

CRIES & WHISPERS background

In his book *Images: My Life in Film* (1990), Ingmar Bergman has written: “All my films can be thought of in terms of black and white, except for *Cries and Whispers*. In the screenplay, it says that red represents for me the interior of the soul. When I was a child, I imagined the soul to be a dragon, a shadow floating in the air like blue smoke -- a huge winged creature, half bird, half fish. But inside the dragon, everything was red.”

Cries & Whispers (*Viskningar och rop*, 1972) Colour. Running time: 91 minutes

Cinematographer Sven Nykvist won an Academy Award for his work on the film. The film was also nominated for Oscars for best picture, best director, best screenplay, and best costuming. Bergman won the Technical Grand Prize for the film at the Cannes Film Festival.

Plot

The film is a trancelike, non-linear narrative made up of vignettes, dreams, and flashbacks. In 1880s or 1890s Sweden, “cancer-stricken, dying Agnes (37) is visited in her isolated rural mansion by her sisters Karin and Maria. As Agnes's condition deteriorates, fear and revulsion grip the sisters, who seem incapable of empathy, and Agnes's only comfort comes from her maid Anna. As the end draws closer, long repressed feelings of resentment and mistrust cause jealousy, selfishness, and bitterness to surface.” (IMDB review) “An extraordinary vision of the interior of the soul.” (Peter Cowie)

Commentary

** You can read here < http://www.bergmanorama.com/films/cries_and_whispers_script.htm > how Bergman conceived of the four women.

“*Cries and Whispers* envelops us in a tomb of dread, pain and hate, and to counter these powerful feelings it summons selfless love. It is, I think, Ingmar Bergman's way of treating his own self-disgust, and his envy of those who have faith. ... Bergman never made another film this painful. To see it is to touch the extremes of human feeling. It is so personal, so penetrating of privacy, we almost want to look away. ... The emotions it portrays and evokes speak for themselves. It would be hard to say that any of the sisters, or any of their actions, 'stand' for anything except the inexplicable way that life can bless and punish us.” -- Roger Ebert <

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020818/REVIEWS08/208180301/1023> >

The film's flashbacks “have an oneiric [dreamlike] quality, and at times it is impossible to determine if their content is a faithful depiction of reality, or mere illusion depicting the character's intimate dreams and fantasies. However, part of Bergman's brilliance is the way the film never questions the veracity of these episodes. In a sense, Bergman seems to be embracing the psychoanalytical posture that states that fantasies and dreams are just as important for the human psyche as real experiences are.” -- Marco Lanzagorta at Senses of Cinema < http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/03/25/cries_and_whispers.html >

“Bergman has stated that his films are essentially emotional experiences, and *Cries and Whispers* stands as his ultimate argument.”-- Paul D. Zimmerman, *Newsweek* (1973)

“In many other respects, *Cries and Whispers* is a well-thumbed catalogue of disillusionments. ... Bergman has assembled characters from all stages of his previous work. ... All the old conclusions are there: marriage is a tissue of lies, men are weak, brutal and repulsive, sex is degrading, faith is inaccessible unless you have it already, in which case it's inexplicable. At times, *Cries and Whispers* looks like self-plagiarism.”

“For me, *Cries and Whispers* is so much about music. 'Cries and whispers' is not my own phrase but comes from a review of a piano sonata by Mozart. I can't remember which one. It said that the slow movements were like cries and whispers, and I thought that fit very well. Because it is, in fact, a piece of music translated into images." -- Ingmar Bergman, interview with Marie Nyreröd (2003)

The film's title “clearly conveys oppositions. Within the context of the narrative **cries** are related to emotional conditions such as pain, anguish, impotency, loneliness, guilt and suffocation. In contrast, **whispers** are associated with feelings of tenderness, tolerance, love and compassion. All the characters in *Cries and Whispers* appear to be trapped in a complex web of emotions, unsure if they want to cry or to whisper at any given time, as if they were being torn apart by their conflicting feelings. However, even with Agnes' ultimate sacrifice, this film does not provide any closure or resolution to these antagonisms. Instead, *Cries and Whispers* is a beautiful film that invites the viewer to think about the nature of the human condition.” -- Lanzagorta <
http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/03/25/cries_and_whispers.html >

“In his later works, Bergman has ranged freely in the realm of intuition: areas that we know but cannot speak about directly. With a fluidity unique to his talent, Bergman has dealt with love -- the kind where another person is known and cherished through unconscious, intuitive sympathy. *Cries and Whispers* continues the Swedish filmmaker's explorations of this theme. Bergman has said of it: 'What it most resembles is a dark, flowing stream -- faces, movements, voices, gestures, exclamations, light and shade, moods, dreams.’” -- Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat at Spirituality & Practice <
<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=3150> >

some Things to Consider

Who is attractive (compelling, sympathetic) in this film, if anyone?

To what extent is this movie about innocence and corruption, and how are they portrayed? How are the various characters in the film diseased or crippled?

What does Bergman suggest about suffering in this film – its causes, its role, its manifestations? How do this film's ideas about suffering differ from those suggested in *Winter Light*, where physical suffering was seen as minor compared with the suffering of loneliness, abandonment, no one to hear or care?

Why do you think Bergman uses the Christian imagery of the Pieta -- when Anna lifts Agnes's head and places it on her bare breasts – to portray this most important moment of human contact?

Who is authentic in this movie? What are the scenes that feel most authentic to you, that feel as if the characters are in touch with truth, or with their own truth? When do the characters recognise something true about themselves, begin to see themselves as they are?

Cries and Whispers has been described as a Passion Play gone awry, with Agnes as the Christ-figure, her suffering sent by God to cleanse the sins of her sisters; the maid as the Virgin Mary; the two sisters as apostles: Karin, the eldest, cold and forbidding, and Maria, the youngest, coy and passive-aggressive. "When Agnes dies and, in a dream sequence, is resurrected, Karin and Maria are driven even further apart as they recoil in horror from Agnes' reanimated body. Instead of everlasting forgiveness, there is only more mistrust and apprehension." Does this seem an apt description of the film to you?

What are the fears and desires that motivate the characters in this film?

Critic Joan Mellen has famously said that Bergman's view of women is essentially a conventional male perspective on female subjectivity. His male characters fail to find meaning or purpose because "their pleas go unanswered" or because they "lack the capacity to care for others;" his women characters fail because they are unable to choose a lifestyle independent of the female sexual role. Mellen says that the women "are depicted as if on a lower notch of the evolutionary scale." Others have said that Bergman's characters "are shown to be caught in a conflict between the inner world and the often menacing outer world. Regardless of gender, age, or status, Bergman's interest is rooted in how they choose to compromise the two." How do you see it, based on the Bergman films you've screened?

"We know what Bergman is getting at here: loving through intuition or dream or touch is the closest we can come to meaning in life." Is this true in this movie? Is it your experience?