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Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* as a Modernist Example of Media Determinism

Introduction

The film medium developed during a time of the rapid expansion of modernism, which took over almost all of art. Nevertheless, mainstream narrative cinema joined this movement only after a considerable delay. During the 1920s certain movements in cinema appropriated the main ideas of modernism, but it was only after the Second World War, in fact during the 1960s, that modernism in cinema came to full bloom.

Due to its reflexive nature, the role of its auteur, and its open-endedness, Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona* (1966) is considered one of the finest examples of modernism in cinema. *Persona* is, nevertheless, also an exceptional example of media and technological determinism. In this film, Bergman accomplishes a reversal of a crucial modernist problem related to technology: he does not show how to animate an apparatus, but rather how media technology have infiltrated the prevailing frame of mind so deeply that the psyche can at best be grasped through the film medium itself.

We should, for clarity, distinguish between a "vulgar" understanding of media determinism as a reductionist, causal relation between the appearance of technological media and their impact on society, culture, art, and subjectivity, on the one hand, and its "soft" (or dialectical) version, on the other. In the latter, there is more space for various, sometimes even mutually opposed processes that obscure the main orientation, which nevertheless remains present in both crucial mantras of the so-called "media turn"—Marshall McLuhan's "medium is the message"[1] and Friedrich Kittler's "media determine our

[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994, 7.

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situation."[2] In both assertions, priority has been given to the materiality of a medium over its content.

In this paper, we will claim that such a view, related today to the above-mentioned authors of the media turn, has actually been one of the key characteristics of modernist art. As pointed out by Mallarmé ("poetry was made not of ideas but of words"), Cartier-Bresson ("the photo was made not of stories but of lines") and other modernist authors, it was the materiality of the medium that constituted the conditions of possibility for the creation, and consequently the interpretation, of a work of art.[3] *Persona* is not an exception to this rule, but is instead one of the best examples of media determinism ever created in the film medium.

Persona, or, *Cinematography*

There can been no doubt that *Persona* is an enigmatic film that defies a definite interpretation, and today, from the distance of half a century, this is perhaps even more so. After showing it to an audience of undergraduate students, I came across a judgment that evidently demonstrated how distant this film already is from the expectations of contemporary 20-year-olds. In their opinion, *Persona* is not film at all, because it tells us no coherent and comprehensible story and, consequently, makes no sense as a whole. They were thus quite bewildered when they realized (after searching internet resources for the film and using their smartphones during the screening, which is equally symptomatic) that what they had just seen was "one of this century's great works of art."[4]

Film critics and scholars never shared the opinion that *Persona* makes no sense; nevertheless, from the very beginning they did find it enigmatic and difficult to pin down. In the words of Bergman's biographer Peter Cowie, "Everything one says about *Persona* may be contradicted; the opposite will also be true."[5] This assertion reminds one of an old joke about abstract paintings:

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2 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, xxxix.

3 Not only modernist artists themselves, but also the scholars who interpreted their works became aware of this process, among them most notably Walter Benjamin.

4 Hubert Cohen, *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession*, New York: Twayne, 1993, 227. Susan Sontag even claimed that *Persona* was the best film ever.

5 Peter Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography*, New York: Scribner's, 1982, 231.

"I think this one is hanging upside down."
"How can you tell?"

Consequently, there have been few serious attempts among critics to develop solid interpretations supported with firm arguments: "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."[6]

One of the reasons why Bergman's masterpiece manages to preserve the status of an enigma, evading any final determination, undoubtedly lies in something that Bertolt Brecht called the alienation effect, which is associated with the film's reflexive or self-referential structure. Christopher Orr even claims that "*Persona* remains the most avant-garde of Bergman's films in the sense that its self-reflexive devices disrupt the spectator's involvement in the events of the narrative and call attention to the film's status as material object. In this respect, *Persona* can be placed within the context of what was in 1967 an emerging subgenre of the art cinema: the Brechtian film."[7]

Persona, therefore, calls the audience's attention to the fact that it is watching a film, or, in other words, it "encourages the audience to suspend its willing suspension of disbelief, to back out of believing the story and take a critical look at it."[8] The alienation effect is enabled, but also complicated, by film's reflexivity. *Persona* is modernist in a radical Kantian-Enlightenment sense, probably most precisely articulated by Clement Greenberg: "The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."[9] The same critical procedure should be valid for any me-

6 Lloyd Michaels, "Bergman and the Necessary Illusion," in *Ingmar Bergman's* Persona, ed. Lloyd Michaels, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 5.

7 Christopher Orr, "Scenes from the Class Struggle in Sweden: *Persona* as Brechtian Melodrama," in Michaels, 88. *Cf.* Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film," in *Movies and Methods. Volume 2*, ed. Bill Nichols, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.

8 Bruce Kawin, *How Movies Work*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, 76.

9 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 4*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 85.

dium, not only modernist painting, and, since *Persona* "is a film in search of its own laws," as Bruce Kawin puts it, it is therefore *per definitionem* modernist.[10]

There are not many coincidences in Bergman's films, and the choice of a title would certainly not be one of them. As we know, the original Latin meaning of "persona" relates to a theatrical mask, and only in the later Roman period did the term change to indicate a character in a theatrical performance. From this early usage, the word entered contemporary culture and obtained the meaning of a character played by an actor, as well as that of an individual's social role. The latter developed within psychology under the influence of Carl G. Jung, who defined persona as "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual."[11]

Many interpretations of *Persona* draw heavily from the assumption that *nomen est omen*, and they follow the motif of masks throughout the film, relating its meaning above all to the abovementioned Jungian understanding of persona. Bergman's *Persona* thus becomes a mask that points to itself and questions the relation between the individual and the social, between being and role-playing.

All interpretations of this sort, which focus mainly on and track the development of the narrative involving the main protagonists, assume that the film's title is, in words of Roland Barthes, the anchor directing us towards a meaning already selected in advance (in this case by the film director).[12] The crucial question that the interpreters have to answer therefore relates to the interpretation of a mask and its meaning, especially in relation to the culmination of the film in a composite close-up of both protagonists comprising a single mask. Some authors conclude at this point that *Persona* is a narrative about one single soul, wearing a mask, divided into true self and role-playing.

There are at least two arguments that speak against such interpretations. The first one comes from Bergman himself, who has been always "extremely specific

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10 Kawin, 76.

11 Carl G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1953, 190.

12 *Cf.* Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image—Music—Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

in disavowing this reading of the film."[13] When presenting the basic idea of this film to Svensk Filmindustri (SF), the leading Swedish film company, he gave a very simple description of the project: "It's about one person who talks and one who doesn't, and they [...] get all mingled up in one another."[14] The second argument follows the well-known, but sometimes neglected, fact that the title *Persona* was not Bergman's initial choice at all. He wanted to give his film the title *Cinematography* and lobbied for it at SF. However, the producers did not accept it and demanded a more appealing name. This makes the title *Persona* an unwanted child, in a sense. It is also known that Bergman insisted that the sprocket holes at the edge of the frame be retained in the early publicity stills for the new film—another clue that points out the primacy of the (cinematic) medium over the narrative (i.e. the mask).

It is interesting to observe that Bergman's modernist strategy, distinctive above all in *Persona*, has not been perceived necessarily as a positive characteristic or a specific quality, but rather quite the opposite. It also seems that given a critical distance from Modernism, this becomes even more the case, as recent film criticism clearly shows. In 2007, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum published a devastating critique of Bergman under the title "Scenes from the Overrated Career." In his article Rosenbaum claims that the main deficiency of Bergman's work lies in the fact that his "movies aren't so much filmic expressions as expressions on film."[15]

Only a few days later, a renowned late film critic Roger Ebert published his commentary under a telling title: "Defending Ingmar Bergman." Ebert himself interpreted Rosenbaum's statement this way: "He means form itself is [for Bergman] more important [...] than narrative, emotional content and performance." Then he added, "Not everyone would agree."[16] Which means, in other words, that not everyone would agree that for Bergman form (i.e. the medium) is more important than content (i.e. the message), but would, on the other hand, agree that such a preference would seriously reduce the quality of his work.

Rosenbaum's claim is too general to cover the whole career of a filmmaker who directed (TV production included) almost 60 feature films and went through

13 Wheeler W. Dixon, "*Persona* and the 1960s Art Cinema," in Michaels, 54.

14 Stig Björkman *et al*., *Bergman on Bergman*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973, 198.

15 Jonathan Rosenbaum, *New York Times*, August 4, 2007.

16 www.rogerebert.com/interviews/defending-ingmar-bergman (Accessed May 10, 2014).

changes and modifications of his style and approach. *Persona* stands in this sense as a breaking point, signaling his departure from his earlier work as a director: "*Persona* was new cinematic territory for Bergman, shorn almost entirely of the theatrical constraints that marked his earlier directorial efforts. [...] Then, too, in *Persona* Bergman finally breaks free of the proscenium arch tradition that informed his earlier work to create a film in which rips in the image, out-of-focus shots, repeated sequences, and elaborate optical effects constantly remind us that we are watching a film, a construct, a world that Bergman has invented solely for cinematic consumption."[17] Both Rosenbaum and Ebert therefore seem to miss the point, at least regarding *Persona*. Not only does Bergman put the primacy of the medium over its message here, but he also shows that one cannot grasp the specific quality of this film properly without considering this very choice. Nevertheless, to understand, how this works, we have now turn to the film itself, to the beginning. Curiously enough, the importance and simultaneously the elusiveness of the beginning poses a question here that reminds us of Hegel's famous meditation in the opening pages of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

A Story of Two Levels

In the beginning there was light, and in the end there was darkness again; something had been created, lived for a short time, and then disappeared again. This could easily be considered the basic premise of *Persona* if one takes into account the importance that art and religion had for Bergman during his entire life and the dialectical relation between God and the artist (as creator) throughout Western history. After a moment of complete darkness, the first image in *Persona* appears, which is that of a projection arc lamp fired up at that very moment. It is not a moment of divine light, a coming into existence, but simply the turning on an electric lamp that creates light and enables it to pass through the film medium onto the screen. In a completed symmetry, and after 84 minutes, in the last image the same arc lamp is switched off, leaving us in darkness.[18]

The world created in *Persona* by Bergman, his extraordinary cinematographer Sven Nykvist, the actors Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann, and many others (since any film is ultimately a team endeavor) exists only for the duration of the

[17] Dixon, 44-45.

[18] The length of the film varies from 79 to 85 minutes, depending on the version.

A composite close-up of Alma and Elisabeth comprising a single mask.

film's projection. Filmmakers had been using fade-outs or the darkening of the screen in order to separate parts of the film for a long time before *Persona*, and Bergman uses this darkness in the same sense. There is no before and no after, and there is no relation to some outside reality, independent of film's projection that we watch during those 84 minutes.

Persona has a double-leveled (or two-layered) structure: one telling a narrative of two women protagonists, Alma and Elisabeth, a nurse and a patient merging into one another; the other showing seemingly unrelated shots from the history of film, the making of *Persona*, the firing the projection lamp, and so on. One might ask what is true and what is illusion, or, what is real and what is mere representation. However, since *Persona* does not seem to exemplify Platonist metaphysics, but rather its reversal, the answers to such questions are less straightforward and more difficult to obtain (supposing that they are meaningful at all).

Let us for the purpose of this analysis name the first part of the film's structure the "narrative level (or realm)" and the second one the "material level (or realm)."[19] About one fourth of the entire film length is dedicated to the material level, which appears three times: in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end, thus establishing a kind of a formal framework. Many interpretations of *Persona* start with the narrative level, while some of them even skip the material level altogether, or at least characterize it as resisting reasonable interpretation

[19] The two levels seem to be somehow connected to Bergman's originally intended title (*Cinematography*, related to the material level) and the official title (*Persona*, related to the narrative one).

because it is mystifying, intentionally impenetrable, or utterly incomprehensible. Nevertheless, one should start not with the narrative, but instead with its material conditions.

Bergman started to shoot *Persona* at the Svensk Filmindustri Studios in Stockholm, on July 19, 1966. Everything went wrong there, or as he recalled, "one day after another went by, and all the time we got only bad results, bloody awful results. And Bibi was angry, and Liv was nervous, and I was paralyzed."[20] Film and actors obviously resisted the studio milieu. Everything shot there turned out to be a failure, and Bergman decided to move to a real, but also domestic location—to his own summer house on the island of Fårö. There was no need to build sets, since the walls were already there, and consequently *Persona* became a minimalist film. Scenes from the hospital, where the narrative begins, were shot in a local museum, and these spaces are almost empty—in Elisabeth's room, there is only a hospital bed, a TV set, and a radio.

Together with film, photography, literature, and theatre, *Persona* therefore covers the whole range of contemporary media and points out their role within a modern world, paying homage to Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), which in principle is a silent film in which meaningful speech only comes out from the technological media. This idea, in a slightly modified form, also finds its place within *Persona*.

One of the two main characters is Elisabet Vogler, a well-known theater actress, who declines to speak.[21] During a performance of *Electra*, she suddenly stopped speaking, remained without words, and since then has remained silent. Elisabeth has been taken to a hospital, but if one expects to find a simple straightforward connection between the Greek play, in which C. G. Jung found the inspiration to label a feminine Oedipus complex the "Electra complex," and the diagnosis given to her by the psychiatrist, then one would clearly be wrong. As her doctor put it at the beginning of film, it is the "hopeless dream to be" which defines her illness, if she is ill at all, and Bergman himself went in this same di-

[20] Björkman *et al.*, 198.

[21] The name Vogler and its connection to the absence of speech had already appeared in Bergman's film *The Magician* from 1958 (the original Swedish title of the film is "Ansiktet," which means *the face*). In this film, Albert Vogler is a travelling performer who pretends to be mute in order to achieve stronger illusionistic effect.

rection, claiming that Elisabeth's silence is "completely unneurotic," and above all, "a strong person's form of protest."[22]

Persona grew from the director's own crisis and illness: from the loss of faith in his creative power and from a prolonged illness that left him incapacitated and hospitalized during several months in 1965.[23] He often referred to it as the film that "saved his life," both literally and in the metaphorical sense of his life as an artist.[24] There is thus an immediate relation between Bergman and Elisabeth: she refuses to speak because she realizes that the mask she is wearing in the theatre is only a symptom of a life in which masks are only changed, but never truly removed. Masks are deceiving, and she is guilty of deceit, but so is Bergman, according to his own words at least: "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. [...] I perform conjuring tricks with [an] apparatus so expensive and so wonderful that any entertainer in history would have given anything to have it."[25] There is therefore no way out: Elisabeth's silence is, as her doctor observes, no more than another role she has taken, another mask she has put on; likewise, *Persona* itself is just another film that uses the same "wonderful apparatus" to perform the same "conjuring tricks."

Persona, then, is a film that transcends subjectivity and aspires to universality, but only to show that it is the apparatus itself that forms a material frame out of which a subject or a soul may develop.[26] This soul enters *Persona* in the form of Alma, the young nurse put in charge of Elisabeth Vogler.[27] According to some commentators, Alma is the main protagonist of *Persona*, with Elisabeth being merely her inner dark side, which begins to surface when she breaks into madness.

22 Björkman *et al.*, 211.

23 *Cf.* Michaels, 13.

24 Ingmar Bergman, *Images*, New York: Arcade, 1994, 64.

25 Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960, 15.

26 *Cf.* Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 20.

27 The meaning of nurse's name Alma in some languages, such as Spanish and Portuguese, is *soul*, which is hardly a coincidence, if we take into the consideration the importance Bergman gives names during his career.

Another interpretation, which gets closer to Bergman's own commentaries on *Persona* but retains the importance of Alma's character, would take into account the aforementioned condition of the hopeless dream of being. It is the condition shared by both life and film, and in putting this relation into the structure of his film, Bergman delved into another characteristic of modernism—a paradox, actually, that none of the avant-garde art movements could escape. The more art struggles to become one with life, the more it realizes that this dream is impossible to achieve. There is no life without a mask, and there is no film without deceit.

There is yet another connection between Elisabeth and Bergman. He reveals it in an entry written 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."[28] This quotation, together with the former, is telling, since it shows an understanding of the film medium that *Persona* renders at its best: to shoot a film is not so much to make an idea visible, to interpret a story, or to translate someone's life into a film narration, as is to take images in order to perform tricks. Some of those images in *Persona* came from the time when Bergman himself was in a hospital: the morgue, for example, which he saw from his bedside window (which appears at the material level), or the image of two women wearing big hats and comparing hands (which appears at the narrative level).

However, there are other images included in the film that are also important, that transcend Bergman's perceptions or visions, and that relate to media and history, perhaps even politics. Elisabeth not only refuses to speak, but also declines any emotional relation to others, including her nurse Alma. Nevertheless, this does not prove that she has no feelings altogether, since she does have strong emotional responses, albeit only to media representations. In a shot taken in her hospital room, there is an image she is watching on a television: an iconic image from Vietnam showing the self-immolation of the Buddhist bonze that makes her cry; the next time there is a photograph of a well-known holocaust image—the Warsaw ghetto child.[29] Other instances that make her emotionally

[28] Bergman, *Images*, 59.

[29] It has been pointed out several times that Bergman, as opposed to Godard, rarely included contemporary political references in his films, and his apolitical stance became one of

react are also related to media representations: a radio play makes her laugh, and the photograph of her own son irritates her so much that she tears it apart.

On the narrative level, *Persona* begins straightforwardly and extremely efficiently: Alma steps into the doctor's office, and within the first minute we know the names of the characters and their relation. From her conversation with the doctor and Elisabeth, we grasp that she is 25 years old, engaged, professionally still lacking full confidence (she is not convinced that she will be able to cope with a patient with such mental strength), but also convinced that her life is predestined to be a happy one: "I'll marry Karl-Henrik and have a couple of children, [...] I have a job that I like and enjoy."

During the sequence, the camera follows the protagonists as it has its own consciousness, breaks the tradition of shot/reverse-shot, and goes extremely close to the actresses in its voyeuristic stalking, showing every detail. Close-up shots are a trademark of Bergman's, though in *Persona* we can also read their extreme variations as an illustration of one of the main characteristics that separates the film medium from the theatre in early film theory (the other one main distinctive characteristic is montage).

The psychiatrist believes that remaining in the hospital will not be of any help and therefore advises Elisabeth to move with Alma to her own beach summerhouse (in fact, Bergman's cottage). As soon as Alma accepts her role as nurse, she starts to invade Elisabeth's intimacy; already in the hospital, she opens and starts to read a letter for Elisabeth. However, later in the beach house, she also sacrifices her own intimacy and reveals one of her deepest secrets—the story of a past sexual misadventure. She once participated with another girl in an erotic coupling with two very young boys on a beach. When she had sex with her fiancé that very evening, she experienced the most pleasurable lovemaking during their engagement. She also became pregnant and decided to have an abortion. It is an intensely sensual experience that Bergman turns into a sequence of ten shots lasting about seven minutes. Even though he thus creates, as Lloyd Mi-

his characteristics. In *Masculine / Feminine*, known for the phrase, "Children of Marx and Coca-Cola," and released the same year as *Persona* (1966), Godard makes strong connections between his film and the contemporary political situation—the Vietnam War, the proletariat, colonialism, and American popular culture in France and so on. Bergman's statement is not that straightforward and bold, but it is still there nonetheless.

chaels has pointed out, "one of the most intensely erotic moments in the history of the cinema," these moments remain in their essence iconoclastic.[30] There are no flashbacks or cutaways, and there is no nudity: Alma is sitting in her chair talking, and Elisabeth is lying in her bed listening.

Alma gradually becomes convinced that they are somehow emotionally connected and that they even look alike. Their relation, however, is not symmetrical. Elisabeth cannot keep Alma's secrets to herself, and even though she is not speaking, she still writes letters. In a letter to the doctor, she writes about Alma as if she were the object of enquiry and reveals the erotic story on the beach, but she unfortunately forgets to seal the envelope. When Alma reads it, she realizes that there is an unsurpassable gap between them. Her positive feelings for Elisabeth turn to anger, and she purposely leave pieces of broken glass on the floor so that Elisabeth cuts her leg, and later on she even threatens her with a pot of boiling water (forcing Elisabeth to say at least one sentence, "No, don't do it!" in an act of self-preservation).

We realize that Alma is on the verge of a breakdown; here *Persona* probably reaches the crucial point on the level of narrative. However, at the moment we see Alma's soul breaking apart, Bergman reaches for something unusual—he brings back the material level and shows that this very soul is only a construction, a product of the film. The celluloid itself cracks and burns, the narrative dissolves, and seemingly unrelated images reappear. We are confronted with the materiality of film once more and realize that what we have been watching is nothing more and nothing less than a movie. After a while, another logic (or logos), that of the narrative, takes over again, and we are again following the troubled relation between Alma and Elisabeth. Nevertheless, things become very uncertain now, and we are at pains to separate dreams or hallucinations from apparent reality. Several shots in a row are dominated by a veil, which obviously symbolizes a dream, a hallucination, or at least a problematic relation to reality. In the course of events, Elisabeth's husband visits the beach house, but then something unusual happens: Alma acts as if she were Elisabeth, and the husband is not aware that he is making love to Alma and not his wife. Interpretations of this scene differ, claiming that we are dealing with Elisabeth's dream, with Alma's hallucination, with a situation in which both women are

[30] Michaels, 4-5.

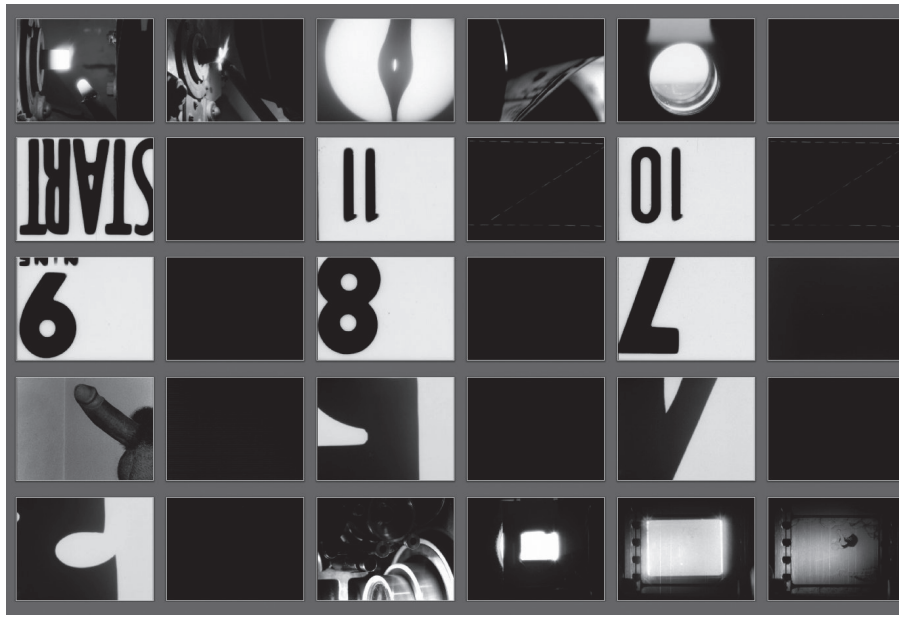
two sides of a single person, and so on, but there is no final solution to this riddle to say the least.

Bergman employs another film device in *Persona*, one that poses a similar question, namely the so-called double monologue. In the sequence in question both women, dressed in black, sit across a table confronting each other, and again Elisabeth is silent, while Alma becomes her voice and explains in detail the decisive moments that have led to her silence. She describes Elizabeth's mothering impulses, her pregnancy, her giving birth, and above all, the fact that she conceived her child out of a feeling of being incomplete, because her friends indicated that she lacks motherliness. As a result, she started to hate her child even before it was born, and after birth, she wished it dead, even though the boy loved her. In *Persona* we see this same scene twice or, more exactly, we hear it twice and see two different versions of the same scene—the first time the camera focuses on Elisabeth, and the second time on Alma. Before the scene reaches its climax for the second time, the camera gradually constructs a composite image, which is half Alma, half Elisabeth. This close-up shot reveals the main theme of *Persona*: the two that cannot be made one. There are two persons, two levels, two kinds of logic, and they remain forever separated. Bergman works hard here to convince us that when there is the danger that two will become one, or in other words, when we do not mind the gap, things go wrong, and the film tears. He makes us see this actually, pointing to the material level itself. Many discussions of *Persona* skip the material level and start with the narrative, but as Susan Sontag once wrote, "Any account which leaves out or dismisses as incidental how *Persona* begins and ends hasn't been talking about the film that Bergman made."[31]

The Material Level and the Materiality of Medium

Persona begins (this time literally) with the first of the three sequences that represent the material level. An initial darkness lasting several seconds is replaced by nearly 60 black and white shots with a total duration of a little less than six-and-half minutes. Two white geometric spots on the black background are transformed into a bright light from the projector arc, and various shots follow showing a film leader running through the projector and gradually reveal the film and the projector itself. The experience is not only visual, but also auditory.

31 Susan Sontag, "Bergman's *Persona*," in Michaels, 75.



Persona begins with a sequence of shots that seem unrelated to film's narration, nevertheless they turn out to be crucial in order to grasp its meaning.

The appearance of the projector is accompanied by high-pitch abstract sounds that resemble a siren before turning into mechanical, but realistic sounds of the projector itself. This is the tool or apparatus that is going to enable viewers to see the world created by the film director. This is, to use Kant's words, the condition of possibility for any film experience.

What follows is a countdown, starting with the very short shot of the word "START" turned upside down, and then we see for a split second, turned up-side-down as well, the numbers eleven, ten, nine, eight, and seven; between them, as punctuation, are shots of a black screen with thin white disconnected lines forming the letter Z. The countdown continues, but instead of number six, which would logically follow, the image of an erect penis emerges, rendering a kind of filmic Freudian slip—the meaning of Swedish word sex is namely both six and sex. However, this is more than just Bergman's inside joke; it is the way to show the importance that Freud, psychoanalysis, and above all dreams have

had for the film medium from the very beginning. As it is, the reversed image of numbers is more than a coincidence, since it shows the upside-down image reproduced in *camera obscura*. The numbers that come after the image of the penis, i.e. five, four, and three, become more and more abstract and finally almost unrecognizable. The number two is replaced (again) with the image of a projector, thus showing the redoubling that it produces. The countdown sequence ends with the image of an illuminated film frame (number one) that transforms into a simple animated cartoon.

The role of the sequence with the cartoon is obviously to show the transition of a static image into a moving picture. In the beginning, we focus on the single film frame, then the film starts to move, and this movement gives life to an animated character (a girl that washes her face, standing in a pond). After a few seconds, the image freezes, then starts to move again, and in the next shot, we see again the source of this life—the projector and the film. A close-up of hands follow, supposedly pointing out the relation between the machine and human hands as his basic tool. The screen becomes completely white after this shot, and what follows is a sequence of shots in which a skeleton pops out of a steamer trunk in a bedroom. This time, Bergman quotes himself, namely, his own feature film from 1949, entitled *The Devil's Wanton*.

In the next sequence, images of unrelated figures emerge—from a spider and an eye (making a reference to another film, this time *Un chien andalou* [1929]), to animal entrails and most disturbingly a close-up of a human hand with a spike driven through it (clearly addressing the religious symbolism). All of these images alternate with reflections of pure light accompanied by abstract sounds. The next two shots, of a surface of a canvas and then of a Winter forest, return us to a calmer atmosphere, and another two deal with the different forms that film can reproduce—one spiked, the other amorphous or round; the natural, the architectural, or the human.

The next sequence, which will not be meticulously analyzed, because it would far exceed our intentions here, concerns the question of life and death. The close-up of an old woman's face, a shot of a boy lying on a bench covered with a white sheet, and close-ups of various parts of human bodies, presumably taken in a morgue, do not leave a lot of space for interpretation. They all lie there dead. They do not move, and the impression is that we are watching photographic

stills, photographs as fragments, devoid of life, which, in turn, seemingly draw our attention to the relation between photography and death. Only the sound of water dripping somewhere in the distance gives us a feeling of time.

Nevertheless, the next close-up shows the eyes of a woman open, and a strange-looking boy slowly awakens, begins to move, puts on glasses, and starts to read a book that appears out of nowhere. Since this level is not random, but subjected to a peculiar logic, despite what most readings of *Persona* contend, the author and the title of the book offer another clue to interpretation. The book that the boy reads is Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (written 1838-1840). In this novel we find an idea that seems so close to the basic concept of *Persona* that it would be hard to consider the appearance of that book in this film as a pure coincidence: "There are two personalities within me: one lives—in the full sense of the word—the other reflects and judges him; the first, it may be, in an hour's time, will take farewell of you and the world for ever, and the second—the second?"[32]

The role of the boy is performed by Jörgen Lindström, who, however, is not credited in the film. This decision could be supported on the basis that he is not a part of the narrative level, does not contribute to the narrative, and consequently could not be considered an actor performing as a character. Therefore, his identity remains a mystery, and even though some critics claim that he is Elisabeth's son while others insist that he is the film's public, neither side has a solid argument. Even more so if one sees in a boy reading *A Hero of Our Time* Bergman himself, or an instance of his psyche adopting an idea for *Persona*, or to be more precise, for its narrative level.

In the next shot, a boy is disturbed by the presence of something that we do not see, but some commentators state that it is the camera, even though there is again no clear evidence to support such claim.[33] He tries to reach it with his hand, and then in the reverse shot, which is one of the most fascinating shots in *Persona*, we finally see what attracted his attention and what he is trying reach—it is a huge unfocused close-up photograph of a woman's face appearing behind the screen. The boy's hand extends to trace (maybe caress, or even to

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32 Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916, 301.

33 *Cf.* Michaels, 1.

A memorable film shot from *Persona* showing Bergman's attempt to bridge the gap between the material and the narrative level.

shape) the figure, which gradually becomes another woman's face. For a first-time viewer, there is no clue about who these two women might be, and with the transition from one to another, the somehow logical solution that this is simply the boy's mother is entirely shaken. Moreover, the soundtrack becomes high-pitched and intrusive, leading to a conclusion or transition.

In the next shot, the titles appear, beginning with "PERSONA," "EN FILM AV INGMAR BERGMAN," and separated by a series of very short shots, some of which are taken from other parts of *Persona*, alternated with close-up shots of the boy. At the end of the sequence, accompanied by intense sound effects, we leave the material level and enter the narrative level—the story about Alma (Bibi Andersson) and Elisabeth (Liv Ulmann) begins.

Conclusion

In his now classic work on Postmodernism, Fredric Jameson describes the transition from Realism to Modernism, and finally to Postmodernism, by way of the concept of the sign: "Once upon a time at the dawn of capitalism and middle-class society, there emerged something called the sign, which seemed to entertain unproblematical relations with its referent."[34] These "unproblematical" relations with the referent are the essential characteristics of Realism, including

[34] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, 95.

Film Realism, and most of the films ever produced, Bergman's own works before *Persona* included.

In Jameson's Marxist-structuralist interpretation of the aforementioned transition, reification is the force that lurks behind it all. Since reification manifests itself through the logic of "ruthless separation and disjunction, of specialization and rationalization," thus showing that in its essence it is the logic of capital itself, the moment of Realism cannot endure, but must eventually give way to another historical moment.[35] Therefore, "by a dialectical reversal [realism] then itself in turn becomes the object of the corrosive force of reification, which enters the realm of language to disjoin the sign from the referent. Such a disjunction does not completely abolish the referent, or the objective world, or reality, which still continue to entertain a feeble existence on the horizon like a shrunken star or red dwarf. But its great distance from the sign now allows the latter to enter a moment of autonomy, of a relatively free-floating Utopian existence, as over against its former objects. This autonomy of culture, this semi-autonomy of language, is the moment of modernism, and of a realm of the aesthetic which redoubles the world without being altogether of it, thereby winning a certain negative or critical power, but also a certain otherworldly futility."[36]

In this view, then, *Persona* is an outcome and a perfect example of the process described above, a process of reification leading to autonomy and Utopia, a process of redoubling, but also one of separation and disjunction. The formal structure of this film, which is one of its most striking and enigmatic issues, is clearly related to the topic of redoubling. The redoubling in *Persona*, however, takes more than one form prescribed by Jameson. Moreover, it is not only the realm of film, which redoubles the world (if at all) without being of it, but it is also a film that in a peculiar way actually redoubles the realm of film itself. Then, on the other level, it tries to put it back together, and we see this in the remarkable close-up shot of the composite face, half Alma and half Elisabeth.

Jameson's interpretation therefore adds another level to our interpretation and shows that even the material level is redoubled: on the one hand, there is the materiality of society, organized in the form of a capitalism that separates and

35 *Ibid*., 96.
36 *Ibid*.

disjoints, and which is driven by the force of reification. On the other hand, there is the materiality of the technological medium, which functions as a mediator between a material basis of society and the consciousness of the subjects living in any given society. It is subjectivity that follows materiality, and not vice versa; this is not only Marx's idea in his critique of ideology, but also Bergman's key point in *Persona*.

There is, however, something more to this. The development of society, and consequently of technological media, does not end with Modernity. Art does not end with Modernism, and the process of reification and fragmentation continues, according to Jameson, until we are left with free-floating signifiers. *Persona* is able to show us these unrelated fragments on the material level—images, shots, and sequences that are shown in an order that seems arbitrary, incoherent. Why, then, does it not fall apart altogether, or simply remain fragmentary, made of free-floating images and sounds? What enables its narrative to appear at all? Why is *Persona* not postmodernist?

This is probably the most important question that Bergman posits in *Persona*. It is modernist exactly because there exists a force that is able to put together all of these seemingly unrelated fragments and form a narrative out of them. This narrative is an island of temporary, inconclusive, and extremely fragile order in an ocean of chaos, and the force needed here is the creativity of a modernist author. A modernist author, as presented in *Persona*, plays the role of Lermontov's Pechórin—he or she is "a hero of our time," who has the capacity to reveal the truth of that time and above all puts on the mask of Kant's *a priori* cognitive unity, without which any possible perception becomes impossible. *Persona* is modernist, because its director takes upon himself the role of the transcendental ego that synthesizes and unifies fragments in order to make a work of (modernist) art.