

### *Persona's* Projection

“The ego is not master in its own house” (Freud 143). Bergman’s *Persona* is often hailed as the Mount Everest for film critics and scholars, claiming only the most sophisticated could hope to grasp any understanding. However, with even a foundational grasp of psychoanalysis, an exploration of the three “body genres,” and an appreciation for the dream logic articulated by Maya Deren, this film unravels, becoming remarkably digestible. These varied subjects all come together under *Persona* to show a remarkably women-centric perspective, a rarity for the time. Through this angle, the film highlights a woman’s struggle with trauma, identity, and fantasy as she unravels all three in what is presented as a psychological montage of humanity and womanhood.

To truly begin to understand *Persona*, one must understand the idea of Freud’s id, ego, and superego. Within Freud's work he defined the mind as having three separate competing parts, most of which were unconscious. According to Freud, “the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the superego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the superego” (McLeod). This triad of instinct, reality, and morality are used in Alma’s story to examine her psyche as she struggles with the trauma of her past and attempts to recover enough to see her son again. We first see this son at the end of the film’s opening montage sequence, showing the adolescent boy as he awakens and reaches for a large screen – upon it an image of his mother (Bergman 5:52). Whilst this boy is shown here, his separation from Alma provides a context in which he “exists only to the degree that we are prepared to grant him ‘reality,’ through the act of activating our empathy, our human touch, the intelligence of our bodies” (Elsaesser). Human touch exemplifying the id, with empathy being the superego

and intelligence being the ego, all paint the picture of the self. This image fuses the parts of the self to begin Alma's story of discovering herself through her two fractured identities.

As important as it is to analyze all three elements of the human mind together in relation to *Persona*, the film also exemplifies each element separately and utilizes these to explain Alma's psyche. The id is on display in all of her gut reactions, from the said-not-shown sexual experience she describes to Elisabet to her immediate reactions to inflict pain upon Elisabet when discovering her betrayal. Superego is shown through her emotional responses upon reflecting on her own actions, from crying about and confiding in Elisabet her abortion story to collapsing and crying at the thought of losing Elisabet upon wronging her. As for the sexual experience on the beach: whilst the act itself was a moment of the id being in control, seeking refuge in her friend by telling her the story was a moment of the superego driving her, and the combination of the two make up her own reality of the ego (McLeod). Whilst the ego handles reality, Alma's reality in the film is that she is taking care of Elisabet, regardless of her position as an unreliable narrator. Elisabet herself, along with all straightforward interactions Alma has with her, functions as a representation of Alma's ego.

Along with mixing different facets of the mind, genres are also treated as tools rather than a complete rubric by Bergman. A key element to the conglomeration that makes up the genre mixing in *Persona* can be analyzed through the lens of the "body" genres as Carol Clover and Linda Williams have defined: melodrama, horror, and pornography. The body genres involve privileging the spectacle of a human caught in the grip of overwhelming emotion or sensation (Williams 4). We first see all three of these elements swirl together in the montage-riddled opening of the film. One of the initial non-film referential images on screen is that of an erect penis, which occupies only a single frame (Bergman 1:23). Whilst this could be said to

exemplify the dominant male presence and its impact on the women in the story, it also serves to shock the viewer into more quickly becoming desensitized to the body genre elements that follow. The combination of this pornographic symbol and the later horror-representative images of a Méliès nightmare, a sheep being slaughtered, and a hand being nailed to a wood plank are followed by the melodramatic aforementioned image of a young boy touching a large image of his mother, yearning for her (Bergman 6:02). The violent and sexual energy on screen go hand in hand, as the two concepts are often married. As Williams points out, “pornography today is more often deemed excessive for its violence than for its sex, while horror films are excessive in their displacement of sex onto violence” (Williams 2). This duality functions as a yin and yang of immediate gratification, an id and an ego fulfilled, leading into the emotional gratification of melodrama as the food for the superego.

The predominant reason for *Persona*'s incorporation of the body genres is in order to build up its portrayal of the female fantasy. The first indication of this fulfillment in the body of the film utilizes the element of pornography, in which Alma confides in Elisabet a sexual experience she hadn't told anyone beforehand. She and her friend were lying nude on a private beach as two boys, emboldened by her friend, had sex with both of them and Alma, “came over and over” from the experience (Bergman 32:00). She then describes coming back to her fiancé and having amazing sex, saying, “It's never been as good, before or since” (Bergman 33:37). Her way of describing her sexual experiences in a scene entirely explained verbally as the camera focuses on capturing the emotions of the two women in close-up perfectly encapsulates the romance fiction-oriented notion of “soft-core emotional porn for women” (Williams 3). The sexual sensations in this case are not shown through an erect penis as in the opening, but correlate to it by highlighting the intimacy of the conversation itself. This aspect of a mysterious

other entering her life to spice up her marriage is a sexual fantasy that is overshadowed by the female fantasy of having a close friend to confide in and who listens to her describe it – a fantasy that Alma so desperately needs in her life that she needed to personify, or perhaps *Persona*-fy, that desire with an imagined second woman from a piece of herself. It should also be noted that, for the duration of the sexual aspect of Alma's outpour, the two characters are only shown in singles as the two characters sit in separate areas of the room. There is a sense of separation and isolation in this element of her monologue due to it existing in sensual fantasy, which is only book-ended by two-shots and intimacy when it moves away from the pornographic and into more intimate melodramatic tension as Alma and Elisabet connect (Bergman 33:43).

The second sensationalization highlighted by *Persona* is the fantasy of fear. Alma first feels this horror emotionally through the anxiety of betrayal as her intimate conversation with Elisabet is used against her in the form of outing the secret that Alma had never opened up about beforehand, going as far as comparing her to a subject as she writes, "In any case, it's a lot of fun studying her" (Bergman 42:48). Once again, this is in an isolated moment, with Alma being alone in her car as she reads this letter. Her fantasy switches from the emotional satisfaction of confiding in an imaginary friend to the masochistic nature of being tortured by and torturing that friend in return – ultimately tormenting herself in her mental processes. These masochistic ideals are firmly within the purview of female fantasy, and as Williams points out, "masochistic pleasure for women has paradoxically seemed either too normal – too much the normal yet intolerable condition of women – or too perverse to be taken seriously as pleasure" (Williams 7). The retaliative torture by Alma to Elisabet, herself, follows this betrayal, first utilizing the horror of pain in allowing her to step onto a shard of glass dropped onto the floor outside (Bergman 46:42). As Alma watches on, the film uses a traditional horror motif, the jumpscare, of the film

stock tearing upon her reaction to watching her own masochism on display. After beginning to confront Elisabet about her betrayal, Alma instills the fantasy of fear into her by threatening to pour boiling water on her before stopping at her screams, asking, “A genuine fear of death, huh?” (Bergman 52:16). She has, in this moment, invented a fantasy of masochism – converting the sadomasochism of horror into the self-inflicted wounds of melodrama. And as she looks upon herself being the tortured and torturer, she “does not seem to be invited to identify wholly with the sacrificing good woman, but rather with a variety of different subject positions, including those which empathetically look on at her own suffering” (Williams 8). Alma, through the fantasy of the self, has succumbed to her own sadomasochistic nature and created a horror that is entirely her own.

Through the horror of her own situation that Alma describes to Elisabet earlier on, after having her sexual fantasy fulfilled and having the shock of her husband discovering her pregnancy, she describes then the melodrama of her subsequent husband-ordered abortion and the trauma that followed. Through this trauma, Alma alludes to her two-identity split beginning around that moment, asking, “Is it possible to be one and the same person at the very same time... I mean, two people?” (Bergman 34:34). The melodramatic tension in this moment permeates the scene as she lays in bed next to her imagined other half, being comforted by her in a display that embodies her psyche through the body genres. The melodrama carries on through this moment and into later scenes of the film, with another key moment being the pure masochism that Alma experiences after threatening Elisabet with the boiling pot. We watch as Alma chases down Elisabet, begging for forgiveness but to no avail before collapsing onto the beach and crying on the bank (Bergman 57:19). This display of rejection by her own invented self could only be described as a fantasy based around her own masochism. It is in masochistic

melodrama that we as viewers can step back and examine the body of work by Bergman and how it relates to the sensationalized genres. By the time *Persona* had been released, “Bergman’s name had acquired a fixed set of, often contradictory, associations: ‘lavishly inventive’ as well as ‘facile,’ ‘sensual’ along with ‘melodramatic’” (Elsaesser).

*Persona* expertly crafts a narrative between a character and her alter ego as she explores the fantasy of the self. Whilst it utilizes elements of pornography, horror, and melodrama to accomplish this feat, its true value comes from its ability to weave the three genres together into a veil that obscures Alma’s reality with her individuality. The film was at its time considered to be “an unapologetically avant-garde work by Bergman that also dared to veer between vampire horror flick and hospital soap opera” (Elsaesser). This culminates in a sequence in which Alma and Elisabet’s husband, Mr. Vogler, turns up at their secluded home. The horror of a sudden appearance and confusing the self, the pornography of lovers having a sexual encounter, and the melodrama of her psychosis preventing her from seeing her son all combine as Alma lays with Mr. Vogler, Elisabet right beside them, screaming, “I’m cold and rotten and indifferent. It’s all just a sham and lies!” (Bergman 1:06:21) Finishing the sequence by panning to a closeup of Elisabet, Alma’s mask begins to shatter as she is torn apart between the three spectacles of the self. “Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm-of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness” (Williams 4). With Elisabet sitting beside Alma as she experiences all three, Alma exemplifies the three body genres in her two bodies as Elisabet stares directly at the viewer and brings the audience into the psyche of the moment.

Alma’s psyche on display throughout *Persona* also utilizes the power of the dream to chronicle and exhibit her fantasy. “Freud’s theory on dream interpretation holds that ‘all dreams

have their own meaning and spiritual value,' which 'represent the realization of a wish'" (Ma 141). Alma's "wish" is a part of her fantasy also, and we watch her manifest this fantasy through her dreams. The first literal dream representation shown in *Persona* happens early on as Alma goes to bed, wakes up, and describes her aspirations and what is to come of her life, saying, "It's all decided. It's inside me" (Bergman 14:16). With this, her life, fantasy, and dreams become symbolically married as though her life is the dream, and herself the fantasy. The way dreams present themselves in reality are represented in the film as well, as "dreams have their own unique mode of operation, which is mainly divided into condensation, drift, and secondary modification" (Ma 141).

The first element, condensation, involves compressing the subconscious to show a fragmented appearance, and this is visualized in the film in two main ways (Ma 141). Montage sequences that bookend *Persona* show condensation predominantly through the thematic elements of the film, both in the mind and the body genre. Through showing the various metaphors for Alma's life and mental state, the film condenses her into a collection of images and emotions. Another aspect of condensation presented in *Persona* is in the fractured visuals highlighting Alma's shattered psyche, such as the previously mentioned film scratch jumpscare to show that Alma is mentally imploding in the moment (Bergman 47:08). These moments set an ethereal tone for the viewer to experience Alma's dream along with her.

Drift, the second mode of operation, happens when "the important components of the subconscious mind may become insignificant in the visible plane" (Ma 142). The clear example of drift in *Persona* is Elisabet herself, appearing as a personification of Alma's subconscious and overall mental state. Masochistic fantasy is present in the melodrama of drift as well, through which "one is able to appreciate the self-seeking and self-killing acts of women in their

subconscious” (Ma 142). Whilst originally used to describe Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon*, which also uses an experimental structure to extrapolate the meanings behind dreams, Elisabet’s character in *Persona* is aptly explained by it as well.

The third aspect of dreams, secondary modification, “offers a camouflage of the deeper structure of dreams and the treatment of the narrative, as well as provides a seemingly logical causal relationship, but in fact, it is the alienation of the subconscious” (Ma 142). The structure of *Persona* overall follows a seemingly linear outline, but with certain moments obscuring the line between dreams and reality. The first example of this happens after Alma’s abortion story to Elisabet as she gets drunk in front of her. Elisabet’s first lines of the film are over Alma as she begins to pass out on the table, saying “Go to bed, or you’ll fall asleep here at the table,” to which Alma repeats this without noticing immediately that Elisabet talked and treats it as if the idea were her own (Bergman 36:10). What follows is a sequence obscuring dreams and reality as the two women meet in the bedroom in the middle of the night to stare into the mirror together, with the narrative beat being clear but the authenticity of the moment being far from. Throughout the entire film, nothing that is displayed is necessarily as it seems, with fantasy and dreams existing at the forefront of the story.

Id, ego, superego; pornography, horror, melodrama; condensation, drift, secondary modification: a set of three dichotomies of three in which *Persona* utilizes to unravel Alma’s mind and satisfy the voyeuristic desires of the viewer in its exhibition of the self. Peeling back these layers, “one constantly returns to the scene of [Plato’s] cave: real effect or impression of reality” (Baudry 171). And whilst the Platonian angle contemplates the source of the shadows projected onto the cave wall in an attempt to free its prisoners, the Freudian perspective does the opposite. Freud cares far more about “making them go back there precisely where they are;



where they didn't know how to find themselves. For they thought themselves outside, and it is true that they had been contemplating the good, the true, and the beautiful for a long time" (Baudry 171). This final grouping of threes of good, true, and beautiful is why Alma ultimately needs to look at herself from a perspective outside her own. She enters her own Platonian cave in order to perceive Elisabet as herself in shadow, prancing upon that cave wall. Alma paints around that shadow to better understand her regrets, her melodrama, her superego. She vents her anger, her horror, her id as she confides in Elisabet, her ego and her drift, both this and the sensual, the pornographic, the rest of her id, her condensation. *Persona* itself alludes to this cave analogy in its own language as well – just as a fire projects shadows onto a cave wall, the film opens and ends with the same shot. A fire produces an image on screen through a film projector, presenting *Persona* as a symbol of the shadow on the wall of the human psyche, fading to black on the stock as the fire peters out (Bergman 1:22:53).

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