

Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*

Edited by

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Bergman and the Necessary Illusion

AN INTRODUCTION TO *PERSONA*

I. SCENES FROM A MOVIE

1. *The darkness of the movie theater is suddenly illuminated on screen by the flash of light from the projector arc, followed by a shot of film leader running through the machine. Images of unrelated figures – an animated cartoon, close-ups of hands, a spider, an eye, animal entrails – alternate with blinding reflections of white light off the empty screen, accompanied by abstract sounds. After the shocking close-up of a human hand with a spike driven through it, the picture dissolves into a montage of wintry scenes and of aged faces, apparently corpses, as we become aware of the sound of dripping water and then a distant ringing. The close-up of an elderly woman viewed upside down suddenly cuts to the same shot with the crone's eyes now wide open. A strange-looking boy lying under a sheet slowly awakens, puts on glasses, and begins reading a book, only to be disturbed by the presence of the camera, which he tentatively reaches out toward to touch. A reverse shot reveals the object of his attention to be a huge, unfocused still of a woman's face; this image gradually shifts to the close-up of what seems to be another woman, one who closely resembles the first. The boy's extended hand traces the elusive figure, separated from him by the screen, as the sound track becomes high pitched and intrusive. The titles begin – PERSONA/EN FILM AV INGMAR BERGMAN – separated by a series of nearly subliminal shots, some of them recognizable, others obscure, while the sound track intensifies the effect through percussive drums and xylophone. The movie's story, set in a hospital room, begins. (6½ minutes; nearly 60 shots)*



2. *Sister Alma, a nurse, relates to Elisabet Vogler, an actress and her patient, the story of a past sexual misadventure: she had once participated with a friend in an erotic coupling with two very young boys on a beach. She then had sex that evening with her fiancé, the most pleasurable lovemaking during their long engagement. Shortly thereafter, Alma discovered she was pregnant and decided to abort the child. While she recalls this intensely sensual experience, the camera remains within the bedroom, alternating between close-ups of the nurse's face and that of the impassive listener who resembles her. Elisabet, wearing a similar white nightdress, reclines on the bed smoking and remaining silent throughout the scene as Alma fidgets in her chair, paces across the room, lights a cigarette, and finally collapses into the other woman's arms. (nearly 7 minutes; 10 shots)*

3. *The same two women, now dressed in black turtlenecks, sit across a table confronting each other. Alma describes in menacing detail the pregnancy and mothering impulses of Elisabet, who again remains silent during the entire account. Mrs. Vogler had felt incomplete because her friends said she lacked "motherliness" and so conceived a child whom she grew to hate even before it was born. Despite her "cold and*



indifferent” attitude toward her son, whom she had wished dead and now finds repellent, the boy loves her with total devotion. The monologue begins with a two-shot of Alma speaking in the foreground darkness, back to camera, with Elisabet facing her and the camera; as it proceeds, the shot dissolves into two successive close-ups of Elisabet’s face, her left side (right side of the frame) brightly lit, the other side in darkness. After Alma’s indictment concludes (“You think he’s repulsive, and you’re afraid”), the scene begins over again, the speech recited verbatim, this time with the camera repositioned so that Elisabet is now in the left foreground darkness, back to the camera, while Alma, half lit from the left, is seen in close-up. As the monologue reaches its climax for the second time, however, the dark side of her face is briefly transformed into half of Elisabet’s face, which then disappears as Alma cries, “Nay!” But within moments, the strange close-up returns and remains, a composite of the two “bad sides” of the actresses’ faces, as the silence is disturbed by a single dissonant chord. (8 minutes; 11 shots)

These three sequences, comprising one-fourth of the film’s total running time, may serve to introduce the enduring artistic



achievement of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. Utterly original at the time of the film's first release and virtually unrepeated in any movie since, they each offer a unique cinematic experience, one that is simultaneously mysterious and beautiful. The opening sequence, for example, goes beyond simply establishing certain images that figure prominently later in the narrative (hands, a rocky beach, upside-down faces) or presenting, as Bergman himself describes it, "a poem about the situation in which *Persona* had originated."¹ By alternating brilliant whiteness and sharply contrasting dark images in a rapid montage (particularly in the credits), the film recapitulates the ontology of the cinema itself – literally immersing the audience in the "flicks" that bring life out of darkness in the expectant movie theater. A careful scrutiny of the body language of spectators during the "beach orgy" sequence will confirm the authority of Bergman's conjuring art. Without resorting to flashbacks or cutaways, without removing a stitch of clothing from either of the beautiful women in the frame, he creates one of the most intensely erotic moments in the history of the

cinema. I have observed a class of unsophisticated students, many of them watching their very first “art film,” lean forward, lips parted, bodies absolutely still as they take in this scene, faintly disturbed by its lesbian undertones but totally absorbed by the unanticipated urgency of the events both described and witnessed as well as their lasting consequences. By the time these same students come to the film’s equally celebrated “double monologue,” after frequently expressing an audible gasp (or groan) of recognition at Bergman’s experimental device, they immediately concentrate on comprehending the nuances of the repeated tale and its shattering final close-up. Few of these undergraduates are prepared to interpret *Persona* immediately after its conclusion, but fewer still remain unmoved or unwilling to embark on a discussion of its significance.

The puzzled, tentative quality of these initial classroom discussions can also be found in the contemporary reviews of *Persona* by some of America’s most literate critics. Although generally praising the film, they tend to shy away from definitive interpretation, preferring instead to describe its sensory effects and to hazard some speculations as to their possible meaning. More thorough “readings” of the text emerged later, but no less an authority than Peter Cowie, Bergman’s biographer, has declared (somewhat hyperbolically), “Everything one says about *Persona* may be contradicted; the opposite will also be true.”² Perhaps encouraged by this critical license, dozens of fascinated viewers, including myself, have scrutinized the haunting images that comprise the film’s eighty-four minutes in order to produce partial explications of what continues to be “one of the most complex films ever made.”³

II. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *PERSONA*

From the moment of its American release in 1967, *Persona* has been considered among Bergman’s masterpieces; indeed, many critics regard it as “one of this century’s great works of art.”⁴ The influential French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* has called it Bergman’s “most beautiful film,” and an international panel of

critics and scholars polled by the British magazine *Sight and Sound* has ranked it among the ten greatest films of all time. Ratings and reputation aside, *Persona* certainly stands today as one of the supreme examples of *modernist* art the cinema has yet produced. Like the central works of modernism in other forms – Picasso’s cubist paintings, Pirandello’s plays, Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Joyce’s *Ulysses* – it exhibits the qualities of fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and ambiguity associated with the movement that came into prominence at the beginning of the century while retaining a spirit of experimentation that makes it still seem “a film in search of its own laws.”⁵ At the same time, Bergman’s trust in the integrity of his own intense vision along with his technical mastery of the medium at this stage of his filmmaking career raises *Persona* to a new level of accomplishment, “modernism becoming classical before our very eyes.”⁶

Despite the evident cultural status of *Persona*, surprisingly little has been written about the film during the past decade. Several reasons account for this recent neglect. The first is probably the spate of excellent analyses produced relatively soon after its enshrinement in the modern canon, beginning with Susan Sontag’s remarkable review essay included in the present volume. John Simon’s *Ingmar Bergman Directs* selected *Persona* along with three other Bergman films for close analysis, deciphering shot by shot the self-referential allusions of the prologue and providing a formalist analysis of the film’s narrative structure. Bruce Kawin’s *Mindscreen* tackled the question of point of view, defining *Persona*’s subjectivity in terms of psychological processes related to self-conscious narration. And Paisley Livingston examined the film as an extension of Bergman’s ongoing concern with the role of the artist in *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art*. The scope and intellectual rigor of these critical works seem to have inhibited current scholars – Robin Wood’s reassessment of his own earlier auteurist study of Bergman, an article cited by some of the authors in this collection, remains a notable exception – from undertaking new appraisals of *Persona*. Another reason may be political: Following his retirement from filmmaking after *Fanny and Alexander* (1983)

and with the ascendancy of *postmodernism* (for which Quentin Tarantino has become a cinematic poster boy), Bergman has come to be regarded as a conservative artist of the somewhat devalued humanist tradition. Against the preference for mask and gesture found in postmodernist narrative, Bergman, despite the title of this film,⁷ has chosen to focus on the *face* and the existentialist necessity for willed *action* of the sort commended by Eliot in the last lines of "The Waste Land." Although few younger critics would deny the achievement of the body of his work, not many seem interested in exploring the gravitas of his cinematic vision for a new generation. Moreover, the European art cinema that had originally nourished him and of which Bergman became the supreme exemplar, has steadily declined since his own retirement. In a related development, the various directions that academic film studies have taken in the past twenty years – toward non-Western cinema, studio history, queer theory, and B-film production, among others – have not seemed conducive to continued examination of "essentialist" films like *Persona*. That is, until now.

The original essays anthologized here reflect a number of new critical approaches to the film, exploring such relatively ignored areas as genre, dramaturgy, female sexuality, and acting technique. Christopher Orr's analysis of the melodramatic elements and Brechtian influences in *Persona*, for example, serves to refute Andrew Sarris's contention, still widely held, that Bergman is "essentially an artist in an ivory tower in an isolated country"⁸; Gwendolyn Foster provides insight into the relations between the two women through a feminist psychoanalytic vocabulary unavailable to the critical discourse of an earlier generation. Collectively, these new essays suggest that much productive work remains to be done on not just *Persona* but the entire canon of this remarkable filmmaker's long career.

III. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF INGMAR BERGMAN

Along with near contemporaries Federico Fellini, Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Akira Kurosawa, as well as

the younger Nouvelle Vague directors François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Alain Resnais, Ingmar Bergman helped shape the international art cinema for more than thirty years until his retirement with *Fanny and Alexander*. Since then, through his continuing career directing for the stage and writing screenplays, memoirs, and personal reflections, as well as recent retrospectives of his films as major cultural events in New York and Stockholm, he has come to be seen as one of the monumental artists of the second half of the twentieth century. Although it is only fair to acknowledge that he is presently somewhat out of favor among many younger scholars, his contributions to the art of cinema remain fundamentally unchallenged:

1. Bringing intellectual content and the emotional force of language to the screen. Bergman's were among the very first screenplays to be regularly collected and published in America.
2. Exploring the expressive potential of prolonged silences in a medium that had cluttered the sound track since the arrival of talkies.
3. Refining the film score to complement what he envisioned as the cinematic equivalent of chamber music.
4. Restoring the aesthetic value of the close-up to a prominence it had not achieved since the silent masterpiece of fellow Scandinavian director Carl-Theodor Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).
5. Expanding the compositional qualities of the frame and creating, along with his celebrated cinematographers, Gunnar Fischer and Sven Nykvist, some of the most celebrated long takes in film history.

In no other Bergman film are all of these achievements more prominent than in *Persona*. Indeed, after watching it again many years later, the director would write, "Today, I feel that in *Persona* . . . I had gone as far as I could go."⁹

Bergman's life, much of it reflected quite openly on the screen, can be understood (if necessarily reductively so) as a product of

his Lutheran bourgeois upbringing and the existentialist angst of postwar Europe. He was born on July 14, 1918, in Uppsala, Sweden, the middle child of strong-willed parents, Eric and Karin. His father soon moved the family to Stockholm, where he was appointed chaplain to the Royal Hospital and, in 1934, parish priest at Hedvig Eleonora Church. In his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, Bergman recalls his childhood as marked by perpetual cycles of “sin, confession, punishment, forgiveness, and grace.”¹⁰ A sickly, sensitive child, Ingmar found refuge from the discipline imposed by his parents during frequent visits to his widowed grandmother’s home in Uppsala, where he indulged in fantasies about the antiques and old photographs that had filled her apartment for a half century, listened to her nostalgic stories, and often accompanied her to the local movie theater. But even his grandmother, with whom he felt an intuitive bond of tenderness, could be a source of fearful punishment, once locking him in a dark closet to atone for some forgotten misbehavior. Ingmar found a more permanent sanctuary in his child’s puppet theater and, later, a magic lantern projector that had been a Christmas present for his older brother Dag, who swapped it for Ingmar’s collection of tin soldiers. Karin Bergman was a devotee of the theater and encouraged her imaginative, reclusive son in his early fascination with puppetry and primitive filmmaking. Ingmar built elaborate sets for his marionettes and staged well-known plays for his private amusement. In addition to the technical training and experimentation this hobby provided, some biographers have suggested that Bergman’s boyhood interest may have influenced both his own early reputation as a “demon director” intent on controlling every aspect of his stage and screen productions¹¹ and his predilection for deterministic themes in many of his films.

Bergman’s distance from his parents, linguistically signified by his avoidance of the intimate pronoun *du* in his relations with them, grew into adolescent rebellion that climaxed in an argument in which he assaulted his father, insulted his mother, and left home permanently in 1937. The next year he enrolled in Stockholm University, where he soon became involved with the

student and local theaters, leaving the university in 1940 but continuing to stage plays, including one of his own, *The Death of Punch* (1942). In January 1943 he began working as a scriptwriter for Svensk Filmindustri (SF), Sweden's most prestigious company since the glorious silent era of Victor Sjöström (who was to play the starring role in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* [1957]) and Mauritz Stiller (the man who discovered Greta Garbo). Many of the technicians and craftspersons had worked at SF for decades, so Bergman was trained by more experienced instructors than he could have found at the university or film school. Two months after joining the production company that employed him for the next twenty-six years he married Else Fisher, the first of his five wives; a daughter, Lena, was born in December.

As it had during World War I, Sweden remained neutral throughout World War II, a period that saw Bergman's dual career in theater and film begin to flourish. His first screenplay, *Torment*, was filmed by the distinguished Swedish director Alf Sjöberg, soon followed by his own directorial debut, *Crisis* (1946), which he also wrote. As these early titles and his personal life suggest (estranged from his own family, by the end of 1946 he had divorced, remarried, and fathered two children), Bergman was living and working at a fever pitch. The movies of his apprenticeship often deal with the stressful circumstances of a young couple, as if Bergman were expressing both his own anxieties and those of a guilt-ridden nation that insisted it too knew about suffering. Add to this cultural context the rising influence of French existentialism, and Bergman's absorption in the philosophical/theological questions that mark his mature work are not difficult to comprehend.

The dozen or so pictures that mark Bergman's first decade at SF, although varying in style from the gritty urban neorealism of *Port of Call* (1948) and melodramatic fatalism of *Prison* (1949) to the lyrical eroticism of *Summer Interlude* (1951) and *Monica* (1953), all reflect – with the singular exception of *Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953), an anomaly that anticipates his metaphysical costume dramas of the mid-1950s – the resistance of youthful, restless characters to the conventions of contemporary Swedish society. These early

works, although competently crafted and sincerely felt, were not huge successes in Sweden. It was Bergman's continuing activity in the theater, a tradition among Swedish filmmakers, along with the loyal patronage of Carl Anders Dymling and Victor Sjöström at Svensk Filmindustri, that sustained him. He directed an average of three plays a year throughout the country, many of them at the Gothenburg City Theater, during this period, which introduced him to several of the performers he would later incorporate into his films. Indeed, Bergman has never abandoned the theater, maintaining an active schedule of directing for the stage (most notably for the Royal Dramatic Theater, Stockholm, which he presided over from 1963 to 1967) that continued long after his retirement from filmmaking.

Bergman's breakthrough into international cinema began with *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), which won a Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and was enthusiastically received after its American release. With *The Seventh Seal*, which premiered to great fanfare and subsequent critical debate in Stockholm as Svensk Filmindustri's fiftieth anniversary production, and *Wild Strawberries*, winner of the Golden Bear Prize at Berlin among numerous other accolades, both released in 1957, Bergman's status as a director of the very highest rank was confirmed. *The Virgin Spring* (1960) and *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) won consecutive Academy Awards for Best Foreign Film. In an era when the art film served to fill a cultural void created by the collapse of the Hollywood studio system and the enormous new popularity of television, Bergman had joined a small galaxy of filmmaking superstars.

Despite a turbulent private life that included five marriages, eight children, and intimate relationships with several of his leading actresses, Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann (the mother of his youngest child, Linn) among them, his reputation as a film and stage director continued to grow. Bergman has always contended that his personal neuroses, which he readily acknowledges, have rarely interfered with his professional activities. He takes particular pride in his craftsmanship and likens his work to that of the anonymous artisans who created the cathedral of Chartres.¹² Of

his sometimes scandalous affairs Bergman has written, "Film work is a powerfully erotic business; the proximity of actors is without reservations, the mutual exposure is total. The intimacy, devotion, dependency, love, confidence and credibility in front of the camera's magical eye become a warm, possibly illusory security. The strain, the easing of tension, followed by anticlimax: the atmosphere is irresistibly charged with sexuality."¹³ Whatever the case, it is certainly true that Bergman has always enjoyed a fierce admiration and loyalty among those who served him on the set. His farewell film, *Fanny and Alexander*, involved a remarkable reunion of present and past wives, former lovers, children and stepchildren as well as longtime collaborators. "Bergman's ability to remain true friends with the women he has abandoned is uncanny,"¹⁴ his biographer reports. Liv Ullmann, for example, has recently produced his novel, *Private Confessions*, for Swedish television and will direct *Faithless (Trolösa)*, his latest screenplay. At the same time, it should be noted that his marriage to Ingrid von Rosen endured, apparently happily, for nearly twenty-five years until her death in 1995.

Around the time of *Persona* in the mid-1960s, Bergman's films began to shift away from metaphysical themes to more personal studies of intimate human relationships and psychological dimensions. *Cries and Whispers* (1972) and *Face to Face* (1976) continued to enhance his prestige, but Bergman's good fortune came to a shocking halt in 1976 when he was arrested by Swedish authorities in the midst of a rehearsal of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* at the Royal Dramatic Theater and charged with tax evasion, an event that immediately became a cause célèbre in Sweden and, before long, internationally. Under considerable strain, the hypersensitive director suffered a breakdown that caused him to be hospitalized. The situation reminded many observers of a scene from a Bergman movie: the kind of public humiliation he had feared since childhood and had dramatized in *Sawdust and Tinsel*, *Wild Strawberries*, and *The Magician* (1958). The charges were eventually dropped with the accused officially exonerated by the Swedish government in 1979, but not before the bitterly disillusioned Bergman announced his intention to leave Sweden in order to

protest the bureaucracy and preserve his artistic freedom. His sojourn eventually took him to Munich, where he resumed his dual career, but his film work, perhaps inevitably, suffered. Although he continued to maintain his home on the island of Fårö, he did not return to Sweden permanently until 1981 for the production of *Fanny and Alexander*, which won four Academy Awards and a considerable profit for Svensk Filmindustri. Reconfirmed as a national treasure following the international success of his finale as a feature filmmaker, Bergman resumed directing plays at the Royal Dramatic Theater and, in 1987, published his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, which became an immediate best-seller in Europe. A decade later, in reasonably good health, he plans new projects and receives new honors from around the world. Life, one presumes, is good.

IV. THE PRODUCTION OF *PERSONA*

Bergman's "most daring and enigmatic film"¹⁵ grew from an extraordinary convergence of personal circumstances and fortuitous events:

1. A crisis of faith in his own creative powers brought on by the administrative drudgery of his position as head of the Royal Dramatic Theater; Bergman has often referred to *Persona* as his artistic salvation, the film that "saved my life."¹⁶
2. A prolonged illness involving a viral infection of the inner ear that left him dizzy, incapacitated, and ultimately hospitalized during the first several months of 1965.
3. A chance view of a photograph of Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann, who had recently become close friends; Bergman noticed the strong resemblance between the two actresses and began conceiving of a film starring them both, "a sonata for two instruments," as he would later describe it.¹⁷
4. The image of two women wearing big hats and comparing hands that floated into Bergman's mind during his hospitalization along with his view of the morgue from his bedside window.



Perhaps influenced by the international political climate at the time as well as the radically new styles developed by European directors like Godard (*Vivre sa vie* [1962], *Pierrot le fou* [1965]), Resnais (*Hiroshima, mon amour* [1959], *Last Year at Marienbad* [1961]), and Antonioni (*L'avventura* [1960]) and certainly reflecting his own need to expand as an artist, *Persona* became Bergman's most innovative film to date, marking a shift toward narrative disruption and technical experimentation that continued in *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and *The Passion of Anna* (1969). The screenplay was much different from anything he had published before, "more like the melody line of a piece of music," he suggested, "which I hope with the help of my colleagues to be able to orchestrate during production."¹⁸ The earlier scripts read like plays; this one, although carefully constructed, is closer to a treatment from which entirely new images and ideas were allowed to emerge spontaneously during production. Most famous among these improvisations, of course, is the trick shot fusing the "bad sides" of the actresses' faces. As a result of the many retakes and revisions

during the actual shooting of the film, the published screenplay, although useful as a source for genetic criticism (the study of how a work of art evolved into its final form), remains an unreliable text for clarifying the experience of watching *Persona*.

In general, the script tends to clarify certain ambiguities and offers few indications of the film's striking formal design. For example, Elisabet definitely directs Alma to go to bed after her long narration of the beach orgy (instead of inscribing the moment's subjectivity by having her whisper offscreen), and it is Elisabet, not Alma, who breaks down into nonsense near the end. Even more significantly, the psychiatrist returns in the screenplay to pronounce a Freudian diagnosis ("strongly developed infantility") and inform us that Elisabet has successfully rejoined her family and career. And the published text gives no description of Bergman's exciting visual prologue or the repetition of Alma's climactic monologue.

V. COMING TO TERMS WITH *PERSONA*

Unlike most commercial movies, *Persona*, for all its ambiguities, may seem easy to talk about (interpret) precisely because it is difficult to understand (comprehend). The problems it presents for viewers are obvious: (1) the absence of visual codes to distinguish between what is dreamed or imagined and what is actually occurring; (2) the ellipses, doublings, and disruptions that confound any sense of a linear narrative; (3) the montage of apparently unrelated images and the presence of the strange boy at the beginning and end; (4) the discontinuities in space and time, as in the scene with Mr. Vogler or the reappearance of Alma in her uniform treating the apparently hospitalized Elisabet near the end; (5) the inconsistencies in point of view ranging from the apparently objective diagnosis provided at the outset by the psychiatrist and the voice-over narration (from Bergman himself) describing the transition to the island to the subjectivity of Elisabet's night visit to Alma's bedroom or the mirror shots of the two women. Alan Barr has accurately described how *Persona* "systematically thwarts

the desire to know, that hallowed pursuit of plot-followers,"¹⁹ but Robin Wood seems equally correct in arguing "we are to take it that what we see is *in some sense* really happening."²⁰ In short, all may be illusion – in one sense, it is *all* "a tissue of lies" (to quote *Cries and Whispers* [1972]), *only a movie*; at the same time, we feel a powerful need to accept this particular film as a representation of some profound truth.

Perhaps the best procedure for considering the construction of meaning in *Persona* is to begin with the most widely held view of its content: Whatever else it may be about, the film is concerned with its own status as a work of art and, as a consequence, the problematic relation between the artist and the audience. To underscore the integrity of his medium and the self-reflexive aspect of his themes, Bergman lobbied for the title *Cinematography* before finally relenting to SF's demand for a more appealing name, and he insisted that the sprocket holes at the edge of the frame be retained in the early publicity stills for *Persona*. Most critical studies to date have emphasized the significance of the film's self-referentiality: the autobiographical content, the commentary on the limits and responsibilities of art, the relation to the cinema's system of signification.²¹ In its pervasive self-reflexivity, *Persona* marks a kind of midpoint in Bergman's exploration of the role of the artist in such works as *Sawdust and Tinsel*, *The Magician*, *Hour of the Wolf*, *Shame* (1968), *Autumn Sonata* (1978), and *Fanny and Alexander*. From the perceptive but still sanguine view of the intrinsically deceptive nature of his craft he had described in the introduction to the first anthology of his screenplays,

Even today I remind myself with childish excitement that I am really a conjurer, since cinematography is based on deception of the human eye. I have worked it out that if I see a film which has a running time of one hour, I sit through twenty-seven minutes of complete darkness – the blankness between frames. When I show a film I am guilty of deceit. I use an apparatus which is constructed to take advantage of a certain human weakness, an apparatus with which I can sway my audience in a highly emotional manner. . . . Thus I am either an imposter or, when the audience is

willing to be taken in, a conjurer. I perform conjuring tricks with apparatus so expensive and so wonderful that any entertainer in history would have given anything to have it.²²

Bergman had developed a much more critical understanding in his notebook during the making of *Persona*:

I am unable to grasp the large catastrophes. They leave my heart untouched. At most I can read about such atrocities with a kind of greed – a pornography of horror. But I shall never rid myself of those images. Images that turn my art into a bag of tricks, into something indifferent, meaningless.²³

This is Elisabet Vogler's dilemma, as well as Bergman's. Her silence becomes her protest.

Bergman's awareness of his artistic predicament undoubtedly stemmed from the tide of political consciousness-raising in the 1960s. He had been steadily criticized, especially in the Swedish and French press, for his isolation on Fårö and his apparent refusal to engage contemporary events within his films. The insertion of iconic images from the holocaust (the Warsaw ghetto child) and Vietnam (the self-immolation of the Buddhist bonze) provides a resonance that transcends the idealist vision of his earlier historical melodramas and psychological case studies. At the same time, they remind us of the gulf that separates documentary and fictional representations.

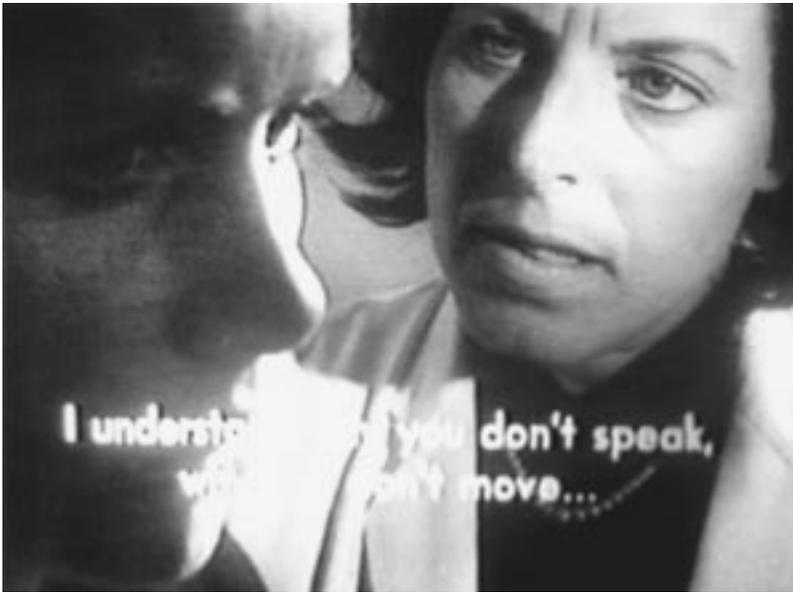
When we consider these historical references along with the film's refiguring of the women's faces into the composite image of a monstrous double, *Persona* may be fairly regarded as a kind of modernist horror movie. In addition to the newsreel, it includes (twice) another film-within-the-film: a snippet of primitive horror farce in which a man is chased around his bedroom by a skeleton, a scene Bergman first used in *Prison* (1949). *Persona* specifically evokes the vampire subgenre through its images of Elisabet lowering her head to caress the nape of Alma's neck and later sucking the blood that bubbles from her wrist. Alma's dedication to caring for others, her breakdown into madness and violence, and her

attraction to mirrors may also conjure up the mythic figure of Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde.

The film's title, of course, introduces the motif of masks that culminates in the composite close-up of Alma/Elisabet – a mask, to borrow Roland Barthes's description of modern art, that points to itself. As *Persona* questions narrative representation and continuity in its formal construction, its story line blurs conventional distinctions between being and role playing. The psychiatrist's diagnosis of Elisabet's "hopeless dream *to be*," cited in nearly all accounts of the film including those anthologized here, still needs to be qualified as a definitive interpretation of Bergman's meaning. Her speech occurs very early in the film, never to be alluded to or repeated. We also have the director's own testimony that Elisabet's silence is "completely unneurotic . . . a strong person's form of protest."²⁴ Moreover, the spectator familiar with Bergman's other work will recognize in the psychiatrist's detached, authoritarian, and imperious demeanor as she pronounces the clinical verdict of science a recurrent figure (*The Magician*, *The Passion of Anna*, *The Touch* [1971]) whose name is always Vergéus. In her anonymity and subsequent disengagement (a revision of the screenplay), she too wears a mask.

The hopeless dream of being, *Persona* implies, is the shared condition of both life and film art. In its aspiration to escape subjectivity, the cinema inevitably falls back on special effects (its expensive and wonderful apparatus) and the audience's willingness "to be taken in"; from our own desire to live in truth, we invariably resort to another kind of performance that experience will, in time, unmask. But to go beyond romantic conceptions of the artist as redeeming visionary or exemplary sufferer, as Elisabet apparently has, or to renounce a conventional life of service, as Alma seemingly does, need not necessitate dismissing the efficacy of either works of art or good deeds. To the tyranny of lies, Bergman responds with the necessity of illusions.

Paisley Livingston confirms this view of *Persona* when he suggests, "If [Mrs.] Vogler's silence queries art, art returns the question, measuring the value and consequences of an actress's refusal



to continue. Vogler, then, is not the voice of *Persona*; rather, the film gives voice to her silence."²⁵ In a succession of films from his mature period – one thinks of the hillside picnic in *The Seventh Seal* that provides an interlude of clarity and peace in the midst of plague, the deus ex machina ending of *The Magician* whereby Dr. Vogler is miraculously rescued from disgrace, and the gorgeous autumnal tableau of the three sisters in a swing at the conclusion of *Cries and Whispers* – Bergman reminds us of the illusory element in all moments of heightened perception, community, transcendence, and happiness as he simultaneously suggests that the solace, affirmation, and joy contained in these images is something more than merely a sentimental religious faith or an existential joke. By such illusions, he seems to say, do we all manage to live.

Such is my own understanding of *Persona*. The essays collected here offer a variety of distinctive critical approaches that illuminate the film's continuing hold over sophisticated patrons of the art cinema and inexperienced patrons of the multiplex alike. The

first two chapters are concerned primarily with *contexts*, providing the sources and cultural background that stimulated Bergman's creative energies. The remaining essays offer new *readings* of the film based on different methodologies for explicating how a cinematic text constructs meaning and is, in turn, itself constructed by various spectators.

Birgitta Steene, a native of Sweden who holds appointments at the University of Washington and Stockholm University, is probably the world's leading authority on Ingmar Bergman. Her essay draws on her knowledge of Swedish film and stage history to demonstrate that Bergman's artistic vision, while employing certain universally recognized elements, is "filtered through an indigenous Swedish mindscape" and influenced, in particular, by the "symbiotic presence" of August Strindberg's *A Dreamplay*. Drawing on several previously untranslated documents, she illustrates how *Persona* "occupies a position in the Bergman canon similar to *A Dreamplay* in Strindberg's oeuvre," and how both works reflect a dialectical tension between classical narrative and modernist discourse.

An experimental filmmaker as well as a scholar of wide-ranging interests, Wheeler Winston Dixon describes the cultural ambience of the international art cinema at the time of *Persona*'s release, emphasizing the influence of Jean-Luc Godard as well as placing this film in the context of Bergman's long career.

Susan Sontag's 1967 essay, first published as a review in the British magazine *Sight and Sound* and anthologized in her book *Styles of Radical Will*, is reprinted here because it has informed nearly all subsequent discussions of *Persona*. It exemplifies her contention, expressed in a famous essay entitled "Against Interpretation," that "the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*."²⁶ Employing this formalist approach, Sontag defines *Persona* as "not just a representation of transactions between the two characters . . . but a meditation on the film which is 'about' them." This self-reflexiveness is usually represented through the theme of *doubling*, expressed through both the film's formal struc-

ture and the exchange of identities. Careful readers will also note Sontag's reference to the image of an "erect penis" in the credits montage, a shot that was subsequently withdrawn from American prints of the film. Thirty years after its publication (and thus without the benefit of analyzing projectors, videocassettes, and repeated viewings), this essay remains remarkable for its synthesis of the film's competing claims – formal, psychological, erotic – and its placement of *Persona* in relation to several landmarks of modernist cinema: Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*, Antonioni's *L'avventura*, Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*, and Bergman's own *The Silence*.

Unlike much that has been written about *Persona*, Christopher Orr's new study eschews issues of intentionality and biography in order to examine Bergman's film through the concept of genre. Orr sees *Persona* as an amalgam of the art cinema's self-reflexivity and the melodrama's unveiling of anxiety over such social issues as class and gender, producing what he calls "subversive melodrama." While Elisabet Vogler personifies the dilemma of the modern artist, he argues, she remains as well a member of Sweden's cultural elite, enjoying a quite different status from that of the nurse who cares for her. The interaction between Alma and her patient, although certainly expressing the fragile nature of personal identity, thus also exposes class exploitation and envy.

Many commentators have noted Bergman's skill in eliciting strong performances from his repertory company of actors – none more compelling than those of Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann in *Persona* – but Steven Vineberg's essay is the first to analyze this aspect of the film in depth. After surveying the evolution of acting style in Bergman's largely neglected early work, he employs certain standard acting exercises as models to explain the effects achieved in several of *Persona*'s most celebrated scenes and to demonstrate how the film is about "the seduction and power of acting."

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's concluding essay follows some of the most recent directions in film theory to shift attention to spectatorship rather than authorship as a means of generating a film's meaning. Adopting the stance of feminist and queer theory, she

sees *Persona* as dramatizing a struggle for control of the imaginary “lesbian phallus,” site of female pleasure beyond patriarchal norms. Her analysis, although speculative and challenging, offers a forthright discussion of a major element in the film – the homoerotic relationship between the two women – that has been consistently repressed until now.

Although none of these studies claims to be definitive, together they may guide the awestruck, puzzled, or simply bored viewer toward a more comprehensive understanding of Bergman’s achievement. Near the end of the film, a disillusioned Alma remarks bitterly, “I’ve learned a lot.” The attentive spectator of *Persona*, it is hoped, will feel much the same way (without the bitterness!) after reading this book.

NOTES

1. Stig Björkman, Torsten Manns, and Jonas Sima, *Bergman on Bergman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 198–199.
2. Peter Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography* (New York: Scribner’s, 1982), 231.
3. Robin Wood, *Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 156.
4. Hubert Cohen, *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession* (New York: Twayne, 1993), 227.
5. Bruce Kawin, *How Movies Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 76.
6. John Simon, *Ingmar Bergman Directs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), 215.
7. Bergman has directed three features with “face” (*ansikte*) in the title: *Woman without a Face* (1947); *The Magician* (1957, released in England as *The Face*, a literal translation of the original Swedish title); and *Face to Face* (1976). After his retirement he also made a short memorial to his mother entitled *Karin’s Face* (1983).
8. Andrew Sarris, *Confessions of a Cultist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 292.
9. Ingmar Bergman, *Images* (New York, Arcade, 1994), 65.
10. Ingmar Bergman, *The Magic Lantern* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 7.
11. Birgitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), 8.
12. Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 21.
13. Bergman, *The Magic Lantern*, 169–170.
14. Cowie, 230.

15. Egil Törnqvist, *Between Stage and Screen: Ingmar Bergman Directs* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 137.
16. Bergman, *Images*, 64.
17. Cowie, 227.
18. Ingmar Bergman, *Persona and Shame* (New York: Grossman, 1972), 21.
19. Alan P. Barr, "The Unraveling of Character in Bergman's *Persona*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 15.2 (1987): 127.
20. Wood, 153.
21. See, especially, Simon, 208–310; Paisley Livingston, *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 180–221; Lloyd Michaels, *The Phantom of the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 33–46.
22. Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, 15.
23. Bergman, *Images*, 59.
24. Björkman, Manns, and Sima, 211.
25. Livingston, 181.
26. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta, 1966), 14.