

Spring Film series 2023

Stalker (1979)

Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky

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“Tarkovsky for me is the greatest, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of film, as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream.” Ingmar Bergman

Andrei Tarkovsky’s*Stalker*represents the high watermark of cinematic achievement. However, the director’s final Soviet film, filmed in the post-industrial wasteland in Estonia, may have also killed the director, his wife and some cast members.

Released in 1979,*[Stalker](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/andrei-tarkovsk-favourite-film-directors/" \t "_blank)*is at once bleak, magical, and astonishingly beautiful. Set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the film tells the story of a hired guide – the Stalker – who leads a professor and a writer into the Zone, a forbidden site from an unspecified and ancient disaster. Eventually, they find their way to the Room, which is said to contain one’s deepest desires. As well as being a reflection on religion and contemporary political anxieties, the film seems to predict the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, which lead to the formation of an exclusion zone around Pripyat, Ukraine.

The prescience of Tarkosvyk’s vision has imbued *Stalker*with the power of myth, as though it were some ancient warning from the depths of the earth.

Although, if it was intended as a warning, Tarkoskvy himself paid no heed. Indeed, the price the director paid to make this astonishing work of art barely stands thinking about. After an earthquake forced him to abandon his plans to shoot principal photography in Tajikistan, Tarkovsky and his crew relocated to an abandoned hydroelectric power station in Estonia, where the dissatisfied director decided to shoot a more minimalist version of the script.

According to sound recordist Vladimir Sharun, the deaths of Tarkovsky in 1986, his wife Larissa and Anatoly Solonitsyn (who plays the Writer) were caused by contamination from the chemical plant located upstream from the set. “We were shooting near Tallinn in the area around the small river Jägala with a half-functioning hydroelectric station,” Sharun recalled in [2001](https://web.archive.org/web/20180322094135/https://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Stalker/sharun.html" \t "_blank). “Up the river was a chemical plant and it poured out poisonous liquids downstream. There is even this shot in Stalker: snow falling in the summer and white foam floating down the river. In fact it was some horrible poison.”

The sound recordist concluded that the deaths of various crew members were a result of Tarkovsky’s decision to shoot in Estonia: “Many women in our crew got allergic reactions on their faces. Tarkovsky died from cancer of the right bronchial tube. And Tolya Solonitsyn too. That it was all connected to the location shooting for *Stalker*became clear to me when Larisa Tarkovskaya died from the same illness in Paris.”

So many years later,*Stalker* remains one of the most hauntingly beautiful Soviet films of all time. Many would be willing to go even further and assert that it’s one of the great cinematic masterpieces. One wonders if[Tarkovsky,](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/andrei-tarkovsky-10-favourite-films-handwritten-list/" \t "_blank)who believed so strongly that man’s purpose on earth was to create great works of art, knew that he was putting his own life and those of his crew in danger and chose to ignore it. Perhaps, he was willing to sacrifice earthly existence for a shot at immortality.

# ‘Stalker’: Searching for Meaning in Tarkovsky’s Philosophical Maze

“My conscience wants vegetarianism to win over the world. And my subconscious is yearning for a piece of juicy meat. But what do I want?”

Outside of Fritz Lang’s Metropolis and Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, no film has ever pushed the boundaries of the science fiction genre further than Stalker. And among those three films, Andrei Tarkovsky’s philosophical maze is by far the one that has triggered the widest range of interpretations and in-depth analysis, often prone to dubious conjecture, that have tried to crack the case wide open to little avail.

Throughout his illustrious career, the Russian director repeatedly wrestled with his own metaphysical anguish, leaving us a string of contemplative masterpieces that favored quiet introspection over conventional narratives that still reverberate to this day. Much like the rest of his work, Stalker is a hypnotizing dystopian tale that stares right into the abyss and delves into the depths of the human psyche; a film that evokes intellectual artistry and perhaps impenetrable understanding as well. From a religious parable to an anti-Soviet manifesto, the movie still opens up to new readings more than four decades removed from its release, and is best understood if seen through the lens of Tarkovsky’s spiritual malaise.

Stalker’s position in cinematic lore has only been further magnified throughout the years on account of its uniquely mystifying conception. Made at the tail end of Tarkovsky’s career in his homeland before fleeing to avoid Soviet persecution, the director and crew underwent a ruthless production near an abandoned hydro power plant in Tallinn, Estonia, where an old factory dumped toxic chemicals upstream of the set. This is widely attributed as the most likely source of the cancer that would prematurely kill several crew members, including the Russian auteur, his wife, and his main collaborator, Anatoly Solonitsyn.

But contrary to what its lofty reputation may suggest, the central premise of Stalker is rather straightforward. Right from the outset, the film introduces us to its lead character and moral compass, the eponymous Stalker (Aleksandr Kajdanovsky), soon revealed to be a sort of professional guide who earns a living by leading people through the Zone — a mysterious, abandoned outpost located in the middle of a post-apocalyptic wasteland where the natural laws of physics seldom apply. Legend has it that somewhere hidden deep within the Zone’s sealed off wilderness lies the Room, a mystical place that is said to grant the innermost desire of any individual who dares enter it.

Much like the original novel, Roadside Picnic, Tarkovsky keeps the true origin of this forbidden place shrouded in ambiguity, hinting at a possible alien incursion or nuclear disaster without granting such a thing as a clear-cut answer. In fact, there’s no proof beyond the Stalker’s word that the Room possesses those aforementioned supernatural powers at all. As far as the viewer knows, access to the Zone is currently restricted and rigorously secured by a military blockade and barbed wire that safeguards it from any trespasser. Needless to say, that doesn’t stop curious wayfarers from trying their luck and hiring the Stalker’s services for a chance at seeing it firsthand.

This brings us to the other two lead characters (Writer and Professor), both of whom go by the names of their respective occupations and will accompany Stalker in his next venture — thus completing the ideological triumvirate laid out by Tarkovsky. Any viewer familiar with the rest of the director’s work will surely know that one shouldn’t take any of his characters at face value, as they always stand in for larger-than-life ideas, conflicting philosophies, and theoretical musings. Stalker proves no exception to the rule; in fact, the true essence of the film lies not so much in the destination but in the spiritual pilgrimage these three individuals undertake on their way to the Room. Tarkovsky used Stalker’s dystopian setting and fantastic elements as mere jumping-off points for fleshing out the real moral conflict of the film and charting the depths of the human psyche. Few scenes would prove as fascinating as seeing these men bicker back and forth, locking horns with each other as they pontificate about human nature, religion, and desire.

The first of two clients is Professor (Nikolai Grinko), described by the director himself as a limited character with a very narrow view whom he wouldn’t want to seek any similarities with. And for good reason — albeit a decisively pragmatic man devoted to the field of science, Professor sees knowledge not as a useful tool but rather a lethal weapon if fallen into the wrong hands. Though at first he claims to be intrigued by the scientific breakthroughs that their expedition may harbor, mentioning among other things a potential Nobel prize as further motivation, we soon learn he has other plans on his mind — most precisely to drop a 20-kiloton bomb to destroy the Room for good. His reasoning? That if it does, in fact, possess such otherworldly powers, it’s just a matter of time until morally corrupt, evil men exploit it without regard for the wellbeing of others. By all means, Professor’s deep-rooted skepticism of the human condition makes a perfect foil to Stalker’s (as well as Tarkovsky’s) unreserved conviction that mankind is inherently good.

By contrast, we have Writer (Anatoly Solonitsyn), who falls on the other side of the ideological spectrum as an idealist man fully devoted to art. Throughout the story, he shows to be very self-conscious of how his work will be perceived, often questioning whether it will endure his own existence as timeless pieces of fiction. At one point, he wonders if there’s a point in creating art at all if it isn’t remembered and appreciated but concludes that there must be no other reason for his suffering than to pour it into creative work. However, Writer has grown disillusioned by the world around him, and has seemingly lost faith in his own talent as an artist, hoping that his trip to the Room will reignite his inspiration and elevate his literary work into recognized masterpieces. It isn’t hard to connect the dots between Writer’s plight and Tarkovsky’s himself — who had to dodge Soviet censorship in order to get his films out in the open — as two creators burdened with their talents who’d grown alienated from their surroundings and were consumed by their lasting legacies. The director described Writer as a man who has lost his way but one, he thought, who will be able to resolve his situation in the spiritual sense.

In his book Sculpting in Time, Tarkovsky described art and science as two valuable means of assimilating the world, equating the former to an endless system of spheres, “each one perfect and contained within itself,” while comparing the latter to “an unending staircase.” The director, unlike Writer, argued that an artist should not see his work as an act of self-gratification but of sacrifice, where “the sincerity of his self-expression is the only pledge of his worth.” In that regard, Writer and Professor are both obvious stand-ins for their respective fields who, despite clashing ideals, represent two sides of the same coin as individuals equally poisoned by cynicism and terrified of a force beyond their comprehension. They would both qualify as what Tarkovsky personally coined as ‘spiritually impotent’: individuals who have strayed from their path to enlightenment and desperately need to take a leap of faith of some kind. A closer look at the director’s canon of protagonists informs us of a few narrative counterparts to Stalker’s main dilemma.

In Andrei Rublev, the titular 15th-century icon painter struggles to find inspiration for his work through hardship, endlessly tormented by the tragedy that surrounds him — from Tatar invasions to Pagan persecutions. It’s only by witnessing the work and relentless spirit of another young artist that he’s encouraged to continue his paintings and become one of the most memorable artists in Russian history.

Nostalghia, the first film Tarkovsky made on foreign soil following his self-imposed exile, centers around a homesick Russian writer who can’t find solace in the Tuscan countryside. During his retreat, he stumbles upon an eccentric neighbor who begs him to cross through a mineral pool with a lit candle; a simple, absurd challenge that he claims will somehow save the world and imbues the writer with a newfound appreciation for life.

In both cases, a disenchanted artist who finds no purpose in a bleak world ruled by materialism befriends a seemingly idiosyncratic character, a ‘holy fool’ if you may, who serves as the catalyst for his path to enlightenment (awakening him in a spiritual sense) and restores his faith by virtue of their passion, selflessness, and love for mankind. This brings us back to Writer and Professor, who in a similar fashion place all their remaining hopes in Stalker, an altruistic man with lofty ideals whose only joy derives from helping others attain their desires by guiding them to the Room, with no interest in entering himself.

And it’s precisely these virtues and moral conviction that both Writer and Professor evidently lack that makes them incapable of entering the Room once they reach its threshold. Keep in mind that the Room allegedly grants one’s innermost desire, but that doesn’t mean that it’s the thing one believes to yearn for the most. This point is further exemplified on their walk through the Zone, where Professor recounts the legendary story of a former Stalker named “Porcupine” who had lost a brother in one of his hazardous treks and entered the Room in order to bring him back to life. However, upon his return, he didn’t find this fulfilled and instead came back home to a large sum of money — meaning that, subconsciously, he longed for wealth more than the return of his dead brother. This unbearable realization drove a guilt-ridden Porcupine to hang himself soon after.

Much like Porcupine, Writer and Professor are afraid of what they’ll discover once their desires are manifested. For them, ignorance is bliss and far preferable to confronting their inner demons or acknowledging their wretched values and priorities — even at the expense of fulfillment. The Zone then becomes a sort of supreme judgment of character that looks into the soul of each wayfarer and exposes their true character. What’s the real nature of our fears and desires? Are we selfish and narcissistic by design? Do greed and pride reign supreme? These are the obvious moral quandaries that one must confront in the Room and can only be ascertained by embracing what you seek.

Granted, Writer and Professor risk their lives and go through a perilous expedition only to come back empty-handed. Taking that into consideration, one could easily be inclined to deem their trip a resounding failure. But in typical Tarkovsky fashion, the road proves far more insightful than the finish line. As our characters ultimately learn, meaningful change is only possible from within, through self-reflection and some moral reckoning. Faith, altruism, and selfless love are mankind’s redeeming qualities, and it’s upon each one of us to live by them, much like Stalker does. In Tarkovsky’s own words:

“Stalker is a tragedy, but tragedy is not hopeless. Tragedy cleanses man. I believe that only through spiritual crisis healing begins. In this film I wanted to make some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is — miraculously — proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world. This is our common, and incontrovertibly positive possession — that essentially human thing that cannot be dissolved or broken down, that forms like a crystal in the soul of each of us which is all a person can count upon his existence.”

Stalker comes to a close in a deliberately anticlimactic ending that, far from being a cop-out, plumbs and deepens Tarkovsky’s meditation on the human condition and underscores the film’s central paradox — concluding that our subconscious desires are not necessarily what we would like to believe, and might be better left unknown. Likewise, the Room is left as a vague abstraction that could be interpreted in endless different ways, but arguably remains as powerful just as that. Is it a religious parable for eternal salvation — the Garden of Eden perhaps — a cautionary tale on nuclear warfare, psychoanalysis, or an allegory of life in the Soviet Union? You could make a pretty strong case for any of them. And yet, much like mankind’s all-consuming quest for knowledge or an absolute “truth,” Stalker might not be meant to be fully understood. Its message might be, after all, the fact that there isn’t just one.

# Ingmar Bergman

Swedish film director

Ingmar Bergman

Born: July 14, 1918

Died: July 30, 2007 (aged 89) [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden)

Awards And Honors:

[Academy Award](https://www.britannica.com/art/Academy-Award) [Praemium Imperiale (1991)](https://www.britannica.com/art/Praemium-Imperiale) [Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award (1971)](https://www.britannica.com/art/Irving-G-Thalberg-Memorial-Award)

[“Cries & Whispers”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cries-and-Whispers) [“Face to Face”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Face-to-Face) [“Fanny and Alexander”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fanny-and-Alexander) [“Saraband”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saraband) [“Scenefrom a Marriage”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scenes-from-a-Marriage) [“The Seventh Seal”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Seventh-Seal) [“Through a Glass Darkly”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Through-a-Glass-Darkly) [“Wild Strawberries”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wild-Strawberries) [“Winter Light”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Winter-Light-film)

**Ernst Ingmar Bergman**, (born July 14, 1918, [Uppsala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uppsala-Sweden), Sweden—died July 30, 2007, Fårö), Swedish [film](https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture) writer and director who achieved world fame with such films as Det sjunde inseglet (1957; [The SeventhSeal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Seventh-Seal)); Smultronstället (1957; [Wild Strawberries](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wild-Strawberries)); the [trilogy](https://www.britannica.com/art/trilogy) Såsom i en spegel (1961; Through a Glass Darkly), Nattsvardsgästerna (1963; The Communicants, or Winter Light), and Tystnaden (1963; The Silence); and Viskningar och rop (1972; Cries and Whispers). He is noted for his versatile camerawork and for his fragmented narrative style, which contribute to his bleak depiction of human loneliness, vulnerability, and torment.

## Life

Bergman was the son of a [Lutheran](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lutheranism) pastor and frequently remarked on the importance of his childhood background in the development of his ideas and [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) preoccupations. Even when the [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context) of his film characters’ sufferings is not overtly religious, they are always implicitly engaged in a search for [moral](https://www.britannica.com/topic/morality) standards of judgment, a rigorous examination of action and motive, in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, which seems particularly appropriate to someone brought up in a strictly religious home. Another important influence in his childhood was the religious art Bergman encountered, particularly the primitive yet graphic representations of [Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bible) stories and parables found in rustic Swedish churches, which fascinated him and gave him a vital interest in the visual presentation of ideas, especially the idea of evil as [embodied](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/embodied) in the [Devil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/devil).

Bergman attended Stockholm University, where he studied art, history, and literature. There for the first time he became passionately involved in the [theatre](https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art) and began writing and acting in plays and [directing](https://www.britannica.com/art/directing) student productions. From these he went on to become a trainee director at the Mäster Olofsgärden Theatre and the Sagas Theatre, where in 1941 he produced a spectacularly unconventional and disastrous production of the Swedish playwright [August Strindberg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/August-Strindberg)’s [*The Ghost Sonata*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Ghost-Sonata). In 1944 he was given his first full-time job as a director, at [Helsingborg](https://www.britannica.com/place/Helsingborg)’s municipal theatre. Also, and more importantly, he met Carl-Anders Dymling, the head of the [Svensk Filmindustri](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Svensk-Filmindustri). Dymling was sufficiently impressed by him to [commission](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/commission) an original screenplay, Hets (1944; [*Frenzy*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frenzy-film-by-Sjoberg), or Torment). This was directed by [Alf Sjöberg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alf-Sjoberg), then [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden)’s leading film director, and was an enormous success, both at home and abroad. Largely as a result of this success, Bergman was, in 1945, given a chance to write and direct a film of his own, Kris (1946; Crisis), and from this point on his career was under way.The films that Bergman wrote or directed, or both, in the next five years were, if not directly autobiographical, at least very much concerned with the sort of problems that he himself was encountering at that time: the role of the young in a changing society, ill-fated young love, and [military service](https://www.britannica.com/topic/armed-force). At the end of 1948 he directed his first film based on an original screenplay of his own, Fängelse (1949; Prison, or The Devil’s Wanton). It recapitulated all the themes of his previous films in a complex, perhaps overambitious story, built around the [romantic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/romantic) and professional problems of a young film director who considers making a film based on the idea that the Devil rules the world. While this is not to be taken without qualification as Bergman’s message in his early work, it may at least be said that his imaginative world is divided very sharply between the worlds of good and evil, the latter always overshadowing the former, the Devil lying in wait at the end of each idyll.

**Britannica Quiz**

[Oscar-Worthy Movie Trivia](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/oscar-worthy-movie-trivia)

In 1951 Bergman’s career in films, like nearly the whole of Swedish filmmaking, came to an abrupt halt as the result of a major economic crisis in Sweden. But in 1952 he returned with the film Kvinnors väntan (Waiting Women, or Secrets of Women), which was followed by Sommaren med Monika (Summer with Monika, or Monika) the following year. These movies marked the beginning of his mature work. In 1952 he also was appointed director of the [Malmö](https://www.britannica.com/place/Malmo) municipal theatre, where he remained until 1959. This new phase introduced two markedly new characteristics in his work. In subject matter, Bergman, now himself married, returned again and again to the question of [marriage](https://www.britannica.com/topic/marriage). Viewing it from many angles, he examined the ways by which two people adjust to living together, their motives for being faithful or unfaithful to each other, and their reactions to bringing children into the world. At this time Bergman began to gather around him, in his film and stage productions, a faithful “stock company” of actors—including [Bibi Andersson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bibi-Andersson), [Gunnar Björnstrand](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gunnar-Bjornstrand), Eva Dahlbeck, Erland Josephson, Ingrid Thulin, [Liv Ullmann](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Liv-Ullmann), and [Max von Sydow](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Max-von-Sydow)—with whom he worked regularly to give his work and their interpretation of it a [manifest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifest) consistency and style.In 1955 Bergman had his first great international success with Sommernattens leende ([*Smiles of a Summer Night*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Smiles-of-a-Summer-Night)), a bittersweet romantic comedy-drama in a period setting. In the next few years, a kind of Bergman fever swept over the international film scene: concurrently with the succession of his new films, which included two masterpieces—[*The Seventh Seal*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Seventh-Seal), a [medieval](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medieval) [morality play](https://www.britannica.com/art/morality-play-dramatic-genre), and [*Wild Strawberries*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wild-Strawberries), a meditation on old age—all of his early work was shown, and Bergman was universally recognized as one of the most important figures in cinema. Indeed, a far wider section of the [cultured](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultured) public became aware of his work than of that of any previous filmmaker. For the first time, a filmmaker was as widely and as highly regarded as artists in any of the more traditional media.Inevitably, a reaction set in, though Bergman continued to make films and direct plays with undiminished activity. His trilogy of films, [*Through a Glass Darkly*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Through-a-Glass-Darkly), Winter Light, and The Silence, dealing with the borderline between sanity and madness and that between human contact and total withdrawal, was regarded by many as his crowning achievement. Through a Glass Darkly won an [Academy Award](https://www.britannica.com/art/Academy-Award) for best foreign film. Cries and Whispers About this time, Bergman acquired a country home on the bleak island of Fårö, Sweden, and the island provided a characteristic stage for the dramas of a whole series of films that included [*Persona*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Persona-film-by-Bergman) (1966), Vargtimmen (1968; [*Hour of the Wolf*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hour-of-the-Wolf)), Skammen (1968; [*Shame*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shame-film-by-Bergman)), and En passion (1969; A Passion, or The Passion of Anna), all dramas of inner conflicts involving a small, closely knit group of characters. With The Touch (1971; Beröringen), his first English-language film, Bergman returned to an urban setting and more romantic subject matter, though fundamentally the characters in the film’s marital triangle are no less mixed up than any in the Fårö cycle of films. And then Viskningar och rop (1972; Cries and Whispers), Scener ur ett äktenskap (1974; [*Scenes from a Marriage*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scenes-from-a-Marriage)), and Höstsonaten (1978; Autumn Sonata), all dealing compassionately with [intimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimate) family relationships, won popular as well as critical fame.

Through the years, Bergman continued to direct for the stage, most notably at [Stockholm](https://www.britannica.com/place/Stockholm)’s Royal Dramatic Theatre. In 1977 he received the [Swedish Academy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Swedish-Academy) of Letters Great Gold Medal, and in the following year the Swedish Film Institute established a prize for excellence in filmmaking in his name. Fanny och Alexander (1982; [*Fanny and Alexander*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fanny-and-Alexander)), in which the fortunes and misfortunes of a wealthy theatrical family in turn-of-the-century Sweden are portrayed through the eyes of a young boy, earned an Academy Award for best foreign film. In 1991 Bergman received the Japan Art Association’s [Praemium Imperiale](https://www.britannica.com/art/Praemium-Imperiale) prize for theatre/film.

Bergman also directed a number of television movies, notably the critically acclaimed Saraband (2003), which featured the main characters from Scenes from a Marriage, and the movie received a theatrical release. In addition, he wrote several novels, including Söndagsbarn (1993; Sunday’s Children) and Enskilda samtal (1996; Private Confessions), that were made into films. His memoir, Laterna magica (The Magic Lantern), was published in 1987.

# Legacy of Ingmar Bergman

Bergman established a worldwide reputation for writing and [directing](https://www.britannica.com/art/directing) films that, in an unmistakably individual style, examine the issues of [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) by exploring human relationships, with others and with God. His work and the worldwide vogue it enjoyed in the late 1950s and early ’60s introduced many people for the first time to the idea of the total filmmaker, the writer-director who throughout a sizable body of work used the medium of [film](https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture) to express his own ideas and perceptions, with as much ease and [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction) as artists in earlier generations used the [novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/novel) or the [symphony](https://www.britannica.com/art/symphony-music) or the [fresco](https://www.britannica.com/art/fresco-painting). In addition, the immense international popularity of his films tended to ensure that Bergman’s picture of [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden) and the Swedish temperament was the first and often the only impression received by the outside world. When other Swedish films seem to present much the same image, it is usually because the influence of Bergman on his Swedish colleagues was so [pervasive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pervasive) rather than because his highly personal vision should be taken as an objectively true portrait of his country.

Bergman’s anguished appraisal of the human situation lost nothing of its intensity through the years. Rather, he progressively stripped away the distracting decorations in his films to create an abstract [drama](https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art) of human relationships, with others and perhaps with God (if God exists). He dealt with the human attempt to define one’s own personality by the removal of masks to see if there is a face underneath. The images of the creator as actor and the creator as magician recur throughout Bergman’s work. He himself embodied elements of both the thinker and the actor, the preacher and the [charlatan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charlatan). In Bergman they all fused to create an artist of great force and individuality whose work is always unmistakably his own.

**Cries and Whispers-Ingmar Bergman**

August 18, 2002

‘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](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ingmar-bergman)’s way of treating his own self-disgust, and his envy of those who have faith. His story, which takes place inside a Swedish manor house on the grounds of a large estate, shows us a dying woman named Agnes and those who have come to wait with her: her sisters Maria and Karin, her servant Anna. Three men drift through, two husbands and a doctor, and there is a small role at the end for the pastor, but this is essentially a story of women who are bound together by a painful history.

This is a monstrous family. Maria ([Liv Ullmann](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/liv-ullmann)) is flighty and shallow, cheats on her husband, and refuses to come to his aid when he stabs himself after learning of her infidelity. Karin ([Ingrid Thulin](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ingrid-thulin)) is cold and hostile, hates her husband, cuts herself with a shard of glass in an intimate place and then smiles triumphantly as she smears the blood on her face. In one of the film’s most devastating scenes, Karin tells Maria how much she had always hated her.

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“Cries and Whispers” was photographed by [Sven Nykvist](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/sven-nykvist), his longtime cinematographer, in a house where the wallpaper, rugs and curtains are all a deep blood red. “I think of the inside of the human soul,” Bergman writes in his screenplay, “as a membranous red.” The women are all dressed in old-fashioned floor-length white dresses or bedclothes, except after Agnes dies, when Karin and Maria change to black. In an essay with the DVD, the critic Peter Cowie quotes the director: “All of my films can be thought of in terms of black and white, except ‘Cries and Whispers.’ “ Yes, because the colors represent their fundamental emotional associations, with blood, death and spirituality. There are only a few respites. An opening shot looks out on the estate grounds, and there are brief sequences in the middle and at the end when family stroll through the green park. These moments release us briefly from the claustrophobic arena of pain and death.Bergman uses flashbacks into the lives of the women, beginning and ending them with full frames of deep red, then fading into or out of closeups where their faces are half-illuminated. These flashbacks are not intended to explain biographical details, but to capture moments of extreme emotion, as when Maria wantonly seduces the doctor who has come to care for Anna’s child, or when Thulin triumphantly wounds herself to wound her husband even more.

One flashback involves both surviving sisters and their husbands, who cold-heartedly decide to reward Anna’s 12 years of faithful service with only “a small payment and a keepsake of Agnes.” Another scene shows Maria asking Karin if they cannot be friends, and Karin rebuffing her venomously, only to allow her sister, moments later, to caress her face. And then, in a scene where we see them talking but do not hear their words, the two women pet each other like friendly kittens, while expressing what look like words of endearment. When Karin later recalls this moment, Maria coldly rejects the memory.Some deep wound has scarred this family. Agnes and Anna, never marrying, living together (possibly as lovers) in the family home, seem to have escaped it. Toward the end of the film there is an extraordinary dream sequence in which the dead Agnes asks first one sister and then another to hold her and comfort her. They reject her. Then Anna (whose dream it us) comforts her, in a composition that mirrors the Pieta. In this scene there seem to be shots indicating that Agnes has come back to life; they are ambiguous, until her hand clearly moves, but remember, it is a dream.

When “Cries and Whispers” was released, it had an impact greater than any other Bergman film except for “[The Seventh Seal](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-seventh-seal-1957)” and “Persona.” In an extraordinary achievement for a foreign film, it won Academy nominations for best picture, director, screenplay and cinematography. Oddly, it did not inspire a lot of complex interpretations, of the sort that have showered on puzzling recent films like “[Memento](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/memento-2001),” “[Mulholland Drive](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mulholland-drive-2001)” or “[Fight Club](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fight-club-1999).” Perhaps that’s because it did not much appeal to young male viewers, who are the most enthusiastic theory-weavers, or perhaps it’s because the movie is simply beyond explanation: 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.Bergman, born 1918, the son of a Lutheran minister, was a lifelong agnostic (although in a conversation with [Erland Josephson](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/erland-josephson) included on the new DVD, he says he hopes to see his wife in the next life). Spirituality is often at the center of his films, and usually involves the silence of God in a world of horror. The knight plays a chess game with Death in “The Seventh Seal,” and a Lutheran minister has a crisis of faith in “[Winter Light](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-winter-light-1962)” when he reflects on the possibility of nuclear holocaust.

In “Cries and Whispers,” Anna’s faith is simple and direct. She lights a candle, kneels before a photo of her dead girl, and asks God to love her. Then she blows out the candle and takes a healthy bite out of an apple (with perfect timing, intercepting some juice before it can fall). When Agnes dies, the scenes of the preparation of her body remind us of Biblical account of the women who took Christ down from the cross, and her cries of pain seem to ask the father why he has forsaken her.

The ending of the film is overwhelming in its emotional strategy. Anna is called before the heartless family, given her pittance, and told to be on her way. Offered a “keepsake,” she raises her voice for the only time in the movie: “I want nothing.” But later we find she has kept something. From a drawer she takes a parcel and unwraps it to reveal Agnes’ journal, and as she reads as Agnes recalls a perfect day in the autumn, when the pain was not so bad, and the four women took up their parasols and walked in the garden. “This is happiness. I cannot wish for anything better,” she writes. “I feel profoundly grateful to my life, which gives me so much.”

Anna’s keepsake is Agnes’ gratitude in the face of pain and death. When Karin and Maria come to the point of their deaths, we feel, they will be without resources, empty-handed in the face of oblivion. Bergman has made it clear from his other films that he feels imperfect, sometimes cruel, a sinner. Anna’s faith is the faith of a child, perfect, without questions, and he envies it. It may be true, it may be futile, but it is better to feel it than to die in despair.

# Ingmar Bergman

Swedish film director

Ingmar Bergman

Born: July 14, 1918

Died: July 30, 2007 (aged 89) [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden)

Awards And Honors:

[Academy Award](https://www.britannica.com/art/Academy-Award) [Praemium Imperiale (1991)](https://www.britannica.com/art/Praemium-Imperiale) [Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award (1971)](https://www.britannica.com/art/Irving-G-Thalberg-Memorial-Award)

[“Cries & Whispers”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cries-and-Whispers) [“Face to Face”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Face-to-Face) [“Fanny and Alexander”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fanny-and-Alexander) [“Saraband”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saraband) [“Scenefrom a Marriage”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scenes-from-a-Marriage) [“The Seventh Seal”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Seventh-Seal) [“Through a Glass Darkly”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Through-a-Glass-Darkly) [“Wild Strawberries”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wild-Strawberries) [“Winter Light”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Winter-Light-film)

**Ernst Ingmar Bergman**, (born July 14, 1918, [Uppsala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uppsala-Sweden), Sweden—died July 30, 2007, Fårö), Swedish [film](https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture) writer and director who achieved world fame with such films as Det sjunde inseglet (1957; [The SeventhSeal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Seventh-Seal)); Smultronstället (1957; [Wild Strawberries](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wild-Strawberries)); the [trilogy](https://www.britannica.com/art/trilogy) Såsom i en spegel (1961; Through a Glass Darkly), Nattsvardsgästerna (1963; The Communicants, or Winter Light), and Tystnaden (1963; The Silence); and Viskningar och rop (1972; Cries and Whispers). He is noted for his versatile camerawork and for his fragmented narrative style, which contribute to his bleak depiction of human loneliness, vulnerability, and torment.

## Life

Bergman was the son of a [Lutheran](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lutheranism) pastor and frequently remarked on the importance of his childhood background in the development of his ideas and [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) preoccupations. Even when the [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context) of his film characters’ sufferings is not overtly religious, they are always implicitly engaged in a search for [moral](https://www.britannica.com/topic/morality) standards of judgment, a rigorous examination of action and motive, in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, which seems particularly appropriate to someone brought up in a strictly religious home. Another important influence in his childhood was the religious art Bergman encountered, particularly the primitive yet graphic representations of [Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bible) stories and parables found in rustic Swedish churches, which fascinated him and gave him a vital interest in the visual presentation of ideas, especially the idea of evil as [embodied](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/embodied) in the [Devil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/devil).

Bergman attended Stockholm University, where he studied art, history, and literature. There for the first time he became passionately involved in the [theatre](https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art) and began writing and acting in plays and [directing](https://www.britannica.com/art/directing) student productions. From these he went on to become a trainee director at the Mäster Olofsgärden Theatre and the Sagas Theatre, where in 1941 he produced a spectacularly unconventional and disastrous production of the Swedish playwright [August Strindberg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/August-Strindberg)’s [*The Ghost Sonata*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Ghost-Sonata). In 1944 he was given his first full-time job as a director, at [Helsingborg](https://www.britannica.com/place/Helsingborg)’s municipal theatre. Also, and more importantly, he met Carl-Anders Dymling, the head of the [Svensk Filmindustri](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Svensk-Filmindustri). Dymling was sufficiently impressed by him to [commission](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/commission) an original screenplay, Hets (1944; [*Frenzy*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frenzy-film-by-Sjoberg), or Torment). This was directed by [Alf Sjöberg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alf-Sjoberg), then [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden)’s leading film director, and was an enormous success, both at home and abroad. Largely as a result of this success, Bergman was, in 1945, given a chance to write and direct a film of his own, Kris (1946; Crisis), and from this point on his career was under way.The films that Bergman wrote or directed, or both, in the next five years were, if not directly autobiographical, at least very much concerned with the sort of problems that he himself was encountering at that time: the role of the young in a changing society, ill-fated young love, and [military service](https://www.britannica.com/topic/armed-force). At the end of 1948 he directed his first film based on an original screenplay of his own, Fängelse (1949; Prison, or The Devil’s Wanton). It recapitulated all the themes of his previous films in a complex, perhaps overambitious story, built around the [romantic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/romantic) and professional problems of a young film director who considers making a film based on the idea that the Devil rules the world. While this is not to be taken without qualification as Bergman’s message in his early work, it may at least be said that his imaginative world is divided very sharply between the worlds of good and evil, the latter always overshadowing the former, the Devil lying in wait at the end of each idyll.

**Britannica Quiz**

[Oscar-Worthy Movie Trivia](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/oscar-worthy-movie-trivia)

In 1951 Bergman’s career in films, like nearly the whole of Swedish filmmaking, came to an abrupt halt as the result of a major economic crisis in Sweden. But in 1952 he returned with the film Kvinnors väntan (Waiting Women, or Secrets of Women), which was followed by Sommaren med Monika (Summer with Monika, or Monika) the following year. These movies marked the beginning of his mature work. In 1952 he also was appointed director of the [Malmö](https://www.britannica.com/place/Malmo) municipal theatre, where he remained until 1959. This new phase introduced two markedly new characteristics in his work. In subject matter, Bergman, now himself married, returned again and again to the question of [marriage](https://www.britannica.com/topic/marriage). Viewing it from many angles, he examined the ways by which two people adjust to living together, their motives for being faithful or unfaithful to each other, and their reactions to bringing children into the world. At this time Bergman began to gather around him, in his film and stage productions, a faithful “stock company” of actors—including [Bibi Andersson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bibi-Andersson), [Gunnar Björnstrand](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gunnar-Bjornstrand), Eva Dahlbeck, Erland Josephson, Ingrid Thulin, [Liv Ullmann](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Liv-Ullmann), and [Max von Sydow](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Max-von-Sydow)—with whom he worked regularly to give his work and their interpretation of it a [manifest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifest) consistency and style.In 1955 Bergman had his first great international success with Sommernattens leende ([*Smiles of a Summer Night*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Smiles-of-a-Summer-Night)), a bittersweet romantic comedy-drama in a period setting. In the next few years, a kind of Bergman fever swept over the international film scene: concurrently with the succession of his new films, which included two masterpieces—[*The Seventh Seal*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Seventh-Seal), a [medieval](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medieval) [morality play](https://www.britannica.com/art/morality-play-dramatic-genre), and [*Wild Strawberries*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wild-Strawberries), a meditation on old age—all of his early work was shown, and Bergman was universally recognized as one of the most important figures in cinema. Indeed, a far wider section of the [cultured](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultured) public became aware of his work than of that of any previous filmmaker. For the first time, a filmmaker was as widely and as highly regarded as artists in any of the more traditional media.Inevitably, a reaction set in, though Bergman continued to make films and direct plays with undiminished activity. His trilogy of films, [*Through a Glass Darkly*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Through-a-Glass-Darkly), Winter Light, and The Silence, dealing with the borderline between sanity and madness and that between human contact and total withdrawal, was regarded by many as his crowning achievement. Through a Glass Darkly won an [Academy Award](https://www.britannica.com/art/Academy-Award) for best foreign film. Cries and Whispers About this time, Bergman acquired a country home on the bleak island of Fårö, Sweden, and the island provided a characteristic stage for the dramas of a whole series of films that included [*Persona*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Persona-film-by-Bergman) (1966), Vargtimmen (1968; [*Hour of the Wolf*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hour-of-the-Wolf)), Skammen (1968; [*Shame*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shame-film-by-Bergman)), and En passion (1969; A Passion, or The Passion of Anna), all dramas of inner conflicts involving a small, closely knit group of characters. With The Touch (1971; Beröringen), his first English-language film, Bergman returned to an urban setting and more romantic subject matter, though fundamentally the characters in the film’s marital triangle are no less mixed up than any in the Fårö cycle of films. And then Viskningar och rop (1972; Cries and Whispers), Scener ur ett äktenskap (1974; [*Scenes from a Marriage*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scenes-from-a-Marriage)), and Höstsonaten (1978; Autumn Sonata), all dealing compassionately with [intimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimate) family relationships, won popular as well as critical fame.

Through the years, Bergman continued to direct for the stage, most notably at [Stockholm](https://www.britannica.com/place/Stockholm)’s Royal Dramatic Theatre. In 1977 he received the [Swedish Academy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Swedish-Academy) of Letters Great Gold Medal, and in the following year the Swedish Film Institute established a prize for excellence in filmmaking in his name. Fanny och Alexander (1982; [*Fanny and Alexander*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fanny-and-Alexander)), in which the fortunes and misfortunes of a wealthy theatrical family in turn-of-the-century Sweden are portrayed through the eyes of a young boy, earned an Academy Award for best foreign film. In 1991 Bergman received the Japan Art Association’s [Praemium Imperiale](https://www.britannica.com/art/Praemium-Imperiale) prize for theatre/film.

Bergman also directed a number of television movies, notably the critically acclaimed Saraband (2003), which featured the main characters from Scenes from a Marriage, and the movie received a theatrical release. In addition, he wrote several novels, including Söndagsbarn (1993; Sunday’s Children) and Enskilda samtal (1996; Private Confessions), that were made into films. His memoir, Laterna magica (The Magic Lantern), was published in 1987.

# Legacy of Ingmar Bergman

Bergman established a worldwide reputation for writing and [directing](https://www.britannica.com/art/directing) films that, in an unmistakably individual style, examine the issues of [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) by exploring human relationships, with others and with God. His work and the worldwide vogue it enjoyed in the late 1950s and early ’60s introduced many people for the first time to the idea of the total filmmaker, the writer-director who throughout a sizable body of work used the medium of [film](https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture) to express his own ideas and perceptions, with as much ease and [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction) as artists in earlier generations used the [novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/novel) or the [symphony](https://www.britannica.com/art/symphony-music) or the [fresco](https://www.britannica.com/art/fresco-painting). In addition, the immense international popularity of his films tended to ensure that Bergman’s picture of [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden) and the Swedish temperament was the first and often the only impression received by the outside world. When other Swedish films seem to present much the same image, it is usually because the influence of Bergman on his Swedish colleagues was so [pervasive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pervasive) rather than because his highly personal vision should be taken as an objectively true portrait of his country.

Bergman’s anguished appraisal of the human situation lost nothing of its intensity through the years. Rather, he progressively stripped away the distracting decorations in his films to create an abstract [drama](https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art) of human relationships, with others and perhaps with God (if God exists). He dealt with the human attempt to define one’s own personality by the removal of masks to see if there is a face underneath. The images of the creator as actor and the creator as magician recur throughout Bergman’s work. He himself embodied elements of both the thinker and the actor, the preacher and the [charlatan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charlatan). In Bergman they all fused to create an artist of great force and individuality whose work is always unmistakably his own.

**Cries and Whispers-Ingmar Bergman**

August 18, 2002

‘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](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ingmar-bergman)’s way of treating his own self-disgust, and his envy of those who have faith. His story, which takes place inside a Swedish manor house on the grounds of a large estate, shows us a dying woman named Agnes and those who have come to wait with her: her sisters Maria and Karin, her servant Anna. Three men drift through, two husbands and a doctor, and there is a small role at the end for the pastor, but this is essentially a story of women who are bound together by a painful history.

This is a monstrous family. Maria ([Liv Ullmann](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/liv-ullmann)) is flighty and shallow, cheats on her husband, and refuses to come to his aid when he stabs himself after learning of her infidelity. Karin ([Ingrid Thulin](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ingrid-thulin)) is cold and hostile, hates her husband, cuts herself with a shard of glass in an intimate place and then smiles triumphantly as she smears the blood on her face. In one of the film’s most devastating scenes, Karin tells Maria how much she had always hated her.

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“Cries and Whispers” was photographed by [Sven Nykvist](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/sven-nykvist), his longtime cinematographer, in a house where the wallpaper, rugs and curtains are all a deep blood red. “I think of the inside of the human soul,” Bergman writes in his screenplay, “as a membranous red.” The women are all dressed in old-fashioned floor-length white dresses or bedclothes, except after Agnes dies, when Karin and Maria change to black. In an essay with the DVD, the critic Peter Cowie quotes the director: “All of my films can be thought of in terms of black and white, except ‘Cries and Whispers.’ “ Yes, because the colors represent their fundamental emotional associations, with blood, death and spirituality. There are only a few respites. An opening shot looks out on the estate grounds, and there are brief sequences in the middle and at the end when family stroll through the green park. These moments release us briefly from the claustrophobic arena of pain and death.Bergman uses flashbacks into the lives of the women, beginning and ending them with full frames of deep red, then fading into or out of closeups where their faces are half-illuminated. These flashbacks are not intended to explain biographical details, but to capture moments of extreme emotion, as when Maria wantonly seduces the doctor who has come to care for Anna’s child, or when Thulin triumphantly wounds herself to wound her husband even more.

One flashback involves both surviving sisters and their husbands, who cold-heartedly decide to reward Anna’s 12 years of faithful service with only “a small payment and a keepsake of Agnes.” Another scene shows Maria asking Karin if they cannot be friends, and Karin rebuffing her venomously, only to allow her sister, moments later, to caress her face. And then, in a scene where we see them talking but do not hear their words, the two women pet each other like friendly kittens, while expressing what look like words of endearment. When Karin later recalls this moment, Maria coldly rejects the memory.Some deep wound has scarred this family. Agnes and Anna, never marrying, living together (possibly as lovers) in the family home, seem to have escaped it. Toward the end of the film there is an extraordinary dream sequence in which the dead Agnes asks first one sister and then another to hold her and comfort her. They reject her. Then Anna (whose dream it us) comforts her, in a composition that mirrors the Pieta. In this scene there seem to be shots indicating that Agnes has come back to life; they are ambiguous, until her hand clearly moves, but remember, it is a dream.

When “Cries and Whispers” was released, it had an impact greater than any other Bergman film except for “[The Seventh Seal](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-seventh-seal-1957)” and “Persona.” In an extraordinary achievement for a foreign film, it won Academy nominations for best picture, director, screenplay and cinematography. Oddly, it did not inspire a lot of complex interpretations, of the sort that have showered on puzzling recent films like “[Memento](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/memento-2001),” “[Mulholland Drive](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mulholland-drive-2001)” or “[Fight Club](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fight-club-1999).” Perhaps that’s because it did not much appeal to young male viewers, who are the most enthusiastic theory-weavers, or perhaps it’s because the movie is simply beyond explanation: 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.Bergman, born 1918, the son of a Lutheran minister, was a lifelong agnostic (although in a conversation with [Erland Josephson](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/erland-josephson) included on the new DVD, he says he hopes to see his wife in the next life). Spirituality is often at the center of his films, and usually involves the silence of God in a world of horror. The knight plays a chess game with Death in “The Seventh Seal,” and a Lutheran minister has a crisis of faith in “[Winter Light](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-winter-light-1962)” when he reflects on the possibility of nuclear holocaust.

In “Cries and Whispers,” Anna’s faith is simple and direct. She lights a candle, kneels before a photo of her dead girl, and asks God to love her. Then she blows out the candle and takes a healthy bite out of an apple (with perfect timing, intercepting some juice before it can fall). When Agnes dies, the scenes of the preparation of her body remind us of Biblical account of the women who took Christ down from the cross, and her cries of pain seem to ask the father why he has forsaken her.

The ending of the film is overwhelming in its emotional strategy. Anna is called before the heartless family, given her pittance, and told to be on her way. Offered a “keepsake,” she raises her voice for the only time in the movie: “I want nothing.” But later we find she has kept something. From a drawer she takes a parcel and unwraps it to reveal Agnes’ journal, and as she reads as Agnes recalls a perfect day in the autumn, when the pain was not so bad, and the four women took up their parasols and walked in the garden. “This is happiness. I cannot wish for anything better,” she writes. “I feel profoundly grateful to my life, which gives me so much.”

Anna’s keepsake is Agnes’ gratitude in the face of pain and death. When Karin and Maria come to the point of their deaths, we feel, they will be without resources, empty-handed in the face of oblivion. Bergman has made it clear from his other films that he feels imperfect, sometimes cruel, a sinner. Anna’s faith is the faith of a child, perfect, without questions, and he envies it. It may be true, it may be futile, but it is better to feel it than to die in despair.