

Spring Film series 2023

Cries and Whispers

(1972)

Directed by Ingmar Bergman

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**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.**ritannica Quiz**

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**

‘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 flightyand shallow, cheats on her husband, and refusestocometohis aid when he stabs himself after learning ofherinfidelity. Karin ([Ingrid Thulin](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ingrid-thulin)) is cold and hostile, hatesher 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.

Agnes ([Harriet Andersson](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/harriet-andersson)), the dying sister, has been caught in a crucible of pain. Sometimes she screams, wounded animal sounds, and then Anna ([Kari Sylwan](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/kari-sylwan)) comes to her, holds her head to her breasts, and tries to comfort her. Anna is the wholly good person in the movie, who prays to God for the soul of her dead daughter, and moves silently in the background as the family eats at its own soul. She loves Agnes, and would love the others if they could be loved.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. “[Persona](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-persona-1966)” (1966) points to it, especially with its use of closeups to show the mystery of the personality; no other director has done more with the human face. It’s as if “Cries and Whispers,” made in 1972, brought him to the end of his attempts to lance the wound of his suffering; his later films draw back into more realism, more sensible memories of his life and failings (for no director is more consistently autobiographical). And near the end there is “[Faithless](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/faithless-2001)” (2000), directed by Ullmann from his screenplay, in which an old man summons actors (or ghosts) to help him deal with his regret for having hurt others.

“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.

(The Magic Lantern), was published in 1987.