Article on Cries and Whispers by P. Adams Sitney
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Color and Myth in Cries and Whispers

I shall address two aspects of Cries and Whispers: its use of color and its symbolic structure.

First, its color. In the rare company of such films as Marnie and Il deserto rosso, Cries and Whispers fuses its meaning to its controlled use of color. Certainly, Bergman never repeated this experiment in chromatic organization. Brilliantly simple, it is a film of reds, even punctuated with red-outs rather than darkening fades. Opening with crepuscular light in the sculpture garden of a 19th-century mansion, the film moves quickly indoors where it settles, with a single exterior flashback, until its epilogue. The house is remarkable for its red upholstery: richly saturated red walls and furnishings set off the white gowns in which the three sisters, Agnes, Karin, and Maria, and their servant Anna, dress themselves following the model of their dead mother who appears in a flashback.

Agnes lies dying, apparently of a cancer of the womb or stomach. After her death the white motif shifts to black. Bergman's screenplay, which differs significantly from the finished film, offers fascinating hints about the color. He presents the scenario as a letter to his cast, telling them that "ever since my childhood I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red" (Bergman 60). Furthermore, the image of the four women in white moving against red wallpaper haunted him for more than a year before he started making the film.

After the brief, muted spectrum of the dawn and a caressing pan of an antique clock in azure and gold, a concentration on red and white seizes and holds the film. Even when the Mother appears, drawing us for a short time outside again into a very green world, she emerges first in her white dress dissolving out of a closeup of a white rosebud, holding a tiny, very bright red book.

Perhaps the most brilliant and simple act of color organization comes from the dramatic placement of what I have called the epilogue, actually a final flashback motivated by Anna's reading of Agnes's diary after her death. The family has left the house, dismissing Anna from their service with the offer of a gift she has refused. Instead, she takes what she knows she would not be allowed to have, although the others would not value it: Agnes's diary. As she reads of an ecstatic afternoon of perfect weather and sisterly companionship we hear Agnes's voiceover and see a final flashback of Anna rocking the three sisters on a two-seated swing amid lush autumnal colors. The natural effulgence is all the more striking for being reserved and isolated at the end of the film. The tonal contrast had shifted from white on red to black on red, but now the oranges and ochres are lavished in a visual cadenza. The overall placement of blocks of colors transforms what would otherwise be a pretty range of scenes into a musical sequence, pictorial elegance into meaning.

What meaning? Let us begin at the end and work our way backwards. The autumnal colors invoke the consummation of the seasons, a gorgeous dying of nature. It is fall (or Swedish summer); the penultimate flaring of color tonality, just before the vegetal death, corresponds to the recovery immanent in Anna's reading of Agnes's words. It is not a rebirth, a spring; rather, it is a repetition in a different register of the temporality of the whole film. But now we know Agnes from the perspective of her death, so the flashback describes a liminal zone, where memory is under the sign of death even if it is gorgeous in its prolongation of the end.

This liminality is one key to the film. In its dramatic center, where the logic of dreams holds sway, the corpse of Agnes elicits comfort from the three surviving women. Karin, resorting to a commonplace of decorum, refuses to get involved with the dead and insists that the experience is a dream; Maria temporarily shows more sympathy, remembering how she huddled with Agnes once in a moment of childhood terror, but recoils at the corpse's kiss; Anna alone cradles the dead body in an often reproduced image that suggests a Pieta, but shows as well a full breast beside the "dead" face incapable of earthly nurture. As Mater dolorosa the servant has a religious faith in the liminality of death itself that is consistent with the very first sight we had of her early in the film, waking and praying beside the fetishes of her dead daughter.

Tracing the film farther back towards its beginning, we can see that this maternal, religious image of the fusion of death and life reverses the first flashback in which the white rose against the red wall triggered the memory of its negative, the red book like a spot of blood on the white dress of the Mother. In this memory Agnes recalls caressing her mother's face. (The script adds that the Mother later retracted this moment of affection just as Karin and Maria deny their earlier moment of reconciliation after Agnes's funeral.) The elaborate linkage of gestures, both rhyming and reversing, throughout the film should not surprise us; for here, as often elsewhere in Bergman's work, the different characters of the film are vectors of a single fantasy system that generates its narrative complexity by scattering and redistributing its aspects among imagined persons who are in essence a single haunting presence. Anna is as much the absent Mother as is Maria (Liv Ullmann plays both her and the Mother); even the miserable Karin (who may take her name from the filmmaker's own mother) is another version of the Mother, her most threatening face.

The most remote icon of the liminal zone between life and death may be glimpsed in the very first shot of the film, at the quintessential moment of liminality, dawn. Very briefly we see a classical statue of a man bearing a lyre: Apollo, the god of poets, or as I would prefer, Orpheus, the poet of life in death and of the power of language over nature. Agnes, Bergman's surrogate in the film, is herself an amateur artist; she crosses the barrier of death and seems to return; her Eurydice, the Mother, is associated with the green world the only time it appears in the film; without her, nature appears in its decaying stage.

Language itself is multiform and ambiguous in this film: we never learn the contents of the Mother's bright red book, but the reading aloud of The Pickwick Papers marks the height of familial cohesion; the exchange between Karin and Maria that seems to mark their reconciliation is muted by a musical passage from Bach; Karin's central utterance—"a tissue of lies"—repeated twice, apparently describing her marriage to Frederick but otherwise unexplained, fuses body and language in a metaphor of deception; the unctuous eulogy of the minister turns into a cry of agnostic alienation; the doctor gives voice to Maria's mirror in a cruel diagnosis; the corpse of Agnes talks and, more poignantly, her diary becomes a voice from beyond the tomb. The title of the film describes two limits of expressive language but comes from a review of a Mozart composition (Gado 408).

The men of the film are all shadowy figures for the dead, radically absent Father. Alternately fierce and weak, they underline the missing male presence in Agnes's life. The doctor, Maria's sometime lover, and Frederick represent the punishing power of masculinity, while Maria's suicidal husband and the minister illustrate male weakness as self-absorption.

Within the visual and color economy of the film the self-inflicted wound of Maria's husband (when he reacts to her hint that she has slept with the doctor) is part of a covert symbolical equation with the broken glass Karin inserts in her vagina and their ultimate visual echo: the red book against the Mother's dress as a displaced menstrual strain. In this dreamlike, liminal world of the metamorphic woman, fusing fantasies of defloration, menstruation, and castration, the four men are versions of masculine self-hatred in sadistic and masochistic registers.

We know from Bergman's autobiography the fetishistic importance he gives to the Magic Lantern. In the flashback of the Mother in Cries and Whispers there is a magic lantern associated with Christmas gifts, as in the autobiography and Fanny and Alexander. In this case the world represented in the magic lantern show comes from Grimm's fairy tales. We might even say that the magic lantern represents simultaneously the gift of fairy tales, and thereby the psychic-defense machinery for exteriorizing infantile and oedipal terrors, and the gift of cinema for the incipient filmmaker.

I want to acknowledge my profound debt to Bruno Bettelheim's The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales at this point. Much of what I shall have to say in the remaining part of this paper grew out of a reading of his book while I was thinking about Bergman's film. Bettleheim points out the persistence of a red/white axis of symbolism in fairy tales, which marks the turn from sexual innocence to puberty and maturity in girls. We find it in the three drops of blood on the handkerchief of "The Goose Girl," the three blood drops in the snow that herald the birth of "Snow White" (in the conventional Italian version there are three blood drops in milk), and the pricking of the finger of "Sleeping Beauty." More sinisterly, the bleeding feet of the sisters of "Cinderella" reflect this same menstruation and defloration motif without the white contrast.

In Cries and Whispers, the self-mutilation of Karin echoes these bleeding feet with more explicit genital recognition. The doctor's harsh analysis of Maria's mature beauty as she stares into the mirror may have its imaginative origin in Snow White's narcissistic mother. The tale of "Hansel and Gretel," the actual subject of the magic lantern show, is particularly apt for refracting the complex of images generating Cries and Whispers. Bettelhiem tells us:

> The mother represents the source of all food to the children, so it is she who is now experienced as abandoning them, as if in a wilderness. It is the child's anxiety and deep disappointment when Mother is no longer willing to meet all his oral demands which leads him to believe that suddenly Mother has become unloving, selfish, rejecting [. . .] [The gingerbread house] is the original all-giving mother, whom every child hopes to find later again somewhere out in the world, when his own mother begins to make demands and impose restrictions […] The witch […] is the personification of the destructive aspects of orality […] When the children give in to untamed impulses, as symbolized by the uncontrolled voraciousness, they risk being destroyed. (Bettelheim 159, 161.)

Oral gratification and oral aggression are prominent components of Bergman's film, whose very title brackets speech with labial (whispers) and dental (cries) suggestions. Maria's seduction of the doctor involves a sensual and somewhat greedy scene of eating; in direct contrast, the silent meal of Karin and Frederick, in which she spills wine and denies him sexual pleasure, precedes the horrific mutilation of her genitals, and that too ends with her rubbing the blood on her mouth and laughing; Agnes vomits, and Anna goes through the motions of breast-feeding her.

The fairy tale begins by positing the zone of liminality: "At the edge of the forest." That edge has become the threshold of life and death and the gingerbread house a womb-like red interior. For Agnes, cancer is the witch, eating her up from within. As an amateur artist, she is at once the incarnation of the Orphic statue and the object of his poetic quest. Her death enacts a fantasy in which a minister (like Bergman's own father) must acknowledge her superior spirituality; her two siblings (Bergman had two) admit the shallowness of their affection; and the figure of the mother trisects into a nurturing madonna, who has learned the painful lesson of losing a child (a fantasy echoing though Bergman's films from Prison to this one), incarnated as Anna, a seducer who goads her victim to destroy himself out of jealousy and humiliation represented by Maria, and a castrating vagina dentata, Karin, laughing like the wicked witch at the destructive consequences of the child's untamed erotic impulses.

So, in making Cries and Whispers Bergman yet again reenacts his fantasy of dying and living to see the loss and remorse his death has caused. The infantile imagination can ascribe this death to the guilt for desiring the Mother erotically. The frightening images of the mutilated vagina block the fantasy of intercourse with the Mother. In fact, the ambiguity of the gesture—is she trying to repel Frederick or trap him into castrating himself?—collapses prohibition into punishment. In the fairy tale structure Karin corresponds to the witch.

In the story of Maria that guilt is symbolically projected on the mother as a seductress, whose pursuit of pleasure would deprive her daughter (we can substitute son; for here as elsewhere Bergman has defended against autobiographical reference by transposing genders) of a father. Thus Maria fulfills the role of the mother in the fairy tale who fails to care for her children and abandons them to the forest. But in Anna we have the all-giving Mother who has lost her daughter (again read son). The female-for-female substitution is blatant in the Pieta allusion.

The lesson of "Hansel and Gretel" according to Bettelheim is that the child must learn to curb his infantile desires and win self-sufficiency through his own ingenuity. The ingenuity of Cries and Whispers is the Orphic transformation of terror and art, of the loss of the Mother into the musical richness of autumnal color and the self-sufficiency of memory.

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