

CRIES AND WHISPERS 1972

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Bergman himself said that 'I feel that in *Persona*—and later in *Cries and Whispers*—I had gone as far as I could go. And that in these two instances when working in total freedom, I touched wordless secrets that only the cinema can discover.' While wordless means wordless, we can say something about those secrets. The four women who form the core of this family drama, this late 19th century period piece, are all to some degree involved in the same issue of 'faith' that haunted Bergman earlier in *Winter Light*, *The Silence*, and *Through a Glass Darkly*. Like those films, *Cries and Whispers* is bathed in the final life sensations of a woman in agony, in the surrounding commiseration of a clergyman, who admits his faith is less than hers, and of a faithful nurse, Anna, whose love for Agnes is itself inspiring.

'Wordless secrets' can also be applied to the fine threads of mutual understanding, conflict, and jealousy which weave together the four female protagonists. Karin and Maria, the two sisters of the dying Agnes (of uterine cancer), observe only a minimal fidelity to their dying sister, caring for her responsibly, to be sure, but in their hearts more concerned with their own painful marital lives and with their own increasingly fractured inter-relationship. Meanwhile it is Anna, the looked down upon nurse, the religious soul who has lost her child to death, who penetrates farthest into the suffering of Agnes, and goes so far as to give her the breast, in the solidarity of pain.

STORY

The Swing While for the most part this story is linear, taking us step by step on the path to death, there is an interesting exception, the final scene of the film, which was the first scene shot in the filming of *Cries and Whispers*. This final scene, shot first because in order to render it sunny and fresh—unlike the otherwise gloomy crimson interiors of the rest of the film—it was necessary to take advantage of the few waning summer light days, before the long Swedish winter light took over. The scene in question brings together the sisters of the tale, and is set in peaceful summer light around the mansion of the tale and around a beautiful swing set up in the yard. It is a scene pulled from the diary of the now deceased Agnes, and discovered by nurse Anna, who was the woman in the mansion most likely to have understood Agnes's sense, that this picture represents the peace and joy which are the highest pleasures of life.

The sisters Such a gracious peaceful light is rarely seen inside the crimson walled mansion in which this film is set, and in which the stark single fact is the imminent death of one of three sisters, Agnes, who is dying (in great pain) from uterine cancer. While Agnes' cries and breathing give eloquent evidence of her agony, and brief respites are rapidly cut off by new attacks of torture, the three remaining women of the household make what efforts their own hearts permit, to aid the sufferer. Anna, the nurse—and far the most 'religiously faithful' of the group—is reliably true to the dwindling person of Agnes. She succors her like a child, showing no fear of the bodily contact which is a point of agonized difficulty for Agnes' two sisters. Those two sisters, Karin and Maria, do their duty to their dying sister, but are locked in an interpersonal struggle which preoccupies them both, and which seems related to the difficulty they both feel to react wholeheartedly to Agnes' agony.

Erotics Because the erotic is a zone of great difficulty for the two sisters, in their relations to one another and to their spouses, it also becomes a suspect in the difficulty the two sisters have in reaching out fully to their dying sister.

Maria Maria is the more sexually outgoing of the two sisters, and the more frustrated in her marriage; it is she who has had a romantic history with the family doctor, who comes to look after Agnes. As he

departs from the mansion, Maria spots him from the shadows, and immediately makes sexually clear that she has not forgotten him. They make love that night, while Maria's anyway vulnerable husband is away, but when her husband returns the next day he is immediately suspicious, even hysterical at the account of what has transpired, even though Maria assures her spouse that she simply offered the doctor lodging for a night. Subsequently, the more than jealous husband stabs himself, though not fatally.

Karin Karin's husband is a severe macho, self-confident in his setting, but ill at ease when challenged, and Karin, who is especially uneasy with touch, not to mention sex, cuts her reproductive organs, to make herself appalling to her sex-ready husband. She then rubs her vaginal blood over her mouth as though she has no more desire for face to face contact with him. This bloody self-enclosing action coheres with Karin's entire uneasiness with the body. When she sees the un embalmed body of the undead Agnes she is deeply shocked by the dark spots already forming on the body, and when it comes to her relation to her sister, she is long reluctant to accept Maria's invitation that she should share in touching her. As in Bergman's *The Silence*, here again two sisters are on the whole incapable of expressing their affection for one another.

Anna Anna, who has lost a child, and who turns to the Lord for support in this tragedy, is most nearly able to understand the suffering of Agnes. Anna is in the end the most faithful to Agnes, and it is properly ironic that in the final scenes of the film, as the family is leaving the mansion, there is little thought given to Anna, who is simply being 'let go,' dismissed by the sons-in-law as though she had been a significant factor in the drama of the death of Agnes. Irony once again it is, that Anna is the one to open the diary of Agnes and find in it the photo of a swing in the afternoon sun, and of the girls and Anna herself, united in an intense moment of peace.

THEMES

Suffering The suffering of the dying Agnes irresistibly recalls sacred religious tradition. When Anna takes Agnes in her arms and 'nurses' her, to relieve her suffering, the historian of religious art will think of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, and of the infinite pity of mother for child portrayed there. The pain being relieved, here, is presented by Bergman as savage, eliciting heart rending and exhausting cries, in which, with Bergman's help, Agnes replicates the death cries of her own father.

Touch The kind of physical solace given by touch is elusive in the mansion of the film. Maria longs for touch from Karin, which will relieve them of their estrangement, and after a moment of great tenderness, when the sisters have deeply touched with eyes and flesh, Karin takes occasion to remind Maria of where they have been together, and we feel the tension of unused possibilities coursing through the family.

Love. Love, here as elsewhere in Bergman, is in short supply, and hard to sustain. Anna's love for Agnes, which reflects Anna's hard won compassion for loss, is perhaps a model for the kind of love which Maria and Karin struggle to find between themselves. The female culture of the mansion itself is bathed in somewhat diffuse lesbian fellow feeling. In the estranged sisters, that lesbianism is a need to melt into another person; in Anna, the lesbian is more fully individuated, so that Anna can leave the house with no unfinished business, at film's end.

Jealousy. After Maria has spent a night with her old flame, the doctor, her husband returns home the next day, and deduces from her comments and tone that she has slept with the doctor. The jealousy following this reaction drives Maria's husband to stab himself, and to drag himself across his room before her horrified eyes.

Characters

Agnes. Agnes is the sister dying of uterine cancer, and drawing all attention in the mansion around her. We watch her exhausted, hopeless face in a thousand micro tones of expression, and we listen to her tell tale heavy breathing as it deepens and falls and on many occasions rises to let out a scream of pain. So powerful is the suffering of the woman, that despite ourselves we waken and understand when she returns as one of the undead.

Anna. The nurse taking care of Agnes. Anna is a religious person, deeply under the otherworldly spell she succumbed to, at the early death of her own child. She is prayerfully close to the issues of life and death, and deeply compassionate toward Agnes, whom she tries in every way to comfort, during her last days. Anna herself is abruptly dismissed from her position, with the death of Agnes, and rejects even the offer to take with her a memento of her mistress Agnes.

Karin. Karin longs for a warm relation with her sister Maria, but is for the most part barely able to achieve intimacy with her. A moment comes, as the sisters melt toward one another in the stress of caring for Agnes, when the sisters achieve the touching they desire, and Karin, who has a terror of intimacy, blends in spirit with her sister. Karin's need for warmth has expressed itself equally in her relation with her husband, who is cold and indifferent to her, and whom she punishes by carving up her genitals and smearing the blood over her face.

Maria. Maria is the sister most at home with her body, with touching others—unlike her withdrawing sister Karin—yet she is repelled by the decay of her dead sister Agnes, and by her dead body, when she returns as one of the undead. Like her sister, Karin, Maria is plagued with a poor marriage, in particular with a dangerously jealous husband, who comes close to stabbing himself to death, from suspicion of his wife's infidelity with the Doctor.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

AGNES

Character Agnes is dying from uterine cancer, as the film opens, and the action and attention of the film consequently gravitate around her. (The household is chiefly female, in this period piece full of mansion-like décor and swirling gowns, and the two brothers in law are marginal, and dysfunctional figures.) We are treated to prolonged exposure to Agnes' face, as it registers a potent gamut of emotions, ranging from interludes of peace to increasingly violent gradations of pain. We measure Agnes' suffering cries, which grow strident as the progress of her agony accelerates, and with each outburst her tortured face shows more fiercely her loss of capacity to resist. She rises from bed, walks around the room, then subsides. Our knowledge of her deepens, although we have little chance to see her interaction with the family.

At the end of a long period of suffering, Agnes dies. She gives little sign of peace or of a 'happy death.' The priest, at her wake, admits that Agnes' faith was greater than his own. After her death Agnes returns briefly to life—is it a dream? an exploration of the limits of art, like the return of Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol*? She asks Karin and Maria to approach her, but Maria, who agrees, shrinks back in horror when Agnes grabs her; Maria says she cannot leave her husband and children. Anna re-enters the room, and takes Agnes back to her bed where Anna cradles the dead Agnes in her arms.

Illustrative moments

Face. As always, Bergman turns to the face as the bearer of personal meaning and expression. We are given ample opportunity to study the tired, ill, and increasingly absent expression of this sister. We see here the grown unmarried woman, whose childhood was beset by the sense that her own mother had scorned and teased her.

Expressive. Agnes veers from pain to agony to moods of peace and sudden calm. Her facial expressions and her cries of pain give us an ongoing measure of her mood and condition throughout the film. As the progress of the disease grows more unremitting, Agnes' expression grows less and less 'mindful,' less perceptive of the physical world around her.

Cradled. Agnes accepts Anna's action of cradling her, like the Christ cradled by his mother in Michelangelo's *Pieta*. While this being-cradled condition may seem passive, Agnes lives her way into the condition, converting it into an action.

Undead. Like a zombie, Agnes returns from her bed of death, and asks Maria and Karin to join her. Both women fear and flee her, especially when she grabs at them. They are of this world, and cannot be seduced by this figure who has already left them.

Supporting characters

ANNA

Anna is the most faithful of the attendants on the dying Agnes. Anna has suffered the early death of her own child, and has in her way been sensitized to religious issues—the mysterious closeness of life and death, and their interconnecting passageways—from before assuming her nurse responsibilities in the household of the three sisters. She is thus the easiest of the three women in her relations with Anna. It is she who is able to nurse her mistress, holding her like a baby, in the extremities of her pain, and, ironically, it is she who is coldly dismissed by the family immediately upon the death of Agnes. A saintly figure, Anna is drawn toward the life of the saints. She is a visionary-believer in the fashion of Thea (in *The Rite*) or of Ingeborg in her way in *Crisis*.

Illustrative moments

Circulating. Anna is most often seen moving quietly about the mansion, performing her nursing responsibilities, quiet and supportive, especially of Agnes, whose cries become at times almost intolerable in the household.

Praying. Anna is faithful to the memory of her dead daughter, and appears before us several times in prayer. (One might be thinking here of Eva, wife of the village pastor in *Autumn Sonata*, who lost her son to drowning, when he was only four, and who keeps his room as a perfectly preserved memorial, a frozen prayer.)

Cradling. Anna can step into the heart of misery, which is too much for the other two sisters, Karin and Maria, though they create plenty of misery in their own private lives. By taking Agnes in her arms, or by offering Agnes her own breast to suck, Anna is showing us how fearlessly she exposes herself to the extremities of others' pain.

Dismissed. When Anna is relieved of her duties—at the death of Agnes—she rejects the family's offer, to choose a favorite memento of Agnes, to take along with her. It is too little to say that Anna is too proud to accept such a throwaway ending, Anna is with Agnes in another dimension which needs no shoring up by trinkets.

MARIA

Character Maria is one of Agnes' s sisters; she commiserated with her suffering sister, but is primarily absorbed in her faulty romantic life, having once been a lover of the family doctor, who has once again entered her life, by stopping by to pay a medical visit to Agnes. She is ultimately unable to make a deep connection with any of the other players in the film.

Compromised. Maria, it seems, has had a love affair with the family doctor, who comes again early in the film, to examine the seriously ill Agnes. When the doctor is leaving the house, after his visit, Maria spots him, and reawakens a flirtation. They spend the night together, this 'distraction' easily outweighing the incumbency of spending the night with Maria's dying sister.

Heartless. When Maria's husband returns, the following day, he immediately discerns that the doctor has been there. Although Maria declares that she simply gave the doctor a spare room, to spend the

night, the husband knows the truth. He is driven by a fit of jealousy to stab himself, yet even then does not evoke great compassion from Maria.

Frustrated. Maria is clearly not up to the powerful challenges of her environment. She is sharply limited in her ability to reach intimacy with her sister, and only at the end, of their struggle to know each profoundly, does she attain to something like a diffuse lesbian feeling toward Karen. With her husband she has virtually no communication at all.

KAREN

Frigid. Karen exceeds Maria, in the difficulty of forming a warm sisterly relation, just as she exceeds Maria in the extremity of her rejection of her husband. So passionately does Karen reject the romantic assumptions, of her husband, that upon retiring to the bed, in the presence of her husband, she cuts her vagina, and smears the blood across her face, to make it clear she wants no contact with the man.

Anguished. Upon the return of Agnes from the dead, in a zombie scene in which the deceased sister invites the affection of her two living sisters, Karen is so anguished, by the sight of body spots on the unembalmed Agnes, that she makes herself scarce, flees. Karen experiences the same angst when her sister Maria tries to relate intimately, even by glance, with her; it leaving us in no surprise that Karen is the least effectual member of the household, in bringing solace to the dying Agnes.

Icy. Karen's dinner with her husband, prior to the self-mutilation scene, is the ultimate in icy social relations, as bitterly conflictual as the human atmosphere in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra*. Karen and her husband can neither look at one another, nor speak with one another, though the stiff-goateed assumption of Karen's husband, is plainly that the two of them will be hopping in bed together as soon as the plates are cleared away. How little he knows!