

# Compassion in the Movies: Between Sentiment and Virtue

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## Summary

Despite the poor press that compassion seems to have been granted, here we attempt to re-bolster its value, considering it not only people's condescension to their inferiors but also, and recovering its original meaning, as embodying the concept "suffering with". Beyond sentiment, closer than virtue, compassion can also be learned. Since it would be presumptuous to know exactly what others experience, suffering with someone else is always an exercise in imagination. In this sense, here we propose a dual exercise in narrative imagination. What better occasion than that provided by certain narratives to become better acquainted with the pain of those "others" and to reflect upon it. Here we shall explore two audiovisual narratives: *Red Beard/ Akabige*, by Akira Kurosawa, and *Cries and Whispers/ Viskningar och rop*, by Ingmar Bergman, both featuring illness, suffering and death. In the former, the figure of the physician is the pivot, while in the latter it is friends and family who are the stars. In both we are witness to compassion or lack thereof.

*Keywords:* Compassion, End of life, Ethics, Narrative, Cinema.

*Let him see and feel human calamities.  
Shake up and startle his imagination with the perils that  
continually surrounded every man.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile. or, on Education*

"Why should I if I don't want to?" Why is one obliged to do something that one does not wish to do? In one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, all moral reflection has attempted to give answers to this question. Either through divine mandate or categorical imperative, through fervent conviction or cold rational calculation, the history of humankind is also the history of the arguments it has devised to justify that obligation; to prescribe what is correct and proscribe what is not. Condemned as we are to live in society -together with our own intimate desires, particular interests, and personal benefit- what is the place of "the other" in our lives? What makes us take that person into account in our thoughts and actions? What makes us do so? What links us to that person?

Adela Cortina<sup>1</sup>, from an essay by Jonathan Sacks<sup>2</sup>, posits the existence of two great narratives

that run through all of Western thought as regards life in society; two ways of narrating that social link: *contract* and *alliance*. On the one hand, therefore, we have parable of the *contract*, which is best exemplified in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. If man is a wolf to his fellow men, how can we dissolve the rapacious nature typical of humans and the constant chain of conflicts that are born of competition, mistrust, and the need for notoriety (glory) that characterise humans. How can we escape that life deemed by Hobbes as *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short*?<sup>3</sup>. Calculating reason counsels us to seal a pact with others through which each party renounces his/her natural avidness for having it all and at once and agrees to follow a common regime or law. Thus arose civil society; as an artificial "construct" that is the fruit of a voluntary pact, of an agreement among its various parties to escape from a situation in which insecurity, fear and uncertainty prevail.

And on the other hand, we have the "alliance", expressed in that Narrative of Narratives - the Old Testament. When Yahweh realised that it is



Figure 1: *The creation of Eve* (1509-1510) by Miguel Angel Buonarroti (1475-1564) (Sistine Chapel, Vatican)

not good for a man to be alone, man was given a woman, who he recognised as part of himself: *bone from his bone, flesh from his flesh* (Genesis 2, 23) (Figure 1). However, let us rid the parable of its religious and patriarchal vestments and let us focus on the substantial. The story of the alliance is the story of mutual recognition, the story of those who become aware of their common identities as humans. And from here emerges a series of duties that are orchestrated around loyalty, respect, and reciprocity.

The difference between both narratives is thus evident. Those who sign a contract can back off when conditions become unfavourable, and this is indeed how it usually happens. Recognition of the “other” as part of “oneself” does not only not break the link at difficult times; it is precisely in those times when it defends it with the greatest impetus. The contract arises out of fear of one’s neighbour, while the alliance stems from the recognition of the “other” as one’s equal. The contract demands external coercion to be effective, while the latter (alliance) is based on an intimate conviction. The contract places self-interest as the basis of social relations; the alliance chooses compassion. This is in no way some sort of condescension towards one’s inferiors but a “suffering with” the pain of the “other”, because one knows that the “other” is one’s equal.

It is on this last aspect that we shall base what is to follow; on that compassion which, eclipsed by the drive of contract, has for centuries been struggling in the market of moral values. If pity implies “suffering with” and all suffering is -at least in principle- something to be avoided, then how can we make

something positive of compassion? Of compassion it has been said<sup>4</sup> that it is mere passion, and hence outside rational will and deliberate choice. This is the opposite to the exercise of virtue which, as a power of action, can help to transform the reality that surrounds us; through affection we too are affected. Also, compassion -and with it its sisters, pity and commiseration-, has been deemed impotent, because although it is a way of participating in the suffering of others -in their sadness and pain- but without palliating them, then what is the good of adding our own grief and pain to those of others? Compassion has also been considered a form of covert egoism because, it is claimed, pious people tacitly expect the same attitude from those that they feel pity for when they themselves feel pain. It has been derided as partial, since we are not so moved by events that happen at a distance as by those that occur closer to us; far greater attention is paid to people near to us (family, friends or acquaintances). Compassion would deny, then, that everybody has the same worth and none more than any other. It has been accused of degrading those who receive it, since it is seen as a form of imposing the superiority of the donor over someone else’s misfortunes, because the humiliation of receiving compassion is itself superimposed over that person’s actual misfortune. In the long run, then, and here we cite only a few of the invectives used by Friedrich Nietzsche (Figure 2), it has been considered the most incisive spur to Christian piety (a); a refuge of the weak; a triumph of mediocrity and of resentment; an obstacle to becoming a superior being; a depressive and contagious instinct that denies the value of true life<sup>5</sup>.

From here, we shall not attempt to refute all of the above writs and nor shall we elevate compassion to the status of virtue (b). Below, we merely attempt to explore a series of considerations as to why we have taken compassion as the pivotal axis of this contribution.

First, it would suffice to compare compassion with some of its opposites, such as cruelty (i.e., complacency before the suffering of others) or egoism (the indifference towards that same pain) so that, at least by contrast, we can decide to accord it a certain moral relevance. Its possible risks seem to be counteracted by its certain benefits.

a.- Christianity is called the religion of compassion<sup>5</sup>.

b.- Right next to its detractors, compassion has also had illustrious defenders. From Rousseau (who considers it the foremost of virtues and the only natural one because it is human) to Schopenhauer (who revolves his whole moral conception around it). In the above work, Aurelio Arteta regales us with a remarkable force of argumentation and erudition by considering compassion as “the humus that feeds the other virtues, the broth in which all of them bathe” In: Arteta A. Op. cit. p253<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 2: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), (photo by Gustav Schultze, 1882)

Second, if compassion is a feeling, let us at least see it as a moral feeling. There is no being that is pure reason, mere intellect. Muddled up as we are within our various reasonings and emotions, the kind of moral that renounces taking into consideration human inclinations would, literally, be an inhuman moral. If ethics is not to aim at mere abstraction -if it aspires to be of this world- it cannot overlook other parts of our make-up: irritation and indignation; blame and shame, sympathy and compassion.

Third, it seems clear that compassion arises when we see that someone similar to us is suffering so much, and so unnecessarily; that his or her dignity -the true core of humanity- has been belittled. Compassion means that we must first recognise that a person's dignity has been insulted. This mistreatment may have arisen because at some moment the person was not granted the status of being a person; because that person has been stripped of the possibility of becoming fulfilled; because the physical or moral damage inflicted has not been repaired, or because the person has been left to suffer alone.

Fourth, very patent in the exercise of compassion is an awareness of one's own vulnerability. Knowing that we ourselves are fragile, finite, imperfect, and subject to contingency, we also know that misfortune may also befall us. The compassionate person cannot but recall that the person suffering could very easily exchange places.

Finally, since we cannot access what others feel directly, and since we must limit ourselves to interpreting their gestures of pain and suffering without really being able to put ourselves in the place of the misfortunate, we must not forget that imagination also plays a role in this process. It does not suffice to recognise the pain of others; we too must feel it in some way. It is necessary to *imagine* it.

Thus far we seem to be seeing compassion as lying somewhere between virtue and feeling. As a feeling, compassion may be felt or not but it would certainly not be susceptible to demand; there could never be a duty to feel compassion. Nevertheless, it does not seem appropriate to abandon ourselves to the fatality of feelings. Feelings too are cultivated; there exists the possibility of developing the capacity to feel sentiments. Accordingly, compassion is also virtue, because it involves a step towards human excellence, *because it allows us to pass from one (feeling) to the other (virtue); from the affective to the ethical; from what is felt to what is wanted; from what one is to what one should be*<sup>6</sup>. But now we should like to spend a little more time on the cultivation of compassion; in particular on the role of narrative in the development of that capacity. This is because it is clear that narratives provide us with men and women similar to ourselves, embedded within specific circumstances and obliged to cope with different moral conflicts, enjoying a good life or passing their time in abject misery, and able to act and express what they feel. This is why the imagination necessary to be able to get closer to the pain of others is, as from here and using the felicitous formulation of Martha Nussbaum, a *narrative imagination*<sup>7</sup>.

Here we shall address two movies: *Red Beard/ Akabige* (1965) by Akira Kurosawa and *Cries and Whispers /Viskningar och rop* (1974), by Ingmar Bergman. These two films are tapestries of illness, suffering and death. In them, we see the dying lose the dignity they are due as persons. And in them we also see how compassion is a way of restitution of that dignity; as a way to strengthen a shared human feeling.

**Red Beard** “a manual of ethics for the training of superior human beings”<sup>8</sup>

**Technical details**

**Title:** *Red Beard*

**Original title:** *Akabige*

**Country:** Japan

**Year:** 1965

**Director:** Akira Kurosawa

**Music:** Masaru Satô

**Screenwriter:** Masato Ide, Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa and Hideo Oguni, based on the novel *Akabige shinryotan* by Shugoro Yamamoto.

**Cast:** Toshirô Mifune, Yuzo Kayama, Tsutomu Yamazaki, Reiko Dan, Miyuki Kuwano, Kyôko Kagawa, Tatsuyoshi Ehara, Terumi Niki, Akemi Negishi, Yoshio Tsuchiya, Eijirô Tono, Chishu Ryu, Takashi Shimura, Haruko Sugimura, Kinuyo Tanaka, Eijirô Yanagi, Koji Mitsui, Nobuo Chiba, Kamatari Fujiwara and Ken Mitsuda.

**Color:** Black and white

**Runtime:** 185 minutes

**Genre:** Drama

**Production Companies:** Kurosawa Production Co. and Toho Company

**Synopsis:** The arrogant and recently graduated Dr. Yasumoto is forced by his father to work with Dr Niide, “Red Beard“, at the Koishikawa clinic.

The story takes place at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Japan, The young Noboru Yasumoto (Yuzo Kayama) arrives in the city of Edo with a view to starting what he hopes will be a successful career as a court doctor (Figure 3). Owing to his noble background and his westernized medical studies in Nagasaki, he seems destined to become the personal physician of some important person (*Shogun*). However, his very influential father, who is also a doctor, has decided to send him to a clinic run by Doctor Kyojo Niide (Toshiro Mifune) -nicknamed “Red Beard”- so that he can learn about the arduous reality of the practice of medicine. The clinic is for the poor and the physicians and nurses work frantically to cure and help the defenceless, all under the iron hand of the clinic’s director. The initial reticence of the young doctor to work there is confirmed –for him- by what he sees and learns. On the one hand, he learns about the nature and behaviour of doctor Red Beard (Figure 4), who he sees as a choleric, uncouth sort of type; on



Figure 3: *I am Noboru Yasumoto...*

the other, he becomes aware of the reality of the miserable circumstances in which he must work, where everything “smells of poverty”. He therefore refuses to apply the fruit of his studies and to share his knowledge with those around him, and spends hours alone in his room, lazing on his bed, drinking sake, and ruminating on his frustrated expectations.

As from that original conflict between two people of different ages, with different characters, aspirations and conceptions about what it is to be a doctor, Kurosawa’s film revolves around a triple entity susceptible to reflection: justice, the aims of medicine, and the learning of virtue.

*Justice.* The link between physical and moral misery expressed by the Japanese director in his films is a common one (c). This is why the struggle of physicians is not only against disease but also against the social conditions that enable it to run its ravages. Red Beard points this out unequivocally from the very beginning of the film:

*We We can only fight poverty and ignorance, and cover up what we don't know. They say that poverty is a political problem, but has politics ever done anything for poverty? And government funds? If there weren't any poverty, half of these people wouldn't be ill. There's always some kind of misfortune behind disease* (Figure 5).



Figure 4: *...And I am Red Bread*

c.- *Red Beard* is a “hinge” film in what has been called the “Trilogy of Misery”, between the previous one -*The lower depths/Donzoko* (1957)- and the one that came immediately after, *Dodeskaden/ Dodes'kad-en* (1970).



Figure 5: ...*We can only fight poverty and ignorance, and cover up what we don't know...*

And it is that for Kurosawa there is a kind of social determinism from which it is impossible to escape. Human life is not more than abject fear and trembling; lies and corruption, suffering and death. However, in his stories, next to this sort of “anthropological pessimism”, the director intercalates characters with a “pure heart” who devote their existence to improving that of others. Red Beard belongs to this class of people. He is fully aware of the relationship between illness, on one hand, and disease and ignorance, on the other. Likewise, he is fully cognisant of the meaninglessness of human life and that, within this context, his fight will be solitary and unceasing. Only compassion can palliate, at least to some extent, the anxiety of those who are born already condemned to a life of misery. Faithful to his deep convictions, he devotes all his time and activities to this. He uses all means within his reach: even “extortion” and the use of physical force. Thus, from the noble and wealthy Matusdaira (Nobuo Chiba), who is a complete glutton, he demands an amount far in excess of the services he has delivered (the mere prescription of a simple diet), which he will devote to financing his clinic and attending to those who have begun the day without knowing whether they will be able to eat anything. And, before the astonished eyes of the young Yasumoto, he has no qualms about using extreme force to liberate the girl Otoyō (Terumi Niké) (Figure 6) from the clutches of the brothel where she is being exploited and mistreated and to take her into his clinic. Are these simply two more cases of “the end justifies the means”? Or are



Figure 6: Otoyō

we dealing with extreme reactions to extreme cruelty which, according to Kurosawa and his speaker in the film, are inherent to human beings? This is so because this *indignant* Red Beard is the Janus-like face of the *compassionate* Red Beard. Both *-indignation* and *compassion-* arise out of the same situation of injustice; they are reactions that emerge from the contemplation of the very spectacle of poverty and inequality. The former (*indignation*) is directed at the person who commits the injustice and the second (*compassion*) at the person who suffers it. Thus, both are conditions of the possibility of justice. If one feels affected by the pain of others, and not merely by one's own pain, this is the first impulse that should make us attempt to make that pain disappear, to try to repair a situation perceived as unmerited. And this is what Dr. Kytojo Niide devotes himself in his career as a doctor.

*The aims of medicine.* Unlike Red Beard, the young Yasumoto aspires to a comfortable and privileged existence at court; owing to his origins and education, he wishes to live a pleasurable existence away from the ravages of human degradation and misery. His real aim is put his exquisite body of knowledge at the service of some great overlord. And it is here that we see the conflict: Yasumoto has still not understood what the final aim of his activity as a physician should be. Life in society is necessarily accompanied by a series of activities considered to be essential by those involved for their complete development, and medicine is one of them. In the performance of these activities, and from the ethical point of view, two types of goods are brought into play: internal and external. The internal good would be the purpose of medicine, its *telos*; that which affords medicine meaning and social legitimacy. No other human activity can replace it in its functions. An external good of medicine would be that which, in serving the community, can be obtained in the form of fame, prestige, money, power or social recognition. External goods are not illegitimate, but neither do they provide any meaning to an activity, since they can readily be obtained in the pursuit of some other activity. So, when does the exercise of that activity become corrupted? It becomes corrupted when the external good prevails over the internal good. This is what corruption is all about: in changing the nature of something, making it bad<sup>9</sup>. What is the internal good of medicine? It is, of course, the prevention of disease and the promotion and conservation of health, although it also involves alleviating the pain and suffering generated by disease, providing attention and care to those who have no cure, and the struggle against premature death and the search for a tranquil demise<sup>10</sup>.



Figure 7: The initiation. The young Noboru Yasumoto meets Red Beard

The Red Beard we are offered in this story seems to assume each and every one of these duties. The young and inexpert Yasumoto, in contrast, seems to long only for the external goods derived from the exercise of his profession. Hence the need for a change in perspective; hence the transformation he undergoes when he begins to appreciate the tireless onslaught of his mentor against misery.

*Learning virtue.* A large part of Kurosawa's stories are structured as tales of initiation (d). Throughout his life he was unable to put aside the fascination he felt for *the spectacle of a being who progresses towards maturity and perfection*<sup>11</sup>, and Red Beard is no exception (Figure 7). Here too we learn of the fruitful relationship between the *maestro (sensei)* and the pupil (*deshi*). We learn how the arrogant, indolent and immature apprentice is humbled and later becomes an abnegated and virtuous physician through the works of the inflexible and tenacious Red Beard. Kurosawa certainly believes in the existence of a *samurai* deep within all of human existence. According to this, we all have an aim in this life; something that merits us giving our all. Something that, because it is necessary (we are condemned to this), we must freely accept and assume. What is the problem? The problem is to determine the nature of what we are destined to do. The flowering of what is to give meaning to our existence and what will make us useful often involves a



Figure 8: The Koishikawa hospital

pathway full of pitfalls. From there stems the need for apprenticeship and initiation; for all of us to be pierced by a series of experiences that will modify our own perceptions of reality. This is because, it must be said, apprenticeship has less to do with the acquisition of instrumental knowledge than with the taking up of a specific way of life.

So we see that the film *Red Beard* has a pronounced circular nature. As Yasumoto is forced, at the beginning of the film, to remain imprisoned within the inhospitable walls of the Koishikawa hospital (Figure 8), at the end -when he is allowed to leave- he refuses to do so, consecrating his life to the care of the less fortunate. Distanced from his former peers for so long, he now feels bound, obligated, to palliate suffering as far as he is able to. Between both moments, he passes through a gamut of experiences from which he will not emerge unscathed. As a prime example, it is worthwhile looking at a particular scene from the film. Yasumoto, who has refused to obey any of the norms prevailing in hospital life, is requested by Red Beard to help him with a dying patient. Doubtful, he goes. While the experienced physician is washing his hands, the young man is encouraged to examine the patient and he makes a diagnosis. But it is incorrect, and Red Beard reproaches him and expresses his idea of the social roots of sickness and governmental disdain for the poor. Red Beard is called away urgently and as he is leaving he says *there is nothing more solemn than the last moments of a person's life* (Figure 9). Yasumoto remains with the moribund patient. He is anxious about the patient's last breaths; he is unable to face up to that radical and eminently singular experience that is death. When he does finally leave the room, we see him staggering, hardly able to stand upright, clinging to the walls of a long corridor. This, then, is his first true experience of death, which of course never figured in his sanitised notes from his stu-



Figure 9: ...*There is nothing more solemn than someone's last moments. Note this carefully*

d.- The use of this is not fortuitous in his first long movie *Sugata Sanshiro* (1943) and in his last, *Madadayo/Madadayo* (1993). Also, between both of these and more or less explicitly, in *No regrets for our youth/Waga seishun ni kuinashi* (1946), *Stray Dog/Nora inu* (1949), *Drunken angel/Yoidore tenshi* (1948), *The Seven Samurai/Shichinin no samurai* (1954) or *Dersu Uzala/ Dersu/ Uzala* (1975).

dent days. This is when, like his own figure, the false ideas about practising medicine, and the ideas about Dr. Niide that had filled his first days at the clinic, begin to dwindle. Here, at last, we see a glimpse of a long and arduous path -like the one we see in the corridor in the film- that is to lead him to maturity.

What is it that makes Red Beard a virtuous physician? Which are the capacities that Yasumoto will take up as his own? Naturally, all those recognised clinical skills known to his peers, but also his capacity for compassion, his ability to “suffer with”, to put himself in the place of those who are suffering. And finally we will see his ability to listen; through the story of the relationship between Red Beard and Yasumoto we follow the warp and weft of constant intrusions on the part of secondary characters who tell their own stories. Before such stories Dr. Niide remains impassive, attentive, and patient. Listening. Always available. This would be the ideal of a perfect doctor: one who is able to combine being a technical virtuoso with moral virtue; one who is just in giving everybody their due; one who shows respect for patient; one who has benevolence (*bene volere*) in wishing them well, beneficence (*bene facere*) in doing so, and trust and confidence.

**Cries and Whispers: the portrait of a dying family.**

**Technical details**

**Title:** *Cries and Whispers*  
**Original title:** *Viskningar och rop*  
**Country:** Sweden  
**Year:** 1972  
**Director:** Ingmar Bergman  
**Music:** Juan Sebastián Bach and Frederic Chopin  
**Screenwriter:** Ingmar Bergman  
**Cast:** Harriet Andersson, Kari Sylwan, Ingrid Thulin, Liv Ullmann, Anders Ek, Inga Gill, Erland Josephson, Henning Moritzen and Georg Årlin  
**Color:** color  
**Runtime:** 91 minutos  
**Genre:** Drama  
**Production Companies:** Cinematograph AB and Svenska Filminstitutet (SFI)  
**Synopsis:** Faced with the eminent death from cancer of their sister Agnes, Karin and Maria watch over her in the old family residence.

Naturally, it would seem excessive to make a doctor, or for that matter anybody, responsible for solving human misery. Here we could invoke Baruch Spinoza (Figure 10): *Helping every indigent is something way beyond the possibilities and interests of any given person (...) a single person does not have the ability to become a friend to all; therefore, care of the misfortunate must be the competency of society and is only of common interest*<sup>A2</sup>. This would be more or less equivalent to saying “ess compassion and more politics”. However, it would be of interest here to introduce the other side of compassion; not in light



Japan poster



Figure 10: Baruch Spinoza (1632 -1677)

of the wicked acts that human beings wage against their fellows, but the compassion that arises from simply being human and, as such, from the caducity from which we can never escape. This is a type of compassion that is not destined for a single innocent victim but for the victim that is the whole of humankind, simply because we ourselves are all very precarious and fragile entities: we are all destined to die. If all pain is unjust and if life is also, and essentially so, pain then all life merits pity. Moreover, the pain we undergo in the face of death is true, unmitigated pain. The other types of pain, in so far that they can be remedied, can be partially palliated; this is what we could call *relative* pain. From this perspective, it is not possible to consider human life as being something apart from a continual fight to the death against death itself and the signs announcing it, and we must understand compassion as something that springs forth from our own vulnerability and finiteness. A vulnerability and finiteness which become more evident as death draws closer to our own lives.

Ingmar Bergman states that his film originated in a recurrent dream that was to accompany him along many years of his life: *Three women await the death of a fourth one and take turns to accompany her in a red room*. From this seminal obsession arises the story of Agnes (Harriet Andersson), Karin (Ingrid Thulin), Maria (Liv Ullmann) and Anna (Kari Sylwan), which Bergman situated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Agnes, who is suffering from terminal cervical cancer, awaits death with apparent calm; only a few and sporadic circumstances seem to worry her. Around her, her two sisters Karin and Maria, and Anna, the ageing housekeeper who has been with them for the last 12 years, take turns to look after her in their large and now decaying family mansion, in which the colour red is omnipresent throughout the somewhat austere decoration. The action actually starts with an intense red background, while we as audience listen to the ponderous chiming of a carillon clock. This is followed, on a cold misty dawn, by images of old statuary in the garden and ancient trees in a thickset wood. On cutting to another scene, we pass into a room, and there the camera halts before a series of clocks, again with their monotonous ticking. Agnes wakes up in pain (Figure 11); she gets up and winds up the clock that has stopped during the night and approaches the window, from where she contemplates an autumn scene. She goes to her desk, opens her diary and writes: *It is early Monday morning and I am in pain*. Meanwhile, her sister Maria, who should be looking after her, sleeps on placidly (Figure 12). So, against the suspended time



Figure 11: Agnes awakes in pain...

of nature herself we see the ineluctable passing of time through the clocks. We become aware that with each second that passes all of us come closer to the final hour, which is death. Agnes realises only too well that her time is nigh, but despite this she resists the ebbing away of her life. She only finds occasional comfort in writing, her word being all that will be left when she has gone. She wishes to die surrounded by her most loved ones, but these seem to be indifferent to her suffering anxiety and loneliness.



Figure 12: ...while Maria sleeps

Bergman is undoubtedly the great director of human loneliness and of the anxiety (*angest*) that derives from it. All issues relating to the existence of God, the crisis of couples, or the fear of death cannot but be explored within the light of the great theme that is human loneliness. God no longer speaks to us and heaven, as stated by the pastor at Agnes' funeral, remains "empty and impassive" to what happens down here in the "dark earth". Couples break up and families break down; death never stops reminding us about our precarious position and the meaninglessness of existence. This is how the Swedish director sees human beings: open to the ravages of time and the world in general -at a permanent cross-roads- and necessarily obliged to face up to themselves and their own decisions.



*Physical and moral misery.* The cancer eating away at Agnes' insides is evidently worthy of a broader reading; it is the same disease that has metastasised society, undermining interpersonal, family and group relationships (e). The physical degradation that Agnes is subject to is paralleled by the emotional and affective decay present in her sisters. The eldest, Karin, who is married to a diplomat, is authoritarian, cold and insensitive. She is always distant and can hardly bear to have any physical contact with other people (Figure 13). The younger sister, Maria, who is "well-married", is voluble, superficial and seductive: the eternally spoiled child.



Figure 13: Karin cannot bear physical contact

Apparently different, Karin shows a predominance of rationality, while Maria is passionate. However, in essence they are equal in that they live vacuous lives or, if one wishes, they are the same in that they brimming with frustrations and resentments, lies and treasons, renunciations and vengeance. Counterpoised against them, Bergman places the suffering Agnes, the patient, and Anna, the housekeeper who saw her own daughter die when she was still a young child.

And so it is that everything in this film is established geometrically, almost symmetrically. On the one hand, we have the number four. There are four women (Figure 14), but also four men, since together with the respective spouses of Karin and Maria - Fredeick (George Årlin) and Joaquim (Henning Moritsen)- we sporadically see another two male characters: the Lutheran pastor (Anders Elk) and the doctor (Erland Josephson). Religion and science are invoked here to express their uselessness, their inca-



Figure 14: Four women, four...

capacity to bring consolation and hope to Agnes' last moments of life. Four breaks in the narrative linearity; four "recallings"; four flashbacks in time (f) that, at the same time as telling us about the past, lead us see the present from a different perspective. Finally, there are four seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter), four colours (at the same time as the ubiquitous red, we also have black, white and the occasional green)... But together with four, we also have two. Bergman has organised everything around a series of binary oppositions. The Title itself -*Cries and Whispers*- introduces us to this. On the one hand, we have the cries of pain, anxiety, impotence and loneliness, and on the other we see sweetness, love, consolation and compassion expressed in whispers. From here, the female characters are opposed in twos; the spaces are articulated between interior and exterior shots; time is a play between the past and the present, and even the music that is heard every now and then swings between the *Mazurca* in G minor, Opus 17 n° 4, by Frederic Chopin that we hear during fleeting moments of well being, and the *Zarabanda* of suite n° 5 in C minor by Juan Sebastian Bach, used to underline the drama of the scene in which it is heard.

All this at the service of the most important aspect of the film: that which posits "mask" and "face".

*Masks off!* Here are two concepts that run in parallel throughout the filmography of Ingmar Bergman: From the visual point of view, the profusion of close-ups, akin to portraits, of the faces of his characters is one of Bergman's signatures. Faces taken directly in front of the camera, cut abruptly by the framing, partially illuminated. Faces that announce to us

e.- As in *The Touch / Beröringen*, (1971), the insects and larvae that are inwardly destroying a beautiful mediaeval sculpture of the Virgin serve Bergman to reflect the evil eating into an apparently happy marriage.

f.- In fact, one of them, that corresponding to Anna, is rather somewhat of a dream-like evocation.

g.- Hence the significant title to some of the films by the Swedish director that address what is being explored: *The face / Ansiktet* (1958); *Persona/ Manniskätarna* (1966) or *Face to Face/ Ansikte mot ansiktete* (1975).

the existence of something beyond what we can perceive directly; the underlying persistence of a zone of shadows. Here we must recall the etymology of the words *persona* and *person*. Both come from the same Latin root *persona* which referred to the mask that actors would wear to cover their faces (g). The people who populate the films of the Swedish director also wear masks that serve as both appearance and refuge. All of them represent a role to be shown to others, hiding their real personalities. All of them, knowing that they are vulnerable, take courage from pretending and from false appearances. In one scene in the film, David - Agnes' doctor and Maria's former lover- expresses what lies beneath Maria's beautiful *persona/face*: dissatisfaction, indifference, superficiality, indolence, sarcasm, contempt, cruelty, boredom and impatience.

All of this is why the essential part of this narrative lies not so much in the fact of the agony and death of one of the characters, but more in how the other characters cope with that unsolvable pain; of how each of them portrays him or herself in the face of the scandal that is death. Because, why not make that extreme experience the motive that will lead people to show what they hide behind the placid surface of their comfortable lives? Bergman obliges them to divest themselves of their masks and show us their true faces.

The four breaks in the chronology of the story that occur in this narrative lie in this direction. The women bare their souls beneath their faces captured by the camera, all suffused with crimson (Figure 15). First, Agnes recalls her childhood, and in it her mother and the good relationship that she had had with her younger sister. Then, we have Maria



Figure 15: A crimson-tinged face

herself, who evokes one of so many infidelities and the contempt she feels for her husband: when he doesn't have the courage to stab himself with a letter-opener and -sobbing- asks for help, she abandons him to his own devices and impassively leaves the room. Next is Karin, the older sister, who is unable to cope with the world of lies around which her life has developed and who mutilates herself to avoid physical contact with a husband who she sees as repulsive. And finally there is Anna the housekeeper who -believing she has heard the cries of her dead daughter- goes to help her, only to find a dying Agnes asking her sisters for succour. In this state of extreme loneliness -which is death itself- Agnes longs for the company of those she loves and believes love her. As she did before with her husband, Karin cannot bear to touch her and leaves the room. As she also did with her own husband, Maria abandons her and flees the room. It is only Anna who will be with Agnes at the end. Only she is able to feel compassion, to "suffer with" Agnes (j). Faced with death, we are all the same; we are all victims, and we are all susceptible to pity. Hence the emulation of the symbol *par excellence* of Christian piety - Miguel Angelo's *La Pietà*- with which the scene ends (Figure 16).

Anna, silent and observant, embodies humble solidarity; disinterested love. She is the one who most gives and least receives. After Agnes' death, the family no longer needs her and she is cynically dismissed. She ends with but a sole remembrance of the dead person; Agnes' diary wrapped in beautiful lace (Figure 17); the place where, with the fear that with her death all would disappear, she noted down, together with her pain, her memories, short epipha-



Figure 16: Ingmar Bergman's *La Pietà*

h.- Bergman stated this explicitly: *Red is the colour of the human soul*<sup>13</sup>.

i- Both characters, the mother and the daughter, are interpreted by the same actress: Liv Ullman.

j- Beyond the exercise of blunt psychoanalytical interpretation, one could speak in terms of a compensatory transference between both; for Agnes, Anna is the longed-for mother; for Anna, Agnes is the lost daughter.



Figure 17: Anna, with the diary wrapped in lace

nies, her fleeting moments of fulfilment. There where she had also written:

*I have received the most beautiful present possible that one can have in one's life. The present comes under many guises: solidarity, friendship, human warmth, affection.*

Thus we see compassion. Faced with the inevitability of death, with the passage of all-devouring time, we are only left with the hope of remaining in the memories of those who loved us, those who gave us comfort in difficult times, those who were prepared to accompany us on our final journey. And it is indeed in this way that Agnes lives on, as we see in the epilogue of the film: in Anna's memory; through their shared experience; through Agnes' own memories spilled out in the diary that now belongs to her lifelong friend.

We close this circular contribution by recalling the two narratives with which it opened: *contract* and *alliance*. We all aspire, and legitimately so, to become the heroes of the narrative that is our own biography. All we have left to do is to determine which of those to narratives we wish to star in: the one founded on fear of our neighbours and self interest, or that built upon the recognition of others as part of ourselves and compassion. That is the choice. That is one of so many choices.

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American poster (one sheet): Bergman's *La pietà* and the clock

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