

Cries and Whispers, 1972

“Can’t anyone help me?”



Major Credits

Direction and Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman

Cinematography: Sven Nykvist

Cast: Harriet Andersson (Agnes), Kari Sylwan (Anna), Ingrid Thulin (Karin), Liv Ullmann (Maria/ The Mother), Erland Josephson (The Doctor), Henning Moritzen (Joakim, Maria’s husband), Georg Årlin (Fredrik, Karin’s husband), Anders Ek (Isak, the pastor), Linn Ullman (Maria’s daughter)

Production Background

Considered by many historians to be his masterpiece, *Cries and Whispers* followed a series of box office disappointments culminating in Bergman’s first English language film, the critically reviled *The Touch* (1971). The director retreated to Fårö to compose the scenario—as was now his habitual practice, in the form of a story—in a mood of depression and total isolation. Because Svensk Filmindustri and his former international backers would not provide sufficient financing, Bergman took the unusual step of offering his cast and crew shares in the film’s profits in return for working without salary. (The scheme worked out well for all concerned.) Also unusual for Bergman, the film was shot entirely on location at an abandoned manor house on Lake Mälaren, about 35 miles south of Stockholm.

According to all reports, Bergman’s spirits had revived—he had fallen in love with Ingrid von Rosen, soon to become his last wife—and the shooting proceeded with exceptional care and conviviality. Two of his daughters appear in the film. The three sisters in the story were longstanding friends and colleagues, and the newcomer—Kari Sylwan, making her first screen appearance—quickly earned their admiration. Sven Nyquist, shooting his 14th Bergman film, won an Academy Award for cinematography.

Cinematic Techniques

1. Color Cinematography: Bergman has said, “Ever since my childhood, I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red.” *Cries and Whispers* is composed nearly entirely in three colors: red, white, and black. This tri-color scheme—particularly the fade to deep red after each “movement”—profoundly affects the viewer’s comprehension of the film.
2. Sound Design: As with *The Passion of Anna*, Bergman begins the film with the sound of soft bells and a stunningly beautiful montage of the exterior landscape—the only images until the very end that escape the claustrophobic confines of the manor house. The subtle sound design (by Bergman regular Owe Svensson) incorporates chamber music (the Bach cello sarabande) and expressive silences (the dinner scene with Karin and her husband; the inaudible whispers between the two sisters) to form a cinematic “language” that transcends the limits of verbal expression.
3. Close-Ups: Bergman concludes each of the four women’s stories with a close-up that fades to red. In a scene that recalls *Wild Strawberries* and *The Passion of Anna*, the doctor holds a mirror up to Maria’s face so that she (and the audience) can closely examine the marks of “indifference... boredom and impatience” that define the character of this beautiful, seductive woman.
4. Composition: In addition to the aforementioned montage that opens the film, *Cries and Whispers* offers some of the most beautiful pictorial arrangements in all of Bergman’s cinema—indeed, in the entire *history* of cinema: the two sisters and Anna dressed in white in the red parlor; the two-shot of Anna baring her breast to comfort Agnes (the second of which has been likened to a modern *pietà*), the concluding shot of the four women outdoors at the swing.

Questions for Discussion

1. With *Cries and Whispers*, Bergman’s reputation as a director of *women* was universally acclaimed. What specific female concerns does the film portray? Given the hysteria and apathy, the perversion and shallowness, of Karin and Maria, and the saintliness of Agnes and Anna, do the accolades seem warranted to a contemporary viewer? What seems to be the central idea Bergman is projecting about the inner life of women?
2. The Pastor (played by Anders Ek, who offered a very different harangue as the monk in *The Seventh Seal*) performs a prayer over Agnes’ body that sounds very much like the inner voice of Ingmar Bergman. How does this brief portrait of the religious mind differ from earlier representations in Bergman’s work? Is there a relation between this prayer and the closing scene?
3. The shard of glass that figured prominently in *Persona* returns here with perverse consequences. What was an *object* in the earlier film becomes a *symbol* here. What idea does it represent?
4. An understatement: *Cries and Whispers* is a difficult film to watch, to endure. Aside from the startling nature of its images, the formal beauty of its design, and the magnificence of the performances, is there also some sort of affirmation of human dignity and the value of existence?
5. Bergman has used class divisions—the Upstairs/Downstairs social structure—numerous times before, but in *Cries and Whispers*, he seems to be offering a sustained depiction of the hollowness of bourgeois life. How would you define the director’s critique of capitalist society?