

2014

The Hopeless Dream of Being: An Exploration of the Female Gaze in Bergman's *Persona*

Benton Meadows

Georgia College & State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meadows, Benton (2014) "The Hopeless Dream of Being: An Exploration of the Female Gaze in Bergman's *Persona*," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 15, Article 7.

Available at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol15/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Knowledge Box. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Corinthian* by an authorized administrator of Knowledge Box.

The Hopeless Dream of Being: An Exploration of the Female Gaze in Bergman's *Persona*

Benton Meadows

Dr. Alex Blazer

Faculty Mentor

In its extensive play with character and form, Bergman's *Persona* becomes as difficult to analyze as an actual patient. Susan Sontag talks about how the viewer can only move toward but never achieve certainty about the action (129). Simply, it is about two women whose conflicting desires lead them to spend a cathartic summer at a seaside cottage. Critic John Simon describes the movie as a meditation on the numbers 1 and 2: it is about one splitting in two and two becoming one (216). The film is constantly attempting to balance, or at least justify, the existence of the disparities and paradoxes of life, many of which become embodied in Elisabet and Alma. Many critics have written on the opposing duality of female spectatorship, and I would argue that by reading the two women as active and passive gazes we can unlock the riddle of Ingmar Bergman's poetic film.

The first question is: what, really, is wrong with Elisabet? She seems very healthy but for her silence, which, as Alma immediately notes, seems self-controlled. Even when the two women reach the cottage by the sea she remains absolutely silent, though in a letter home she says that her soul is seeming to smooth over. John Simon notes that a clue is given in the title. In Latin, "Persona" literally means mask. This is interesting enough, but Simon traces the roots of the word further. While *Persona* was being made, Ingmar Bergman was reading Carl Jung, who defines "Persona" as the role a that someone plays for the benefit of others, as well as to satisfy their own expectations of self (Simon 224). So when Elisabet suddenly stops on stage, with the urge to laugh followed by a plunge into silence, it seems that she suddenly realizes what Shakespeare means when he writes, "all the world's a stage." I

can see why she would laugh; she is doing the deed. While on stage she realizes that every action, whether in life or theater, is an act; there is a painful irony in the uniform dishonesty of everything.

Alma and Elisabet both return to the mirror stage of their development at the summer cottage. This is a pre-lingual stage that begins as a child first recognizes him or herself in the mirror, typically sometime between 6 and 18 months (Lacan 2). This recognition is our first sense of self. We realize that the reflection is us; we say, "That is me." Even more than this, we perceive the reflection as something that we should be. The reflective gestalt is inevitably separate, causing a personal anxiety that we do not measure up to what we are supposed to be (Lacan 4). As we grow older, the mirror stage continues and expands beyond our own reflection, or, rather, it expands to include those in whom we find a reflection of ourselves. Cinema provides this reflection as much as, if not more than, any other experience.

In *Persona*, for example, Alma tells Elisabet that, when she left the actress' last film she was struck by how similar they looked and even thought that she, too, could be like Elisabet if she tried. But, she concedes that she is not as pretty as Elisabet is and admits that she is too lazy to change. It is interesting to note Elisabet's similarity to the cinema screen. She is, after all, one of its stars, and the first time we see her she is in makeup on stage. Plus, like the screen, she is silent and unresponding. This vacancy allows the pent up Alma to speak to her as an analysand would to their psychoanalyst (Renn). In *Elisabet*, Alma experiences a multidimensional effect of the cinema in her waking life. Critic Laura Mulvey explains how Lacan's mirror stage is satisfied in voyeuristic gaze, for when we project ourselves onto the silent screen our repressed desires emerge (2). And as the movie unfolds, this is precisely what happens.

Elisabet has almost completely returned to the mirror stage. She has reverted to a time before speech; she is only receptive and gives no output. When we first see her in the hospital, she is nearly vacant, and we do not see her show any emotion until, in her room at night, she reacts with terror to footage of Thich Quang Duc's self immolation. Since Elisabet has returned to the mirror stage,

she is terrified as she relates to Thich Quang Duc. As someone rebelling silently, she is struck at the possible outcome of a refusal to comply. Elisabet no longer acknowledges any defining traits and does not seem to want to speak to or of her family. To quote Mulvey again, “the sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of the” mirror stage (3). In a way, the two women have joined us as members of the audience, by which I mean that they, too, can be psychologically affected by the film.

It is hard to say what exactly the two women represent. Consensus always defines them as opposites: as two sides of the same woman (which seems, to me, a little too much like a kitschy psychological thriller), as analyst and patient (Renn) or as corrupted action and “ingenious soul” (Sontag 136). The most enlightening idea, which is mentioned in many places including Sontag’s essay, interviews with the actresses, and most notably in John Simon’s essay on the film, relies on August Strindberg’s play *The Stronger*, which features two characters, one silent and one talkative (Simon 299). There are many readings that this play can contribute to the film, but for this essay I will focus on the difference between the passive, or silent, character and the active, speaking, character.

The passive/active binary is one of seemingly endless disparities that the film confronts in Alma and Elisabet’s distant statures. They are such opposites that any duality can be represented in their arguments. It is important to note, again, Simon’s comment that *Persona* is about one splitting into two and two becoming one (216). Simon cites Susan Sontag’s essay on the film where she says we are watching the story of two women but also the two sides of a single woman: the aforementioned corrupted action and ingenious soul, who flounders in contact with the corrupted action (136).¹ Alma and Elisabet are two different women, this is certain, but they do literally become one in the famous shot of their faces in amalgam. The double-function is disconcerting and it is one of the ways in which the film finds its sublimity. For, in the summer cottage by the sea we find ourselves,

1. This is eerily similar to Lacan’s definition of the mirror stage in dreams, which I have included in the next footnote.

with the women, attempting to balance or marry the paradoxes that we find in every hollow of our inter- and intrapersonal relationships.

In film terms, this binary can be shown by the two opposite views of the female gaze in film as explored Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane. The two women have reverted to the mirror stage, making the cinematic gaze function within the film as well as for those watching it.² Both writers are concerned with female gaze in patriarchal cinema, where women are always objects of desire. Even in *Persona*, a film with only two characters, both women, there is a patriarchal order. We see this effect on Alma manifested in her energies. Alma's main focuses are her confusion and ennui. These come from her relationships with men: first in the five year affair with the married man and after in her engagement to Karl Heinrick. Elisabet, on the other hand, does now show Alma's energy, as she is the object. Elisabet is both the object of desire that cinema so often portrays and simultaneously a mother. Doane is working off of Mulvey, who says the female gaze can function in two ways: the passive, or masochistic, and the active, or masculine, gazes (Doane 24). As *Persona* is working with the character divisions that Strindberg creates in *The Stronger*, there is a direct link to these roles, which are already fairly obvious. To be clear, Alma, the speaker, is the active character and the silent Elisabet is passive.

To explore this a little, let's bring the active and passive gazes to the original level of psychoanalysis. The three psychoanalytic critics that I have mentioned are each adding onto the work of the critic that came before them; Doane is responding to Mulvey who is responding to Lacan. In his discussion of the

2. I find it interesting here to add a note on the setting. Lacan says that the mirror stage is represented in dreams by a castle which is "surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way" (5). The summer cottage can easily be compared to this dream castle, as the sometimes marshy, always natural setting establishes the wild juxtaposition. Then, there is a beautiful shot of Bibi Andersonn right after Alma reads Elisabet's letter where she is standing on the edge of a marshy pond looking at her reflection, and we can see her body full above the pond and below in the reflection.

mirror stage, Lacan marks the opposition between what he calls narcissistic libido, which is a function of the pre-Oedipal gaze, and the sexual libido, which develops as humans move into the Oedipal stage (Lacan 6). I would argue that, as adults, when we watch a movie and return to the mirror stage we do not forget our learned sexual preferences as we have irrevocably passed through the Oedipal stage. I would align the activity of Alma's gaze with the sexual libido. We see this throughout the film as her problems seem all to be tied to sex: She is controlled by her relationships with men and deals explicitly with her sexual desire when she is in the cottage. This comes in three forms: memory, subversion, and action. Memory is the driving force during the intense scene in which she recounts her beach orgy. Sexual subversion drives Alma's infatuation with Elisabet, and the subsequent action when she goes to bed with Herr Volger during the dream-like middle section of the film. Inversely, Elisabet's return to the mirror stage is more complete; it functions on a narcissistic libido as we see in her refusal to speak and in her absorption in images on the television and the photographs of her son and the Jewish Diaspora.

Laura Mulvey goes further into the structures of looking specifically as they apply to women. The active gaze (of Alma), which Mulvey calls Scopophilic, recognizes itself as a separate being from the object of its desire in order to view the object erotically (3). Here, again, I will point to Alma's direct reference to Elisabet's film, but this time I want to point out the way she signifies difference, saying that Elisabet is much prettier. This happens more directly later in the film when the women begin merging and Alma repeatedly shouts, "I am not Elisabet Volger!" This gaze, Mulvey notes, aligns the female spectator with the male viewer in that they both desire to own the beauty on stage. She notes that once this desire is fulfilled, the glamour of the beauty fades. In *Persona* this also happens directly. We first see Elisabet on stage, lit and with makeup on, but then Alma is given custody of her and she looks sickly without her makeup and stage demeanor. As with Lacan, Elisabet represents the Narcissistic gaze of a woman, which Mulvey defines as the identification of the ego with the object of desire (3). For Elisabet this is easy because she is an

actress; she is that staged object of desire. This seems too easy. We have to ask, what is it that Elisabet desires? This question is difficult because, as a staged female there seems no other object of desire. As a female, Freudian psychoanalysis would say that her desire is located within her lack of a phallus. Then, Mulvey quotes Freud, who believed that the binary at the basis of this formulation, the sexual and narcissistic libidos, were always overlaying and interacting. These two contradictory forces, she says, have found their place in the cinema which has “evolved a particular illusion of reality in which this contradiction between libido and ego has found a beautifully complimentary fantasy world” (3). This sounds like it was written about *Persona*. I think one of the most beautiful scenes in the film touches on this coexistence. The two women return from mushrooming and sit at a porch table and hum a duet, each part responding and adding to the other to form one piece of music.

Doane, the latest critic of the group, helps to answer some questions that have so far been left unanswered. Perhaps the added effect that Doane’s article has comes from its inclusion of Metz’s idea about the distance between the voyeur and the object (23). This is something that Mulvey approaches when she is talking about how the active gaze keeps its object at an erotic distance, but she leaves it at that. Doane compares this look to the threat of castration which a boy faces in the Oedipal stage, so it is “in the distance between the look and the threat that the boy’s relation to knowledge of sexual difference is formulated” (23). In *Persona* I think this applies mostly to the young boy we see in the prologue and epilogue to the film, but the meaning of this quote has to be changed for the cinema, or at least reevaluated into Metz’s definition. The cinema space would be between the viewer and the screen, and it would be here that sexual development is placed. In the case of the boy, we see him reaching for the shifting faces of the shrouded women. John Simon believes that this boy is Bergman, and he describes the distance into which he is reaching as the “evanescent frontier between reality and dream” (239). The shrouded, shifting women, then, are different aspects of the desired mother. This point is supported by the repeated use of the shroud

in the film. Whenever the shroud appears it is always framing the mother: Elisabet.

As the application of Mulvey ends we are left with a scant understanding of Elisabet's passive gaze. We can take the theories so far as to say that she is attempting to resolve her lack, but this only leads us to ask the same questions that someone would ask at the beginning of a discussion of *Persona*. For instance, why is Elisabet quiet, or, a little bit more refined, how does she attempt to nullify this lack? Her career has not paid off what she thought it would. Her desires are as strong as ever. She is thrown off when a friend mentions her lack at a party, saying that she has everything, the career and marriage, but she lacks motherliness. This sends Elisabet down a new path to negate the lack; Doane calls this action the masquerade. The masquerade is a guise of exaggerated femininity that attempts to nullify the lack by increasing the gap between the looker and the object (Doane 26). Again, I want to call the Jungian definition of "Persona" to mind, as it is tied to the idea of a masquerade. It is the social role that each of us plays.

In the end, the problem for both women, both binaries of the female gaze or whatever duality we want to tie to them, is the ineffectivity of their work. Both women are trying to conquer their lack, but to no avail. John Simon notes that "the two opposites, theatre and life, have become one in their joint untruthfulness" (265). *Persona* says it even more succinctly in Elisabet's note to the nurse in which she summarizes some of Alma's near-incoherent chatter from the night before: She claims her perceptions do not match up with her actions. Neither Elisabet nor Alma can make sense of their own actions. Alma begins her first monologue by noting that we can do whatever we want, but then talks about the life that she is predestined to live with her fiancée Karl Heinrich. She says that it is nothing to think about, that this future is inside her. In Alma and Elisabet's relationship we see two oppositions affecting each other, sometimes well and sometimes destructively.

At the end of the film, things have returned to normal. We see Bergman shooting a film with Elisabet and Alma gets on the bus going back, we assume, to everyday life. Nothing seems to have changed, but both women say that they learned a lot during

their stay at the cabin. There is at least sufficient change to make Elisabet work and speak again. Elisabet and Alma must have come to accept their Persona; they have learned that these masks are not something that we can escape. Can truth manifest in social interaction? This we still do not know, but the women realize that we give of our personal honesty as a sacrifice for our interactions with others. Our perception of a person will never match their conception of themselves. What Susan Sontag says of the film can be said of people, we can only move toward one another but never achieve certainty. As Sontag says, everything at the end of the film remains divided, though it is vampiristically intertwined (145). We have to remember that the first thing we see the boy in the prologue reach for, the frontier between reality and dream, is the audience. So the boy, Bergman, reaches out for life, sets reality as his ultimate desire. *Persona* is a powerful film because it shows us our innate desire for reality and life and at the end it sacrifices itself and falls off of the reels.

Works Cited

- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 17-32. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." 1949. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977. 1-7. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18. Rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. New York: Norton, 2001. 2181-92.
- Persona*. Dir. Ingmar Bergman. Perf. Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann. Released by United Artists, 1966. DVD.
- Simon, John Ivan. "Persona." *Ingmar Bergman Directs*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. 208-310. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. "Bergman's Persona." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969. 123-46. Print.
- Renn, Max. "Ingmar Bergman's Persona: A Comment on the Ideal and Material Aspects of the Psyche." *Mercuryxrisis*. Live Journal, 02 May 2011. Web. 23 Nov. 2013.