

Article on Cries and Whispers by Julian C. Rice
The Massachusetts Review, vol. 16, no. 1
Winter 1975, pp. 147–58.

Cries and Whispers: The Complete Bergman

IN A 1973 INTERVIEW in L'Express, Ingmar Bergman assures us that the metaphysical quest of such earlier films as *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Winter Light* (1963), has not been a major theme in his films for at least ten years.¹ His latest work, *Cries and Whispers*, gives us no reason to doubt that the “refus de Dieu” theme has been decisively abandoned. Ever since *The Silence* (1963), the psychological element has predominated over the metaphysical. And especially since *Persona* (1966), where the influence of Jung seems quite direct, Bergman’s work has evolved steadily from existential negation toward psychological individuation.

This interest in psychology has produced a thematic conception which germinated in *The Touch* (1971), and which has come to fruition in *Cries and Whispers*; it is described in a 1970 interview with John Simon, where Bergman defines his principal theme as a concern with the “wholeness inside every human being.” This “wholeness” is the basis upon which relationships with other human beings are formed. The fragmenting of wholeness within the self is inextricably bound up with the fragmenting of interpersonal relationships. Bergman expresses it this way to Simon: “It’s a strange thing that every human being has a sort of dignity or wholeness in him, and out of that develops relationships to other human beings, tensions, misunderstandings, tenderness, coming in contact, touching and being touched, the cutting off of contact and what happens

¹ “Plus loin avec Ingmar Bergman,” L'Express (Du 8 au 14 Octobre, 1973), p. 80.

then. That's what is fascinating. I feel that I have come out into an enormous field, and I can now get started. I'm very curious about the pictures waiting for me around the corner."² *Cries and Whispers* mirrors this desire to heal fragmentation between the self and others, and between separated elements in the individual psyche.

The film opens in silence, outside of a manor house in a beautiful autumn dawn. The mood is serene and the image is harmonious. Fragmentation begins with the ticking of clocks and the visual transition from nature to various clocks and small statues—the products of the conscious mind. Consciousness creates time because of its awareness of mortality. The dying Agnes awakens into an awareness of her pain and goes to the clock on the mantelpiece in her bedroom to set the hands to the correct time. Agnes's experience of death forms the basis of the film's "plot" and is one of two unforgettable physical images in the film. The other dominating image is that of human closeness, epitomized in the scenes where Anna holds Agnes to her naked breast, a cinematic icon of madonna and child. Death is a lonely experience. But the madonna image invokes life, and salvation to the extent that the bliss of the nursing infant, or such parallel experiences as may be occasionally found in adulthood, are the best that life has to offer. Agnes's character is perhaps "incomplete" by literary standards, but here, we know as much

² John Simon, *Ingmar Bergman Directs* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1973), pp. 29–30. Bergman made a similar statement in the *L'Express* interview (p. 80), "Ma seule religion, c'est de croire que tout être humain-ou presque-porte en lui une sorte de sainteté. Si cela s'appelle amour ou autrement, je n'en sais rien. Tout ce qui arrive se passe a l'intérieur de nous et dans nos relations avec les autres. C'est ça qui est merveilleux!"

about Agnes as is necessary to our understanding of the film's totality—she is dying, and she is, in an important thematic sense, a child.

She is also, in another sense, an artist who works in painting and literature, but primarily in the latter, through her “diary.” Agnes is a type recognizable from Bergman's earlier films, the alienated artist, in this case separated from the other characters by her artistic sensitivity and the immediacy of her mortality. It is her feeling of alienation that impels Agnes to write. Her writing, like all artistic endeavor, is the dying child's protest against physical death and the psychological death of infancy, as well as a contradictory effort to accept death and dissolve the confining walls of the isolating ego.

This contradiction arises from the essentially split nature of the psyche. The conscious mind strives for differentiated existence, for physical and psychological survival. But all living entities, including the human psyche, possess a contrary impulse toward unity, ultimately toward dissolution. Eros and Thanatos do not describe this opposition accurately. The death wish, the sexual drive, and the need to feel and express love are aspects of the unifying impulse, the desire to return to undifferentiated, thoroughly integrated being. Agnes and Anna express this unification impulse most strongly in *Cries and Whispers*. Maria and Karin represent varying intensities of the “adult” impulse to differentiation, which, taken too far, results in the frigid isolation and guilt of Karin. But every adult has been long banished from the bliss of undifferentiated being. Near the beginning of the film, we learn that Anna's child is dead. The shot of the empty crib fades to a close-up of Agnes holding a white rose and beginning to reminisce about her childhood. In the helpless suffering of her death pangs, Agnes will become, momentarily and redemptively, Anna's child, as the parallelism in the opening sequence clearly foreshadows. The death of Anna's

first child deepens the meaning of the death of Agnes, her second child, suggesting the universal death of childhood, a psychological rather than a literal dying. The film presents human beings as crying, dying children, exiled from the perfect contentment of unconsciousness.

In the first major flashback, Agnes expresses the universal desire to return to the Eden of infancy. She envisions the grounds of the manor on a glorious summer day, which contrasts sharply to the bleak, leafless landscape of the film's present. Agnes's mother is seen reading a book, an activity recurrently glimpsed in the film and appropriate both to the representation of the conscious mind and the mirroring of the audience's concentration. Against the lush greenery of the Edenic garden, the mother is both strikingly beautiful and dissonant, with an elegant white dress starkly setting off her jet black hair and perfect blue eyes. Agnes recalls that she used to "spy" on this remote idealized vision of perfection. But from an early age, Agnes, because of her sensitivity and rapidly developing consciousness, felt isolated from her mother. She remembers the magic lantern shows (an important event in Bergman's own childhood) where her mother and Maria were always close, while she felt left out and alone.

But all this is balanced by the recollection of a supreme moment of communication, when Agnes was ten. The moment was unplanned and spontaneous and it occurred in the red drawing room when Agnes unexpectedly came upon her mother in a disturbed, pensive mood: "I went up to her. Then she gave me a look so full of sorrow that I nearly burst into tears. But instead I began to stroke her cheek. She closed her eyes and let me do it. We were very close to each other that time." Later the adult Agnes would come to understand her mother's "ennui," "panic," and isolation. But at that moment in the drawing room, Agnes and her mother had recovered a primal unity, that temporary union

between the self and the other which dissolves the ego's prison walls.

The experience is recovered in the midst of her graphically depicted suffering; the massively maternal Anna cradles Agnes on her breast, a scene which visually represents the wholeness Bergman spoke of in the Simon interview. But the ministrations of her sisters to her suffering, the motherliness they offer, is for all of them, another moment of "grace." Karin and Maria are tenderly maternal in these scenes. Their selfishness and guilt in other situations has not cancelled out their capacities for dignity and wholeness. Agnes, near her death, is entirely passive, the blissful recipient of the concentrated devotion of adults to her infantile helplessness. She is bathed, changed, and read to, with no reciprocation expected and no future debts incurred. The "bedtime" story from *Pickwick Papers* appropriately concerns Mr. Pickwick's undaunted comic refusal to pay his bills. As Maria concludes her reading, "and acting on Mr. Pickwick's gentle hint, Sam retired," Agnes peacefully falls asleep. She awakens soon, in great pain. The clocks have been relentlessly ticking through the whole death scene, and nothing more can be done for Agnes.

Although she dies at thirty-seven, the pastor's funeral speech repeatedly refers to Agnes as a "child" who has been taken in the "bloom of her youth." He speaks of a certain purity in her character, and prays that if there is a God, Agnes especially will be worthy to "plead our cause." With Him above, the Pastor hopes, Agnes may intercede to free us from the oppression of our "deep doubt." Her faith, he mentions later, was stronger than his.³

³ Childishness, for Bergman, is a primary attribute of the artist, for open-mindedness and curiosity are necessary qualities of the creative mind, "look at Picasso or Stravinsky . . . they are children, grown-up, old, wise

The Pastor, who resembles, to some extent, the Pastor in *Winter Light*, has no more to contribute to the film's meaning, or, perhaps, to the developing oeuvre of Bergman.⁴ The vision of man's alienated existence on the "dark, dirty earth under an empty and cruel heaven," is no longer of paramount concern. In its place, the image of Agnes on Anna's breast recurs in the film in spite of Agnes's literal death. Bergman implies that the relationship of Agnes and Anna cannot die, and that although God, as a subjectively traumatic concern, is dead, the redemptive moments of wholeness remain. As an archetype of the wholeness of integrated being, God remains very much alive in *Cries and Whispers*. Nevertheless, since wholeness is an uncommon and fleeting treasure, Agnes and Anna represent primarily a symbolic ideal, which is only rarely experienced in reality.

The alienation of adult experience and the impediments to redemptive communication are sequentially mirrored in the Maria and Karin flashbacks. Before her flashback begins, Maria is seen in the room she had as a child, surrounded by her dolls. For Maria, other people

children, with wonderful childish eyes. Marvelous." (Simon, p. 35.) The camera dwells on the large brown inquiring eyes of Agnes, in the childhood flashbacks and on her deathbed. Her ability to dissolve her own ego, to be enveloped by other people, by the external world, accounts for the saint-like identity the Pastor attributes to her. Perhaps she can be a voice, a communicator of our collective experience, even though the loss of God cannot be made good.

⁴ An additional scene between the Pastor and Maria, which appeared in the original screenplay, was eliminated in the finished version. See Ingmar Bergman, *Cries and Whispers*, trans. Alan Blair, *The New Yorker* (October 21, 1972), p. 46.

are usually no more than dolls, subjectively arranged in her life as narcissistic tributaries. Because of her narcissism, which is a negative infantile trait, Maria does not appear strongly to require the feeling of completion supplied by another human being. Rather than the creative, curious childishness of Agnes, Maria's childishness is that of the self-sufficient id, an amoral, continual pursuit of pleasure, finding fulfillment primarily in physical gratification. Maria's consciousness is only rudimentarily developed. Her choice of the coldly intellectual Doctor as a lover may suggest some desire for completion.

But the Doctor is nothing less than a personification of the unyielding rejection of unconsciousness: he refuses to permit the dissolution of the psychological barriers between the conscious and unconscious minds and between the self and the other. The scene in which he describes Maria in the mirror expresses an extreme pessimism about human capacities for wholeness and communication. He describes Maria as having changed. Her eyes, which used to look straight on, now cast quick side-long glances, her mouth shows discontent and hunger, and the wrinkles on her forehead have been caused by indifference. The Doctor emphasizes Maria's indifference, her "sneering" and "ennui," but Maria's verbal response simply confirms what the camera had implied by showing both of them in the mirror during his accusations: "I know where you see it—you see it in yourself."

The Doctor has thus been unable to escape the trap of his rigid consciousness. While Maria's narcissism is physical, his is intellectual, but Maria's unconsciousness has not been complemented by his intellect. Each remains imprisoned in narcissism, the Doctor bored by the inevitable limits of arid abstractions, and Maria bored by the limited variations of adornment and infidelity. The acrobatics of the intellect can be no more than loving to "say interesting things about yourself

and other people.” Communication for the Doctor is never a genuine touching but only a mechanical stimulation of mutual projections. Breaking through the shell of the self might be the “extenuating circumstance” the Doctor suddenly expresses a need for, but Maria only interprets this need as a “guilt” from which she judges herself free.

Nevertheless, Maria has become an adult with a husband and child, and the escapist regression she seeks is only partially effective. Being an adult necessitates involvement, a responsibility for the emotions of the other people in her life, and Maria is unable to be the infantile recipient of the unreciprocated adoration given by her mother but necessarily withheld by adult lovers. Her alternative is to seek sexual gratification without emotional involvement, but this cannot entirely cancel out the rudimentarily developed sensibilities she possesses. Just before Maria enters the study where her betrayed husband has stabbed himself, she sits with her child in an attitude reminiscent of the scene where, as a child herself, she was seen sitting on her mother’s lap during the magic lantern show. Maria dismisses her child, and with a premonitory look of dread, hesitates before entering the “study.” The scene implies Maria’s reluctance to leave her childhood and to take on the burden of consciousness. When Maria sees her husband bleeding and hears his cries for help, she steps back with a look of horror. She has refused to enter the arena of adult emotion and responsibility, and she has not been strong enough to seek and incorporate the “other” in her psyche and to achieve wholeness. The shadows darken around her childishly frightened face as the flashback ends.

While Maria’s alienation results from an infantile regression and is essentially a fearful retreat from life, Karin’s isolation is the product of her iron-willed repressive pride. And just as Maria’s weak husband does not provide the proper counterpoise to her own weakness,

Karin's husband is so much like herself that their existence is a perpetual battle for emotional dominance. The dinner scene, which begins the flashback, is "charged with hatred—a mutual hatred that is almost tangible, without mercy or let up." Like the Doctor, who does not love Maria, or the unconsciousness she may represent to him, Karin's husband is another personification of the restrictive intellect, which impedes communication. He is also, correspondingly, a personification of societal pride, or social status as self-conscious identity (he is a diplomat), and he is therefore far removed from the basic existential springs of feeling and being. During the dinner scene Karin unintentionally breaks her wine-glass, an action she later repeats during the dinner with Maria. This compulsive glass breaking implies a desire to break through the restrictions of social existence, as does her incantatory repetition of the phrase, "it's but a tissue of lies," after her husband leaves the room. But Karin also fears the dissolution of social inhibitions that the achievement of individuation would require. During the elaborate undressing scene, in which Anna removes Karin's multiple layers of Victorian clothing, she expresses fear of the psychological nakedness that real communication necessitates. Looking at herself in the mirror in her peignoir, she accuses Anna of "staring" at her, and, suddenly turning, slaps her.

The use of the mirror echoes the ego-enclosed mirror relationship of the Doctor and Maria ; Karin tries to forestall the encroachment of unconsciousness and femininity, represented by Anna, upon her masculine, boundary-setting consciousness. Anna's refusal to forgive her for the slap implies that the unconscious cannot submit passively to carelessly tyrannical inhibition. Its negative response is painfully portrayed in the following sequence, where Karin takes the wineglass splinter, and with excruciating visual and dramatic tension, uses it to cut her genitalia.

As the Pastor's brief appearance had suggested a relationship between the themes of *Winter Light* and *Cries and Whispers*, the glass cutting sequence evokes a corresponding image and theme in *Persona*. Alma, the nurse, bitterly resenting the superior attitude of the actress Elizabeth, accidentally drops a glass on the terrace. Desiring to break through Elizabeth's wall of defensive indifference, she then sweeps up all the pieces but one and waits for Elizabeth to cut her foot on it. While Alma watches triumphantly, the camera creates a sense of tense expectancy for the audience, culminating in Elizabeth's graphic physical pain.

In *Cries and Whispers*, several motives for Karin's masochistic act are implied: she is symbolically scourging her sexuality as an act of repression, but, also, as an act of expiation, she is able to express her sexuality only in this masochistic manner. The display to her husband and the triumphant smearing of the blood on her face suggest again the desperate desire to reach someone else and to have her unconscious identity confirmed in the mind of another. Since social convention, guilt, and mutual projective hatred have made it impossible to reach her husband through normal communicative means, this shockingly hostile action expresses both her rage and an attempt to expose her suffering unconsciousness, perhaps to liberate and revive the dying child in herself.

Although the audience here, as in *Persona*, has been forced by the camera to take Karin (and the film) seriously by empathically suffering her pain, the husband only narrows his eyes in disgust; Karin's attempt to lash out results only in a scorpion-like maiming of herself. The visual assault upon the sensibilities does not lead to real communication, the scene implies, and the echoes of *Persona*, like those of *Winter Light*, may represent former elements, now integrated, but no longer stressed, in Bergman's evolving vision.

Although Karin so desperately needs some sort of redemptive ego loss, she is extremely resistant to Maria's offers of sisterly friendship in the following sequence. She is shown initially reading the passage in Agnes's diary which identifies companionship with what Agnes "thinks is called Grace." But when Maria approaches her, she repeatedly screams, "Don't touch me!" Like the nurse in *Persona*, Karin drums the word "nothing" into her consciousness again and again in an attempt to deny the presence of frighteningly unmeasured needs and emotions. "Can you grasp how anyone can live with so much hate as I have to bear? There is no pity, no relief, no help, nothing. And I see! Nothing escapes me." Karin tries to make the disgust, arising from her fear of spontaneity and mortality, the whole of life. She expresses contempt for Anna's "imploring eyes" and Agnes's "ridiculous artistic ambitions," but the film suggests that her disgust is not, as she thinks, the result of her superior intellectual perception. Instead Karin fearfully shrinks from the possibilities of enlargement and wholeness that her unconscious self demands and she so intensively needs. Nevertheless, it is Karin, who pursues Maria just before they achieve another of the film's unforgettable unions. The beautifully choreographed icon of balletic touching is played wordlessly, accompanied by the Bach cello piece, which communicates directly to the unconscious with supra-verbal immediacy.

Although the concluding dream sequence is Anna's dream, it is, unlike the earlier flashbacks, essentially an expression of archetypal rather than personal experience. The last sequence clarifies the meaning of the resistance to the unifying "touch." The strong assertion of the self-defining, differentiating impulse against the unifying reaching-out impulse is related to the physical survival instinct. The desire to accept others and to achieve wholeness in the self is inhibited by the fear of

the ego's dissolution, which, Bergman implies, is closely related to the innate fear of physical death.

At the beginning of her dream sequence Anna is shown sitting up behind the brass bars of her bed, as if to foreshadow the liberation from the fear of death that she will embody. Having been awakened by the sound of a child's crying, Anna comes into the drawing room to discover Maria and Karin in physical states which objectify their imprisonment by fears and repressions. Maria's retreat from life is symbolized by her "petrified" expression, and her infantile need for maternal comfort is suggested by her despairing look to Anna and the soundless movements of her mouth. Karin stares straight ahead, and when Anna approaches, she too mouths an unheard soundless plea. Although Anna's replies are for the most part inaudible, she is able to tell them that she hears "an endless crying." The crying, besides being that of Agnes, is also that of Karin and Maria, or of the dying child within them that they will neither comfort nor acknowledge.

This child in the psyche, represented, in Anna's dream, by Agnes, refuses to die and repeatedly cries for its mother (the breast, the womb, undifferentiated being), because of its abject fear of the isolation which ego-consciousness strives to impose. For Maria, Karin, and by implication, the rest of the human family, no degree of egocentrism can overcome the need for undivided closeness with that "other," for whom Agnes cries. Karin, as the most alienated sister, refuses to admit this need just as she refuses to accept the necessity of death: "it's disgusting and meaningless. She has already started to decay. She has great spots on her hands." Maria can go somewhat further, but she is unable to mother Agnes because her own needs for mothering are so great. This allows her to have more compassion than Karin, but although she says that she is sorry for her "dear sister," her comforting words are sisterly rather than motherly, "do you recall when we

were small—we would hold each other close when twilight came—it’s simply the same thing now, isn’t it?” When Agnes tries to embrace her, Maria’s detached acceptance breaks, and she bolts in terror, unable, however, to get through the locked doors in the adjoining drawing room.

Only Anna can fully accept her servitude to death and the liberation from the fear of death that such acceptance implies. Although Anna at first tries to tell Agnes that her awakening from the dead (an echo of the opening montage of *Persona*) is only a dream, the fear of death is an immortal reality in dying man, and that fear, while it can never be put to rest, can be assuaged. The scene of Anna tenderly holding the “dead” Agnes in her child-like funeral cap, concludes Anna’s dream.

After Anna’s face is shown half in shadow, the fade to red is followed by the raised head of Karin’s husband with a glass of red wine at his lips. Maria’s flashback had begun with a similar fade to the Doctor drinking red wine, and Karin’s flashback had also begun with a close-up of her husband drinking white wine. Red seems to be Bergman’s symbol of the alienating consciousness, and it is ironically appropriate that a close-up of Karin’s husband, an incarnation of artificial and divisive social pride, should follow the definitive communication image that concludes Anna’s dream. His presence foreshadows the breaking of the newly formed bond between Karin and Maria. After expressing detestation of the “spontaneity” that the sisters have shown in offering a “memento” to Anna, he departs into the steadily and appropriately falling snow.

While their husbands wait outside, the sisters bid good-bye to each other through their funeral veils. Although Karin tries to keep their new relationship alive, Maria refuses, having regressed to the comfortingly shallow level of social concerns: “Look after yourself and give my love to the children. I expect I’ll see you

again at Twelfth Night, as usual.” The furniture in the manor house has been covered with sheets, and like the beach cottage in *Persona*, the film’s setting is being abandoned as the characters go their separate ways. But, again as in *Persona*, the separation of the major characters is not quite the end of the film. Anna remains in the house with the “memento” she has secretly kept—Agnes’s diary, covered in lace, and hidden, as something valuable, in an old chest.

The passage that Anna reads fades to a flashback on the beautiful grounds of the manor house, where, some years earlier, Karin and Maria had come to visit Agnes on a glorious, warm, autumn day. The three women are dressed in white, with white parasols, and Anna wears a white shawl, as the golden leaves fall around them. The film ends, where it had begun, outside of the stiflingly gorgeous, red-walled house, in the liberating green freedom of the garden. The three sisters are shown on a swinging garden seat, maternally rocked by Anna, while the voice of Agnes, speaking from her diary, serenely concludes, “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. I can’t wish for anything better. Now, for a few minutes, I can experience perfection. And I feel a great gratitude to my life, which gives me so much.”

The last, warmly beautiful image is the “memento” that Ingmar Bergman has saved for his audience. In the Preface to the screenplay of *Persona*, Bergman writes that in spite of the selfishness inherent in the communication process, it is his hope that after the film has ended, the “shadows shall live on in our retinas and in the most sensitive nerves of our ears.”⁵ Cries and

⁵ See Birgitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman* (Twayne, New York, 1968), p. 121.

Whispers is another effort to create a bridge between the alienated self and the other. It is an attempt to create wholeness out of the fragmentations of Ingmar Bergman's previous works and out of the inherent fragmentations of the human psyche. Although the film must end, and the members of the audience, like Karin and Maria, must return to the alienation of their separate lives, something of the shared experience of the film will remain in their minds, helping to overcome the absolute isolation that would exist without this art.

The artist has sought his audience, just as Maria has pursued the Doctor, and as Agnes had called out for Anna. But when the Doctor tried to understand Maria, he could only scrutinize her face in a mirror, seeing in her only what he saw in himself. This despairing view implies that communication is impossible and that fragmentation can never be overcome. In the affair of the Doctor and Maria nothing has been felt and nothing has been communicated. Maria, the Doctor says self-revealingly, sneers too much. But Anna and Agnes do love each other, which implies that the dead "child" in the adult self can be comforted, although it can never really die, and will usually feel alone and isolated. In addition to her identity as the universal crying child in the psyche, Agnes represents art, as an impulse to achieve individuation or psychological completion. The final passage from her diary suggests that wholeness and communication are indeed possible, if only for fleetingly redemptive moments.

In spite of the many losses and deaths, both psychological and physical, which the film unsentimentally reveals, Ingmar Bergman is grateful to his life for giving him the ability to communicate and the opportunity to make films. The ticking clocks and the ending in bright sunlight recall similar elements in *Wild Strawberries*, which also concerns the memories of a sentient, dying human being. *Cries and Whispers* ends where it began in a moment of brilliant color and visual semi-bliss.

The motif of circularity, of the “return,” implied by Agnes’s recollection of her mother in the garden, is reinforced at the end in a reflexive cinematic return, echoing a film made many years before. The intervening films of despair and existential negation, personified by the Pastor who speaks at Agnes’s funeral, have not been rejected, but have been assimilated into a newer, larger vision.

Although Bergman has perhaps alienated those who insist that the visual arts suffer when they become “literary,” *Cries and Whispers* enlarges the creative dilation accelerated by *Persona*, and extends the possibilities of cinematic art. Bergman’s film contains a remarkably comprehensive integration of complex themes and images beneath a deceptively simple surface and reveals the evolution of an oeuvre, which continues to move steadily, in excitingly unpredictable forms, toward a deepening expression of wholeness.