

The Passion of Anna/A Passion (1969)

Major Credits

Director and Writer: Ingmar Bergman

Cinematographer: Sven Nyquist

Cast: Max von Sydow (Andreas Winkelman), Liv Ullmann (Anna Fromm), Bibi Andersson (Eva Vergéus), Erland Josephson (Elis Vergéus), Erik Hell (Johan Andersson)

Production Background

Like *Persona*, *Hour of the Wolf*, and *Shame*, its immediate predecessors, *The Passion of Anna* extends Bergman's depiction of changing and degenerating personalities threatened by physical and psychological violence. The film also continues the director's recent formal experimentations, particularly in the four "interludes" during which the actors speak directly (and spontaneously, without a script) about their characters. Despite its current status as one of his underappreciated masterpieces, Bergman was not particularly happy with the result, recalling both its difficult production issues and regretting the evident traces to the late 1960s (*Images*, 306).

The Passion of Anna was the director's second color film with Sven Nyquist, following the unsuccessful comedy *All These Women* (1964). This time the collaborators sought to make a black-and-white film in color. When the colors emerged as too bright in several scenes, they were muted in the lab.

Today the film seems a perfect bridge between *Persona* (1967) and *Cries and Whispers* (1972). It recalls *Persona* in many ways: the landscape on Fårö island playing a prominent role; the voiceover narration by Bergman himself; the intercepted typewritten letter from the protagonist's husband; the Brechtian alienation effect of the interludes; the televised images of the Vietnam war; even the wooden figurehead of a woman glimpsed in both works. As in *Cries and Whispers*, the persistent refrain in *The Passion of Anna* is that life is but a humiliating "tissue of lies."

The opening credit reads "L182," which refers to the in-house designation for the production at Svensk Filmindustri, another touch that resembles the opening of *Persona*. The black-and-white sequence of Anna's dream near the end appears to be taken from unused footage in *Shame*.

Cinematic Techniques

1. Long takes: Not to be confused with "long shots," the prolonged moments when the camera does not move and there are no cuts—most notably, Liv Ullmann's five-minute monologue about her marriage and the dialogue-less breakfast scene near the end—serve to concentrate the audience's attention (as in a "fixed gaze") and create tension.
2. Close-ups: The psychological conflict and claustrophobia are enhanced by Bergman's exquisite close-ups. Note, particularly, how the physiognomy of Ullmann's face subtly changes during her monologue, an effect entirely unavailable on the stage or in a book.
3. Optical zoom: In the film's stunning final shot, Nyquist manipulates the camera lens—while the camera itself remains stationary—to create the effect of a dissolve as Andreas's image appears to disappear into the grain of the film stock. This is one of the cinema's most *spectacular* (in the literal sense) endings.

Questions for Discussion

1. Bergman has written upon re-screening this work, “My philosophy (even today) is that there exists an evil that cannot be explained—a virulent, terrifying evil—and humans are the only animals to possess it” (*Images*, 306). This theme appears to permeate *The Passion of Anna*, but does it apply to each of the characters equally? How is Bergman’s conception of evil different from that projected in the horror or crime genres? More to the point, is it possible for an audience to admire an artwork suffused with this philosophy?
2. Which of the four unscripted scenes in which the actors speak about their characters seems most revealing? How do these interruptions affect your comprehension of the film’s “project”?
3. What is the role of Johan in the film’s narrative and philosophical arc?
4. For perhaps the only time in Bergman’s cinema, animals figure prominently in several scenes. What purposes do they serve in illuminating the human story?
5. As an architect and photographer, Elis seems to serve as a surrogate—like the Voglers in *The Magician* and *Persona*—for Bergman’s conception of the artist. What qualities does he bring to his practice of art and his participation in life? (Keep in mind that Elis’ last name is Vergéus.)