

## Persona (1966)

### Major Credits:

Director: Ingmar Bergman  
Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman  
Cinematography: Sven Nykvist  
Cast: Bibi Anderson (Alma), Liv Ullmann (Elizabeth Vogler)

### Background:

Bergman is the son of a country parson and spent much of his childhood following his father as he preached in a variety of small churches. He had an uneasy relationship with his authoritarian father, eventually leaving home as a young man to pursue a career in the Stockholm theater. For nearly forty years, he has continued to direct on the stage as well as the screen. Until 1976, when he was forced to leave the country because of a tax dispute, Bergman lived all of his creative life in Sweden, much of it on the island of Faro which we see in this and several other of his films.

There are at least three significant sources for the conception of Persona: 1) Strindberg's one-act play, The Stronger; 2) an infection of the inner ear which caused Bergman to be hospitalized, suffering from acute loss of balance; 3) the physical resemblance he noted between the two principal actresses (who were mutual friends), Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann. Bergman wrote the screenplay, which is substantially different from the final form of the film, while recovering from his illness, calling it "a sonata for two instruments."

Persona is a characteristically modernist work: it is deliberately ambiguous, calling into question conventional definitions of reality, sanity, and character; it is a self-reflexive work, continually drawing attention to its own status as a work of art; it is intensely personal, almost confessional, in its exploration of neurosis, the activity of the artist, and the limits of intellect.

### Bergman's Influence on the Art of the Cinema

Despite the international prestige generally accorded him during his long career, Bergman has been criticized for being an essentially conservative, theatrical director, one who is moreover obsessed with certain repetitive and morbid themes. Persona, in fact, is (along with Hour of the Wolf) the most experimental of his films, but it reflects several significant qualities which have contributed to the development of film art and which can be found in most of his major works.

1. the intellectual force of language--Bergman's are the first screenplays to be regularly published
2. the expressive use of silence
3. the introduction of a reduced, non-melodic sound track and music
4. the restoration of the close-up as a significant unit of meaning
5. the compositional qualities of the frame, creating memorable tableaux

### Sequences for Discussion:

1. the prologue (pre-credit and credit sequence)
2. Alma's narration of the beach orgy and the subsequent bedroom sequence
3. the interruption of the narrative after Elizabeth steps on the glass
4. the "double monologue" about Elizabeth's son

"Persona is not just a representation of transactions between the two characters, Alma and Elizabeth, but a meditation on the film which is 'about' them."

- Susan Sontag

## Some Ways of Thinking About Bergman's Persona

Susan Sontag, Styles of Radical Will (originally in Sight and Sound, Autumn, 1967).

"The theme is that of doubling; the variations are those that follow from the leading possibilities of that theme (on both a formal and a psychological level) such as duplication, inversion, reciprocal exchange, unity and fission, and repetition. The action cannot be univocally paraphrased. It's correct to speak of Persona in terms of the fortunes of two characters named Elizabeth and Alma who are engaged in a desperate duel of identities. But it is equally pertinent to treat Persona as relating the duel between two mythical parts of a single self: the corrupt person who acts (Elizabeth) and the ingenious soul (Alma) who founders in contact with corruption."

John Simon, Ingmar Bergman Directs

"Persona, as has been variously pointed out, is one of those modern (or post-Mallarmean, post-Pirandellian) works of art that are concerned, at least partly, with themselves as works of art: with how they come into being, and what it means that they are, after all, works of art and not slices of life, and how this makes them superior or inferior, or both at once. Significantly, Bergman for some time did not allow stills from this film to be given out unless they showed the sprocket holes along one side, and the working title of Persona was, for a while, simply Film. The printed screen play is twice interrupted by speculations about the nature of film, and, as we shall see, the finished film, too, does a good deal to call attention to its filmness."

Robin Wood, Ingmar Bergman

"In Persona one can see the whole traditional concept of art--an ordering of experience towards a positive end, a wholeness of statement--cracking and crumbling even as, half-way through the film, the image cracks and crumbles. Breakdown... is both theme and form--that is to say, it is experienced both by the characters and by the artist, the "formal" collapse acting as a means of communicating the sensation of breakdown directly to the spectator."

Vernon Young, Cinema Borealis: Ingmar Bergman and the Swedish Ethos

"I have learned in Bergman movies always to look for the personal involvement first. His subject, whatever ramifications and ideal extentions may be suggested, is forever himself. In Persona, among a diversity of excursions, he does seem to have faced the devouring necessity of the artist, as he sees it, to exploit the feelings of others; he states further, with even more merciless finality than in The Magician, the pitiful need of ordinary souls to be exploited, to empty themselves into the rhetoric of art so that they are left at the last with nothing of themselves. Their small vengeance is to repudiate their guide into the abyss."