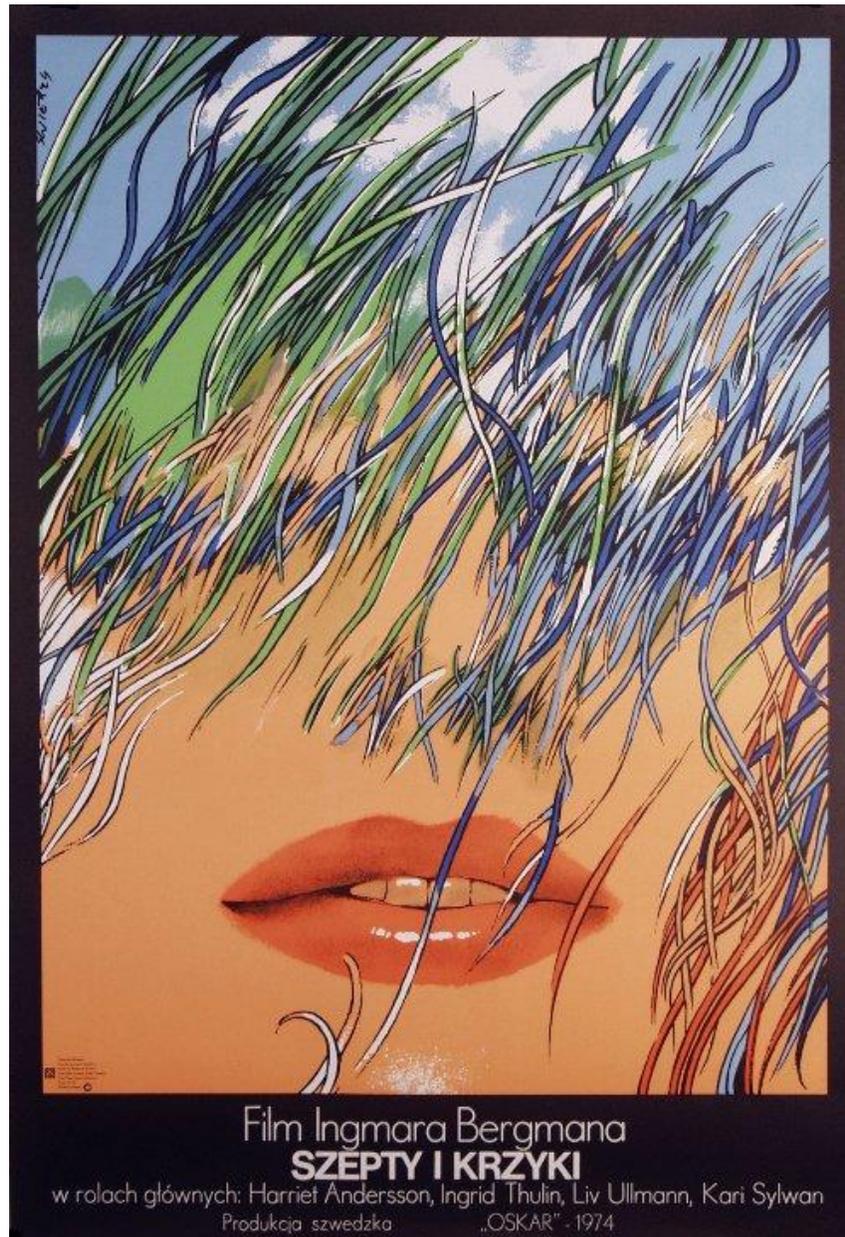


Cries and Whispers



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed and narrated by Ingmar Bergman. Produced by Lars-Owe Carlberg. Screenplay by Ingmar Bergman. Production Design and Costumes by Marik Voslundh. Cinematography by Sven Nykvist. Music by Bach and Chopin. Edited by Siv Lundgren. Cinematic length: 91 minutes. Distributed by New World Pictures. Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri. Cinematic Release December 1972: DVD release 2001. Rated R. Rating 85%. All illustrations from the public domain.

Cast

Agnes: Harriet Anderson

Liv Ullmann: Maria

" " :the mother

Anna: Kari Sylwan

Karin: Ingrid Thulin

David the Doctor: Erland Josephson

Reverend Isaak: Anders Ek

Joakim: Henning Mortenson

Frederik: Georg Arlin

The Story Teller: Inga Gill

Maria as a girl: Linn Ullmann

The undertaker: Greta Johansson

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Review

When making this film Bergman had to battle to put together even a shoestring budget. He started with his life savings. Fortunately his dream cast and cinematographer agreed to profit sharing instead of wages. He was lucky to get Taxinge –Näsby Castle for his sole set and luckier to get some fill in funding by the Swedish government. Even the American rights went for only \$75,000. Roles such as screenwriter/narrator /director/production designer/costumer doubled. All this meant that he had no crowds of extras, special effects or original music. Even the producer doubled as one of the few extras. Amazingly one of Bergman's later films *The Serpents Egg* had lavish funding and these austerity measures did not exist - and neither did the austere, focused, powerful but retrained vision that *Cries and Whispers* displays. Everything about this film, from the acting, screenplay and photography to the imparted subtle touches, to the use of stillness and silence, fuse to make an extraordinarily complex, rich and rewarding film.

In *Cries and Whispers* Bergman seems to imply that happiness is brief, comes at a cost and can be an illusion. The only group who smile and laugh in the film are the young children – who are listening to fairy tales. When the mother of the three sisters at the centre of the story is pictured as sweetly amused with one of her girls this is narrated by an unhappy envious spying sister, Agnes (Harriett Anderson). When Maria (Liv Ullmann) listens to her lover describe her face we see her amused, happy face in close up listening but oblivious to the fact that he is making criticisms, trying to tell her how she shows signs of stress and too early ageing.

The third sister Karin (Ingrid Thulin) does not seem to know what happiness is and when Maria tries to change her into a happy person she ultimately rejects this. When Anna the housemaid (Kari Sylvan) reads Agnes dairy about the arrival of her sisters Agnes has assessed the situation half-right. Yes, it feels wonderful to be alive and walking in a beautiful park on an early autumn day. It *seems* wonderful that her sisters care for her by visiting. When she writes about that moment “Come what may; this is happiness” she writes more than she knows, for she soon will be in agony, dying of cancer and her sisters have motives for visiting not based in compassion.

As in so many of Bergman's films and plays, an appearance of decency and settled order are established and then underlying realities emerge. The first shot is of a female statue playing a harp, and like the statues some of these women have an unchanging, often silent and cold appearance to keep up. The next shots are of the

estate's exterior and then the interior. Everything appears to be beautiful and has been arranged to be orderly, even time as we see clock after clock, all ornate in appearance ticking away. Order however, can become stifling and claustrophobic as the shots of clocks pile up with their relentless ticking. The interior shots show us we are amongst the rich in a fin-de-siècle era. Candles instead of light bulbs, no cars or phones, hemlines past the ankle, parasols, top hats, stifling collars and massive estates for wealthy families.

Upper class nineteenth century order and control are ultimately an illusion. Like everything else alive the rich must ultimately face death: the first shots of Agnes show her battling cancer. Her illusions about her sisters begin to dissipate, if not for her, for the viewer soon after. Her two sisters have left their husbands and children behind, apparently to join Anna in tending to Agnes in her last days.



Harriett Anderson as Agnes. No role could be more different to that of the young and sensual free spirit in her 1953 film debut Summer With Monica

In these first scenes Maria appears sleeping in a chair far from Agnes's room. When the others arrive Maria wakes up saying she must have fallen asleep while watching over Agnes. So why if she is watching, is she so far away and why have blankets? With the arrival of Agnes's doctor her motives become clearer. She tries to rekindle an off again on again affair just after he has said Agnes' will die soon. When on his way out Maria waylays him, their hands go over each other in the same way that his hands had just searched over Agnes body when checking for the

spreading cancer. He then rejects Maria's advances. He does not make it clear if he rejects Maria because he feels guilt over her husband's suicide attempt after he released they had made love, fear of his loss of reputation and professional disbarment if they are discovered or because he has just been treating her dying sister. None of these things worry Maria, who only knows her own desires.



The three sisters and Anna walk in the estate park



Everything is neat, opulent, elegant, ordered and enervating in the mansion





Maria and her lover. First comes the facial analysis and then comes the sex.



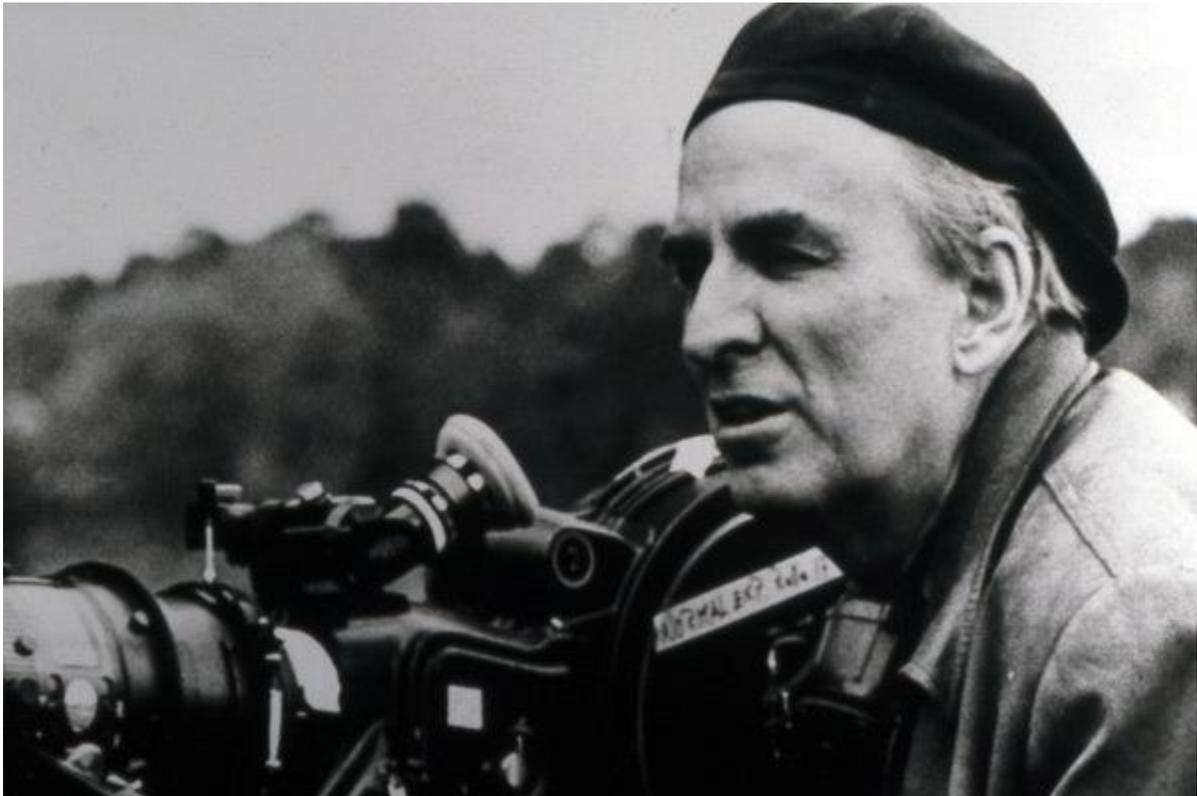


The four central characters: (left to right) Karin, Agnes, Anna and Maria

Maria at least is a vibrant, naturally happy, polite person who tries to get along with people. This makes her at odds with Karin, a dour, cruel neurotic, so repressed that she snarls when Maria hugs her and cannot bear to be touched, to the extent that she self- mutilates her sex organs and smears her face with blood to repel her husband's sexual advances. She does not seem to really care for Agnes, asking the doctor just a little too intensely does Agnes have long to live. Her voice has expectation in it but no compassion. When she talks of selling the estate she has a just suppressed smile, something rarely seen on her face. Is the sale why she really turned up? When Agnes dies Karin shows no emotion, but immediately concerns herself with straightening the corpse and the bed, restoring order, while Maria weeps in the background.

Anna, the dutiful, quiet, caring housemaid, also emerges as different to how she superficially seems. The viewer sees her at her morning prayers, thanking God for taking her dead daughter to heaven and thanking him for giving her another day of life. Like Agnes she appreciates life as a generous gift, seeing the beauty in it, an idea that would never occur to Karin or her husband, people who apparently do not know or want relaxation or happiness. Anna's devotion however, does not originate in the attitude of a quiet dutiful servant as it superficially seems to: Anna and Agnes were lovers. When she rejects the siblings' offer of a memento of Agnes, does this happen because she already has what she wants, Agnes's diary? Or is she rejecting their implicit knowledge of the lesbian relationship because she does not want it known as she will need a new employer? Or because she has trouble coping with Agnes's death? Is she repelled by the other members of the family because she knows that they did not love Agnes?

Nothing is as it seems indeed.



Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)