

Document Citation

Title	He may be the greatest filmmaker of all time
Author(s)	Thomas Meehan
Source	<i>Saturday Review</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	72
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Bergman, Ingmar (1918-2007), Uppsala, Uppland, Sweden
Film Subjects	Viskningar och rop (Cries and whispers), Bergman, Ingmar, 1972

FILM

He May Be the Greatest Filmmaker of All Time

BY THOMAS MEEHAN

Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* is among the most brilliant, moving, and painful films that I've ever seen. In an isolated Swedish manor house that stands beside a lake in a parklike setting of barren, late-autumn trees, a spinster of thirty-seven, Agnes (Harriet Andersson), is dying in terrible agony of cancer of the womb. Death is near, and keeping the deathwatch in the shadowed house are a maidservant, Anna (a heavy-breasted young peasant girl, played by Kari Sylwan), and Agnes's two sisters—Karin (Ingrid Thulin), a frigid, embittered woman of thirty-nine who is married to an elderly diplomat whom she despises; and Maria (Liv Ullmann), a stupid, indolent beauty of perhaps thirty who is married to a weakling whom she frequently cuckolds with such types as the cold-eyed, middle-aged doctor who is attending Agnes. Although the story takes place at the turn of the century, the film exists outside of literal time and place, in a mysterious realm of fantasy, nightmare, and the supernatural. As the film opens, we see a real house standing among real trees in a chill and misty early morning. But as Bergman moves his camera inside the house, where almost all of the film takes place, it becomes evident that realism is secondary to symbolism. We see, for instance, that each room in the house is decorated in a different shade of red—the walls are red, and so are the rugs, the drapes, and even the blankets on the beds. Each scene fades with a dissolve not to black but to red. Amid these stylized rooms, in which the color shifts from dark maroon to bright scarlet as the light changes, the three women who are keeping the deathwatch move somberly about, dressed in white, ankle-length gowns. Agnes, writhing in pain on her deathbed, is in white, too. "Ever since my childhood I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red," Bergman has written, and in *Cries and Whispers* perhaps he intended the color to suggest blood, thus representing life and passion, in contrast with

white, which stands here not for purity or innocence but rather for sterility, impotence, and the immense void of death.

As Agnes approaches death, flashbacks tell us that she, Karin, and Maria have, each in her own way, been living a life of total unhappiness. *Cries and Whispers*, as one critic has pointed out, is Bergman's *The Three Sisters*, but it is the conviction that life, wherever it is lived is entirely pointless, and it is not just arid provincial life that has cast his three sisters into despair. Why are we put on earth to endure life? Agnes, bewildered and in agony at the approach of death after having lived a meaningless life, doesn't know. And neither does Karin, who hates not only her husband but herself to the degree that she admits to frequent thoughts of suicide; nor Maria, who is too shallow and egocentric even to understand the cause of her depression. Only Agnes is capable of love, and as death nears, she feels an overwhelming affection for Karin and Maria that is for the most part unreturned. Indeed, the two sisters respond to the cries from the deathbed with fear and repulsion. We are told that the three sisters loved one another as children, but the sisterly bond of love between Karin and Maria has long since been broken. Despite attempts to draw close once again, each realizes that she has nothing but hatred and contempt for the other. Both Karin and Maria are racked by guilt, too, at being unable to feel love for Agnes as she is dying. Only Anna, the maidservant, is able to love Agnes. In one of the film's most touching scenes Anna climbs into bed with Agnes, bares her outsized breasts, and enfolds the dying woman compassionately in her plump arms.

Agnes lapses into a coma. She gasps for breath in rasping half-screams that chill and frighten you, and then she dies. Her corpse is laid out in white on the bed and the others move about the red rooms dressed now in black. One assumes that Agnes's agony has ended, but such is not the case, for the supernatural now intrudes. The decaying corpse moans, cries out, and tears stream down its cheeks. Agnes speaks: She asks to be loved, to be held in the arms of her sisters before her soul departs from the house. Karin and Maria shrink away in terror and horror. Once again only Anna is able to enter the bedroom and embrace the dead woman.

Agnes is buried, Anna is dismissed, the manor house is closed up, and

Karin and Maria go their separate ways with their husbands. And so *Cries and Whispers* would appear to be over. But it isn't. Bergman's final scene ends on a note of affirmation, reminiscent of the beautiful closing moment of *Wild Strawberries*. Perhaps only he could get away with such an optimistic ending to a film that has otherwise so relentlessly told us that life is pointless. The scene re-enacts an episode from Agnes's diary written several months before her death. Already aware that her cancer was terminal, she had sat with Karin and Maria one sun-drenched afternoon in the old-fashioned swinging seat on the back lawn of the manor house. We see Anna gently pushing the white-garbed sisters back and forth, as we hear Agnes's voice-over memory of the moment: "The people I'm most fond of in the world were with me. 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." Dissolve to red, and The End.

Cries and Whispers is magnificently performed by all four of its principals, particularly by Harriet Andersson as Agnes. It is a major work by a man who may be the greatest filmmaker of all time. Nonetheless, I should warn you that it is not a film to see when you are feeling depressed. In other words, although Chopin is played in the background at several points during *Cries and Whispers*, it's not a movie that you come out of cheerfully whistling the tunes. □



Cries, whispers and cuckolds.