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 0521656982 - Ingmar Bergman's Persona
 Edited by Lloyd Michaels
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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

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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

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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

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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 craftpersons 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