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Concerning Bergman and the

By Bruce Cook

In a long interview in John Simon's new book *Ingmar Bergman Directs* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 315 pages; \$9.95), Bergman declares: "I am always interested in faces. I just want you to sit down and look at the human face." And it must be true. Paging through the admirable collection of stills in the book, one is struck again and again not just by the great number of close-ups among them but by their peculiar stark quality. The image of the human face, as presented by Bergman, becomes as eloquent and expressive as the purest poetry.

I was reminded of this when, after leaving Bergman's latest, *Cries and Whispers* (New World), I found myself haunted for hours afterward by the faces of the four women on whom the film concentrates with such intensity. Three sisters and a servant are presented in crisis. There is a spare, reticent quality to their story, but through Bergman's presentation you come to know them as you have known few others in any film.

Agnes (Harriett Andersson) is ill, dying of some unnamed malady that looks like cancer. Her two sisters, Maria (Liv Ullmann) and Karin (Ingrid Thulin), have come back to the family home to help the servant girl, Anna (Kari Sylwan), care for her. Nothing much happens,

really, except that Agnes dies, as it is clear she must, and the two sisters close up the home and send the servant away.

The real story of the film is in the relations of the characters to one another and of each to her past. Somehow this house where the sisters grew up and in which the action of the film is contained is alive with these relations, aquiver with bad vibrations from remembered sins—the whispers of the title. We learn a good deal of this specifically, and even more is implied.

And the cries? They come from Agnes in the extremity of her pain. Only Anna, the servant girl, can comfort her. There is some suggestion that Agnes, as the "good" sister, can take upon herself the sins of the other two, being a kind of sacrificial lamb or a scapegoat sent out into death's desert. Yet it never quite works out as neatly as that. Agnes does not go gentle into that good night, and the two sisters survive her death with their mutual antagonism intact.

The rhythm of *Cries and Whispers*, its compelling images—those faces!—and its mysterious implicit statement put it closer to poetry than just about any other movie I have seen. But when I speak of poetry on film, don't think of some misty, sweet bit of vagueness. No, this is Bergman: hard, specific, tough—an artist.