

The Face as a Fingerprint: Mediation, Silence, and the Question of Identity in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*

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*This volume is dedicated to readings of the borderline informed by Psychoanalysis. My essay is the exception. In it, I analyze Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) with an eye to the dangers of a one-way conversation. Interestingly, *Persona* dramatizes an inversion of a typical psychoanalytic session, for here the patient says nothing and her nurse confesses. The aftermath of this inversion and its consequences are explored with the help of the Italian feminist, Adrianna Cavarero, the Danish Philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, and the Serbian performance artist, Marina Abramović. Enjoining a debate within psychoanalysis from the border regions of existential and feminist philosophy, I argue that the silence of an interlocutor creates a mask screening the speaker from the mutual recognition needed for a healthy sense of identity. This essay argues the case for conversation.*

I. The Embodiment of the Word, its Flesh is the Issue

The discourse of modernity posits the individual even as the age ushers in mass culture. Fascination with the particularity of the flesh accompanies a copious range of abstractions describing society at large. Concepts such as *civil society*, *the crowd*, and *the public* abstract from the bodies they purport to acknowledge. The tension between the supposed singularity of the individual and the open door of mass participation in cultural life becomes a staple of critique. One only has to think of Kierkegaard's notion of the nihilism of the *Present Age*, Nietzsche's claim that the subject is merely a *prejudice of grammar*, or Heidegger's conception of *das Man* to understand the split between bourgeois cultural conceptions of the individual as the favored unit of analysis and these critics' realization that a collectively held conception of the singular ironically functions as a point of identification. It is that irony, that semantic fluctuation between universally held concepts and particular experience, which conjures up the image of Narcissus as he sees his own reflection as an other; the moment of desire itself becomes a moment of misrecognition.

If we let our imaginations loose and imagine that he maintained his human form long enough, we can conjure up a Narcissus who might have gotten past seeing himself as the other, having realized that Echo's disembodied voice, which seemed all too familiar, had repeated what he said out of an unfulfilled desire for reciprocation. Perhaps

he would have experienced the insight that his self-awareness was dependent on someone else whose voice is both a copy of his own and at a distance from his body. Maybe he could have understood that while his image appeared to him as other, it is the materiality of the voice of the other that reminds him of who he is. At that moment, one can imagine that he moves past the primary narcissism of his youth, and grows into the realization that his identity both is and is not his own (an affect of an acoustic uncanny).

Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) explores the dangers of an abstracted and voiceless other, who serves as both a locus of identification and an object of desire. Its dramatic subject, one might argue, is the very same oscillating dance of the universalized particularity of the modern subject that arose as a point of concern in nineteenth century philosophical discourse. However, the film has a twentieth-century wrinkle, for the movement of identification, unlike that of Narcissus, is not merely contained within one identity, but fluctuates between borders that are blurred by the leading away of seduction. This seduction conveys both the potential and the pitfalls of identification.

Persona has enjoyed copious critical attention. From the initial, perplexed newspaper reviews to the numerous articles and even in a full-length monograph, commentators have tried to make sense of the film's mix of avant-garde techniques and straightforward dramaturgy.¹ From confused protests, to depictions of the 'transcendent image,'² to pleas for a *Swedish nativist* reading,³ to formal analyses of devices bared,⁴ to critiques of an assumed Hegelian model of identity and recognition,⁵ interpretations of this rather cryptic film abound. My approach is phenomenological and aesthetically formal. I am interested in the face as a locus of representation; in the persona as a mask that resonates with sound; and in the way silence elicits subjective movement causing replication, an assumption of another's voice, and eventually a return to the safety of social conformity.

In more concrete terms, this essay will describe the way *Persona* highlights mediation as a device and depicts subjectivity as an affective instantiation of seduction, incorporating the to and fro of Alma's identification with and movement from Elisabeth as a dance.⁶ To explicate these two phenomena (mediation and seduction as a movement away from and then towards the self), I will discuss the way that existentially

derived narratives elicit a reciprocal desire to speak in the auditor, then illustrate that silence inflects this desire and elicits repetition and identification. I will then analyze how the appearance of the mask, like the spoken word, creates a tension between notions of individuality and universality. This essay concludes with an analysis of how Elisabeth Vogler's celebrity and her silence are interrelated loci where these tensions become apparent for Alma, and by depicting how her reaction to Elisabeth alerts us to the role of emblematic individuals in creating a split in the notion of quotidian identity, where the concept of the individual ironically is collectively held.

II. Appearing is not Enough: The Reciprocity of Narrative Desire

In the second and third chapter of *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero retells and analyzes an episode of the *Odyssey* in which we find Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians.⁷ The tale unfolds as a disguised Odysseus seeking a way home sits incognito in the company of prince Alcinous, who calls for a blind poet, "the glorious bard, Demodocus" to entertain his unknown guest. (Homer 123) After the appropriate sacrifices are made, Demodocus takes up his lyre and proceeds to sing of famous men. His song, "well known by then throughout the world," tells of the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles. The rhapsode's words "caused Odysseus to lift his purple mantle with his sturdy hands and draw it over his head to hide his comely face, for he was ashamed to be caught weeping by the Phaeacians." (124) A series of events occur and eventually Odysseus is invited to tell his own story, which he starts as the epic's next book, entitled *The Cyclops*, begins. He muses where to begin and decides, "I had better start by giving you my name [.]" (139) Odysseus then tells the story of his encounter with Polyphemus, the Cyclops, where he and his men are held prisoner in a cave while the giant eats two of the men a day. Odysseus then gives Polyphemus some wine and the Cyclops offers a gift in return, if only Odysseus would share his name. The Ithacan famously tells the monster that his name is "Nobody," and Polyphemus rudely replies that he would then eat "Nobody" last. (149) As you may recall, Odysseus then escapes by blinding Polyphemus, and upon taking flight, he reveals his own true name. (149) Deception here literally leads to the blinding of the other, yet once blinded, Polyphemus hears the true name of the one who

had put out his eye. In a sense Odysseus reveals his identity only once the other is no longer capable of seeing, the revelation of his true name comes retrospectively and at a distance from the trauma of watching his crew being eaten alive.

However, back in the court of Alcinous, a chain of repetition takes shape. After hearing his own story from the lips of another and hiding his face in shame as he cries, Odysseus assumes his own narration, telling a tale of a disguise revealed, of a name disclosed after escaping from the jaws of an unnatural creature who had threatened to consume him in the darkness of a cave. In a differentiated repetitive act, Odysseus reveals his identity, saying his name only after another has said it, shedding his disguise as an introduction to telling a tale (unknown to the bard) of how a disguise saved him from being eaten alive. He doubles the revealing of his 'true' identity by saying it again just as he said it when he escaped the Cyclops. If he had not escaped, perhaps this tale would never have been told.

Cavarero reads this episode in the following manner: First she argues that Odysseus understands the significance of his life as it is narrated by another, and in coming to this insight, he regains his proper name. She does not emphasize the repetitive aspect of the tale, where Odysseus survives through disguise. Instead she continues by reminding us that naming precedes any significant action on the part of the one named and that as such it is a gift.⁸ She then raises a paradox asking: why does Odysseus weep at the Demodocus' biographical rendering of his life when he is perfectly capable of telling his own story, his autobiography?⁹ Why is he moved by someone else saying what he already knows?

Cavarero begins to answer these questions by engaging Hannah Arendt's phenomenological reading of this episode from *The Life of the Mind*, which emphasizes that identity necessitates appearing before the other. However, she is quick to point out that for Arendt, mere appearance is not enough:

The primacy of the visible thus has the merit of exemplifying the reason for which an identity constitutively exposed to others is also unmasterable. Indeed, the one who is exposed cannot know *who* is exposing because he/she does not see him- or herself. (Cavarero 21)

For Arendt, humans must also engage in words and deeds in plain sight to come into full identity. “Arendt gives this scene of interactive exhibition the name of *politics*.” (Ibid.) In other words, the human who appears is always in the company of others also appearing, we are always already both “*actor and spectator*.” (Ibid.)

However, as compelling as Arendt’s argument may be, Cavarero takes her distance from the Arendtian notion that politics circumscribe the arena of identity, claiming that while it is clear that Odysseus does not truly know who he is before the rhapsode recites a piece of his biography, there is another side of the story. This other side has to do with the rhapsode himself, for it is Demodocus’ blindness that allows him to add a layer of memory that reveals Odysseus’ appearance despite his disguise.

Indeed, for Arendt, Homer is the archetypical figure of the *storyteller*—the narrator of stories who concentrates both the art of the historian and the art of the poet in his work. In other words, he is the blind poet; the one who, by recounting stories saves the reciprocal exhibitions of the actors from the fragile actuality of the present to which they belong. (26)

Cavarero argues that by concentrating on the commemorative aspects of narrative Arendt misses something, namely the context of mutuality. She claims that Odysseus’ identity emerges when he hears himself depicted as a protagonist and feels the reciprocal desire to narrate his own life. This desire is not, she argues, merely a matter of recognition, a longing for immortality (as Plato might have it), but instead is a manifestation of uniqueness in the here and now. This uniqueness is not atomistic however, for: “[b]iography and autobiography are bound together in a single desire.”(33) The irony here is that uniqueness emerges only through relation. In this way, Cavarero cautions us about committing the error she ascribes to Arendt’s reading of Odysseus and rhapsode, that of forgetting that the concept of uniqueness alone is not enough, we need “unity” as well so that we do not fall prey to narcissism. (37)

What does this unity entail for Cavarero? She argues that we need to open up the autobiographical process that masquerades as identity. Unlike Hegel, who

emphasizes the need for consciousness of the recognition of the other, she claims that we desire to *hear ourselves in the materiality of another's voice as well*; we long to feel the flesh of the word.¹⁰ Cavarero argues that humans need to honor the reciprocity of narrative desire by realizing that our own stories are conflated with stories about us that precede us and are born outside us as they create a sense of ourselves as unique individuals in space and time. If not we run the risk of entering into “an impossible game of mirrors, the self is indeed here both the actor and the spectator, the narrator and the listener in a single person.” (40) For if the appearance of the face is not enough to be our fingerprint, if our identities need the confirmation of conversation, does silence as an answer smudge the contours of our image? Does this result in a type of narcissism where we create an identity for the other from our own need for biographical reciprocity? Is this what is happening in *Persona* where Elisabeth's silence leads to Alma's identification with and then violence towards her? I will begin to approach an answer to these questions, by turning to a performance piece staged by Marina Abramović earlier this spring at the Museum of Modern art in New York.

III. What is at stake? Is celebrity a mask that appears like but does not fulfill the narrative desire found in intersubjective exchange?



Between March 14 and May 31, 2010, the Serbian artist, Marina Abramović performed a piece entitled *The Artist is Present*. The premise was simple: the artist sits for seven hours a day facing another chair, museum visitors are invited to sit opposite Abramović, who will not respond to them; she will sit in silence. The performance took 716.5 hours and Abramović faced 1,545 visitors (including many celebrities), many who waited for hours on line for the privilege.¹¹ As you can see in the photograph above, spectators surround Abramović and her visitor. The visitor, by virtue of not being “the artist,” who is present, is, as Cavarero might put it, both an “actor and spectator.” So both acting and spectating are doubled. In addition, Abramović’s silence takes away a crucial element of Cavarero’s paradigm of the reciprocity of narrative desire, namely the exchange of the biographical story itself.

Why, then, would the participants wait for as long as eight hours to sit across from the artist, whose presence and whose silence recreate a scene that Cavarero finds to be purely narcissistic and leads to a loss of the ability to see both the difference and the interconnectivity between self and other? I believe the answer to this question revolves around questions of mediation, and that the piece is not directly a distillation of interaction between two individuals. The form of mediation is a narrative particular to modern culture and tangentially related to the ancient story of the hero, whose tale is “well known throughout the world.” This is a question of celebrity, seduction, and the lure of *non-reciprocal* identification. For if Abramović were not a well-known performance artist and if the exhibition were not held at the MOMA, would it be conceivable that her silence would have attracted such a devoted following both on the ground and in the press?

It is important to note that Abramović’s performance was not evanescent; it was a happening with an archive that took place at a high profile location. The portraits of those who participated in the performance can be seen in a *flickr* photo gallery.¹² One man, Paco Blancas, “a New York based make-up artist,” found his own celebrity through persistence, having as of May 10, 2010 “faced-off” with the artist 14 times.¹³ Blancas explains his attraction to the exhibition and why he was moved to tears by stating that Abramović’s silent presence “presses the button that makes you feel all these emotions and feelings.” He continues:

You're just being and thinking about somebody or something that's important in your life. And then just acknowledging this person or situation and moving on into being present because yeah, the tears come, but I don't want to cry for the entire sitting. I want to move on and continue to be with Marina, to be present.¹⁴

From his description it is clear that the mechanism of the “tenacious relation of desire,” which Cavarero claims stands between narrative and identity,¹⁵ brings Blancas' own experience to mind. However, one wonders whether “Marina's” lack of response (with her own story) causes Blancas to seek numerous repetitions of the experience. One wonders whether his use of the first name emerges out of the type of intimacy one feels when listened to silently (parallel to the experience of transference in analysis). Perhaps Blancas recognizes Abramović because he tells her his own story, and it could well be that her lack of response maintains his desire to gain her recognition, which would arrive not in the moment when she listens to him, but out of a story that she tells in response to his own. The vocabulary of Blancas' appearance is also suggestive: looking at his photographs in the *flickr* gallery reveals that his appearance changed every time he visited Abramović.

Another visitor, Anya Liftig, a performance artist living in Brooklyn, dressed as Abramović and sat opposite her silently for the entire day. She labeled her action a performance of her own, which she called “The Anxiety of Influence.” In an interview of Liftig on BOMBLOG, the interviewer opines:

When I read reviews of “The Artist is Present,” writers often describe Abramovic's piece as her “interacting” with her audience, which I think is a misnomer. The performance is really as far from *interaction* as you can get, since in the museum setting surrounded by guards on all sides—who won't even let you take a picture—the audience's available set of actions is very limited. So rather than interacting with Abramovic, it's more like

she's inviting the audience to sit there and contemplate themselves, not her.¹⁶

The interviewer stands at a distance and does not see any interaction between Abramović and the participants from the public. Perhaps understanding the narcissism of wanting to be seen as one sees the spectacle, he/she cannot fathom any inter-subjective participation, and understands the performance as being limited by its staging, by its very allure. Ironically enough, Liftig describes her own experience as follows:

I started off trying to tell Marina a story, about some very difficult things that happened to me as a child. I tried to communicate to her some things that I felt I had not addressed in a long time. I also tried to have a conversation with her about why she was an artist. I wanted to share with her how being an artist made me feel compelled to do some strange, strange things. I was asking her if she felt the same way. I wondered if she was communicating back. At certain times I thought that we were really in sync. Other times I didn't. Other times I was totally hallucinating. She looked like a childhood friend I once had. Then she looked like a baby.¹⁷

Liftig, who dressed up like Abramović and perhaps even aspires to her position as a major figure in the art world, as a performer who commands the attention of a world-class museum and the press, sees things differently, and because of this alerts us to the nature of celebrity. Liftig does not need to hear Abramović to have a conversation with her, to imagine her temporally, biographically as a performer, as a baby. Liftig identifies with Abramović as an *idea*, as a *mask* that shifts and changes, a mask that perhaps she longs to wear herself. The artist is always already present for her, as a celebrity whose story is told prior to interaction, as a *universal that particularizes* differently in different moments. Celebrity as mediation effaces the interpersonal. Celebrity as persona is a mask that resonates with a voice whose source is unseen, giving the illusion of resonance to silence, of depth to surface.

IV. Personae: Masks and Mediation



Depending on your etymological dictionary, the word “Persona,” used in the sense of an actor in a role, is an early 20th-century Italian coinage of a Latin translation of either the Greek *Prōsopōûor* or the Etruscan *Phersu*, either of which signifies a mask used in dramatic performance and designed to resonate with the voice of the actor. It is as if the mask, rather than the hidden face beneath it, were animated by sound. Earlier, our English word, “person,” is derived from the same sources through a French detour, and the notion of the mask has slowly been effaced by the bourgeois ideal of a solid citizen, a person with character, not a person as character. However, the notion of role playing lives on in literary studies where we have *dramatis personae* and the like, and in Jungian theory, which speaks of personae as social roles and in dream.¹⁸

Masks themselves have a long and varied history. Our illustration above depicts the poet Menander as he contemplates classical Greek comic and tragic masks, and certainly the oldest forms of drama and ritual made use of such items in an attempt to universalize the particularities of the actor on stage.¹⁹ According to Aristotle, Greek

tragedy was a means of uniting the community through recognition and catharsis. This ties early drama to its ritualistic origins and A. David Napier reminds us how many rituals enabled a community to codify rites of passage: “Throughout the anthropological literature, masks appear in conjunction with categorical change.” (Napier XXIII) Napier argues that masks allow for the observer of a ritual to negotiate the “ambiguities of change.” (15) For certainly the mask depicts a face but no one in particular. Its specificity is a disguise for the strictly personal qualities of the one who wears it, and this allows for the individual to become a locus of identity for everyone who witnesses the performance. Masks also provide an unchanging face for the fact of becoming, in a way stamping the fiction of being on the face of persistent change.

In our own times, driver’s licenses, passports, and credit cards, are all forms of picture identification. Institutions in the Western World demand legibility of our appearances, they demand that our particularity shine through representation; yet the importance of the mask remains as we live in a culture where celebrities remain points of universal identification, where chat rooms make possible conversations through an alias, and where forms of virtual reality abound. Perhaps this paradox—where the demand for the legibility of appearance, which extends to recent legislation in Belgium that bans the Niquab, exists side by side with a proliferation of masking—helps to explain why Marina Abramović’s silent appearance helped to evoke extremely personal and transformative reactions from Paco Blancos and Anja Liftig. The face itself promises clarity, identification, yet Abramović’s silence, like a mask, suggests that there are depths underneath the surface of her face, depths that are open to the imagination of the viewer.²⁰

Friedrich Nietzsche reminds us that “the spirit enjoys a multiplicity of masks” (Nietzsche 122) as a fundamental aspect of the *will to power*, his metaphor for that expansive interpretative pathos that enables the negotiation of narratives within the self. Elsewhere in the same text, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues that every interpretation is itself a mask, going so far as to claim that our understanding of the masked other creates surface out of depth. He writes: “Every profound (*tief*) spirit needs a mask: what’s more, a mask is constantly growing around every profound spirit, thanks to the consistently false (which is to say shallow) interpretation of every word,

every step, every sign of life he displays—.” (39, Aph. 40) But what if the other were silent? Would we then attempt to interpret the depths of that silence by donning the mask ourselves? Is the mask a screen upon which we project an intimation of that which remains beyond our ken? Nietzsche certainly thinks this is the case, for near the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes “Every philosophy *conceals* a philosophy too: every opinion is also a hiding place, every word is also a mask.” (173, Aph. 289) For Nietzsche, knowledge, philosophy, mediates the body, leading us away from ourselves. This is why he would later open up his *On the Genealogy of Morals* with a statement about how “we knowers” do not know ourselves. Incorporating our discussion of Caverero into this moment, we can understand how we can never be the object of our own study, we need the words of the other to obtain a closer look. It is if language serves as both a cement and a solvent in that it both unites and separates us.

Perhaps this uncanny arrangement, of universal notions of what particularity should be, can help us understand Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) and Nurse Alma’s identification with and seduction by the actress, Elisabeth Vogler. For *Persona* relies on the mask, on its play with the relationship between surfaces and depths, appearances and reality, facts and fictions, the disclosed and the hidden. It addresses our propensity to order the multiplicity of our lives through interpretations that are mediated by the other, and the narratives that live ek-statically besides our persons.

V. In the Beginning there was Darkness, Interpretation comes after the Fact

Personae and masks proper share the suggestion of depth, of something behind appearance, of an interpretation that codifies the phenomenon of emerging into sight. Therefore it is appropriate that Bergman’s *Persona* opens with a dark screen. It seductively begins by creating an illusion of pure possibility. A white square gradually lights up and glows; almost immediately after this we see an armature illuminated by phosphorous light. Magnetically drawn, this armature makes contact with another glowing piece of metal and a projector is engaged. A film reel spins, the celluloid is shown being fed through the projector, the lit up lens appears, the film leader flickers across our visual field, an erect phallus appears for an instant, and other flashes of light

reveal a series of images, some of which are germane to film history, others seemingly selected randomly.

The image of the means of projection and of the screens on which the images are projected mimic or double a phenomenological experience related to the appearance of the film itself. However, we do not see the projector that actually shows us the film, but an image of a projector as such. On one hand, this gesture has led commentators such as Marilyn Johns Blackwell to understand that this opening is about the “transcendent image”; however, I reject such an idealistic reading of this film.²¹ The representation of the mechanics of the film point instead to *mediation*, saying to us that we are seeing a film, but the representation of film as such, the means by which this statement is made, creates a tension between the universal of film and its manifestation as a particular film on the screen. The montage that follows confirms this reading.

The rapid succession of seemingly disconnected images that make up the opening montage calls for and resists interpretation. For certainly a representation of the means and manner of representation, a projector that lights up and throws images onto a screen, is juxtaposed to a series of flickering pictures that illuminates how we re-order our lives retrospectively from the representation of experience returning in the image of thought. Rather than indicating transcendence, this opening refers to the tension between a form of mediation that reveals itself as such and the possibilities of particularity by means of mediated articulation. This is similar to the way language offers us something held in common by virtue of being understood by a speaking community and something particular to the speaker him or herself. It also displays how mediation as a form of seduction, as a leading away from the self leads to ek-static interpretations of identity through interpretation. To my mind, one of the finest metaphors of how this works can be found in *The Seducer’s Diary* embedded in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (1843). To abbreviate a long story, the editor of *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita, finds two manuscripts in a desk drawer, and at the end of the first manuscript, which he attributes to a figure that he calls “A,” is the diary of Johannes, a self-defined seducer. A, like Eremita, finds this manuscript in a desk drawer, arranges the papers, and provides us with an interpretative introduction to the text. However, unlike Eremita, A has secretly copied Johannes’ diary and wants us to take it to be equivalent to its original. In his own

prefatory remarks to *The Seducer's Diary*, "A" quotes Cordelia, the girl who was seduced by Johannes. She states that loving Johannes was like being embraced by a cloud, that his footsteps left no traces. She remarks: "I have always loved music; he was a matchless instrument, always sensitive; he had a range such as no other instrument has. With an indescribable but cryptic, blissful, unnamable anxiety, I listened to the music I myself evoked and yet did not evoke; always there was harmony, always I was enraptured by him." (Kierkegaard 1987, 310) In other words, the seducer seduces by virtue of his effacement as mediation and through becoming an instrument that embodies the possibility of the expression for the one seduced. Much like a mask, he places himself between Cordelia and her interpretation of her experience.

Johannes serves as a form of mediation himself, his seduction leads Cordelia away from herself to a moment of foundationless anxiety. It is also important to remember that as a musical instrument, Johannes delimits yet creates possibility. For as Cordelia's choice of metaphor tells us, seduction creates the possibility of enunciation, but the one seduced, the musician, plays the seducer and gives him voice while he mediates her aesthetic possibility.²² This is significant, for the player of an instrument is free only to the extent that she has learned the possibilities circumscribed by its form. Both seducer and seduced are in a relationship that has elements of both restriction and possibility.

The necessity of the musical instrument for playing music engenders the freedom to play the instrument itself, which in turn creates the possibility of tuning, timbre, and the like. It is a paradox that corresponds to the vibration of the string where the resonance moves within the orbit of the body of the instrument; sound moves within and between, so to speak. Johannes expresses this possibility of movement within and between as a paradox. He claims that erotic love both loves an "enclosure" and "infinity," while it fears "Boundaries." (442) It is as if the form of mediation lights up the darkness with its possibility yet restricts this possibility through its particular form. Mediation uses desire to create the illusion of the thing in itself.

This reveals how Johannes' seduction of Cordelia creates a desire that is paradoxically contained and in freedom. For if seduction needs to both reveal and conceal its own device through the mask, in the case of *Persona*, the image of the

projector on the screen; it needs to be inside and beyond as both mediation and ideal. It uses mediation as the means of being part of the particularity of the one whom it leads away and the image of the ideal as the means to move back ironically to the sense of the particular as a collectively held concept of the individual. Johannes the seducer articulates this movement from his own perspective: “The image I have of her hovers indefinitely somewhere between her actual and ideal form.” (334)

This fluctuation between the ideal and the actual resembles the irony of bourgeois subjectivity, or the identification of the everyday person with a fixed sense of particularity that lies both within and between the self and the image of an idealized other. And it is my belief that this is what Cavarero, Abramović, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Bergman aim to critique. For if the ideal of the particular depends upon a notion of individuality collectively held, then the mediation of the individual by this paradox needs the illusion of a conventional notion of self-representation. This is where irony comes into the mix, as it needs the receiver of the message to be both alienated from the usual meaning of the representation and to share a context with the other in order to register the ironic possibility. Irony subverts the ideal, but it does not adhere to the actual, it commutes between the poles.

Persona's opening montage does not speak to the delineation between the fact of the means of mediation and the fiction of the drama, but to their permeable border in the guise of the relationship between the actuality and ideality of a relationship between self and other, between particularity and speech as a universally held medium. The opening speaks to seduction as mediation, in this case, through film.

VI. Touching the Screen, Acting and Spectating

After the opening montage, the flickering, random images quickly slow down and a new series of pictures concludes with a vignette where seemingly dead bodies awaken and where a young boy appears to reach out in our direction. The boy seems to touch an invisible barrier between the spectators and himself; the boundary between the characters in the film and “us” seems to be the surface of the screen we view. Yet as the boy seemingly attempts to break the plane of an invisible barrier between the fictional world and the tangibility of the spectator, there is a sudden change of

perspective as a reverse angle shot reveals that he does indeed touch another screen upon which an inconstant image or images is projected. First we see the blurred face of one character and then another. Later in the film, we realize retrospectively that we are seeing the faces of the two main characters, Elisabeth and Alma, (psychiatric patient and nurse, actress and fan), as they morph one into the other and back again.²³

However, it is important to remember the way representational illusion is created in the opening montage; we first see a projector and then perceive that the screen that separates us from the fictional cinematic world is our point of contact with the figure of the boy; but we soon find out that he is not actually attempting to break the plane of the illusion, rather he touches a screen projected onto the scrim that separates us from the fictional world in which he plays a role. In a parallel to the projection of the projector onto a screen, we experience the illusion that the boundary that marks off the fictional world from our own is in question, when actually the questioning of the boundary is contained within the illusion. We are, in this way, given the conceit of being both actors and spectators, the ones watching and the ones being watched.

The fiction of *Persona* moves away from itself towards reality only to back away from the real towards the fictional. After we realize the boy is not actually returning our gaze, that he is not actually trying to reach us, the montage is interrupted. Suddenly the title appears, *Persona*, black letters set in relief against a white background. This is followed by the credits, each name interspersed between random images. The credits, the real names of actual people, are then followed by a screen suffused with white light, then by the image of a closed door. As the door opens, nurse Alma appears and the drama begins.

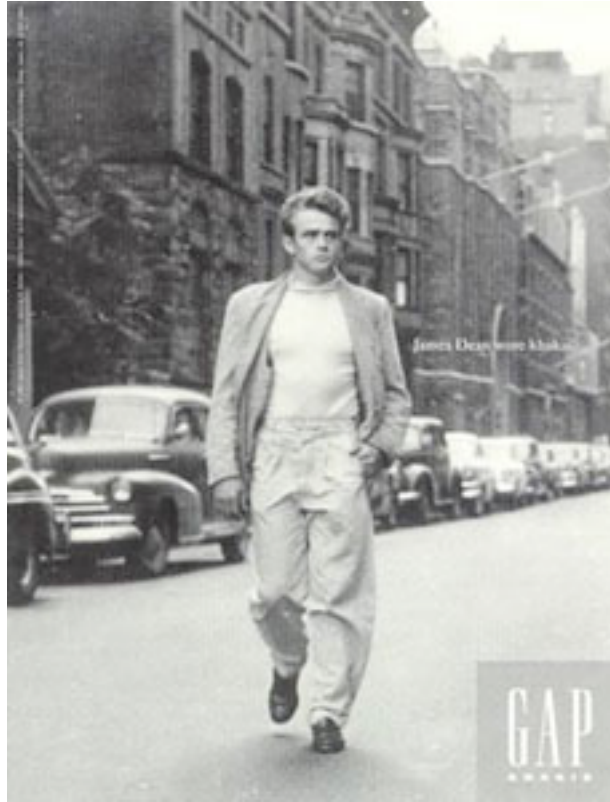
If *Persona's* opening montage began as darkness becoming visible, then its dramatic narrative opens only after the device of its own fiction is revealed. *Persona* illustrates how subjectivity is enacted through a performance about and between relations. The boy touches the screen, the membrane between us and the fictional universe of the film; he turns away back towards the fiction, and so do we. And certainly, the projector itself is ironically projected upon a screen and a representation of representation's own device is no more real than any other projection. For any

spectator is well aware that the projector on the screen and the film that spools through its leaders is not the actual projector showing the actual film, but merely a simulacrum. The baring of the device points more to the centrality of the borderline between the fact of human particularity and mediation of that particularity by technical and cultural means than to the comment of an ironic representation that claims it is real when it is merely a representation like any other. For the represented projector is really any possible projector, a universal construct that stands in contradistinction to the particularity of the actual machine, which is hidden from the spectator's sight. The effect does not confer the real, but is instead metonymic, a representational gloss of a seductive chain of desire drawn away from the particularity of actual experience into a world that suspends the rules of individuation in order to bare its device. This signifies that mediation acts as a leavener, as the yeast that raises the particularity of the individual to the universal in the bourgeois conception of subjectivity. This is the irony of our conception of the subject, its split in philosophico-historic terms. We are divided into actors and spectators, who somehow participate in the creation of our own personae even as a mask grows around us as we speak.

VII. Monological Movement: If you do not answer me, I just might speak for you.

So far, following Caravero and using Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* as an example, I have posited that subjectivity has a narrative component that becomes short-circuited in the face of an unresponsive silence. This silence can be seductive when it is fronted by a well-known and public face, and this seduction acts as a type of mediation that re-establishes the possibilities of inter-subjective identification. Seduction itself mediates, acting within the performance of identification as a musical instrument, circumscribing possibility within an almost infinite frame of articulation. I then suggested that one of the ways seduction works in modern Western society is through the ironic identification of the individual with a collectively held notion of individuality, and that it happens that the notion of a hypostatic subjectivity often comes from a known figure, such as a celebrity. I then likened this identification to the phenomenon of watching a masked ritual, where the bearer of the mask performs not just for him-or herself, but

for the community at large as an abbreviation of the possibility of particularity. One only has to recall a late twentieth-century GAP advertising campaign for Khakis, where a famously iconoclastic individual would be shown wearing the pants and the ad would simply state that “X wears khakis,” urging the viewer to be an individual by virtue of wearing the same outfit. The logic being that *you can be yourself by being like him or her.*



Let us test these postulations to see if they serve as a philosophical distillation of the issues raised in *Persona*. If we are seduced and subsequently mediated by *Persona*'s opening montage, we are led away, turning away from the facticity of our own being in the world, and we subsequently turn towards the fiction presented by Bergman. The last images of the film's opening frame depict Elisabeth and Alma morphing into one another. As the drama begins to unfold we learn that Elisabeth Vogler is a famous actress and she is in despair. At one point, her analyst speaks for her as she speaks to her because Elisabeth refuses to speak. Her silence, the doctor opines, is a result of the “hopeless dream of being” and the “burning need to be unmasked.” (Bergman 40) She concludes that in the end Elisabeth is playing a non-speaking part, just another role in a series of

roles. On the other hand, Alma, last name withheld, is an ordinary person. She is a young nurse, who aspires to have a stable life, to fulfill the expectations put upon her. Early in the film, she expresses her admiration for artists. She knows who Elisabeth is and has seen her on the screen. She professes to “have a tremendous admiration for artists.” (31) As the film progresses, Elisabeth will listen and Alma will speak; Elisabeth will remain constant, a fixed mask so to speak, and Alma will lose the fulcrum of her self-image. Elisabeth is lost in the endless possibility of all the roles there are to play; Alma identifies with her possibilities in a different manner: *she is seduced by Elisabeth’s mask into identification*. Like the viewer whom she doubles, she is mediated by film and subsequently by the figure of Elisabeth.

However, before she loses herself, Alma will tell the actress about wanting to be like the old nurses who wear their uniforms to the day they die; she will confess of a love affair and an orgy on a beach—all in the face of Elisabeth’s silence. Her tales convey unresolved passions and a desire for constancy; she expresses her admiration for those who can be dedicated to one thing and play one part only. But *the artist is present* and she is silent and Alma, like Paco Blancos and Anja Liftig, will identify with her figure. At one point, Alma says:

That evening when I had been to see your film, I stood in front of the mirror and thought ‘We’re quite alike.’ (*Laughs*) Don’t get me wrong. You are much more beautiful. But in some way we’re alike. I think I could turn myself into you. If I really tried. I mean inside. Don’t you think so?

In fact, Alma does in effect try to turn herself into Elisabeth, and it is Elisabeth’s silence that acts as the seductive element, the mask that effects the movements between the two women. One can discern from the citation above, that the face, which often serves as a visual fingerprint of who we are, becomes a bit smudged as Alma begins to identify her own aspect as being a pale copy of the actress’s visage. Alma’s desire for Elisabeth grows as she speaks her life and the actress listens. Elisabeth never answers but instead smiles faintly or looks down. After an emotionally exhausted Alma lays her head down on the kitchen table, Elisabeth seems to tell her in a soft voice to go to bed.

Alma repeats the words as if they comprised her own thought. Elisabeth will later deny having spoken when Alma asks her the next morning; however, whether or not she actually spoke is no great matter as her silence affects Alma in a way that makes the actress's voice a part of her own. Bergman takes great pains to choreograph and embody the subtle psychological movement between the two, and he does so *entr'acte*, in a moment between Alma's confessions and her discovery of Elisabeth's thoughts about her.



In a scene, which can only be described as a short dance (perhaps accompanied by a nautical *balletto*), Elisabeth comes into Alma's room as foghorns resound slowly and rhythmically in the distance. Alma stands with Elisabeth behind her and the two women curve their heads around each other; the actress pulls back Alma's bangs and her face is framed by Elisabeth's body. At the end of the scene Elisabeth's hair falls over her face and her aspect disappears behind Alma's. This scene and its music repeat later in the film and it becomes emblematic of one aspect of the women's relationship to each

other. For as the film progresses, Alma will incorporate her image of Elisabeth into a mask that she will wear, and she will eventually efface Elisabeth by acting and speaking in her stead. It is as if Elisabeth's silent seduction will be given voice through the instrument of its mediation of Alma's sense of her own subjectivity, and the nurse will experience herself as hovering somewhere between the actuality of her own body and the ideal form of Elisabeth's image. I will give two examples.

Later in the film, in what arguably could be called a dream sequence, Alma seemingly awakens from a fitful sleep, turns on the radio and hears only bits and pieces of language. She walks into Elisabeth's room, who appears to be asleep, and speaks about how the actress appears different when her scar is covered by make-up and her face is relaxed into a certain meanness. It is of course an ironic moment as well, for Alma's pendulum swing between subject positions is juxtaposed to Elisabeth's, who according to her analyst longs for the constancy of being, and has just finished looking at the still photograph of a Jewish child, whose face is masked in terror, as he is being rounded up by the Gestapo. For all of Alma's movement to and fro, Elisabeth's sense of the world animates the stillness of traumatically inflected memory.²⁴ This is an echo of the opening of the movie, which reveals the way projection creates the illusion of movement by virtue of its mediation of a series of still images.

Back to the scene: as Alma speaks to the apparently sleeping actress, she hears a man call out Elisabeth's name and says that she will see "what he wants from us." In an echo of the apparently dead souls of the opening montage, Elisabeth opens her eyes as soon as Alma leaves the room. When Alma reaches the beach, a hand reaches out and touches her, startles her, and calls her Elisabeth. It is the actress's husband, wearing dark glasses and seemingly blind. Alma replies that she is not Elisabeth, but the actress appears behind her, moves Alma's hand like a puppeteer and orchestrates a scene where Alma makes love to Herr Vogler. Alma's identification goes so far as to be a stand-in for Elisabeth as an object of desire. More importantly, there is a physical leading away, a symbol in dream of the desire to wear Elisabeth's face, her mask, her persona. It is also curious that Alma, like Odysseus listening to the rhapsode, hears Herr Vogler confirm her fictions through his false recognition of her as Elisabeth, and through speaking to her as if she were. Perhaps this is the stuff dreams are made of. Perhaps

Alma's reflections about the silent Elisabeth have led her to an identification that is narcissistic by nature; she can no longer discern the border between herself and the other who is the object of her desire. She even desires the one who desires Elisabeth, but as the scene concludes, she is repulsed by that desire.

Our second example involves silence as an initiator of repetition. It occurs during the same dream sequence and comes rather late in the film. (It is also the best example of how the relationship between speech and image plays out ironically during the film.) The scene unfolds as follows: Alma, dressed identically to Elisabeth, who is sitting at a table with her hands cupped and facing down, approaches the actress from behind and takes the once torn and now taped together photograph of Elisabeth's son from under one of her cupped hands. Alma proceeds to tell Elisabeth the story of Elisabeth's own pregnancy and her struggles with motherhood. Not only does Alma speak Elisabeth's inner life for her, but the scene is doubled with Alma's speech repeated word for word on both occasions. The main difference in each of these scenes is that angle of the camera shot is reversed. In the first take we view Elisabeth from Alma's perspective as she listens rather uncomfortably to Alma's rendition of her own life, a life that she is herself silent about. The second scene shows us Alma as she speaks. This second take is the key, for towards the end of her depiction, Alma's face begins to morph into Elisabeth's. It is worthwhile citing Bergman's screenplay here:

Alma hears this voice speaking on and on through her own mouth, and she stops and tries to avoid Elisabeth's eyes. Then she speaks very quickly.

—I don't feel like you. I don't think like you. I'm not you, I am only trying to help you, I'm Sister Alma. I'm not Elisabeth Vogler. It's you who are Elisabeth Vogler. I would very much like to have—I love—I haven't—
(Bergman 97)

Alma uses language to deny that she is Elisabeth right after she claims to speak her thoughts. The source of utterance is no longer discernable and language is reduced to purely ironic effect. In the film, Alma's face merges with Elisabeth's, oscillating back and

forth between her own image and that of the actress's. Alma cries out that she is not Elisabeth, but herself. The transposition of the face of the other upon her own marks the desperate struggle for Alma's particularity. Her speech is negatively inflected by the presence of Elisabeth's image. The film conveys a visual irony where the utterance of the character is in utter variance with her image and we, the audience, know the context; Alma is and is not the other. However, her speech is always already for and about the other. Elisabeth's face as a fingerprint is now internalized. We will see this when Alma looks in the mirror, moves back her bangs with her hand, and sees her own reflection turn to Elisabeth's image, which seductively mediates Alma's sense of her own appearance in the world. It is as if this moment reveals the inverse of Odysseus' tears upon hearing his own story. If Odysseus is moved to the pronunciation of his own name and reciprocates with a story from his own lips, Elisabeth's silence, like Marina Abramović's, elicits a desire to tell the story of the other and to be threatened with the loss of one's own subjective integrity.

In the penultimate moment in the film, the body as the boundary between the two women has become seemingly permeable. Bergman choreographs this condition once again. The dream sequence continues with a third version of Elisabeth sitting at the table. This time there is no mention of Elisabeth's pregnancy and Alma, no longer dressed like Elisabeth, once again dons her nurse's uniform. She whispers in Elisabeth's ear that she is unlike her, that she changes all the time, and here we can see that Elisabeth, the player of many roles, is now seen only as a mask. Alma loses her ability to speak, drums the table as if ecstatic, and in a moment where agency and volition are muddled by the permeability of volition, we see a hand scratch Alma's arm drawing blood, and Elisabeth sucking that blood. Alma then strikes the actress violently and the scene shifts to Elisabeth's private room at the hospital. Alma holds a seemingly drugged Elisabeth and asks her to repeat after her. She asks Elisabeth to say the word *ingenting* (*nothing*) and she does. Elisabeth's silence and Alma's maddened relationship to it, finds an ultimately ironic expression in the voiced negation of speech itself. The anxiety of change, of constant becoming, as a negation of language, creates a movement, a *to* and a *fro*.

VIII. “To become is a movement away from that place, but to become oneself is a movement in that place.” (Kierkegaard 1980, 36)²⁵

The scenes described in the previous section illustrate how Cavarero’s paradigm of the reciprocity of biographical desire breaks down in the face of silence. They also shed light on why Abramović’s visitors could begin to feel they knew her and interacted with her. For the silence of the individual who serves as a model for an ideal individuality, creates a crisis of misrecognition, recreating a primary moment of subjectivity in the least comfortable of ways. Our conversations are gifts, like the gift that Odysseus gives when he names himself before telling the story of his encounter with Polyphemus. As you may recall, a disguised Odysseus hears his story, which is “known throughout the world.” He is moved, then reveals himself and tells a tale where he said that his name was nobody (*ingen*) only to reveal his proper appellation once he had blinded his adversary. What Cavarero leaves out is that Odysseus remained homeless for a decade as a result of this saving indiscretion, and that it is in the moment that he names himself before telling the tale that he finds himself at home within his own narrative, he finds his voice.

Elisabeth is also known. She is also disguised by Alma’s knowledge of her public face, her face mediated or masked by the medium of film. Her mask, though it might appear constant, has become an inconstant stand-in for necessity, for Elisabeth is a celebrity, known more for her personae than for her person. She is a constant point of identification for her fans but lacks constancy herself. Ironically, her appearance on screen, her impersonation of others seems to promise something beyond appearances. This promise comes because her admirers identify with her masks, which in turn seem vaguely seductive to them. In a way, Elisabeth is both a seductress and seduced, for as a celebrity she draws her viewer away from herself, as she simultaneously is moved away from herself, for she appears and speaks as the other. Her life is a movement towards and away in turn. This is Elisabeth’s tragic collision: her acting, her cultivation of possibility as otherness has collided with her desire to leave her face as a fingerprint somewhere or other. Ironically she will succeed through her silence. For Alma, the nurse who takes care of her sees Elisabeth’s visage as it fluctuates with her own face in

contemplation, and it is only through the violence of the imagery in her dream that she returns to her place, as a nurse, riding the bus home.

What does all this say about boundaries, repetition and seduction? In *Persona*, the permeability of the boundary between fact and fiction becomes apparent in the opening frame when the boy appears to reach out to us in all our facticity as we watch the film, and then the trick of the camera's angle exposes us to the realization that what we thought was a border between the world of the film and the world of the spectator is merely another borderline in a fictional world delineated according to the spectator's perspective. This permeability becomes apparent again when Elisabeth, a fictional character, watches the self-immolation of an actual Vietnamese Buddhist monk on the television in her hospital room.

The camera zooms in and we too are absorbed by the screen as a border between the suffering of characters in a fiction film and in our own world. And our perspectives are challenged once again as Elisabeth later gazes upon the still photograph of a young boy being rounded up by Nazi soldiers in the Warsaw ghetto; the camera moves and we follow Elisabeth's eyes as they scan the image. In *Persona* the question of who suffers creates a multiplicity of perspectives and a permeable boundary between the private life of the bourgeoisie and the violence of the world beyond. The question is not whether we can parse fact and fiction in a representation of the self, but how we can understand the movement between fact and fiction in the performance of a subjectivity where appearance is always subjected to the mediation of representation.²⁶

Alma's notion of Elisabeth is mediated by the latter's performance on film and, in turn, this notion contributes to her own self-delimitation. Like Johannes, who turns into the instrument upon which Cordelia plays, invisibly mediating through his own effacement, Elisabeth does not need to appear to be present in substance in order to seduce Alma, who is conducted away from herself by Elisabeth's appearance on celluloid as representation. Elisabeth seduces, yet it is Alma who speaks, or is this entirely clear?

Elisabeth speaks only three times and she writes a letter. The first time comes after Alma has confessed a sexual encounter with some young boys on a beach. Then Elisabeth reverses the therapeutic roles and writes a letter analyzing Alma through the offices of her own desire. In this letter, Elisabeth is coldly analytical and Alma's reading

of this letter, the only sustained expression of Elisabeth's own voice however disembodied, marks a turning point in the film. Ironically, after reading Elisabeth's evaluation of her speech, Alma looks into her image in a lake and then despite her anger begins to look and act more and more like Elisabeth. Like Narcissus, the image of herself depends solely on a lack of recognition between her own reflection and that of another. This scene corresponds to the other aspects of the film in the following manner. The frame does not merely bare the device but illustrates the way that seduction as a form of mediation leads us away from ourselves and to our identification with representations, which in turn are effaced by the error of the bourgeois notion of the self, namely that "I" am identical to my image of myself as if that image were mine alone. This notion of a bourgeois uncanny, where we derive our sense of individuality through a collectively held value, is shown to be limited, a misrecognition of the boundary between self and other. This misrecognition assumes an impermeability and as such is derived from a narcissistic blindness that obscures internal fragmentation, imagining it to be whole, identical with itself and one's desire for the other. Bergman uses visual irony to convey this mediation.

In *Persona*, silence cuts short an exchange of narrative desire and this results in various forms of miming, repetition, and anxiety. It also results in the loss of a boundary between the self and the other, and a violent re-inscription of the border between Alma and Elisabeth. Ultimately, as mentioned above, Alma is saved by her ironic use of language, stating her difference "I am not you" precisely in the moment where she looks the same as the actress. If the face is a fingerprint, an apparent trace of our subjectivity, language conveys the presence of the self as it considers what Caverero calls the unity that allows uniqueness to appear.

¹ One could certainly argue that experimental cinematic gestures are in tension with the way Bergman looks to Strindberg's *The Stronger* as a model for a two-woman drama where one character speaks and the other does not.

² See Marilyn Johns-Blackwell: *Persona: The Transcendent Image*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

³ See Birgitta Steene. "Persona Through a native Mindscape," found in *Ingmar Bergman's Persona*, ed. Lloyd Michaels. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 24-43

⁴ See Susan Sontag. *Styles Of Radical Will*: New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969. 123-147.

⁵ See Kelly Oliver. "The Politics of Interpretation" found in *Philosophy and Film*, eds. Freeland and Wartenberg: London: Routledge 1995. 233-249 and *Subjectivity Without Subjects: From Abject Fathers to Desiring Mothers*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. 95-110.

⁶ I do not use the term dance abstractly—note the scene where Elisabeth and Alma move and intertwine in a short ballet. This scene occurs right after Alma's confession.

⁷ See Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, tr. Paul Kottman: London, Routledge 2000, 32-45. For the original tale see Homer. *The Odyssey*, tr. E.V. Rieu: London, Penguin 1946, 122-138.

⁸ Caverero writes on 19: "The name announces the uniqueness, in its inaugural appearing to the world, even before someone can know who the newborn is; or, *who* he or she will turn out to be in the course of their life. A unique being is without any quality at its beginning, and yet it already has a name. The newborn does not choose this name, it is given it by another, just as every human being does not choose how to be. The uniqueness that pertains to the *proper* is always a *given*, a *gift*."

⁹ Caverero 17-20

¹⁰ My thanks to Maurice Merleau-Ponty for coining the term, "the flesh of the world."

¹¹ Figures taken from Jane Levere's post "Marina Abramovic Answers the \$64,000 Question: How Did I Pee?" from the Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jane-levere/marina-abramovic-answers_b_598972.html

¹² <http://www.flickr.com/photos/themuseumofmodernart/sets/72157623741486824/>
Note how many people appear to have cried.

¹³ <http://flavorwire.com/89459/meet-the-man-who-sat-with-marina-abramovic-14-times>
for images of Blancas. Notice his different guises.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cavarero 32.

¹⁶ <http://bombsite.powweb.com/?p=8919>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The tension between these two etymological aspects of the persona, the trajectories from mask to role and from mask to person, is at the very heart of the split in Western bourgeois subjectivity. Our roles are never our person, just as our person always exists in excess of any role we have to play, including the role of the “individual” identical to him or herself. This split is also at the heart of Bergman’s *Persona*.

¹⁹ A good indication of the universalizing function of the mask can be found when we consider that Aristotle developed his notion of mimesis or recognizable representation when contemplating the masked art of Greek tragedy.

²⁰ This phenomenon is depicted perfectly by Isak Dinesen/Karen Blixen in her short story “The Blank Page.” The tale’s denouement tells of the lure of a sheet with no markings, a blank “canvas” that tells the most profound and variable of stories.

²¹ See Johns-Blackwell 3-9. I would argue that the idealism of a “transcendent” image ignores the very tension in the film, which allows for a critique of idealism as a form of seduction—as a point of identification that leads us away from the particularity of our own experience.

²² This certainly helps us to understand the power of Abramović’s, *The Artist is Present*.

²³ We see the boy seemingly move towards us and then towards indeterminate others. Later we recognize who these others are retrospectively as they unfold towards us during the film’s progression.

²⁴ Elisabeth’s engagement with suffering in the ‘real’ world is a theme in this film. Earlier she views the self-immolation of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk on a television set. As fascinating as this is, it is beyond the scope of this paper. See Ohlin *The Holocaust in Bergman’s Persona: the instability of imagery* or Stern *Persona, Personae*.

²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, tr. Hong and Hong: Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980. 36. Earlier in the text, on pg. 30, Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym explains that the self is always in a state of becoming and “[c]onsequently, the progress of becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process.”

²⁶ There are of course strong political implications in the difference between an analysis that claims a clear delineation between fact and fiction in the formation of the subject. Just recall the discourse of authenticity and the harshness of its judgments. Or think of the currency of the claim to “keeping it real” or the allure of “reality tv.” The list can go on and on but while this is on the border of my analysis, it is beyond the ken of my expertise.

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