

Review of Cries and Whispers by Vincent Canby  
New York Times, Dec. 22, 1972, page 16

Set in a tranquil autumn park is a handsome 18th-century Swedish manor house, every room of which is decorated in a shade of red. Walls, rugs, draperies, even the blankets in the bed rooms. Depending on the light, the red may look as dark as dried blood or as brilliantly scarlet as a new azalea. The time is the turn of the century, at the end of a long night. Agnes (Harriet Andersson) awakens, moves her head fretfully from side to side on the pillow, then gets out of bed and goes to her desk. In her diary she writes: It is early Monday morning and I am in pain.”

Thus begins Ingmar Bergman’s magnificent, moving and very mysterious new film, “Cries and Whispers,” with a focus so sharp that it seems to have the clarity of something seen through the medium of fever. Every sense has been heightened to a supernatural degree. Fears, wishes and suspicions never spoken occasionally rustle through the house like wind. We can even hear the newly dead talk, distantly and somewhat reproachfully, mindless of the rapidity with which physical decay sets in.

Agnes, in her late 30s, un-married and with nothing much to show for her life except some rather ordinary watercolors of flowers, is dying of cancer, slowly and with great pain.

Attending her are her older sister, Karin (Ingrid Thulin), a drawn, angry woman who is married to a diplomat she loathes; her younger sister, Maria (Liv Ullmann), an extraordinary beauty, also married but not inhibited from extramarital affairs that help pass the time; and Anna (Karl Sylway), a peasant woman with a round, expressionless face, who is probably younger than Agnes but who acts like a forest mother to her.

When Agnes awakens in the night in pain, it is Anna who crawls into bed and holds her and fondles her until she drifts into sleep again.

Nothing that Bergman has done before is likely to prepare you for “Cries and Whispers” except in a comparatively superficial sense. Like all of his recent works, it is ever-aware of what I hesitate to call its filmicness. Sequences begin and end with close-up portraits of the character being considered. The color program of the film is designed to call attention to itself—the red interiors, a fondness for white costumes that is so insistent that the appearance of a gray dress seems to be a terrible omen, the periodic dissolves to the blank red screen.

All of these things are simply the methods by which Bergman dramatizes states of mind that have seldom been attempted, much less achieved, outside of written fiction. A lot, I am afraid, will be made of the fact that “Cries and Whispers” moves, like “Persona,” in and out of reality and fantasy without easily defining either, though it must now be apparent that everything we see in Bergman is “real” to the extent that we see it and that it is meaningful to the characters and to us.

The movie is Bergman’s “The Three Sisters,” not set in any recognizable provinces but in three overlapping wastelands of the soul. On the occasion of Agnes’s dying, the three sisters come together again briefly, each life having already peaked. Each longs for the kind of communion they may or may not have had in childhood, though they remember having had it. Each realizes that it is now impossible.

Maria (Miss Ullmann, who here is one of the world’s great beauties), more or less seduces the guilt-ridden Karin into believing that the two of them can recapture the intimacy of their youth; then the next day she forgets the promises made. After her death, Agnes implores Karin to help her until—I suppose you might say—she gets through to the other side. “I’m alive,”

screams Karin, “and I want nothing to do with your death!”

Because Bergman is a man who loves women without identifying with them, his film is full of the sort of wonder and speculation experienced by a tourist in a strange land that he knows well, but that will never be his own.

Only Bergman, I think, could get away with the scene in which Karin picks up the piece of a broken wine glass and slashes her genitals, in order to taunt her husband with her blood. And only Bergman could obtain the mixture of humor and sadness that floods the scene in which Maria’s former lover, the local doctor now grown middle-aged, holds Maria in front of a mirror and charts for both their benefit the tiny lines that mark Maria’s journey into laziness and indolence.

“Cries and Whispers,” which opened yesterday at the Cinema I, is not an easy film to describe or to endure. It stands alone and it reduces almost everything else you’re likely to see this season to the size of a small cinder.