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"CRIES & WHISPERS"

A BERGMAN

FILM OF ANGUISH AND INSIGHT

BY GAIL ROCK

"Cries and Whispers" is a film that will not go away. Most films can be cast aside after they are dealt with at the typewriter, but a month after seeing Ingmar Bergman's newest film, I still feel under its influence. Shadows of it linger, and reappear uninvited: little aftershocks that refuse to vacate my consciousness.

Some people are speechless after seeing it. Others find themselves blurting out the most personal confessions of fear and longing. Some say that seeing it with someone else is like a shared rite of passage, that it created a bond between them.

This film reaches back into the dark corners of the mind where nightmares lurk. Bergman forces us to confront our most secret feelings about love and death and lust and hate. He seduces us with his dazzling visual artistry—then suddenly terrorizes us with the realization that we have gone too far with him to turn back. He has described the film in *The New Yorker*, October 21, 1972, as "... a dark, flowing stream—faces, movements, voices, gestures, exclamations, light and shade, moods, dreams. Nothing fixed, nothing really tangible other than for the mo-



Agnes in agony (above) and at peace (right). The photographs that accompany this article were taken directly from the screen.

ment, and then only an illusory moment. A dream, a longing, or perhaps an expectation. A fear in which that to be feared is never put into words."

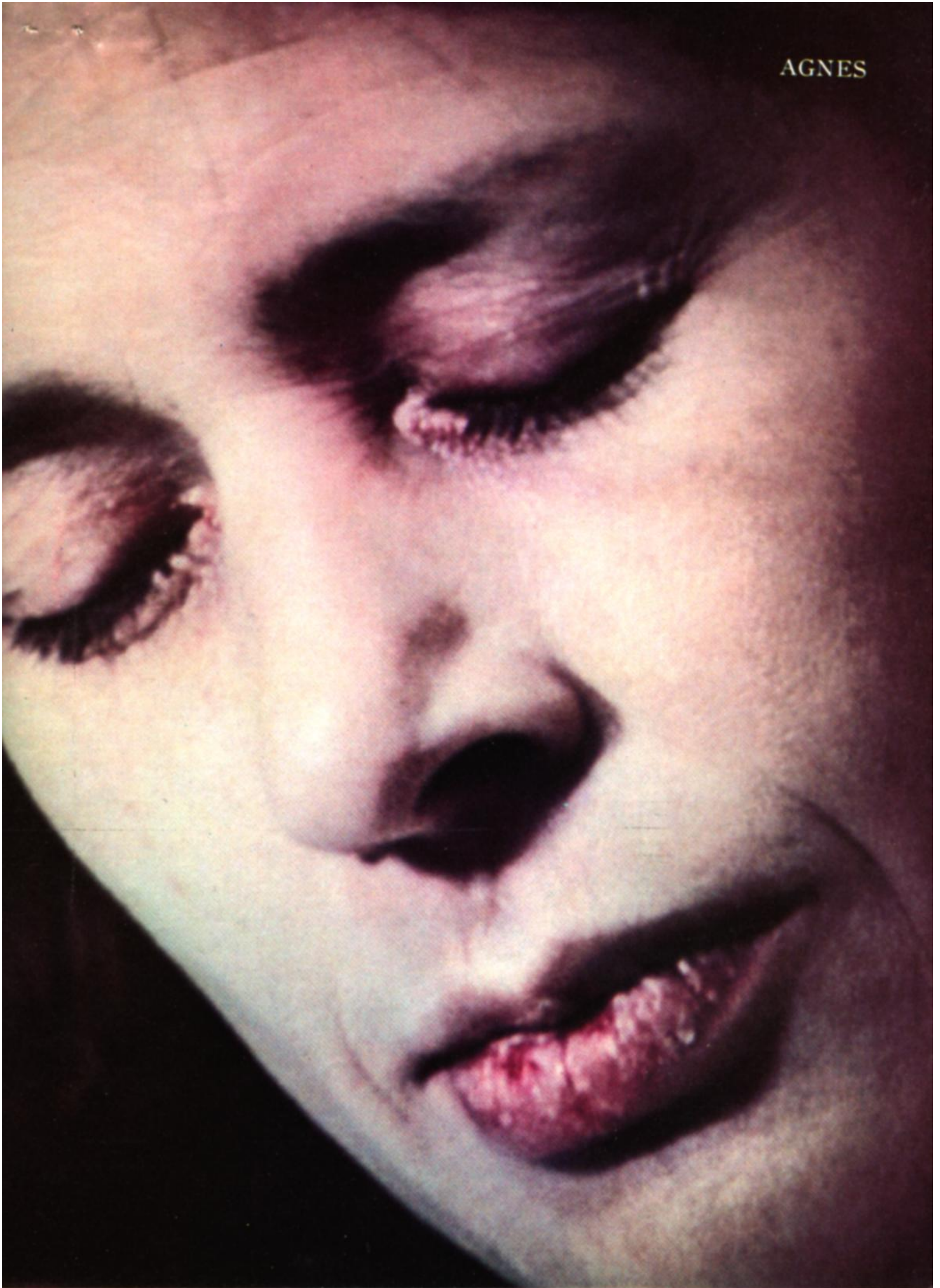
The period is late 19th century, the setting a luxurious country mansion. Four young women are alone in the house; one is dying and her two sisters and a servant are attending her deathbed. The "cries and whis-

pers" are the nightmares of the soul that surround her suffering and death. We are never sure just whose nightmares they are—the film flows back and forth between fantasy and reality so ambiguously that we become as disoriented about what is real as are the characters themselves.

The stars are three of Bergman's favorite human beings and most accomplished actresses: Harriet Andersson as the dying Agnes; Ingrid Thulin and Liv Ullmann as her sisters Karin and Maria; and a fourth talented actress I have not seen before, Kari Sylwan as the servant, Anna. They are presented to us in a lushness of setting and costume that Bergman seldom permits himself. The house is a brooding maze of red rooms, dark wood, gilt clocks, glittering crystal, and white linens. The women are always dressed in white or gray or black against the red walls. Bergman also uses red throughout as a transition between scenes, dissolving in and out of frames of solid red into close-ups of the women's faces—with unintelligible whispers, ticking clocks, and a moaning wind in the background.

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AGNES



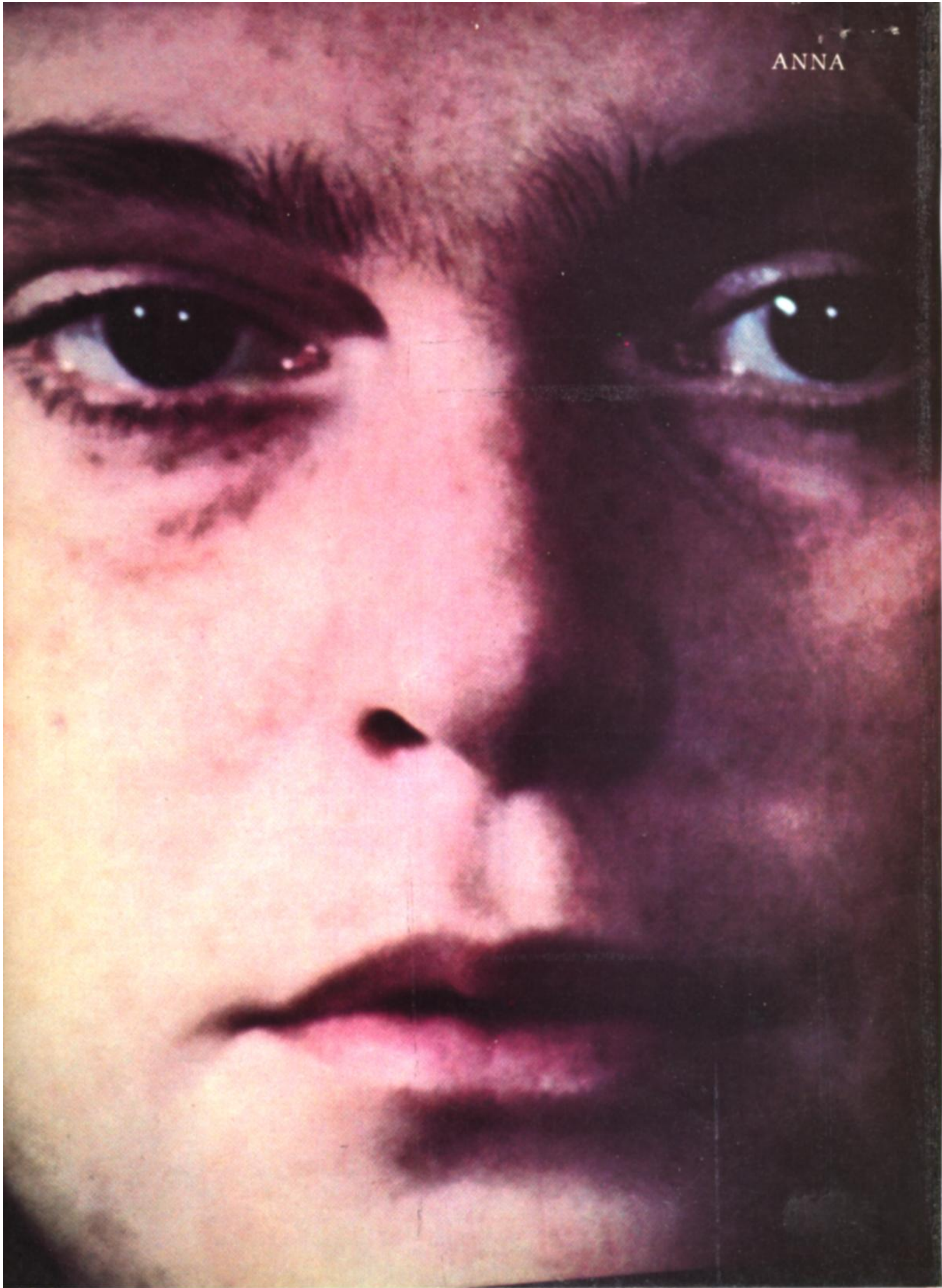
MARIA





KARIN

Forgive me!



this use of red, he wrote: "Don't ask me why it must be so, because I don't know. I have puzzled over this myself . . . but ever since my childhood, I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red."

And he takes us on a dreamlike journey through that moist membrane with some of the most stunning scenes you will ever behold, detailing the relationships among the four women with fierce power. At a time when most films are bereft of even one well-defined female character, Bergman has created four distinctly different and complex women. He does not make them understandable nor pretend to understand them, and so, paradoxically, they take on a reality that is rare among female characters imagined by men.

Of Agnes, the dying sister, he wrote: "She has let her life flow quietly and imperceptibly along, without any meaning or misfortune. No man has turned up. . . . For her, love has been a confined secret, never revealed. . . . She is preparing to make her exit from the world as quietly and submissively as she has lived in it." In fact, Agnes dies a horrifying death, and Bergman forces us to share it, holding us at her bedside just as the sisters are held there by love and guilt. Harriet Andersson is brilliant in this most difficult role—her suffering, her death, and her terrifying cries for comfort after death are played without a false note.

The servant Anna is perhaps the most mysterious character in the film, partly because Kari Sylwan is able to play her with that added dimension, and partly because Bergman explains least about her. He has written: "A silent, never-expressed friendship was established between Anna and Agnes. Anna is very taciturn, very shy, unapproachable. But she is ever-present—watching, prying, listening. She doesn't speak; perhaps she doesn't think, either." But he shows us Anna caring for the dying Agnes with strangely erotic tenderness, and leaves us to speculate on just what their friendship might have been. Were they lovers, or when Anna (whose own child has

died a few years before) holds Agnes to her bare breast in the attitude of a Pietà, is it the tenderness of a mother-child relationship?

Bergman describes Maria as "... a spoiled child—gentle, playful, smiling, and with an ever-active curiosity and love of pleasure. She is very much taken up with her own beauty and her body's potentialities for pleasure. . . . She is sufficient unto herself and is never worried by her own or other people's morals." He makes her seductive pursuit of every-



Karin

one pathetic, disgusting, and erotic. Her quest for affection is rejected again and again. The family doctor rebuffs her attempt to renew an old affair. When she tries to make contact with the repressed Karin, she must endure a torrent of hatred in exchange for a few moments of intimacy. When, in a chilling fantasy/reality scene, the dead Agnes calls to her sisters for comfort, Maria leans toward the deathbed and is suddenly, horrifyingly clutched by the dead woman's cold hands and drawn to her in a fierce kiss on the lips. She runs, screaming, down the halls and can find no escape. Yet for all the terror she must endure, Liv Ullmann's subtle performance implies that Maria's narcissism protects her from being wounded as deeply as the others.

Of Karin, the oldest sister, Bergman says: "She is the mother of five, but seems untouched by maternity and matrimonial misery. Deep down, under a surface of self-control, she

hides an impotent hatred of her husband and a permanent rage against life. Her anguish and desperation never come to light, except in her dreams. In the midst of this tumult of bridled fury, she bears a gift for affection and devotion, and a longing for nearness . . . immovably shut in and unused." It is Karin who seems Bergman's strongest, most complex, and most tormented character, and Ingrid Thulin plays the role with superb intelligence. In a horrifying episode, Karin, thrusting a shard of glass into her vagina, wounds herself—a self-destructive expression of spiteful loathing for her husband. She is repelled by Maria's attempt at intimacy and shrieks hatred at her, then is suddenly, desperately in need of her caress. But it is Karin who turns away from the dead Agnes's cry for comfort, saying, "I don't love you."

The men in this film are very much in the background: Bergman concentrates on the women's interrelationships. He has always seemed fascinated with the capacities for eroticism between women—a kind of open, animal sensuality that I don't think he intends to be taken for lesbianism. Some insist that he intends certain of his female characters to serve as "disguises" for male lovers; that is, for Bergman himself. He will not comment except to say that he is part of all his characters.

He is certainly part of his female characters, defining them with great sensitivity but, at the same time, keeping a certain distance—the distance of a man observing alien territory. It is as though he believes that women possess some special mysterious power of the psyche; yet his awe doesn't obscure his powers of observation. He manages to be both passionate and objective. Perhaps it is this quality that makes him an artist. He goes beyond technique and mere linear storytelling into a moving, intellectual experience that lingers in the mind and becomes part of our own consciousness.

Gail Rock is a free-lance writer whose work has appeared in the New York "Times," "Show," and "Ms."