

Persona (1966)

Ingmar Bergman's [Persona](#) is one of those fascinating films where you keep returning to it, trying to uncover more of its mysteries and hoping it reveals more of its secrets. The beginning of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: Space Odyssey* captured the birth of man. *Persona* and its infamous beginning is said to have captured the death of the motion picture camera. *Persona* is the quintessential example of the art house film and there will be several times within the film where Bergman is informing you what is real and what is fantasy. For example, in the climax of the film Bergman clearly shows the camera crew and sound operators on a crane filming the last scene, which indicates to me that Bergman, is reminding the audience that what we are witnessing isn't necessarily 'real'.

Like the attributes of the art film *Persona* gives no clear answers, the film is based more on interpretation, its ending is ambiguous, its character's lack any defined desires and goals, and what every audience member sees in the film can differ based upon each person's perspective. American film theorist David Bordwell stated, "First, the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events." I realized the best approach when watching this film is to try and not dissect every individual

scene and instead try to focus on the underlying themes Bergman is trying to project between the power struggles within its two characters.

[Bergman](#) wrote *Persona* during nine weeks while recovering from serious pneumonia and a lot of the powerful visuals in the film were scenes Bergman dreamed of while being severely sick in the hospital. *Persona* is a very small film with only five actors who appear onscreen with actresses Bibi Andersson and Ingrid Bergman being the only ones to actually appear in the film for more than a few minutes. Much of the mise en scene is dominated by extreme contrast and lighting and beautiful composition shots with the cottage scenes being drenched by intense sunlight which washes the image out in a white glare.

The actresses also wear solid black outfits which make for an interesting contrast to the bright outdoor shots and of the rough geometric shapes and textures of the rocks and of the sand. I can see how some people might find this film similar to a horror movie, on the way it was shot and the intensity of the lighting and sound effects within several of its dream sequences. In a very morbid scene Alma gets furious and randomly starts slapping Elisabet and after Alma cuts her wrist with her nails she forces Elisabet to suck her blood from her arm. This disturbing scene has a very gothic vampire like feel and I believe it somewhat symbolizes that Elisabet is the one who is completely in control and Alma is the frail weak victim who is even psychologically more sick than her own patient.

Persona is Bergman's first film that took a wildly different step in his already successful career. This was probably Bergman's most creative and experimental art film and throughout the rest of his movie career Bergman never made a film quite as strange or mysterious. Like most art film director's Bergman's films always tend to leave a personal signature mark and its themes that are presented within the framework of the story are more personally intertwined with the

director himself. David Bordwell states, “The art cinema foregrounds the author as the structure of the film system. The author becomes a formal component the overriding intelligence overriding the film for our comprehension.” Bergman’s theme of the existential questions of death have been a familiar trademark in his work, similar to others like Truffaut and his constant use of freeze frames, Bunuel and his mockery on the Catholic Church, Michelangelo Antonioni’s long-take pans and Federico Fellini’s childhood love for the circus.

Persona also shifted away from Bergman’s older fundamental themes on the questions of God and faith and explored more the questions of the psyche and of the human mind. Psychotherapy, sexuality and relationships were themes Bergman started to explore more after *Persona* and would keep exploring for several more decades with films like *The Passion of Anna*, *Shame*, *Cries and Whispers* and *Scenes from a Marriage*. David Bordwell says, “The art of cinema is classical in its reliance upon psychological causation...it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes.”

Persona is about the roles a person chooses to play in their life and the questioning of their own identity. It's also about the hidden secrets and torments in our pasts that we keep to ourselves and which we rarely share with others. Even though Alma and Elisabet are different they also have many similarities, which can make anyone question if they are one of the same person. They both are failing mothers, where Alma aborted her baby and has to now live through the guilt. Elisabet can't hold a loving relationship with her son, and her feelings are filled with hate and contempt.

Maybe the boy in the beginning of the prologue who touches the screen is a symbol of both of their children and is metaphorical on their failings as a mother. Bergman admitted on several occasions the failings he had as a father and many times put his stage and film work

before his family which is strikingly similar to the character of Elisabet, who loathed her newborn son because she was terrified he would eventually keep her from performing on stage. *Persona* is a surrealistic nightmare about the illusions of oneself and about the sins, regrets, lusts, guilt and hate that we bury deep below our subconscious. Maybe were all like Elisabet, actors and actresses who carry on an identity that we believe summarizes who we really are. Or maybe this film is really about Bergman and his emotional breakdown of himself as an artist, and the role that he has lived and the torments he had to endure.