



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Persona

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  
82 mins

\* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Persona

Mon 17 May 14:30; Fri 28 May 21:00; Wed 2 Jun 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large) Mon 28 Jun 21:00

Touch of Evil

Tue 18 May 14:30; Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50; Sun 20 Jun 18:15

The Tango Lesson

Tue 18 May 20:45; Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by So Mayer, author of ‘The Cinema of Sally Potter’)

Citizen Kane

Wed 19 May 18:00; Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45

L’eclisse (The Eclipse)

Thu 20 May 14:15; Sat 5 Jun 12:10; Tue 15 Jun 17:50

La Haine

Thu 20 May 17:50; Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00; Fri 18 Jun 20:40

The Last Picture Show (Director’s Cut)

Fri 21 May 20:30; Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45

Steamboat Bill, Jr.

Sat 22 May 12:00; Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30

Raging Bull

Sat 22 May 14:40; Sun 30 May 15:30; Tue 1 Jun 17:30

Cleo from 5 to 7 Cléo de 5 à 7

Sat 22 May 21:00; Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

The Big City (Mahanagar)

Sun 23 May 12:10; Wed 23 Jun 17:40

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Sun 23 May 15:20; Thu 24 Jun 17:40

The Night of the Hunter

Mon 24 May 14:30; Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Killers + pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith, author of ‘In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City’

Tue 25 May 20:30; Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50

Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten)

Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 1 Jun 14:30; Fri Jun 25 20:45

Eraserhead

Thu 27 May 18:20; Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10

Man Hunt

Fri 28 May 18:10; Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15

Sweet Smell of Success

Fri 4 Jun 15:00; Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

The Man Who Wasn’t There

Fri 4 Jun 17:50; Sun 27 Jun 18:20

The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)

Sun 6 Jun 18:10; Sat 26 Jun 16:30

Le Doulos + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau, King’s College London

Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45

Bitter Victory

Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55

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