Article on Cries and Whispers by Joan Mellen
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Bergman and Women: Cries and Whispers

It is often claimed that Bergman, like Antonioni, is a director whose subject is Woman, that he has a unique affinity for portraying and understanding the female psyche. It is certainly true that many of Bergman's films focus particularly on women and how they come to terms with their lot in life. This applies to early works like Summer with Monika (1952), films of his middle period like The Silence (1963), and more recent films like Persona (1966), The Passion of Anna (1969), and The Touch (1970). Bergman's view of woman and her capacities for fulfillment is most explicit in his latest film, Cries and Whispers (1972).

Women are indeed frequently so significant to him as symbols of the dilemma of alienated, suffering human beings that Bergman employs them as spokeswomen to express his personal world-view—a world-view basically defined by the traumatic absence and silence of God, who has coldly abandoned us all to a cruel world. His women characters sometimes serve Bergman to express his agony over our ultimate inability to derive meaning from life except in rare moments of sensual ecstasy, soon contaminated by disgust over the bodily processes in which all experience is rooted. Yet if women occasionally are Bergman's vehicle for locating meaning, it is much more frequently male characters who pursue the ethical issues in his films which are not peculiar to either sex.

What is striking about Bergman's treatment of women is thus not the philosophical role they are called upon to play in his films. It is, rather, his treatment of their characters. Bergman offers a much different explanation for the inability of his female, as opposed to

his male, characters to find purpose in a universe without direction. His men fail largely because their pleas go unanswered or because, although they are full and vital human beings, they lack the capacity to care for others; his women are ensnared at a much more elementary level of human development. Their lives lack meaning because they are rooted in biology and an inability to choose a style of life independent of the female sexual role. In this sense Bergman is far harder on his woman than on his men. They are depicted as if on a lower notch of the evolutionary scale. Although the philosophical quest for an authentic mode of existence can hardly be limited by female as opposed to male hormones, Bergman insists that because of their physiology, women are trapped in dry and empty lives within which they wither as the lines begin to appear on their faces.

If the Knight in The Seventh Seal fails to achieve a sentient life because the cold abstractions by which he moves lock him into an ethical opacity, Ester in The Silence lives an empty, futile life because she has not accepted the demands of the female body, because she refuses the female sexual role. Her quest does not fail, as the Knight's does, because her intellectual or even emotional gifts are not rich enough, but because her body drags her down; she is punished for her revulsion by the odors of the sexual act. Her "disease," like that of Agnes in Cries and Whispers, is unlike that of the Knight, that of Tomas in Winter Light, or even that of old Johan Borg in Wild Strawberries. Ester is fixed in her relation to physiology and in her refusal to assume the primeval, instinctual life of a woman.

Thus Bergman presents us with a double standard. His men move in an ethical realm, his women in a biological one. It is true that his films reveal that these men are frequently found wanting. They contribute little solace or transcendence to a world whose people have lost the capacity to care for each other. But the

cause of their moral demise does not rest especially in their male physiology. Bergman's men are distorted human beings, but their intrinsic physical characters and the nature of their flesh are not presented as standing in the way of their redemption. They are not irrevocably limited by the nature of their participation in the sexual act, as are his women. Free of limitations which are defined as intrinsic to the species, there is the hope, at least implicitly, that these men can change.

Bergman's women, on the other hand, are too often creatures whose torment resides in the obligation to submit to the repulsive sexual act. If Bergman's men lack power because there is no ethical imperative rooted outside the individual to which he can respond, his women (like Anna in The Silence or Karin in The Touch) are powerless before the sway of their lusts. They are passive, almost somnambulistic, in their search for a man with whom they can unite their flesh. This is the raison d'être of his healthy women—those who are presented as infinitely preferable to women who rebel futilely and self-destructively against this injustice visited upon them by nature.

This is the story of Ester in The Silence and Karin in Cries and Whispers, both played with hysterical frigidity by Ingrid Thulin—as well she might given the definition of the female Bergman continuously imposes upon her. Rebellion only leaves women like Ester and Karin exhausted and excluded from the flow of normal existence. Ester, in fact, must die for her rebellion. If she refuses to be a woman as Bergman defines woman—instinctual, passive, submissive, and trapped within the odors and blood of her genitals—there is no place for her in the world. If a woman director were to present a male equivalent to Ester, most critics would be quick to infer that she hated the sex.

It might be argued that in our stage of cultural and psychological development this is how women are, that Bergman merely depicts what he sees. According to

this view, one should not make the mistake of assuming that Bergman endorses this vision of woman as weak, pallid, and locked into her physiology. Yet Bergman's point of view is arbitrary, in willful ignorance of the long chain of revisions of the misogynist female psychology outlined by Helene Deutsch, which portrays women as by nature passive, narcissistic, and masochistic. Bergman's insistence upon maintaining this stereotype suggests that he has accepted an anachronistic view, without questioning how his adherence to the spirit of the Northern Protestant culture from which he emerges has shaped his understanding of the potential of woman. Absent from Bergman is any sense of how women can surmount and have transcended the norms of the ascetic and rigid late–19th-century philosophical milieu with which he has burdened himself. Far from understanding and showing compassion for the plight of women, Bergman creates female characters who are given the choice only—as in Cries and Whispers—to be a Karin (cold and frigid), or a Maria (mindless and promiscuous), with the secondary alternatives of being an Agnes (inexplicably non-heterosexual and insatiably in Angst) or an Anna (servile and bovine). And Bergman implies through the closed microcosm of human existence he presents that these will forever be our alternatives. This is surely a gross distortion of reality, for however copiously the world is populated with women like Karin and Maria, there are other kinds of women as well. Even Julie Christie's professional prostitute in McCabe and Mrs. Miller has an intelligence and vitality absent from the entire range of Bergman women. This is not how we are. The two basic types of women forever imposed on us by Bergman, beginning as early as The Naked Night (1953), arise out of a distinct and jaundiced sensibility. In either case woman's behavior is arbitrary and axiomatic, inexplicable because it is based upon an ordained mysticism of the female body—a view which most conscious women today would scorn.

Alma, the wife of the clown, who bathes with a regiment of soldiers, represents irresponsible lust. Agda, on the other hand, the bourgeois wife of the circus owner, finds "peace" in renouncing her sexual role; she is the prototype of the cold and unfeeling woman who denies her nature and its imperatives.

In the later films, the motives of women like Agda are clothed in irrationality and mysticism. All we can observe is distorted behavior flowing from discontent with their biological natures, a limitation which Bergman presents as a given, rather than as an eccentricity. The typical woman of the more recent Bergman is Eva in Shame (1967) who cannot have children and who gives herself gratuitously to the Mayor more out of self-hatred and despair than from an instinct for survival. She is as amoral and disoriented as Anna in The Passion who caused the automobile accident in which her supposedly "beloved" husband was killed.

Even those women who succumb to the dictates of their biological role fail to find peace or meaning. Releasing themselves to lust makes them feel only unsatiated and demeaned. It is indeed largely through his false dichotomy, the two definitions of "woman" as the hot and the cold, that Bergman sustains his theme of the human being as a humiliated, pathetic creature ruled by impulses which he lacks the power to satisfy.

For Bergman's women in general the body and its demands are insatiable. When bodily urges are unacknowledged, rage and frustration follow the denial. When they are gratified, the mind and sense of middle-class decency are outraged, possessed by feelings of disgust and self-hatred. But denied women become stifled, emotionally dead, or harsh and perverse. From the double-bind that Bergman thus imposes on his women, only grace from God (who must be cruel and unfathomable or he wouldn't have so afflicted us) could bring respite; and the heart despairs over such absolution from their deity. Part animal and partially aspiring to

transcend her animal nature, Bergman's woman can never be content.

"I think it's terribly important," Bergman has said, "that art expose humiliation, that art show how human beings humiliate one another, because humiliation is one of the most dreadful companions of humanity and our whole social system is based to an enormous extent on humiliation." It is largely through woman, the creature tied to her flesh, that Bergman pursues the theme of man as humiliated victim of a cosmic joke whose dictates can never be transcended nor its purpose fully grasped or accepted. The debasing sexuality of his woman is fated as long as there is a human race. They are powerless, inherently unable to organize their lives differently, as with the young girl in The Virgin Spring (1960) whose rape signifies the destiny of all women. Despite the girl's narcissism and self-satisfaction it seems absurd to argue that faults of her ego brought her as a flawed individual to this end. A spring is discovered where the girl was murdered partly because in the morally inexplicable universe which torments Bergman, fertility and the reproduction of the race require the violence visited upon women. It is another harsh paradox of human existence from which Bergman's women can never escape.

Discussing Cries and Whispers, Pauline Kael recognized the psychological and clinical distance of Bergman from his woman characters, his sense of "women as the Other, women as the mysterious, sensual goddesses of male fantasy." But this considerably underestimates the meaning of Bergman's distance from his female characters. Seeing women as "different" and "Other" amounts in Bergman's films to their utter dehumanization.

Cries and Whispers is an extreme manifestation of this emotion and perception of women. Agnes, a dying woman, represents primarily the condition of women, if also that of mankind. She is shown in constant close-

up in the sheerest animality of ailment: puking, rending and biting her lips, and racked by asthmatic gasping. There are buckets of sweat, vile secretions and contractions. The full ugliness of the body dominates. Bergman's disgust becomes objective and aesthetically repellent to the subject herself, adding to her malaise. Stripped of its cumbersome and portentous metaphysics, this portrayal reveals in Bergman a man for whom not only sexuality or its intimations of need are vile, but particularly the female functions.

Woman, whose behavior flows from the mysteries of her organism, is at best patronized. This seems true of Bergman's early women characters played by Harriet and Bibi Andersson , but particularly of the Eva Dahlbeck persona who, despite an ease with her sexuality, is never quite taken seriously. Bergman's intellectual women are vastly less attractive than his spiritually questing men. One is ineluctably brought to the conclusion that for Bergman it is not woman's role to quest after meaning. When she does, it is forced, unnatural, and with far less grace, finesse, or hope than with men. The most appealing of his women are those played by Liv Ullmann. Since Persona she has represented in his films a sensuality which, while it does not transcend its torments, at least attempts style. But even in the Ullmann characters it is a fate particular to woman that she is locked within the essential vulgarity of her flesh.

Cries and Whispers presents four women ensnared for the time period covered by the film into obsessive relationships with each other, excluding except in flashback men, children, and parents. It presents an unmistakable culmination of Bergman's sense of how women are inexorably and particularly limited by the physical shells in which their souls have been encased by that absent, unintelligible godhead who has left us so alone without communication, solace, or release.

The set design of Cries and Whispers is a decaying mansion suggestive of a cocoon walled by red velvet and red brocade. The frequent fades to red with which Bergman moves from one character to another convey how every woman acts out a facet of the character of each. This red comes to represent not only their shared blood, but the way in which each sister, in enacting aspects of behavior which is potential, or at other moments actual in them all, exhausts the nature of woman, her soul colored by her physiological being. "Ever since my childhood," Bergman says in the treatment for the film which he published in The New Yorker (October 21, 1972), "I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red." Yet in Cries and Whispers, this color of blood stands more for the body of woman. An image of her biology, like a "moist membrane," it defines her however she struggles to elude its grasp.

The four women are the dying Agnes, her sisters Karin and Maria gathered at her deathbed, and a servant named Anna. Although Agnes is very emaciated, writes Bergman in the treatment, "her belly has swelled up as though she were in an advanced state of pregnancy." She is dying of cancer of the womb, at once the disease of being a woman and of not fulfilling a woman's function by bearing a real child.

Karin, the eldest, despises her sexuality. Her husband, writes Bergman, "is repulsive to her physically and mentally." Although she has five children (whom, significantly, we never see, not even in Karin's own flashback) she is tortured by her sexuality and hates being a woman. In the treatment (although not in the final film version) when Karin speaks of an affair she is having with another man she refuses to associate it with love: "It's a dirty itch and a few moments' oblivion." The reference may not have been incorporated into the film because Bergman wished to stress Karin's

frigidity and a total abstention from the physical life of her sex.

Only apparently an opposite to Karin, Maria uses her body to pursue "pleasure," promiscuously. She is utterly unmindful of moral categories or distinctions. Her body is not merely indulged but assimilates all experience to its demands. The doctor with whom she once had an affair has since discarded her; he comments on the deterioration of her physicality. She stands before the mirror that exposes to all women the pursuit of age. Just as Karin is humiliated by being a woman, the doctor, and Bergman, try to humiliate Maria for losing what has always defined her: physical perfection as a woman.

The fourth woman is the servant Anna, heavy and silent. Having lost her child, her entire sensual life is devoted to the love and care of Agnes. At no time in the film is she revealed in any physical act of love other than when she climbs into the bed of the dying (or dead) woman and cradles her to her ample breasts. She is the character most capable of loyalty and love in the film, yet her love amounts only to the animal consolation of physical nearness—all, Bergman says, of which woman is capable. (Bergman's men frequently cannot give even this much.) Comfort is possible in this film only from another woman, although even this is extremely rare. Most women, like most people for Bergman, cannot reach out and offer any love or kindness to another except in the easiest of circumstances, or out of lust.

All these women suffer deeply. The hurt of all is symbolized by the agony of Agnes, in her torment and struggle. Her lips are bitten, her skin sallow, her hair lank, her teeth yellow, her nostrils distended with pain. She is woman stripped of allure, bared to the repellent essentials of a body in decay.

The women are dressed in white, expressing their unconscious wish to return to the virginal and to ex-

clude men entirely from their lives. All the men in the film—the pompous, self-satisfied doctor, the sardonic, sadistic husband of Karin, and the weak, pallid, plump husband of Maria—are pathetic figures, less physically vibrant than the women. Woman is thus defined at once by being physical and unsatisfiable, a judgment validated by the inadequacy of the men Bergman chooses as their husbands and lovers.

All the women in Cries and Whispers yearn to remain children and suffer for being adult women. The first shots of Maria show her as still a small girl lying next to the dollhouse of her childhood with a doll beside her. With Karin, Bergman focuses in close-up on her large white hands, cracked and chapped. Their dryness seems to express the price she has paid for her refusal to assume her role as a woman, as well as the brutal onset of an unattractive middle age. Anna is childlike with a continuing faith in God. She thanks God for his all-knowing kindness in taking her baby daughter as she still prays to him. Agnes has had no man in her life, which has been centered on her mother who preferred the pretty Maria to the more austere, deeply loving Agnes.

Bergman focuses on an extreme close-up of each woman to introduce the defining flashback of her life. Simultaneously (and awkwardly) a narrator in voice-over informs us of the lapse in time and why the characters happened to be at the original mansion in which they are now gathered. The first such flashback has Agnes remembering a mother whose love she could never win. Her mother is a woman plagued by "ennui, impatience and longing," who could be "cold," and who always made Agnes feel left out. The high point of Agnes's life was a moment when she was permitted to touch her mother's cheek. Through this gesture she could express how deeply she felt, although only now, too late, can she understand her mother's ennui and loneliness.

Their mother, who doesn't speak a word in the film, is a woman very much like her daughters, and like all of Bergman's women. She felt in the very sight of Agnes the futility of her aspiration to be more than a reproducer. The more Agnes craved her mother's love, the more oppressed her mother felt. Maria, even as a child frivolous and unperceptive, was paradoxically easier for the mother to be with than the daughter who understood too much. To give love in Bergman is to be reminded of one's despair. This is so painful that it is easier not to love. And without love, life is empty. The emotions of Agnes repeat those of her mother, and of all women. This memory, culminating in touching her mother's cheek, is all that remains to the dying woman whose mother has been dead for twenty years. And it is on Agnes, who longed for more love than life offered, that Bergman inflicts a Kierkegaardian sickness unto death. Her disease is almost a direct consequence of her greater perception of God's brutality and man's hopeless self-hatred and sense of futility.

The whisper Agnes hears as she returns to the present is not a cosmic echo, but the entrance of the doctor. Like Bergman's God, this healer cares little for his patients and does not in fact heal at all. In the course of the film two of his patients die—Agnes and the little daughter of Anna. Maria hears her own cries and whispers, the frustrations defining her past, just as Agnes has been tortured by an unuttered cry—her never having had the opportunity to tell her mother how well she understood her.

The camera focuses on the doctor's graceless manners as he eats his dinner. And it is by this repellent act of eating that Maria, watching him, is aroused. While she lusts after him, he, like a cunning animal, is cold and indifferent, contemptuous of her because of his power to arouse. His inaccessibility makes him more desirable. Bergman's women persistently direct their

lust toward men who care little for them, who in fact mix their passion with contempt.

The next morning Maria's husband Joakim, having returned, guesses at her infidelity as she sits whispering to her daughter. In chagrin, Joakim the weak stabs himself. Then, in tears, sobbing pathetically, he cries out for help. His wife eyes him with revulsion as the screen fades to red. Maria's contempt for her husband thus punctuates the flashback, defining the relationship.

In the original treatment Bergman has Maria indulge at this moment in a fantasy of "forcing the knife deeper into her husband's chest with all her strength, in a moment of stinging satisfaction." In the final version we are left with her scorn, the sneering for which the doctor had reproached her only the night before. The hatred of women for men is unabated throughout the course of this film. It is as irrevocable and inevitable as life, as the blood red fades to the "normal," pointing to woman's special shame.

Anna bares her breast to the dying Agnes whose death agonies grow louder and deeper. The disease in its vileness conveys the horror of our existence on this "dirty earth," as the Pastor will refer to it. Yet Bergman strongly suggests it is no worse than we deserve, so essentially incapable are we even of gestures of kindness and selflessness. For every scene in the film in which Karin and Maria are gentle toward Agnes, there is a companion scene in which they retreat in revulsion before her yellow hands and insatiable demands. The scene of Maria and Karin washing Agnes and of Maria reading her the Pickwick Papers is paralleled by the refusal of each sister in turn to comfort the dead woman, who cries that she cannot yet go to sleep so attached has she become to the living.

The dying cry of Agnes is "Can't someone help me?"—Bergman's metaphysical lament which forever goes unanswered, an ungratified hunger beyond the reach of family or society. Bergman has in fact reified

this feeling into a fatality and a principle of the universe; in this sense Maria and Karin must remain impotent to comfort their dying sister, despite their partial desire to help.

No stronger than the husbands of Karin and Maria or the doctor is the pastor who asks the dead Agnes to intercede for him and all the living with the God who has taken her. Surely speaking for Bergman in reiteration of the themes which have run through so many of his movies, he begs Agnes to "'pray for us who are left on this dark, dirty earth under a cruel, empty sky . . . to free us from our anxiety." Ask him, the preacher exhorts Agnes, "for a meaning for our lives . . . plead our cause." At this point we can hardly fail to conclude that the individual woman Agnes is sacrificed by Bergman in a primitive ritual (again explaining the omnipresence of the color of blood) in the hope that this time God will answer. Bergman must have been unaware of the depth of his philosophical commitment to the theme of man's abandonment by an overbearing superior being when he said after the production of Winter Light (1962) that he had finished with the theme of the silence of God.

Yet Cries and Whispers is broken in half by the reiteration of this very theme, which remains as integral to Bergman's work as his sense of the absence of free will afforded by the universe to human beings. It is expressed in his depiction of women as "classical" examples of beings limited by the shape God has given them and powerless to do anything but act in reaction to repellent biological drives.

Thus, concealing a shard of jagged, broken glass, Karin murmurs, "It's nothing but a tissue of lies," a statement that could stand for the disillusionment of all of Bergman's characters. The phrase is repeated three times as she thrusts the glass into her vagina, finally drawing blood which has metaphorically dominated the mise-en-scène throughout the film. It is the blood of

being a woman, drawn with the special perverse satisfaction that comes with a revenge on men. In a scene of gross exaggeration, Bergman has Karin in bed spread her legs exposing the bloody mess to her prissy little husband in his fur-trimmed smoking jacket. Smearing blood on her face, she proceeds to lick it off, reveling in her own degradation and in the degradation of her sex. But such revenge involves only self-mutilation. The fade to red comes this time indubitably as a humiliation.

The last third of the film reveals Bergman's belief that women are not necessarily capable of greater gentleness and feeling than men. It denies that they alone have retained the power to "touch" each other. Two overtures occur. The first is made by Maria to her sister Karin that they "be friends." She is sorry that they never "touch each other." She urges that they "laugh and cry together." The second overture is made by the dead woman toward her two sisters and her friend. Only Anna, the deprived, working-class woman who possesses nothing of her own, retains the capacity unselfishly to feel concern for another.

Karin finally accepts Maria's touch, although hatred has so locked her into her own life that she abhors anyone's touching her. She is deeply aware of the pain of losing contact after yielding to the need for it. Finally, she retreats murmuring, "I can't. I can't. It's like hell." Life is "disgusting, degrading." She tells Maria that she has often thought of suicide and that she hates Maria with her "coquettishness and wet smiles." Yet she is correct about the "false promises" of Maria, as the film will reveal.

Karin's horrid and fought-off emotions are the most deeply felt and are presented as the most authentically derived from experience. At last Karin yields to Maria's embraces only to discover her own awakened needs and feelings unreciprocated at the end of the film. It is only when Karin is physically and sexually aroused by

Maria that she responds to her caresses. This summons in her only the return of anxiety, disgust, and self-hatred. Feeling for Bergman, between women as between men and women, has its origin in lust, although rejecting such love as unclean brings only loneliness. After much self-torture, Maria and Karin share one brief moment of tenderness and pure feeling, expressed by the haunting cello, the only sound we hear. It is a redeeming moment, all that life can offer. But great agony precedes the experience in which we are made vulnerable. And once the moment passes, despair and self-hatred return with a vengeance.

Because Cries and Whispers moves on so non-naturalistic a level of abstraction, so doggedly leading from its mise-en-scène to generalizations about the human condition, the scene in which the dead Agnes makes overtures to her companions does not strain the credibility of the film. The mood of Kierkegaardian despair (before the leap to faith) has so ominously prevailed, and the imagery of the film has so statically illustrated preconceived values in the obvious hand of the director, that we do not suffer a shock upon discovering that the corpse cannot fall asleep. Agnes's corpse becomes another of Bergman's props, helping him to show (in a sequence redolent of ritual) how, lacking a God, even in the presence of the beyond we can only repeat the paltry whimpers of the ego.

The corpse of their sister (like the women who come to lay her out) remind Karin and Maria of their feeling of repulsion toward being women who must lose all as they age, and indeed toward being people who must ask for gestures of warmth from others. In Cries and Whispers the need for love, the moment of asking, is tied to putrefaction and physical decay, as if to make clear that the denial should have been foreknown. Even death is not a great enough shock to jolt the sisters into communion—a point Bergman

beautifully conveys by allowing his audience to respond rather matter-of-factly to a corpse come to life.

When they were young, the sisters competed for the love of their mother. Time has withered them while at the same time forcing them to retain (and even to nurture) a feeling of such Nordic "otherness" toward each other that Agnes's request, so pathetic and so purely an expression of the unconscious needs of them all, must go unanswered. The testing of her sisters by the corpse is a means Bergman uses to illustrate what his women have become: selfish, unable to respond even at a moment that breaks the bounds tying us to the normal, the mundane, the pragmatic.

The servant Anna opens and closes the door, like a medieval messenger of the Gods; she represents the director in carrying out the terms of the test. And it is she who responds to the pleas of the corpse for warmth. The hands of Agnes which are now spotted do not fill her with the revulsion they evoke in Karin and Maria, members of a decadent bourgeoisie who, the sequence reveals, have long since begun their decay as human beings. If Anna is bound by the same biology, her role in the social order has not caused her to become ungenerous and exploiting.

Anna responds because even in Cries and Whispers and under the most grotesque of circumstances, Bergman does not wish wholly to renounce the human capacity to feel. (Films as disparate as Wild Strawberries and The Touch make this clear.) Yet Anna's warmth also seems to involve an obliviousness to life's horrors, a limited capacity to register what life is. She cannot, for Bergman, represent a viable alternative to the self-centeredness of Maria and Karin. To Anna, Agnes is like the sick child she has lost. Her simplicity is the result of not asking too much of the world, especially of not questing for the purpose of things. It is only she, not the actual, intellectual mother of Agnes, who is capable of mothering. The perpetually dumb, accepting

and serving Anna is a symbol of what God's servant has to be.

Near the end, Karin tests the earlier sensual overture of Maria. "Do you mean to keep your resolutions?" she asks. But it has all meant nothing to Maria, who carelessly replies, "Whyever not?" Her mind wanders to Joakim waiting impatiently outside, and when Karin asks about her thoughts, she becomes hostile. For Maria, Karin is asking too much. "You touched me," Karin reminds her, "don't you remember?" "I can't remember every silly thing," is Maria's reply. She becomes as cold and vengeful as Karin has been throughout the film. Rejecting the perfunctory, superficial embrace Maria offers, unwilling to take less than what she needs, Karin is left as alone at the end as she was at the beginning.

The crowning irony of the film is reserved for the conclusion. As a further expression of her devotion, Anna has secretly chosen her own keepsake—the diary of Agnes. She opens it and we read of the day when Karin and Maria first came to sit by the side of Agnes. The same woman who later, in her greatest need, will be rejected by both her sisters has written:

> . . . the people I'm most fond of in the world were with me. I could hear them chatting round about me; I felt the presence of their bodies, the warmth of their hands. I closed my eyes tightly, trying to cling to the moment and thinking, come what may, this is happiness.

Agnes writes, ironically, not of Anna and her love, but of the sisters who abandon and betray her and who recoil when her need in death is greatest. And it is Anna and not her sisters who must read these words. Love among these women is not recognized or valued when it is present. After all of Anna's devotion and Agnes's dependence upon her comforting, not a syllable

registering her feeling for Anna is present in the diary. She has left Anna as little as her sisters have, and equally rejects her, if by default. Thus Agnes too partakes of the natures of her sisters.

The park around the house is still green as the women in white go out to the swings. "For a few minutes I can experience perfection," Agnes writes; it is only these few moments that will be granted her during her entire life. She feels a gratitude for life that seen in flashback seems to represent a pre-experience, the film before it began and before either we or Agnes learn how little Karin and Maria are capable of giving. That all was illusory is stressed by Bergman in juxtaposing Agnes's words with all that has come after.

There is a bitter disparity in Cries and Whispers between the richness of color, the purity of the white against red, and the absolute degradation visited upon these women, who have been deprived of every saving grace, even the mythical "gentleness" that is said to belong to females but be denied the male. Women are in reality far from being Bergman's "favorite people," as one feminist critic supposed. Bergman exposes himself once again as one of those film-makers most hostile to a vision of women as free, creative, autonomous, self-sufficient, productive, satisfied, or, indeed, gentle. His women, rather, are chained to bodies which leave them little freedom or opportunity to transcend the juices, demonic drives, and subordination peculiar to their gender. Paradoxically, their bodies even deprive them of that sensitivity frequently attributed to women. Cries and Whispers, in fact, provides one of the most retrograde portrayals of women on the contemporary screen.

Despite the plethora of women inhabiting the director's world, Bergman, as one of the great (if cult) figures in international cinema, stands in the way of a liberated film image of women. His rigid, determinist misogyny ought not to escape notice because it is rooted

in a pseudo-philosophical Angst which passes as profundity. There is something both inauthentic and suspect in an artist who delights in enclosing his women characters in a cycle of pain based on physiology at a time when many women are examining and discovering the means by which they can move beyond what they have been. In fact, Bergman has made victims and martyrs of his women at precisely the moment when real women are rapidly rendering obsolete his vision of their "natures."