

INGMAR BERGMAN'S OEUVRE, from theatre to cinema and television, is aesthetically captivating and ethically fraught. Stylistic and thematic concerns recur in his plays and films, blurring the edges between reality and illusion, and eliciting the spectator's active participation through emotion and imagination. Illusion, in particular, acquires an ever-growing significance in its close link with issues of authenticity, to the point of becoming 'necessary' (Michaels 1999, 1), or even 'inevitable' (Hubner 2007, 3); that is, illusions allow individuals to cope with a potentially meaningless life. Thus, places and faces are troubled by unresolved dilemmas and irrational desires.

The search for glimpses of sense concretises more powerfully in the faces during the extreme close-ups, enigmatically lit by Sven Nykvist and Gunnar Fischer. In *Cries and Whispers* (*Viskningar och rop*, 1972), the intense facial close-ups, which disclose something about the characters' painful interiority, are also the target of destruction by means of an equally intense colour – red. While the film is overall figurative, it nonetheless contains several images which go beyond mimesis through an iconoclastic use of the colour red. Colour therefore becomes fundamental for complicating a simple reproduction of the phenomenal world, in an attempt to produce an ethical representation of the other's pain. What is more, the film offers an exquisitely cinematic passing from the moving image as iconophilic icon – the facial close-up – to the moving image as iconoclastic *eikōn* – the monochromatic red screen.

This chapter thus proposes an interpretation of Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* as emblematic of an iconoclastic ethics. It argues that the recurrent fades to red which punctuate the film are a way of representing the others' suffering in a manner respectful of its, at least partially, invisible and ineffable character.

Through an overview of the importance of colour and an in-depth analysis of the film and its central themes of grief and lack of empathy, the chapter demonstrates that the fades and the resulting red monochromatic screens are examples of iconoclastic *eikones* in which a mimetic, potentially spectacular image is replaced by an image that hints at its model without exhibiting it in a figuratively accessible manner. The film therefore supports an iconoclastic perspective because the gap between the intelligible content and its visible form is unbridgeable.

The Figurative Image Disappears into Sheer Colour

Like Derek Jarman's *Blue* and Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Blue* (see Chapter 8), one of the most striking features of Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* is colour. While Jarman makes colour the constitutive image track of the film, Bergman and Kieślowski punctuate theirs with fades to colour and monochromatic screens, thereby exhibiting how a mimetic image slowly vanishes into colour. All three films are significantly built around a consistent, anti-naturalistic use of a dominant colour, which assumes connotations and meanings independent from the coloured objects. Bergman's recurrent fades to red which suspend figuration, decomposing the magnified female faces, demonstrate colour's potential for the iconoclastic rendering of a cinematic world.

While early film theorists such as Béla Balázs ([1945] 1970, 242–45) and, more emphatically, Sergei Eisenstein (1957, 117–53) stressed the importance of colour as autonomous element of film, very few narrative films have used it in this way. More often, colour in film is rendered and thus perceived matter-of-factly, as something belonging to the mimetic reproduction of the world and as a means for heightening the impression of reality.¹ In Bergman's film, however, as in Kieślowski's, colour is essentially separated from the thing represented and, therefore, is fundamentally liberated from mimesis. In saying this, I do not mean that colour exists in a fluctuating state – it is, in fact, embodied in the screen; thus, it phenomenally exists as the colour of a physical object. But in the film's economy and its overall experience, colour is abstracted from visible forms to produce a dominant-colour-feeling experience; that is, in our experience of the film, we suddenly experience red or blue (the being-red or being-blue of the screen).

The idea of a colour-feeling experience, which may or may not be dependent upon a colour-representing experience, is a key notion in the philosophical debate over colour. Such ongoing issue originates from and addresses two problematics concerning colour: colour seems to be both a property of

objects – something is in a specific colour – and a property of someone's experience – I perceive something as being in a specific colour (Byrne and Hilbert 2001; Levine 1998; Maund 2012). Various philosophical approaches tackle the issue in different manners, and the overall debate is complex and goes considerably beyond the scope of the present book. It suffices to consider how the debate centres on colour-feeling experience (how one experiences a colour) and colour-representing experience (how a colour is embodied in a physical object), as well as the ways in which these two kinds of experiences (mind-dependent and mind-independent) occur (Byrne and Hilbert 2001, xii–xix). For instance, if we consider a red apple, there are a number of questions that could be raised in relation to the red-feeling experience and the red-representing experience (on which I will not dwell), such as: if one, under normal conditions, is having a red-representing experience (a red apple), does this imply that one is also having a red-feeling experience? Is this proposition reversible (red-feeling → red-representing)? Is it possible for one to have, for instance, a blue-feeling experience while having a red-representing experience? And so on.

There is no conclusive outcome to the philosophical debate on colour. In cinema, I conceive of colour as both a property of objects of the *mise-en-scène* and as absolute entity; namely, colour as loosened from any tie with the objectual world. In this latter usage, colour is employed as autonomous and, thus, its chromatic presence on the screen acquires meanings that go beyond those related to the mimetic reproduction of such colour in phenomenal reality. Accordingly, Bergman's red and Kieślowski's blue are not mere attributes of the coloured objects because the red of an apple is not just an apple being red, in much the same way as a blue lollipop is not just a lollipop being blue; rather, they chromatically resonate with the being red and being blue of the films. That is, red and blue objects, as well as filters and lighting, enhance and create the possible meanings that these two colours assume in the films. Bergman's red and Kieślowski's blue² recur not only in the totalising monochromatic screens, but also in the objects of the *mise-en-scène* – from the burning red of the walls to the bright red of the blood; from the slightly dark blue of the room to the clear blue of the swimming pool's water. In both films, therefore, colour is also employed with autonomous value and becomes 'an abstract, un-objectual [*inoggettuale*] entity that *flows in the film through things*' (Venzi 2006, 25). Colour thus exhibits itself in two ways: by concretising in objects of the *mise-en-scène*, which can already produce a first departure from mimesis to something more symbolic and at times anti-naturalistic, albeit remaining in the figurative realm; and by offering itself as colour separated from any object, in a monochromatic screen.

Consequently, the experience of a film wherein one specific colour is employed in such manner is likely to elicit a dominant-colour-feeling experience. Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* encourages red-feeling experiences, even though not every object of the mise-en-scène allows for a red-representing experience. This overall red-feeling experience of the film is evoked by the continual and insisted recurrence of the colour red, not only in physical objects, but also and especially in the fades and the monochromatic screens. On the one hand, scenes are lit in a way that tends towards a single dominant colour, and props are also chosen in red, thus producing a slightly anti-naturalistic mise-en-scène; on the other hand, there are several fades to red and red monochromatic images, in which the anti-naturalism of the mise-en-scène turns into explicit abstraction. Such autonomy of colour carries out the metaphorical destruction of the mimetic shot, thereby creating iconoclastic *eikones* in the encounter between the film and the spectator.

A Film of Red and Faces

Cries and Whispers is Bergman's only film where colour is treated as essentially autonomous. Colour is also at the basis of the film's seminal idea, as evident in Bergman's own telling about the haunting images which pushed him into making the film: 'the first image kept coming back, over and over: the room draped all in red with women clad in white' (Bergman 1994, 83). This is *Cries and Whispers* reduced to its minimal form. In its use of colour, this film is also Bergman's most cinematic work. Contra Hubert I. Cohen (1993) who claims that '*Cries and Whispers* is [. . .] novelistic and theatrical' (250), I argue that the film's force resides in the facial close-ups and extreme close-ups, which do not exist in theatre, and in the tearing apart of these faces by the fades to red, which is impossible in both literature and theatre. *Cries and Whispers* is, therefore, only apparently 'novelistic and theatrical', given that it is profoundly based on inherently cinematic techniques. While for Cohen (1993) 'the film's fabric is woven of mise-en-scène more than giant close-ups' (250), I contend that the extreme close-ups and their destruction in the fades to red construct the most powerful sense of the film; namely, the impossibility to fully express, in both visible and audible terms, a person's inner life and inner inferno.

The film follows two sisters, Maria (Liv Ullmann) and Karin (Ingrid Thulin), taking care of a third, Agnes (Harriet Anderson), who is dying of womb cancer. Anna (Kari Sylwan), a servant devoted to Agnes, is however the person physically and emotionally looking after Agnes. To accompany Agnes in her final days, the women find themselves together in the manor of their childhood: outside, there

is the large park lit by a faint Nordic sun; inside, where most of the story occurs, there are the claustrophobic, intensely red rooms. While Agnes embraces her pain, maintaining compassion and gratitude, her sisters remain entrapped in their inability to empathise. Both unhappily married, Maria indulges in fleeting moments of superficial tenderness, and Karin hides her overwhelming hatred behind a stiff coldness. Agnes dies, and the sisters dismiss Anna in a heartbeat, before harshly departing from each other.

The film is structured around a continuous alternation between present and past, in which the boundaries between reality and its distortion are increasingly thin. Three flashbacks and a dream interrupt the unfolding of the events in the present, and a last flashback concludes the film. Each of these interruptions belongs to one of the female characters, conveying a sense of their personality – Agnes's capacity to love unconditionally, Maria's narcissistic egotism, Karin's inability to overcome the hatred for both herself and others, Anna's compassionate love. Maria's and Karin's flashbacks and Anna's dream are shot and edited in the same manner. A figurative shot fades to red and the screen turns into a red monochromatic image. Then, an extreme facial close-up of the character, in which only one half of the face is lit, appears. This face slowly decomposes into another fade to red, leaving the screen completely red for a second time. Then the flashback, or the dream, begins. At the end of the flashback, the same transition is repeated backwards: the figurative shot fades to red; the screen becomes a red monochromatic image; an extreme facial close-up of the character, in which this time the other half of the face is lit, appears and then plunges into a fade to red; then the screen becomes completely red for a fourth time. Accompanying these transitions from the face to the monochromatic red screen are indecipherable whispers and, from time to time, the feeble sound of a distant bell. Agnes's flashbacks, however, differ from Maria's, Karin's and Anna's because they are not introduced by a fade to red, but by a dissolve,³ and for the fact that there are no extreme close-ups of Agnes's face in between the fades. The sisters' flashbacks and Anna's dream, in which the fades to red signal the transition to and from the past, are the most cinematic scenes in the film and those which lead to iconoclastic *eikones*, as I shall explain.

The first flashback belongs to Agnes; differently from the ones that will follow, it is dominated not only by the colour red but also white, and it partially occurs in the well-lit, open space of the manor's park. After we are introduced to the character and her pain in the present, Agnes reminiscences about her childhood and her beloved mother, played by Liv Ullmann. During a magic lantern show on the Twelfth Night, Agnes gazes at her mother's blithe enjoyment of Maria's company, remembering how the mother could be, instead, 'playfully cruel' with

Agnes. From Agnes's past emotional discomfort, we are taken back to her current physical agony. The presence of a doctor, David (Erland Josephson), called to assist Agnes, leads to Maria's flashback. While in the present David refuses Maria's advances, in the past, when he was called for Anna's dying daughter, he spent the night with Maria. In an intense monologue in front of a mirror, Maria and David acknowledge their shallowness and selfishness. The day after, Maria's husband, Joakim (Henning Moritzen), who has returned from a work trip and, having sensed the cheating, is caught stabbing himself with a paper-knife by an uncaring and slightly repulsed Maria. Back in the present, Agnes dies, and the priest recites a surprisingly agnostic sermon for her, before Karin closes the chamber's doors and everything fades to red. Karin's flashback coils around the disgust for her husband, Fredrik (Georg Årlin), twenty years her senior, and her self-harm. In a loveless atmosphere of tension and uneasiness, Karin and Fredrik are dining when she accidentally breaks a glass, spilling red wine over an immaculate white sheet. After she has returned to her room, Karin uses the shard of glass broken at dinner to cut her vagina and then smears her face with the blood, defiantly smiling at a repelled Fredrik who has come to claim his matrimonial rights. Finally, there is a dreamlike sequence of Agnes's resurrection, shot as if it were a flashback of Anna. Hearing someone crying, Anna rushes into the bedroom where Agnes supposedly lies dead. Caught in a liminal state, Agnes resurrects, beseeching her sisters to assist her trespassing. First Karin enters the room but, overcome by repulsion, she runs away. Then Maria approaches Agnes with seeming tenderness. However, when the dead sister begins to touch the living sister, who is capable of only superficial displays of affection, Maria screams in disgust and hastily leaves the room. Only Anna remains beside the unrested dead, taking Agnes in her arms in the manner of a *pietà*. Additionally, there is a further flashback which concludes the film. Like the first flashback, it belongs to Agnes, is introduced by a dissolve, is white-dominated and shot in the sunny park. It is a reminiscence of Agnes's joyous day with her sisters and Anna. The sisters, dressed in white gowns, with Anna in grey, share a startling moment of grace in the warmly lit park of the manor.

While there are a variety of possible themes to explore in relation to *Cries and Whispers*, my analysis will primarily focus on the magnified female faces consumed by the fades to red and their value as iconoclastic *eikones*. Existing scholarly analyses discuss a cluster of topics: there is the idea, supported by Bergman himself (1977), of the female characters as representing different aspects of Bergman's mother (Cohen 1993, 249; Cowie 1992, 277; Gado 1986, 409–22; Sitney 1989), the possible interpretations of the dreamlike sequence of Agnes's resurrection (Hubner 2007, 108–16; Törnqvist 1996, 157–58), the

analogy between Christ and Agnes (Cohen 1993, 257–60; Gado 1986, 409, 416–19; Kalin 2003, 134–41, 145; Törnqvist 1996, 153) and the significance of the extensive presence of the colour red in both *mise-en-scène* and editing (Cohen 1993, 250–51; Kalin 2003, 147–49; Misek 2010, 63–64; Törnqvist 1996, 149; Venzi 2013).

One of the most examined sequences is that of Agnes's resurrection, which incorporates some of Bergman's stylistic and thematic concerns. While establishing a parallel between Agnes and Christ as both *agni Dei* (Kalin 2003, 134–62; Törnqvist 1996, 146–59), the scene also provides a lyrical blurring of reality and illusion through its style. Laura Hubner (2007) considers the scene's contradictory status of a dream which is stylistically shot as if it were real – it is, in fact, shot in the same manner as the previous flashback sequences. According to Hubner, the opposition between content and style contributes to making Agnes's resurrection the most startling and horrific scene in a film where the boundaries between reality and hallucination are incredibly thin. However, while in her account 'this image of the corpse rising has to be seen as truly horrific' (Hubner 2007, 114), I find it instead tender and disarmingly lonely. Agnes's skeletal hands are not the brutal hands of a zombie, but a desperately poetic metaphor of the loneliness of death. It is instead the white-dominated flashback that concludes the film which consists of the most dreamlike sequence of *Cries and Whispers* because of its style and overall atmosphere. This scene is stylistically at odds with the rest of the claustrophobic, intensely red film, in which resentment and selfishness regulate most of the relationships among characters – except for that between Anna and Agnes. This concluding image of the four female characters dressed in white, harmoniously spending time together, seems a shared fantasy, or an impossible image, because of its light colours, outdoor spaces and unexpected peacefulness which are absent from the rest of the film. The white is so candid and the calm so sweet that it seems impossible for them to exist in the harshly red reality that dominates the film. As Frank Gado (1986) notes, 'this idyllic finale' is a 'gentle illusion' (421).

Indeed, while this final flashback is drenched in luminous white, the rest of the film visually reverberates in ominous red. Such colour becomes an objective correlative of the grief and pain which dominate the film and whose representation is however never obscene. The reality of the others' suffering is preserved and respected in the cries on the magnified faces and in the whispers on the red screens. Physical pain does take a visible form in Agnes's body writhing in agony, Joakim's suicide attempt and Karin's self-harm. However, the presence of the fades to red and the red screens, in which we sense that something deeply and painfully violent is invading the screen, functions as a means to safeguard the

invisible and inexpressible quality of a person's interiority, thereby refusing to spectacularise suffering. The obsessive presence of the colour red – in the *mise-en-scène*, the fades and the monochromatic screens – and its autonomy from mimetic reproduction or conventional meaning constitute the most astonishing and innovative element of the film.

Bergman (1994) conceived of 'the color red as the interior of the soul. When I was a child, I saw the soul as a shadowy dragon, blue as smoke, hovering like an enormous winged creature, half bird, half fish. But inside the dragon everything was red' (90). Following Bergman's likening of red and soul, the red in *Cries and Whispers* has been variously connected to the character's troubled inner life as representing 'raw emotion' (Hubner 2007, 114), or 'some mood of rawness or passion or anger, some feeling of interiority' (Harcourt 1974, 252). It is also linked to blood, thereby becoming 'symbolic of the widespread physical and mental wounds' (Mosley 1981, 161), as well as 'of life but also of sacrifice, of death. It is the color of erotic love, passion' (Törnqvist 1996, 149). The close association of red and interiority leads Jesse Kalin (2003) to claim that, 'when we enter the manor at the film's beginning, we thus enter the human soul with all its mysteries' (149), while Peter Cowie (1992) elaborates on the unsettling red-feeling experience that the film elicits, paralleling 'Bergman's vision of the interior of the soul-monster [. . .] with the sensation of bloodletting that the film transmits' (280). Resonating with aspects of the philosophy of colour, Richard Misek (2010) also emphasises the totalising presence of red in the film, suggesting to 'watch the film in an unlit room with white walls, and these walls too become drenched in red' (63). That is, someone's experience of *Cries and Whispers* is likely to produce an overall red-feeling experience, even if the spectator is not having a red-representing experience (for instance, the white walls). Besides the absolute redness of the monochromatic screen and the progressive one of the fades, red objects infest the film's *mise-en-scène*, impregnating everything to the point that 'the film emerges from red, returns to red in the spaces between scenes, and concludes with red' (Misek 2010, 64).

What is however remarkable about *Cries and Whispers* are the fades to red, which are unusual in film, where such transitions are mainly by means of fades to black. There is something in the fades to red which goes beyond the conventional meaning of the fade as signalling a passage of time. Clearly, the fades to red in *Cries and Whispers* are associated with a passage of time, since they precede and conclude the flashbacks. However, because of the autonomy which the colour red acquires throughout the film, such fades also point to something else: a subtly violent force that surfaces on the screen. The redness seems to swell while the figurative image recedes, as if, in a blushing triggered by inner

disquiet, blood was rising to the surface of the screen. Thus conceived, the fade to red assumes an iconoclastic value, troubling the spectator's look, as opposed to the more widespread conventional sense of the fade to black. Luca Venzi (2013) observes:

In the first case [fade to black], spectators read the black as a purely syntactical scan and fill in, without disorientation, the absence of image confronting them: what they encounter is a discursive convention rather than a visual transformation; in the second case [fade to colour], the spectators' capacity to detect a discursive note in the film, which the film is continuously asking them, has to be replaced by the fact that a figurative image has gradually become a colour. (62–63)

Venzi goes on to briefly outline the use of the fade to red in *Cries and Whispers* as that which destroys the figurative image, concretely manifesting 'the wide, amorphous lump of a suffering not fully representable' (68). Similarly, Cohen (1993, 250) dwells on the film's fades to red and their violent character. The fade to red both tries to give visibility to a hidden, brutal impulse and challenges the spectator's look through the sudden destruction of figuration. Tied to a disquieted interiority, which arises in its unfigurability in the red screens, the colour red concretely dismantles figurative shots, producing iconoclastic *eikones*. Furthermore, the fade to red replaces the figurative facial close-up of female characters with the iconoclastic close-up of their tormented interiority. What we experience in the red's swelling is an inner life, with its demons and unilluminated corners, slowly emerging on the surface of the screen.

From Iconophilic Icon to Iconoclastic Eikōn

While there are numerous fades to red in the film, I will primarily consider those which precede and follow the flashbacks, because these transitions, where faces crumble in a red screen, concretely illustrate the passage from the iconophilic icon to the iconoclastic *eikōn*. In these fades to red, we pass from the moving image as iconophilic icon – the facial close-up – to the moving image as iconoclastic *eikōn* – the red monochromatic screen. As in Jean Epstein's ([1921] 1977) and Béla Balázs's ([1945] 1970, 52–88; [1924] 2010, 38–45, 100–11) accounts, in which the face in the close-up is that through which interiority surfaces on an exterior, visible means, the facial close-ups in *Cries and Whispers* attempt to convey something of a person's inner life. Concurrently, however, this possibility is partially negated by the fades to red which dismantle the figurative

shot, giving rise to iconoclastic *eikones*: the intensely red screens. Sound similarly remarks on language's failure to express a human being's inner state. Thus, we pass from the cries on the magnified faces to the whispers on the red screens; in both cases, we are confronted with sounds which ultimately remain indecipherable.

The status of the film's disquieted interiorities, their being beyond figurative representation and intelligible expression, is directly linked to suffering, which constitutes that place of our interiority where we never go back easily. *Cries and Whispers* is a film of decomposing faces apt for a non-representational rendering of physical pain and inner suffering. From the film's inception, close-ups of Agnes's face contorted in a grimace of pain, followed by her literally writing and underlining that she is in pain, fill the screen. Physical pain recurs also through Joakim's stabbing and Karin's mutilation. However, pain in the film is not solely physical, but includes emotional pain to which none of the main characters is immune – from the most superficial of Maria's disappointment for her unfulfilled desire for David, over Karin's failed attempts to face her deepest emotions, to Anna's grief for her daughter. Being a film on pain, it is also a film on empathy and its absence. Empathy is here intended in its etymological meaning of 'to suffer with' and refers to an individual's capacity to find in themselves that place of sorrow which enables them to suffer with someone else; namely, to imaginatively share the pain of others. Robert Sinnerbrink (2016) observes that 'empathy is *feeling with*' (92) another person and consists in 'the capacity to imaginatively adopt the other's perspective [. . .] from a first-person point of view' (93). In her thorough account of film and empathy, Jane Stadler (2017) also stresses the relevance of 'moral imagination' together with 'embodied resonance' (325) in empathic processes and delineates how narrative and stylistic cues can attune us to others' emotional state. For instance, cinematic close-ups, both visual and aural, can cognitively and affectively move us, move something in us, through the powerful encounter with a magnified face or sound of the other which invests our eyes or ears. In *Cries and Whispers*, in addition to the narrative and the giant facial close-ups, also the non-representational red screen insistently urges spectators to confront the other's pain, inviting to an empathic effort. The empathy which the film encourages is uncomfortable, because it demands us to affectively imagine someone else's pain through a resonance with the pain that we ourselves may have experienced, without however reducing the other's suffering to our own. That is, the empathy we may feel for these characters is disconcerting, also because the pain which is surfacing on the screen is not our pain.

Cries and Whispers shows a wide spectrum of behaviours towards others, from Agnes's unworldly compassion to Fredrik's complete inability to feel with others. Agnes is physically in pain because of her cancer and emotionally capable of empathising with others. Anna utterly empathises with Agnes, yet she seems unable to understand or relate to Karin's suffering, refusing to forgive her after being slapped. The late mother blissfully spends time with Maria, reserving a cold and un-empathic attitude to Agnes as a child. Maria and Karin both lack empathy and recoil at Agnes's imploration of love during the resurrection scene. However, while Karin is at least practical when it comes to Agnes's illness, Maria is visibly uncomfortable in front of Agnes's physical pain. Finally, David does not hesitate to humiliate Maria both in the present and in the past, and Fredrik is selfishly indifferent to everybody. Therefore, to the exclusion of Agnes, who is a true sacrificial *agnus Dei*, a general inability to empathise affects all the characters at different levels: more clearly Fredrik, David and Maria, who is not afraid of physically touching because she remains at the epidermal surface of things, as well as Karin, who abhors being touched because she understands its profundity, and Anna, who can empathise with Agnes but 'refuses even to make a gesture or an attempt to recognise what Karin feels or see how wounded she is' (Kalin 2003, 141).

Agnes, Maria and Karin are the most fascinating characters because of their painfully conflicted interiority, the complexity of their personality and the intensity of their facial close-ups. The face in the close-up as iconophilic icon – namely, the figurative image of the face as that which can reveal something of a person's interiority – recurs throughout the film. According to Irving Singer (2009), *Cries and Whispers*, like other Bergman's films, 'rel[ies] extensively upon close-ups of faces that disclose what is happening in a character's innermost feelings' (83). The characters' tormented inner life undoubtedly surfaces in the facial close-ups through the often-subtle epidermal changes of expression; however, the film also acknowledges the limits of the figurative representation of interiority. The facial close-ups which plunge into a red screen are symptomatic of the impossibility to figuratively reveal such 'innermost feelings'. Bergman searches the magnified faces which, by means of progressive changes in the expression, convey a sense of the character's inner state. However, a person's inner suffering eventually remains beyond mimetic reproduction.

The Face as Icon

Cries and Whispers is rife with close-ups of faces, and each of these close-ups does express something about the character, thereby constituting what



Figure 7.1 Close-up of Agnes in pain

can be addressed as iconophilic icon. The facial close-up as iconophilic icon is present from the beginning of the film when we are first introduced to Agnes (Figure 7.1). Agnes's face writhing in pain, her eyes closed tight, the mouth curved into an excruciating grimace and the head slowly turning in distress, as if looking for some solace somewhere, effectively disclose the character's state. Here, an internal, invisible pain surfaces in the exteriority of the face and offers itself to viewers. In much the same manner, the moving image concluding the film before the last pouring of red is a close-up of Agnes's serene face during a moment of grace. Such peacefulness is enhanced by its being at odds with Agnes's aching face in the rest of the film; on this peaceful face, which seems more angelic than terrestrial, we read the serenity of her soul.

Maria's facial close-ups also disclose something about her character. Her uncomfortable smirks and unrested eyes give a glimpse into her nervous beguilement and overall shallowness: she shuns seriousness and seemingly cannot focus on anything but for a fleeting moment. In her flashback, there is a mirror scene which at once affirms and negates the possibility of expressing a person's interiority through the exteriority of the face. Maria and David are reminiscing about the past when David puts her in front of a mirror. With Maria's face occupying most of the frame in an extreme close-up (Figure 7.2), David starts listing the almost imperceptible changes that have occurred on her face as evidence of her inner alterations:



Figure 7.2 Extreme close-up of Maria and David in front of the mirror

DAVID: I want you to see that you've changed. Now you cast rapid, calculating sidelong glances. You used to look directly, openly, undisguisedly. Your mouth, once soft, has an expression of discontent and hunger. Your complexion is pallid, you use make-up. Your fine, broad forehead now has four wrinkles above each eyebrow. You can't see them in this light, but you can in daylight. Do you know where they come from?

MARIA: No.

DAVID: Indifference, Maria.

[David's lower face, primarily his lips, enters the frame beside Maria's face]

DAVID: And this fine contour, from ear to chin-point, is no longer so implicit. It shows that you're easy-going and indolent. Look here, at the nostrils: why do you sneer so often? You sneer too often; do you see, Maria? Beneath your eyes the sharp, barely visible wrinkles of boredom and impatience.

MARIA: Can you see all that?

DAVID: No, but I feel it when you kiss me.

Throughout the scene, Maria's expression, at first curiously amused, slowly changes into an uncomfortable smile. We follow David's account while searching Maria's face for these signs. And we see them. We notice the faint wrinkles, we become aware of the make-up covering her cheeks. The micro movements of Maria's face, which allow for her inner state to become visible, recall Balázs's physiognomy and Epstein's *photogénie*. As if following Balázs's claims about the

power of physiognomy to disclose a character's emotions, or Epstein's account of the close-up as that which augments our knowledge of the magnified reality, Maria's continuous and subtle changes of expression from an apparent self-confident smile to a self-conscious smirk reveals her uneasiness at David's words. However, Bergman investigates the limits of this epidermal, cognitive enhancement throughout the film. In this scene, the faith in the facial close-up as that which discloses a person's interiority is verbally dismissed. David cannot read this inner state on Maria's face, but he can feel it when they kiss. While formally Ullmann's face remains to dominate the frame, the facial close-up as iconophilic icon is partially negated by David's words; thus, interiority seems to resist mimetic rendering even in the presence of figuration.

Finally, Karin's facial close-ups are soaked in intense distress; in a way, they complement Agnes's: while the latter's close-ups are mainly expressions of a physical pain, the former's give a visible shape to an emotional suffering. From the extreme close-up of her face in doleful bewilderment introducing her flashback (Figure 7.3), over her face smeared with blood, to that following an attempt at intimacy with Maria, Karin's close-ups reveal her status as wounded beast. Shortly after Karin's flashback, there is a sequence for the most part composed of facial close-ups and extreme close-ups against a red wall, which displays a first failed attempt at a more profound bond between Karin and Maria. The two sisters look for each other, Maria tenderly caressing Karin, who at first refuses to be touched before dolefully abandoning herself to the caresses. It seems as if an emotional bond has been established. But suddenly Karin jumps away from Maria with a desperate cry, throwing herself against the wall. Her cries act as a counterpart of Agnes's: there, it is a physical pain devouring the character; here, it is an emotional suffering trying to find an outflow. On Karin's face, where everything is deformed by a profound and sharp anguish, we read her soul's disquietude. While she relentlessly repeats 'don't touch me', first in a cry, then in whispers, her face slowly disappears, swallowed by a fade to red.

The Becoming Red of the Face

Indeed, the sisters' facial close-ups as iconophilic icons are, in some instances, consumed by fades to red. In the fades to red and in the red screens which follow, interiority is denied a figurative form. Something interior can be expressed in the face, but there always remains something else which is impossible to mimetically bring to the surface. Thus, the fade to red progressively covers what is figurative, and the soul – Bergman's red – invades the screen. The subtle yet palpable violence of the monochromatic screen is also enhanced by other

reds which occur throughout the film: first and foremost, the red of blood – of Joakim, who stabs himself and bleeds onto his white shirt; of Karin, who cuts her vagina and then rubs blood on her sadly satisfied face. It is also the red of the suffocating house, which itself seems to be bleeding, and the dark red of the wine that stains the candid sheet. It is, therefore, a violent, intense red, tied to destructive impulses – not a red belonging to a soul at rest, but the colour of a disquieted interiority.

Given that, in Bergman's view, red is the colour of the soul, the fade to red can be read as a fade to the soul, the soul surfacing on the red monochromatic screen. As such, the soul is at once that which can transpire from the changes of expression occurring on a face and that which remains, at least partially, unrepresentable in mimetic terms. Cinema's failure to figuratively express a person's interiority is rendered both visually and aurally: the red monochromatic screen bears witness to that which lies beyond mimetic reproduction and intelligible words. Thus, whispers accompany the red screens without articulating the clear meaning that intelligible sentences have. *À propos* of *Cries and Whispers*, Bergman (1994) states: 'Words will ultimately become meaningless, and the behavior will be out of sync; illogical forces that one cannot account for will come into play' (89). While in quotidian, social life individuals are most often expected to live according to logic, as the characters in the film strive to do, interiority follows its own, not necessarily logical laws of desire. Words, like figurative images, fail to express such inner life. Echoing Bergman's account of language, Törnqvist (1996) explains: 'Bergman distrusts language as a means of establishing contact. On the contrary, he maintains, language is normally used to build walls between people behind which they may hide' (15). The characters in *Cries and Whispers* do not establish a profound bond through words, and the most powerful scenes in which they manage to express something about their troubled interiority occur without words being spoken. Cohen (1993) remarks: 'Bergman knows that words cannot convey what humans feel or what feelings do' (258–59). Thus, we hear evocative whispers in the transitions from a face to a red screen, which hint at both something obsessively tormenting the character and the possibility of a sincere emotional bond beyond the misunderstandings brought by words.

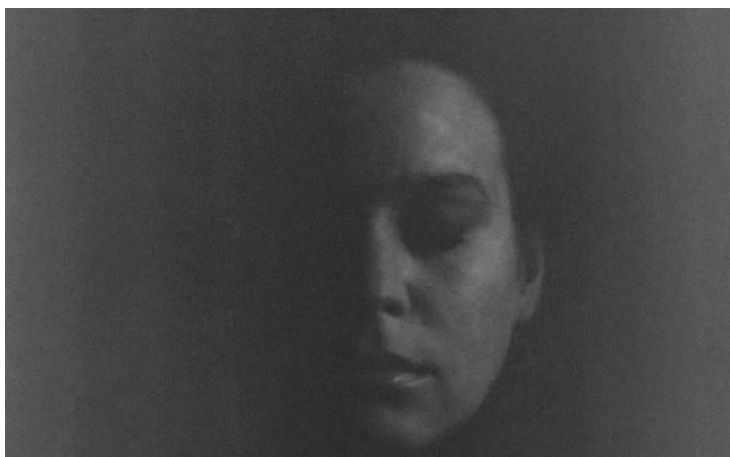
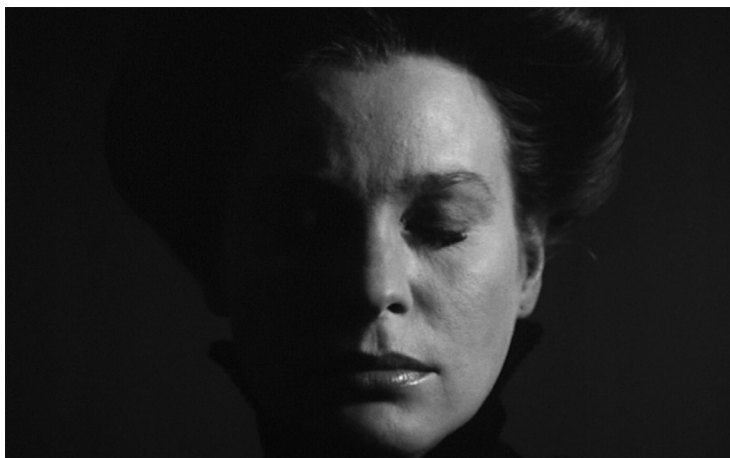
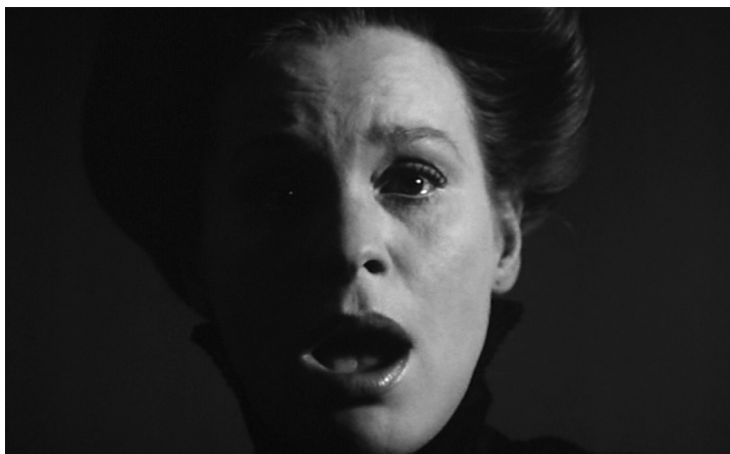
Moreover, in the fade to red transitions, there is the passage from an image as iconophilic icon to an image as iconoclastic *eikōn*. We first see a facial close-up that augments our knowledge of the character, and then we are confronted with an image beyond mimesis; we hear whispers, at times accompanied by stifled cries and the tolling of a bell. The extreme facial close-up being decomposed by the fade to red thus exhibits the very process of destruction of the icon

(Figures 7.3–5). What is most striking in terms of iconoclasm in *Cries and Whispers* is the fact that we see the process of the un-making of the giant faces, not only the result. That is, an iconoclastic *eikōn* is concretely produced before the spectator's eyes. Most importantly, cinema can show this process because of its being movement. As Balázs ([1945] 1970) had realised,

the filming of colours in movement [...] could open up a vast domain of human experience which could not find expression in any other art, least of all in painting. For a painter may paint a flushed face but never a pale face slowly being warmed to rose-red by a blush; he can paint a pale face but never the dramatic phenomenon of blanching. (242)

A monochromatic painting, for instance, can only display the result of destruction, but not how something has been progressively destroyed. Cinema, instead, can film how a face gradually vanishes into colour. In Bergman's film, we first see a figurative, magnified face, and we can almost 'taste the [character's] tears' *à la* Epstein ([1921] 1977, 13); then, progressively, tragically, we witness the decomposition of this face, its slowly dissolving into a red screen. The showing of this process also attests that, while a face can expose something of a person's interiority, inner life exceeds our capacity to give it a fully figurative and intelligible form. Interiority and intimate suffering cannot be exhausted by mimetic images or comprehensible words because they also comprise an inexpressible part, which nonetheless exists and demands to be acknowledged as such. This is what takes place in the transitions to and from the flashbacks, and more generally in the fades to red. It is here where the inherently cinematic force of *Cries and Whispers* rests: not only do we see an iconoclastic image (the red screen), but we also witness the process of destruction of iconophilic icons and of production of iconoclastic *eikones*. In front of our eyes, a figurative shot crumbles because of the unbridgeable gap that separates it from its referent.

The magnified faces decomposed by the fades to red are icons shattered into red fragments; then the fragments recompose themselves into a red screen. Introducing Maria's and Karin's flashbacks, as well as Anna's dream, we see an enigmatic, vivid close-up of one of the female characters: Maria's lips forming a self-conscious smirk, her eyes incapable of settling on anything; Karin's straight look, her eyes and mouth wide open in fear, before she shuts them in sorrow and resignation (Figures 7.3–5); and Anna's blank expression, as if incapable of having thoughts of her own. Then, each time, the red swallows the sisters' troubled faces and Anna's inscrutable face, and the screen becomes a red monochrome. Each face offers a fleeting glimpse into the character's interiority – we can



Figures 7.3 to 7.5 From Karin's facial close-up to the fade to the red screen

almost feel Maria's discomfort, Karin's emotional wounds and Anna's saintly devotion. But we can only gain access to a minuscule fragment of their doleful state, which remains beyond visual or aural representation. The fades to red and the red screens which intermittently interrupt the narrative, thereby destroying figurative shots, as well as the whispers accompanying them, express the failure to audio-visually represent a person's inner life. These monochromatic red screens qualify as iconoclastic *eikones* for they are the iconoclastic close-ups of that which is viscerally private and unrepresentable. Ultimately, interiority – with all its demons and desires – is located beyond mimesis, in a blinding vision of red surrounded by wistful whispers.

Concluding Remarks

Cries and Whispers displays the very process of destruction of the icon and production of iconoclastic *eikōn* through the female faces first consumed by the red and then hesitantly reconstructed from the red. In an exclusively cinematic manner, a movement from the iconophilic icon to the iconoclastic *eikōn* is produced via colour: from a figurative face on which something interior reveals itself to a monochromatic red screen where the unrepresentable face of the soul appears. The depiction of the others' suffering, always in danger of falling into obscenity, is respected in these movements from a restless face to a red screen; and in the unfolding of such process, we read at once the possibility to evoke something on a face and the insufficiency of mimetic images to account for a person's intimate suffering. The face, and particularly the female face, qualifies as a privileged site for both the sacralisation and destruction of the image, for the face is the most emotionally charged part of the human body. Kieślowski's film, the analysis of which concludes this book, similarly produces a dismantling of the female face via an iconoclastic usage of colour and fades, echoing Marian iconography in that it binds the feminine to the maternal and sorrow, as well as an iconoclastic tradition fearful of the Holy Mary icon.