2012).

In the remake, Mira informs Jonathan of her pregnancy. He responds calmly, though conflicted. They revisit their earlier plans and acknowledge the challenges of raising their daughter, Ava. Mira fears the burden will fall on Jonathan, while he recalls their initial uncertainty with Ava and how things turned out well. Despite reservations, they agree to proceed, expressing cautious optimism.

The fourth and final scene of both versions offers a stark reversal. In the original, Johan meets Marianne post-abortion. She is distraught and remorseful, while Johan avoids emotional engagement, proposing a quiet retreat to distract her. He soon leaves, and Marianne is left weeping alone. In the remake, Jonathan accompanies Mira to the clinic before the procedure. He is visibly anxious, but supportive. After taking the medication, Mira insists on being left alone. Jonathan hesitates, then complies. As in the original, the episode closes with the woman crying in solitude.

Another element that warrants critical attention is the "breaking of the fourth wall" in the HBO adaptation. The first episode opens with actress Jessica Chastain, not yet in character, walking through the production set as she prepares for the scene. Filmed in a single continuous take, the camera follows her through the backstage environment

until the assistant director calls “action,” at which point the performance begins. This meta-cinematic device immediately establishes a rupture between fiction and reality, drawing attention to the constructed nature of the narrative. Hagai Levi explained the motivation behind this choice:

It was an instinct. I felt already that there is something a little bit artificial or not totally realistic in the show, for some reason, and I wanted to make it a point, every week, that this is not actually really a couple who lives in Boston. This is a set and this is actually true for everyone. It’s much more abstract than that. It’s a fable, in a way. It’s like to say, ‘Hey, let’s discuss monogamy. Let’s discuss marriage. Let’s not just focus on these specific circumstances and make it more of a discussion of a general principle’ (Rico, 2022: 125).

This framing technique functions as a distancing effect, reminiscent of Brechtian strategies, inviting the viewer to reflect not only on the story being told, but also on the conditions of its telling. By foregrounding the artificiality of the medium, Levi repositions the series as an abstract fable rather than a strictly realist drama, encouraging a more philosophical and universal engagement with its central themes —monogamy, intimacy, and the institution of marriage.

This act of distancing —emphasising the constructed nature of the series and framing it as a contemporary fable— serves as a conceptual threshold, inviting the viewer to engage not only with the characters’ emotional landscapes, but with broader questions about the institution of marriage itself. It is within this interpretative framework that the adaptation reconfigures the representation of the heteronormative couple, prompting a closer examination of how gender roles, intimacy, and emotional expression are reframed in light of evolving cultural sensibilities.

## 6. (Re)interpreting the Heteronormative Couple

Dowd and Pallotta (2000) argue that the idealism typical of 20th-century romantic films is gradually fading. These films often ended before marriage, allowing audiences to project an idealized future.

In contrast, contemporary narratives reflect a more pragmatic view of love, shaped by postmodern rationality: “the ideal of romantic love has been subtly redefined, overcome one might say, by a sense of rationality” (p. 569). Understanding how this thematic shift plays out in the series requires noting key transformations in the adaptation. While the core theme —deception and familiarity in heteronormative marriage— remains, traditional gender roles from the original are reversed in the remake.

Both versions open with an interview that serves a similar narrative purpose: to introduce the characters through dynamic exposition. In the original, it is for a magazine column; in the remake, for a PhD thesis in Psychology and Gender Studies. While Johan and Marianne met through university debate clubs and political activism, Jonathan and Mira connected via theatre. Despite contextual differences, both couples share a sense of abandonment and emotional disconnection. The remake adds new layers by including a polyamorous, interracial couple, and a moment of sexual tension between Kate and Mira —absent in Bergman’s version.

Male emotionality is more central in the remake. Whereas Johan and Peter bond through emotionally distant activities like chess, Jonathan and Peter openly discuss intimacy, fidelity, and polyamory. This shift reflects evolving representations of masculinity, with men portrayed as more emotionally articulate.

The depiction of abortion is also markedly different. In the remake, the procedure is described in clinical detail, highlighting Mira’s physical suffering and the emotional weight of her decision —unlike the Swedish version, where the process is left implicit. This detailed portrayal aligns with contemporary sensibilities and contributes to a more humanised, nuanced exploration of reproductive choice.

Professor and critic Phillip Lopate (2004) highlights the central premise of the series: “On what basis can men and women, natural antagonists, expect to sustain love?”. Ultimately, highly inspired by the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, Bergman sought to scrutinize this question precisely. In the first episode, after the dinner scene with friends, the character Peter even quotes Strindberg: “Could there be anything more terrifying than a husband and wife who hate each other?”.



Strindberg's sentence presents the theme of the heteronormative couple through an underlying antagonism. In addition to the changes in the characters' psychology, embodying new social and cultural sensitivities, the differences in the protagonists' dimensional scheme are also significant. Bergman's characters have fixed beliefs and end up being emotionally absent in how they deal with different conflicts, especially regarding gender issues and power dynamics in marriage. Johan, for example, tends to avoid discussions about affection and maintains a more distant and pragmatic stance. In the remake, the emotional complexity and vulnerability of the characters are deepened, especially the male ones. However, as the season develops, even in the remake, Strindberg's premise returns, and marital antagonism comes to the fore. Not so much from Lopate's perspective, seen as "natural antagonists," but more as two different people with different interests, united by familiarity. In this case, there is a greater emphasis on the question of individuality in the remake. The premise is universal, but the characters are unique. This depth and specificity can make it difficult for viewers to resonate as the plot becomes less universal. However, from a dramaturgical perspective, we can consider that the new characters have more depth and dimension.

Although Mira has a more discreet position during the interview, just like Marianne in the original, she plays the role of the family's leading provider. She is the one who is absent from her daughter's life. However, there is a sense of guilt associated with this absence and reinforced by the victimization of her husband. In the original series, there is no mention of this estrangement on Johan's part, although it does exist.

One of the most significant changes in the female character is that, unlike Marianne, Mira has an extramarital affair and decides to leave her family to travel with her new partner. In other words, the original plot is maintained, but the genders are reversed in the extramarital affair. Other elements remain unchanged; for example, Jonathan retains his traits of intellectual superiority and charisma. This is very clear when, for example, he responds more quickly than Mira to Mira's identification of her pronouns at the beginning of the interview, suggesting that he still has a particular form of control. Mira's expression summons up in the

subtext a sense of powerlessness, even concerning her own identity—a new form of submission from which she wishes to escape. However, despite taking on the role of Johan, Mira manages to be more complex and three-dimensional. Her motivations are immediately understandable, and the character is human, which allows the audience to empathize with her, even after she leaves Jonathan to be with Paulie, her lover. This more sensitive and less binary portrayal of the protagonist reflects emotional and moral nuances that resonate with contemporary audiences and reinforce the abovementioned individuality.

In the original work, the only thing that unites Peter and Katarina is their pleasure in ridiculing Johan and Marianne as the archetypal perfect couple. At one point, Peter mocks this ideal marriage's depiction, and Katarina, until now infuriated with her husband, ends up agreeing and laughing. This moment reveals a latent contempt and simultaneously reflects the bitterness and disenchantment present in Peter and Katarina's relationship and their ideas of marriage. In the remake, this dynamic is changed to a less performative one. Peter and Kate end the evening ashamed of their argument and leave with an apology. This shift illustrates an even more significant concern with keeping up appearances. In the Swedish version, there is only a brief mention of the mutual betrayal between Peter and Katarina, but in the HBO series, the couple adopts a polyamorous arrangement. Mira believes that this relationship model only serves to justify Peter's successive infidelities. However, Kate seems to believe in the power of her choice and argues that the open relationship will be an excellent example for her children.

Like in the original version, Jonathan and Mira are portrayed as what Bergman called emotional illiterates. This trait is especially evident in the episode *The Illiterates*, but it already surfaces in the pilot, when Mira reveals her pregnancy. The conflicting feeling of "wanting and not wanting at the same time" persists in both versions, preserving the emotional complexity at the heart of Bergman's work. As with Johan and Marianne, the remake's protagonists are contradictory—oscillating between selfishness and generosity, immaturity and reflection. As Bergman (2012) described, they are "fearful, cheerful, selfish, stupid, good people, wise, generous... all in one big mix" (p.12).

In *Scenes from a Marriage*, we are confronted not merely with a representation of contemporary America, but with the deliberate depiction of a particular vision of American identity, mediated through a liberal and progressive sensibility. In the current socio-cultural landscape of the United States —shaped by intense political tensions, identity disputes, and shifting social dynamics—this revisitation of conjugal intimacy acquires renewed relevance. In contrast, Bergman's original version treats the social context as a mere backdrop for a more existential and philosophical inquiry into the human condition and the pursuit of happiness. While the original work subtly paints its social background around the existential dilemmas of its characters, the remake reverses this logic by attributing a central role to the historical and cultural context in the shaping of character identity and the configuration of their conflicts.

Therefore, both the Swedish original and its American remake can be read as emotional thrillers disguised as romantic realism — narratives in which love appears immutable in the face of circumstances, yet ultimately incapable of withstanding them. Bergman's original vision assumed an almost clinical, essayistic quality, and it is upon this foundation that Hagai Levi build up his adaptation: a dramaturgical re-reading that honors the original's legacy while subjecting it through a new cultural, formal, and emotional lens.

## 7. Conclusion

Revisiting Strindberg's original provocation —“Could there be anything more terrifying than a husband and a wife who hate each other?”—, both versions of *Scenes from a Marriage* not only echo this anxiety, but seem to reconsider it in more complex terms: Could there be anything more disturbing than love and conflict coexisting, when the human condition itself is inherently contradictory? In both versions, the series explores the unsettling possibility that the true terror does not lie in conjugal hatred, but in the impossibility of disentangling affection from resentment, or desire from estrangement.

The *Scenes from a Marriage* remake remains a thematic essay on marriage and heteronormative

relationships. Rather than rewriting the past through a contemporary lens, it draws on present-day social memory to reinterpret the original, much like recreating a classic painting in a new artistic style. Framed within postmodern thought, the adaptation both reflects and reshapes collective understandings of romantic love and power dynamics. By adjusting the characters' emotional arcs and placing them in new socio-cultural contexts, the remake recomposes the conventions and myths surrounding the heteronormative couple. By doing so, it rather echoes the complexities of contemporary relationships.

Let's suppose we can see audiovisual fiction as an alternative form of historical thought that maintains a permanent dialogue with History as a formal discipline. In that case, we can look at the adaptation of *Scenes from a Marriage* as a thematic-essayistic update on marriage and the dynamics of power and relationships in contemporary couples. The very dramaturgical act of adapting the work proposes, from the outset, a rapprochement between the original work and the contemporary audience's experience. This rapprochement invites reflection and dialogical continuity on the heteronormative couple and marriage in contemporary society, thereby contributing to the consolidation of new perspectives on the subject in social and individual memory.

Fiction, claiming to be ever more accurate than historiography (Todorov, 1992), allows for an increasingly vast and interdisciplinary place for debate. Therefore, it is pertinent to allude to the controversy that blames Bergman's series for the exponential increase in divorces in Sweden in its debut year. Although there is no empirical evidence to support this thesis, it is pertinent to consider what this statement suggests and represents. By relating to actual experience, fiction can change perspectives and beliefs, and, according to Aumont (2019), “the relationship of the fictional work to our real experience is enough for us to take it seriously” (p.81). Examining the original work and its contemporary adaptation leads to a place of plural discussion and a questioning of the implications of changes in social and cultural paradigms and the relationship and evolution of social memory about the themes it addresses, and, as such, their relevance in public debate and our personal lives.

## Notas

1. Pedro Lopes was involved as a screenwriter in several projects adapting international television formats for the Portuguese market. Among these projects, the following formats stand out: *Muñeca Brava*, *Bons Vizinhos*, and *Kachorra* (Argentina), *Maternidade* (Italy), *Dancin' Days* (Brazil), *La Família Mata* and *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (Spain). As general content director at SP Televisão, he oversaw the adaptation and production of international formats such as the series *In treatment* (US) and the telenovelas *Zalim İstanbul* and *Gulperi* (Turkey). In the opposite direction, *Laços de sangue*, an original telenovela created by Pedro Lopes, was

adapted in Mexico by Televisa under the title *Vivir de amor*. Miguel Rico has combined his work as a screenwriter, media critic, and researcher, with a particular focus on the fields of adaptation and audiovisual remakes. At an early stage in his academic and professional career, he is currently developing the adaptation of a graphic novel with the support of the Portuguese Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual (ICA). He has also contributed to the development of several international co-productions and is part of the writers' room for the telenovela *Vitória*, a primetime Portuguese adaptation of the Turkish drama *Gülperi*.

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### How to cite:

Lopes, P., & Rico, M. (2025). Remaking Scenes from a Marriage: Social Memory and the Cross-Cultural Representation of the Heteronormative Couple. *Comunicación y Medios*, 34(52), 70–81. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-1529.2025.764931529.2025.76553>