



Persona

In many ways Bergman's most avant-garde and radical film, *Persona* is ostensibly about a great stage actor (Ullmann) who has mysteriously withdrawn into silence and travels to a remote island to recuperate while being cared for by a loquacious nurse (Andersson). As a battle of wills between the women develops, their relationship becomes ever more complicated and fraught, and our sense of what film itself is becomes less clear.

Jelena Milosavljevic, bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

What is emotionally darkest in Bergman's film is connected particularly with a sub-theme of the main theme of doubling: the contrast between hiding or concealing and showing forth. The Latin word *persona* means the mask worn by an actor. To be a person, then, is to possess a mask; and in *Persona* both women wear masks. Elizabeth's is her muteness. Alma's is her health, her optimism, her normal life (she is engaged; she likes and is good at her work). But in the course of the film, both masks crack.

One way of putting this is to say that the violence the actress has done to herself is transferred to Alma. But that's too simple. Violence and the sense of horror and impotence are, more truly, the residual experiences of consciousness subjected to an ordeal. It isn't that Bergman is pessimistic about the human situation – as if it were a question of certain opinions. It's that the quality of his sensibility has only one true subject: the depths in which consciousness drowns. If the maintenance of personality requires the safeguarding of the integrity of masks, and the truth about a person is always the cracking of the mask, then the truth about life as a whole is the shattering of the total façade behind which lies an absolute cruelty.

Bergman's film is profoundly upsetting, at moments terrifying. It relates the horror of the dissolution of personality (Alma crying out to Elizabeth at one point, 'I'm not you!'). And it depicts the complementary horror of the theft of personality, what is rendered mythically as vampirism: at one point, Alma sucks Elizabeth's blood. But it is worth noting that this theme need not necessarily be treated as a horror story. Think of the very different emotional range in which this material is situated in Henry James' late novel, *The Sacred Fount*. The vampiristic exchanges between the characters in James' book, for all their undeniably disagreeable aura, are represented as partly voluntary and, in some obscure way, just. But the realm of justice (in which characters get what they 'deserve') is rigorously excluded by Bergman. The spectator isn't furnished with any idea of the true moral standing of the two women, their enmeshment is a *donnée*, not the result of some prior situation we are allowed to understand. The mood is one of desperation: all we are shown is a set of compulsions or gravitations, in which they founder, exchanging 'strength' and 'weakness'.

But perhaps the main contrast between Bergman and James on this theme derives from their differing positions with respect to language. As long as discourse continues in the James novel, the texture of the person continues.

The continuity of language, of discourse, constitutes a bridge over the abyss of loss of personality, the foundering of the personality in absolute despair. But in *Persona* it is precisely language – its continuity – which is in question.

It might really have been anticipated. Cinema is the natural home of those who don't trust language, a natural index of the weight of suspicion lodged in the contemporary sensibility against 'the word'. As the purification of language has been envisaged as the peculiar task of modernist poetry and of prose writers like Stein and Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, so much of the new cinema has become a forum for those wishing to demonstrate the futility and duplicities of language.

In Bergman's work, the theme had already appeared in *The Silence*, with the incomprehensible language into which the translator sister descends, unable to communicate with the old porter who attends her when she lies ill, perhaps dying, in the empty hotel in the imaginary garrison city. But Bergman did not take the theme beyond the fairly banal range of the 'failure of communication' of the soul isolated and in pain, and the 'silence' that constitutes abandonment and death. In *Persona*, the notion of the burden and the failure of language is developed in a much more complex way.

Persona takes the form of a virtual monologue. Besides Alma, there are only two other speaking characters, the psychiatrist and Elizabeth's husband: they appear very briefly. For most of the film we are with the two women, in isolation at the beach – and only one of them, Alma, is talking, talking shyly but incessantly. Though the verbalisation of the world in which she is engaged always has something uncanny about it, it is at the beginning a wholly generous act, conceived for the benefit of her patient who has withdrawn from speech as some sort of contaminating activity. But the situation begins to change rapidly. The actress' silence becomes a provocation, a temptation, a trap. For what Bergman shows us is a situation reminiscent of Strindberg's famous one-act play *The Stronger*, a duel between two people, one of whom is aggressively silent. And, as in the Strindberg play, the one who talks, who spills her soul, turns out to be weaker than the one who keeps silent. As real gestures – like Alma's lustful affection – appear, they are voided by Elizabeth's relentless silence.

Alma is also betrayed by speech itself. Language is presented as an instrument of fraud and cruelty (the blaring newscast, Elizabeth's cruel letter to the psychiatrist which Alma reads); as an instrument of unmasking (Alma's excoriating portrait of the secrets of Elizabeth's motherhood); as an instrument of self-revelation (Alma's confessional narrative of the beach orgy) and as art and artifice (the lines of *Electra* that Elizabeth is delivering on stage when she suddenly goes silent; the radio drama Alma turns on in her hospital room that makes the actress smile). What *Persona* demonstrates is the lack of an appropriate language, a language that's genuinely full. All that is left is a language of lacunae, befitting a narrative strung along a set of lacunae or gaps in the 'explanation'. It is these absences of sense or lacunae of speech which become, in *Persona*, more potent than words while the person who places faith in words is brought down from relative composure and confidence to hysterical anguish.

Here, indeed, is the most powerful instance of the motif of exchange. The actress creates a void by her silence. The nurse, by speaking, falls into it – depleting herself. Sickened almost by the vertigo opened up by the absence of language, Alma at one point begs Elizabeth just to repeat nonsense

phrases that she hurls at her. But during all the time at the beach, despite every kind of tact, cajolery and anguished pleading, Elizabeth refuses to speak. She has only one lapse. This happens when Alma, in a fury, threatens her with a pot of scalding water. The terrified Elizabeth backs against the wall screaming ‘No, don’t hurt me!’ and for the moment Alma is triumphant. But Elizabeth instantly resumes her silence. The only other time the actress speaks is late in the film – here, the time is ambiguous – when in the bare hospital room (again?), Alma is shown bending over her bed, begging her to say just one word. Impassively, Elizabeth complies. The word is ‘Nothing’.

At the end of *Persona*, mask and person, speech and silence, actor and ‘soul’ remain divided – however parasitically, even vampiristically, they are shown to be intertwined.

Susan Sontag, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1967

PERSONA

Director: Ingmar Bergman
Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri
Production Manager: Lars-Owe Carlberg
Production Supervisor: Bo Vibenius
Assistant Director: Lenn Hjortzberg
Script Supervisor: Kerstin Berg
Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman
Director of Photography: Sven Nykvist
Camera Operator: Anders Bodin
Focus Puller: Lars Johnsson
Editor: Ulla Ryghe
Art Director: Bibi Lindström
Properties: Karl Arne Bergman
Costumes: Mago
Costume Assistant: Eivor Kullberg
Make-up: Börje Lundh, Tina Johansson

Music: Lars Johan Werle, Johann Sebastian Bach
Sound: P.O. Pettersson
Sound Assistant: Lennart Engholm
Mixing: Olle Jakobsson
Sound Effects: Evald Andersson

Cast

Bibi Andersson (*Nurse Alma*)
Liv Ullmann (*Elisabet Vogler*)
Margaretha Krook (*doctor*)
Gunnar Björnstrand (*Mr Vogler*)
Jörgen Lindström (*boy*) *

Sweden 1966
83 mins

* Uncredited

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Sat 4 Mar 13:20; Sat 11 Mar 18:05
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Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40
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Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX
Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari) Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30
Shoah Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35
The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d’Arc) Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)
Citizen Kane Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30

Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)
Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00
2001: A Space Odyssey
Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00
Au hasard Balthazar Mon 6 Mar 18:30
Vertigo Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10
In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah) Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30
Late Spring (Banshun) Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20
The Night of the Hunter
Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45
Mulholland Dr. Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15
Beau Travail Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King’s College London)
Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)
Persona Thu 9 Mar 21:05
Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)
Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50
The Godfather Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles Sat 11 Mar 18:50
Taxi Driver Mon 13 Mar 20:40

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