In the deepest circle of Dante's *Inferno*, we might not find the lake but the emergence of wonderful, almost radiating crimson – the red of *Cries and Whispers* that is not just a color but, as Bergman himself put it, the representation of the inside of the soul. Unlike other films along his filmography, everybody has to watch to fully grasp the concept of this great Swedish director, *Cries and Whispers* is not so black and white in tones, but rather vibrant, however, at times very bleak and frightening. Even though the visual side of the 1972 film is a great asset, we cannot fixate on it for long without mentioning the theme of the film – even if it is so hard to discern. As Roger Ebert once put it, *Cries and Whispers* is beyond explanation, and the ideas behind it are indeed very hard to be **disentangled**. The film needs to be felt and experienced rather than analyzed at every second and is largely open to interpretation since we cannot decide for dead Bergman what he meant in certain scenes that can be allegorical or hinting at something much deeper than what we see on the surface. We are left agape – that is the only fact that we can agree on. The film does not appeal; it shocks, and the permanence of that emotion every time a former enjoyer of the film is presented with a portion of it is undeniable, since we cannot truly express what it is that *Cries and Whispers* evokes in every single one of us.

The film is a chamber piece, centering around the lives of four women – Agnes, played by Harriet Andersson, is the mainspring of the tale that follows the childhood and later lives of emotionally crippled female characters that are far from perfect, maybe as Bergman was. Agnes is, however, the purest among the sisters – alas, the irony that sets her goodness against her debilitating disease is just the right thing for us to experience the crudeness of life that befell her. From an entry in her diary and her moist eyes, lips that are **parched**, we understand that Agnes is in pain. The other women are around her to look after her, but the laziness, the oneiric feel that follows Maria and Karin, speaks for their enthusiasm as well. Their sincere disposition towards Agnes is only revealed when she dies, leaving them unfeeling and rather indifferent – in fact, as they always were. Agnes is an example of faith – a very small part of the pastor that appears to give her the last rites signifies that her faith was childlike, maybe not something that a contemplative person would hold for very long, such as Bergman himself, but certainly worthy of envy, which is expressed through the pastor – the firm faith that Bergman himself envied as well.

We peek in through her childhood, and we see the mother of three – both Maria and the mother of the sisters are played by Liv Ullmann; however, the color and structure of Maria's hair and her apparel differ from those of her mother, suggesting that they were indeed very different. Agnes recalls that her mother was aloof – seen wandering in the green – she is bored, estranged from the social circumstances and gender roles assigned to her as a mother, red book against her dress, for some representing menstruation. We see her sorrowful expression, her eyes that look away at the sight of the horizon that is so far from the object she is observing. From a very simple scene, we understand the feelings of neglect and abandonment Karin has, as her mother, even if she was pure and gentle, was not affectionate to her and only shared talks with Maria. In a moment of unsure gesture, we see warmth exchanged between the mother and daughter – they caress each

other's cheeks, and in a moment of profound closeness, we are taken aback to Agnes, who is confined to bed reminiscing on the twelfth night when, with the magic lantern, the family is enjoying the Brothers Grimm story. The importance of fairytales that reveal the emotional connections lost in translation from a fantastical world to the real one is, of course, a major metaphor for Bergman, who so often utilized near-magical storylines to reflect on his characters' psyche, the unconscious, dreamlike world that they failed to understand. Here the gathering of the family feels very remote for Agnes, creating a feeling of unity – also between the characters of the story – antagonizing the strife that we later see between the sisters. The contrasting colors of the hair and the dress of the mother are a key to her contrasting desires to stay within the limits of her womanhood in a patriarchal world and, at the same time, her unreadiness to compromise her freedom to something that is so distant to her, thus unwanted – her distractedness is not a mere coincidence attributed to neglectful mothers but her response to the epoch that forced women to be suppressed and often confined to their bedrooms, in film represented by the blood red, reinstating the human soul which is trapped in something material.

Agnes is most likely living with Anna, the latter not only being her servant but also her lover, which is further accentuated by the connections between the two on the bed of Agnes, often kissing and caressing each other. The woman derided by others is the only perfect character to exist in the film and apparently the only one who understands Agnes. Anna is not a devout Christian like Agnes; however, she prays to God, and immediately after she speaks for her dead daughter, she is gnawing on the apple, which for many represents the forbidden fruit. Since it is mostly associated with the original sin, Anna, who is not married, much like Agnes, takes the fruit lightly, not cognizant of the parallels it might invoke – of Eve and the sin – therefore she is immune to it; she, in fact, takes all of it. Her daughter, who is now dead, represents one of the cries we hear in the film after the death of Agnes, which might be an insinuation of motherly feelings she might have had for the ill woman, who she comforts in her bed, resembling the *Pietà* – Anna representing the Holy Virgin and Agnes Christ, posing in the same way as Michelangelo's appraised sculpture. The prayer that is said for her daughter leads us to the religious site that is very often used in Bergman's films – the sacred represented by the close interaction, the connection of two naked bodies that goes strictly against the doctrine of Christianity, which represents the idea of the faith and sacred surviving and thus emerging from the body, not from the dogmas of the religion. This goes against the intellectual struggle Bergman had experienced in his early career that backfired to his incessant zeal to understand faith, which is encapsulated in his apparent envy for Agnes, who unfailingly, despite her disease, goes on to believe that in a world brought to us by God, the suffering of such a pure individual can be justified – it would be more correct to say that she does not reflect much on that, as she cannot devise ill of those she loves, including God. Anna's faith, humble and wordless, arises not from theological conviction but from her position outside the bourgeois world of the sisters. Her servitude gives her access to a form of grace that is physical rather than intellectual – a sacredness that survives in care rather than doctrine.

As for the allusions that we see connected to Agnes, we can say that she is very often likened to Christ for her devotion and love for her sisters and her willingness to somehow unite them – the feud between Karin and Maria only unravels after her death, therefore her death signifies the feeble peace that could easily be broken by the elimination of a frail woman dying of cancer. Agnes, now dead, is positioned in a similar manner that is attributed to Christ after he was removed from the cross – both greatly suffered, manifesting in themselves a great toll they have taken in order to release others from their sins, maybe failing to do so. In a dreamlike scene, we also see that Agnes comes back to life, demanding that both sisters visit her. Karin and Maria both refuse to warm cold Agnes, who is now resurrected from the dead like Jesus, craving the affection of her sisters who are disgusted at the sight of her in the case of Ingrid Thulin's character and frightened by the moving corpse in the case of Maria, brought to life by Ullmann. Anna's dream tells us how the sisters felt about Agnes in life, concealed as far as she was alive – it also depicts how they are generally: Karin being emotionally impotent and decrepit, and Maria being scared to come in handy when her husband, learning of her infidelity, stabs himself, and moved to tears in fright from Agnes demanding her warmth. It tells us how shallow they are, not only cruel to each other but also to Agnes, who in death cannot find anyone besides Anna to be close and intimate with.

This inability of intimacy is represented in two lines, by the promiscuous Maria and repressed Karin – both of them unable to give in to their sexual side, one denying her licentious side, the other stabbing her vulva with a shard of glass just to represent her incapacity to provide sex for her husband – here her sexual skill likened to one of her speech. The blood is transferred from her cut-open vulva to her mouth, signaling that she will neither provide words nor sex for the husband that she loathes.

Karin is also infallible when it comes to being cold to her sister, solely hating her. However, both sisters' hatred in this case is counterproductive, as instead of driving them from each other, it attracts them to one another, provoking something that we might call a revelation, but in this context of human affectedness, the stifled emotions being untangled and latent feelings flowing like a waterfall of endless discord between the sisters. Almost incestuous encounters between Karin and Maria, interchanging from normal discourse to one of great emotional intensity, tell us that they are, in fact, repulsive individuals, but also much too like anyone we might acquaint outside of the film – their ills are just a conglomerate of traits that we see in normality. The array of their twisted emotions that torture them provides suffering not dissimilar to ours, and their desires to end their life or their tendency to despise each other are not something that ordinary humans do not relate to. *Cries and Whispers* is not a film about contempt or dissension – we witness unfiltered loathing, alienation, and revulsion that cannot be reversed. The failure is represented in the case of both sisters. Firstly, we see Karin rejecting Maria and her reach-outs to touch her, which shows Karin immune to touch and affection, and the second, we see Karin recalling the memory of their touch, which is now called off by Maria, sardonically reflecting that the state that Karin is in is sad. Their contrast is carried out by the difference between their

sexualities: as for Maria, who is having an affair with the doctor, she is rendered indifferent and indolent; she sneers – this incapacitates her to feel actual affection for anyone, making her harmless but selfish, cool, distant, and unconcerned. Karin, who is more open about her feelings, switches from exhausting, formal talk to something that reveals her unknowing of the feelings she experiences – she cannot palpate or be held, neither by Maria nor her husband. Against Maria's scream of fear is her cry that derives from her fury and scorn, the disdain she feels for her family that cannot be expressed in words. Instead of a gentle sneer that feels flirtatious from Maria's part, Karin laughs uncontrollably, which is said to be reminiscent of the wicked witch in *Hansel and Gretel* – she also represents something beyond a simple character, as she shares the name of Bergman's mother and, in many ways, can be an extension of his memory of the woman, unable to love but at the same time tortured by her emotional failure, clumsiness, and struggle to find the authentic self. The sisters are the antagonistic image set against Agnes and represent the folly that we might notice in the sluggish, uneasy, and relaxed lifestyle that is too different from that of Agnes.

The metaphors like clocks representing ephemeral time and the statue interpreted as either Apollo or Orpheus are reckoned to be of secondary importance to the apparent relevance of women's outwardness in their conduct to show their grapple against life and against each other. The film moves from stillness to chaos; often from the night emerges the sound that only one character can hear – the clocks ticking and the baby crying, matched by the heavy breathing and the agonizing pain-screaming of Agnes, create an ambiance that is hard to resist in exchange for your disturbance. Like the chambers clothed in red, these sounds represent that humans very often feel like acoustic rooms for their feelings – their outcry, be it scoffing or screaming, representing their very own emotions.

Cinematography, done by Nykvist, is phenomenal – we see a resemblance between *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers* – half-dawning faces of the characters and the moments where they touch each other are often graced to us by close-ups – utilized here more than in any other film. Maria touches Karin and puts the palm of her hand on her face in the same way we see in *Persona*, this representing the profound closeness, the climax in their relationship, the peaking emotion exchanged between them that was something else than distaste.

Husbands play a very minor role in the film, the whole film rather representing, with the cello suite of Bach, the inner souls of the women who, in the end of the film, in the remembrance of the days past that will never be revoked, are a recollection in a diary of Agnes, now kept as a keepsake by Anna, representing the happy memory shared between four women. The strolling in the garden of the palace is something in the shade of an Edenic experience that further proves to us that the closeness and intimacy of women were fully and most deeply felt by Agnes, who is seen truly happy and graceful in this bright scene of the film. This further proves that memory is a failure of our imagination, preserving only a tiny part of what is actually present, while it presents absolution for Agnes, it traps Karin and Maria as loving sisters, who they never were – showing us how our perception distorts reality between time that can only be a vessel of our

remembrance, always failing to aid when it comes to truthfulness and authenticity. This final moment might also serve as a fantasy constructed to survive the grief brought by Agnes's death and by unappreciative sisters who give her inadequate gifts to pay for something invaluable. We cannot say for sure if the final grins of women are genuine epiphanies of their happiness (are we so naïve?) or something close to misapprehension. The redemption we are faced with is an escapism from the suffering Anna and Agnes experienced and the pain that was inflicted by the sisters on each other and on Anna and Agnes.

It can be said that the film's ability to convey emotion is unmatched, and the themes employed here cannot be exhausted, so one must stop speaking about it before one starts rambling. So I am advised to cease the discussion; however, *Cries and Whispers*, for me, represented something deeper than the discordance between four women – it was a myriad of the worst and the best qualities that an individual can experience through their life, brought to the screen so impeccably by the pained expressions or unmoving faces of the reddening close-ups of the greatest actresses that have ever participated in the craft of filmmaking. Bergman, once reflecting on the advantage of women, likened this belief to his imagination of women peering through the mirror – just as these four women are seeking our souls, since they know of all the crooked afflictions one can obtain through one's life. We are being observed throughout the film, only to find out that it is we who were exposed to our worst selves. It does not matter, a man or a woman, watching the film is a sacred experience that can transcend all emotional barriers and encrypt its strange, sometimes unclear but enthralling, torturesome encounter with its watcher in their souls, causing further tribulation in awe of the unsureness that follows it – we can contemplate the meaning of the film, but one thing stays clear: the sharp and powerful idea behind the film encapsulated human suffering, evil, aloneness, and loneliness found in an unsullied voyeur that is a sacrificial object for others at her death to realize the hypocrisy that has derailed their lives, making them barren and unworthy of love or happiness.