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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

An Ambiguous Hermeneutic:

Doubleness in Ingmar Bergman's Quest for Self

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of

English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Ingy Aziz

Under the supervision of

Dr. William Melaney

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

One of the functions of art in all its forms is to provide the means for self-exploration and, in this way, to enable us to relate cultural representation to the question of meaning. The beauty of cinematic art is that it gives voice to our deepest and most profound concerns and enables us to bridge the gap between personal psychology and public understanding. As interpreters, we do not always unearth the answers that we seek, but we certainly gain more insight through delving into the minds of major filmmakers in the canon of modern cinema. This thesis is on the Swedish director, Ingmar Bergman, and how he integrated aspects of his life into his films in order to communicate with his audience and to plumb the depths of his own psyche as well. The quality of in-betweenness or doubleness that is present in Bergman's films almost always propels the viewer to experience them in a state that resembles lucid dreaming. Bergman can be said to position his audience in a state of consciousness between slumber and wakefulness where we search for purpose and sometimes, but not always, find answers. In this context, I will also briefly visit three additional directors—Alejandro Jodorowsky, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Jean-Luc Godard—in terms of how their artistry enabled them to approach the problem of the self in comparable ways.

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Introduction: “I have many lives”

Ingmar Bergman was a Swedish filmmaker whose work is both inimitable and enigmatic. All the shades of his own life are reflected in his masterpieces, contributing to the ambiguity that gives his lifetime achievement its distinctive flavor. His biography recounts a mother who did not want him, a strict and negligent father, multiple romances and marriages, offspring he could not remember, seclusion from the world on an island that was largely kept a secret, and a turbulent questioning of faith and religion. However, one thing remained constant, namely, his passionate search for the meaning of personal existence. That pursuit shaped his work as a filmmaker and had an indubitable impact on contemporary art. Bergman shaped his enigmatic façade while exploring the philosophical themes of being and doubleness.

The themes of doubleness and the search for a self are examined in his films and mirrored his own life. Bergman’s life was disorganized but through that chaos he wrote for three hours and watched three films every day. He confronted his own fears through making films, almost as if that process helped him understand himself more. In an interview with Melvyn Bragg in 1978, he mentioned that death was one of his biggest fears and that his method of facing that fear was to write *The Seventh Seal*. Afterwards, death no longer was an obsession for him.

Bergman could be situated in a contemporary context by examining Samuel Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu* for clues on the theme of doubleness and a hermeneutics of the self. Beckett did not necessarily need to provide a specific plot in order to move his readers (or viewers) into a state of questioning. Interpretations of *Ohio Impromptu* are varied, but the themes of doubleness and perhaps the searching for some higher authority have remained more or less constant in his work. In this dramaticule, the reader and the listener could be interpreted as mirroring images of the same character—both “trying to obtain relief” and both wearing the same hat that mirrored

James Joyce's Latin Quarter hat. This brings us to how through writing *Ohio Impromptu*, Beckett himself was searching for meaning in his own artistic work through his search for Joyce. The separation between reader and listener, the character who reads from a text and the "twin" who listens, constitutes a vivid doubleness in the sense that they are not one and the same but are two sides of the same coin. The dramaticule closes off with "nothing is left to tell" and we as spectators are left with more questions than answers.

The above analysis of *Ohio Impromptu*—where a man and his mirroring image share a brief yet edifying encounter—underlies my own examination of Bergman's films, *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, and *Persona*, allowing me to examine doubleness as a tool that demonstrates how the artist travels the path of self-reflection. If it were possible to separate the self from the mirroring image, then perhaps the final clarity could be attained concerning life's purpose. This is the dream of becoming the absolute signifier, in Lacan's sense, but it is ultimately frustrated. In Bergman's case, however, this way of proceeding is perhaps the "lamb" that opens the final seal, allowing viewers to examine their own purposes and meanings. John Orr explains how Bergman explores the ambiguity inherent in "the role of the caring professional" in his films:

One of the key secular features of Bergman's contemporary cinema is the role of the caring professional: the academic or the doctor or the psychiatrist, whose actions seem to embody the local expression of a caring society. Yet in Bergman the caring professional operates on the shifting sands of institutionalized compassion. While Bergman often has an unerring gift for revealing compassion at the heart of cruelty, he equally has a gift for insinuating indifference or cruelty at the heart of compassion. This motif recurs throughout many of his later pictures Just as the doctor-patient relationship encourages care, it also encourages confession: the flipside that Bergman

often hones in on as the confession phenomenon. This seems odd coming out of a tight Lutheran culture and not an obvious continuation, rather in Bergman something post-religious—the power to speak out openly about the intimate nature of one’s life. (20)

In examining *The Seventh Seal*, I closely analyze how Bergman portrays doubleness through Antonius Block’s encounter with Death, which sets us on the path of a hermeneutics of self. In *The Seventh Seal* the role of the caring professional who brings out and highlights the “confession phenomenon” could be found in the character of Jöns, Antonius Block’s squire. This doubleness can also be found in Alejandro Jodorowsky’s film, *The Holy Mountain*, where an unnamed thief encounters an alchemist/master who takes him on a self-cleansing odyssey disguised as a journey towards immortality that intends to defeat the concept of death.

In the loosely autobiographical *Wild Strawberries*, the theme remains the same, yet the encounter shifts between a man and his past as it impinges on the difficulty of self-understanding. Bitterness and old age both accompany Isak Borg as he struggles to accept his mediocre and lonely fate despite being an accomplished academic. *Wild Strawberries* again presents the role of the caring professional embodied in the character of Agda, Isak Borg’s housekeeper. In Andrei Tarkovsky’s film, *Mirror*, we encounter a loosely autobiographical drama told in a nonlinear narrative about a Russian named Alexei who struggles with his past and his relationship with his family. Both films conclude open-endedly with their protagonists on their deathbeds.

Finally, during the time when Bergman was appointed as the head of the Royal Dramatic Theater in Sweden, he decided to write *Persona* to try and awaken his creative mind after a period of dormancy. The encounter between two women living together—Elisabet and Alma—establishes different lines of communication and conveys the sense of a disunited whole, offering

us the image of a self that is imperfectly integrated through falling into madness, self-doubt and the loss of identity. Sister Alma embodies the caring professional in *Persona*, and she truly exemplifies the “confession phenomenon” as the film unfolds. In Jean-Luc Godard’s film, *Vivre sa vie*, we meet Nana who gives up her family in pursuit of self-actualization, only to lose herself entirely in the end, thus providing another basis for viewing Bergman’s work comparatively.

My aim in this thesis is to study how Ingmar Bergman develops a unique understanding of self through three films, which foreground the themes of guilt, death and religion, while also exploring themes of identity, and antagonism in a late modern idiom. Is Bergman able to find God? Is he able to win the game of chess against his master? He proves time and time again that there will always be a reason for us to keep searching, but do we ever find the answers? These are all questions that I examine in my thesis. There is generally a quality of in-betweenness or doubleness in his films that are almost always experienced like a lucid dream. His films can be said to position us in a state of consciousness between slumber and wakefulness where we search for purpose and sometimes, but not always, find answers. When exploring and rewatching these films, one can hardly find a surface-level commonality, but what they all have in common is the ambiguity of the quest for self—where the journey is always somewhat indubitable on a cathartic level, even when the destination never arrives.

Chapter One: *The Seventh Seal* – Doubleness and Death (The Reaper)

The year is 1957 and Ingmar Bergman exhibits a major shift in his writing. He no longer writes comedies but instead focuses more on psychological battles that will be presented in various ways. Bergman's *Seventh Seal* was released after its script was initially rejected. In this film, I will argue, Bergman is no longer portraying anything but the inner workings of the mind. Various windows into the soul invite us to acknowledge our innate quest for some supramundane meaning. The timelessness of this film is not to be taken lightly, considering that it had been released after the Second World War, and the world having had experienced global trauma. In addition to its relatability in our own moment in time and the passage through the events of yet another plague. At the time of its release, one could have safely argued that the subject matter was quite challenging, and perhaps even taboo. How could anyone so blatantly question God, his existence, and his deafening silence? This is not a philosophical textbook that could bear the brunt of being misunderstood; this is a film that so artfully presents us with factual historic events, then walks us through the various encounters of life, only to drop us off at the point of inevitable biblical finitude and recognition of our own mortality.

Taking a closer look at the events that take place in *The Seventh Seal*, the viewer could find it ironic that the title of the film is a reference to The Seventh (and final) Seal from the *Book of Revelation*, yet it signifies the initiation of Bergman's dive into religious semiotics. There is of course a reason why countless books and studies have been carried out in efforts to decipher this film and what it means, but did anyone ever reach a definitive conclusion? Bergman had said on several instances that he had lost his faith sometime during his childhood, despite growing up in the Lutheran faith. However, *The Seventh Seal* implies a distinct difference between spirituality

and religion in a film in which religion could be signified in the moments when the Devil is referenced, whereas spirituality is suggested when Death appears.

Apart from the title of the film, the setting is significant in itself. Having been situated in medieval times, *The Seventh Seal* may have created a sense of detachment between the characters and the audience, but instead it creates the opposite effect. In *Ingmar Bergman: Magician and Prophet*, Marc Gervais praises how an American audience watching it in the late fifties would have been able to relate to the film easily, and his statement still holds true for an audience watching it in our own time:

The Seventh Seal may have been situated in fourteenth-century Sweden but to us, a North American audience in the late fifties, it was today. And the Knight's pilgrimage, through a countryside devastated by a post-Crusades Black Death, rampant evil, and religious fanaticism, felt strangely relevant to our own apocalyptic times, haunted as we were by images of the death camps and a cold war threatening nuclear holocaust. Thus, when the Knight is blessed with that little moment and its gift of meaningfulness and peace (at least for a time), all of us felt in need of it—the Knight, and surely Bergman himself, and each one of us in the audience, whatever our backgrounds or circumstances. (17)

The splendor of this film is that it portrays numerous characters that could all arguably carry fragments of Bergman himself, and simultaneously are easily relatable to one another as well. The film initially began when Bergman started writing a one-act play for drama students in Malmö, and then slowly transformed this rudimentary effort into the masterpiece that is *The Seventh Seal*. In his autobiographical book, *Images: My Life in Film*, Bergman said, “*The Seventh Seal* is definitely one of my last films to manifest my conceptions of faith, conceptions

that I had inherited from my father and carried along with me from childhood. When I made *The Seventh Seal*, both prayers and invocations to something or someone were central realities in my life; to offer up a prayer was a completely natural act” (273).

In the opening scene of the film, the appearance of the medieval knight Antonious Block (played by Max von Sydow), who has just arrived in a plague-ridden Sweden after tedious battles in the Crusades, automatically leads us to believe that he is a man of God. However, when he is met by the personification of Death, Block immediately asks for more time, a request that is communicated semiotically through his participation in the game of chess. We soon find out that Block needs more time in order to find answers regarding the presence (or absence) of God, and possibly do one final good deed to give some justification to his life.

If we momentarily zoom out of our focus on the film’s characters and look at the motion picture as a whole, we confront the symbolic ocean of artistry in both the script and the emblematic representation of death in all its forms. After all, the film can be viewed as Bergman’s attempt as a filmmaker to untangle his feelings towards death on a hermeneutical level. In *Images: My Life in Film*, Bergman claimed that “as far back as I can remember, I carried a grim fear of death, which during puberty and my early twenties accelerated into something unbearable. The fact that I, through dying, would no longer exist, that I would walk through the dark portal, that there was something that I could not control, arrange, or foresee, was for me a source of constant horror” (274-276).

So how does Bergman confront this fear of death through his timeless creation? If we zoom back on the significance of each of the characters, we could find the pieces of a puzzle that makes up different facets of our passage through life – from the moment of birth, until death. First, we meet Antonious Block who embodies Bergman’s dilemma of confronting death in the

midst of finitude. Block is lying down by the shore with the chess board already set beside him, almost as if to imply that the chess game with death would be inevitable—whether he is aware of it at a specific moment or not—again, signifying the inescapability of death. He then walks up, moves closer to the sea, and starts praying absentmindedly – soon after, and ironically, Death appears. Despite what one may have thought, Bergman’s depiction was one that does not instill fear in the viewer, and brings to mind what he said of himself in *Images*: “I plucked up my courage and depicted Death as a white clown, a figure who conversed, played chess, and had no secrets, [which] was the first step in my struggle against my monumental fear of death” (276).

As soon as Death asks him if he is ready to bid his life farewell, Block responds that his flesh is not, but his soul is. We then begin to wonder, why is Block not ready? If anything, this is a man who has just returned home from war only to find more malice in the form of a plague eating up his entire land. The act of stalling that Block seeks throughout the film, and his elaborate game of chess with Death, gives him more time and perhaps gives his life more meaning—a meaning that he was not able to attain through the lost years of the Crusades. He fears Death despite partially being ready for him, and knowing that Death is inescapable. His constant piety, his prayers and his willingness to sacrifice his life in the name of God throughout the years that he had spent at war were still not enough to assuage this nagging fear. Bergman further highlighted those feelings in *Images*:

My fear of death was to a great degree linked to my religious concepts. Later on, I underwent minor surgery. By mistake, I was given too much anesthesia. I felt as if I had disappeared out of reality. Where did the hours go? They flashed by in a microsecond. Suddenly I realized, that is how it is. That one could be transformed from being to not-being—it was hard to grasp. But for a person with a constant anxiety about death, [that

experience was] now liberating. Yet at the same time it seems a bit sad. You say to yourself that it would have been fun to encounter new experiences once your soul had had a little rest and grown accustomed to being separated from your body. But I don't think that is what happens to you. First you are, then you are not. This I find deeply satisfying. That which had formerly been so enigmatic and frightening, namely, what might exist beyond this world, does not exist. Everything is of this world. Everything exists and happens inside us, and we flow into and out of one another. It's perfectly fine like that. (277)

One scene in particular stands out in terms of how Bergman portrays the duality of both his struggle with Death and his confrontation with it is Block's church confession. In that scene, Block is possibly at his most honest and vulnerable: "I want to talk to you as openly as I can, but my heart is empty. The emptiness is a mirror turned towards my own face. I see myself in it, and I am filled with fear and disgust. Through my indifference to my fellow men, I have isolated myself from their company. Now I live in a world of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my dreams and fantasies" (Bergman 19:30-21:00). Of course, Block is tricked in that scene as he is not aware of confessing to Death himself—an act of blatant genius in which Bergman effortlessly and continuously exhibited the inescapability of death.

Death then asks Block the intrinsic question that all humanity inevitably asks at a point of desperation: Why would you still resist dying, if you claim to have been going through all this pain and suffering for some purpose? Why would you still choose to hold on to life? To which Block responds that he is still seeking answers:

Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles? How can we have faith in those

who believe when we can't have faith in ourselves? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? And what is to become of those who neither want nor are capable of believing? Why can't I kill God within me? Why does He live on in this painful and humiliating way even though I curse Him and want to tear Him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is He a baffling reality that I can't shake off? I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand towards me, reveal himself and speak to me. I call out to him in the dark but no one seems to be there. (Bergman 20:14-22:00)

The beauty of this scene, and the dialogues that take place in all of Bergman's films, are what make up for a relatable recapitulation of life's biggest challenges. Bergman's scripts not only reflect on his own dilemma of existing—they also give voice to us mere mortals who struggle to find the right words to explain the hollowness of existing. To an unsuspecting viewer, this is a simple scene between the Knight and Death where the Knight gets fooled by Death, but to the perceptive viewer this is a delightfully melancholic scene where thoughts become tangibly semiotic and vividly expressed. Antonious Block is a man who has faced all life's adversities and yet he is still willing to stall with death in order to give meaning to his life—which raises the question of what should we do with our own lives in order to give it meaning? Perhaps we may never be able to answer this question. Who is to determine the value of life? Is it we, the protagonists? Or do we wait for a higher power, such as God or Death, to assess that significance for us?

Despite its pivotal position in modern cinema, *The Seventh Seal* creates uneasiness amongst all its viewers due to the topics it confronts. The overall setup of the film does not provide a smooth cinematic experience, but rather it lays the groundwork for opening up the viewer's third

eye into Bergman's mental and emotional resources. Many of those who attempt to analyze *The Seventh Seal* focus solely on the topic of the silence of God, or rather, the nonexistence of God. However, the main aim here is not just to come to terms with the semantics of God but to settle our own rapport with whether we want to accept the existence of a higher entity beyond our control or not—and that is the ambiguity Bergman wishes for us to maintain in our analysis.

Another major character in *The Seventh Seal* is Jons, Block's companion and faithful squire. If we view Block as the heroic protagonist who questions and confronts God and Death, then Jons is the anti-hero or libertine who brings balance to the situation through his chaotic nature. Jons embodies all the characteristics that Block lacks—he is cynical, disorderly, deadpan, realistic, and not at all bothered by life's misfortunes. The fact that both Block and Jons go hand in hand throughout the film goes to show that the two sides of the coin shall forever remain united. We cannot hope to maintain the urge to rise above our faults and shortcomings without also embracing the absurdity and humor that make life a little less arduous.

While most of Block's exchanges cover vast questions, Jons' dialogue offers a realistic take on the human experience. For instance, during the very same church scene where Block is exasperatedly confessing to Death in disguise, Jons is outside, having an entirely different conversation with the church painter about his own similar yet different view of life and his experience. Whilst he gives his monologue, Jons draws himself on a piece of cardboard almost to solidify his position in his own little "Jonsworld":

For ten years we sat in the Holy Land and let snakes bite us, flies sting us, wild animals eat us, heathens butcher us, the wine poison us, the women give us lice, the lice devour us, the fever rot us, all for the Glory of God. Our crusade was such madness that only a real idealist could have thought it up. This is the squire Jons. He grins at Death, mocks

the Lord, laughs at himself and leers at the girls. His world is a Jonsworld, believable only to himself, ridiculous to all including himself, meaningless to Heaven and of no interest to Hell. (Bergman 24:00-25:30)

The dichotomy that is portrayed here is that while both Block and Jons have faced the bleakness of life and the transition into what is beyond, in terms of the Crusades and the plague, they both react differently to those major events. Their different reactions indicate Bergman's mastery in demonstrating how characters who share the same experiences could end up displaying fundamentally different personalities.

There are numerous interpretations of *The Seventh Seal*, and certainly the most familiar of them are the religious ones, particularly those that are concerned with the finitude of man, but what of the modernist twist that can be given to the theme of doubleness as it plays out in the film? This is not just a film about the silence of God, as many label it. It is a film about man's different reactions to that very silence. All the characters in the film are affected by God's silence, and they all apprehensively wait for his 'sign'—a sign coming directly from the heavens above, or a sign that implicitly gives them hope of a Higher Power might offer them some sort of redemption. In any case, this sign gives the suffering undergone an ambiguous meaning. Both Block and Jons wait for the witch to be miraculously saved from the fires of the stake, the flagellants are waiting for a collective repentance, Plog is waiting for good karma and Lisa for excitement, Skat creates chaos in hope of change, Jof and Mia search for the sign through their dreams and earthly pursuits, Karin awaits her husband's return, while the mute girl waits for it all to end.

The doubleness of Bergman facing himself in Block's character and in Block facing himself in Death prepares us for the cyclical aspect of *The Seventh Seal* and the cyclical nature of life

itself. Block does not just have to win the chess game with Death—that is a minor detail, like the scene of the witch burning, that serves as a distraction to throw us off from the main dilemma. The same could be said about the game of chess itself; not much would change about Block’s life regardless of the outcome—life goes on, and death is inevitable whether he wins or loses the game of chess. What matters most is Block’s perspective. Would he continue to view this entire ordeal as a desolate progression towards a bleak culmination, or would he learn to appreciate the little moments that weave his days together such as Mia offering him a bowl of fresh strawberries and a glass of milk? I think that specific moment is Block’s turning point. He knows then and there that life is not about beating death; “I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping, Jof with his lyre. I’ll try to remember what we have talked about. I’ll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk.”

This exact moment could be traced back to Bergman talking about his experience while making the film in one of the most beautifully written passages in *Images: My Life in Film*;

At the time I was still very much in a quandary over religious faith, I placed my two opposing beliefs side by side, allowing each to state its case in its own way. In this manner, a virtual cease-fire could exist between my childhood piety and my newfound harsh rationalism. Thus, there are no neurotic complications between the knight and his vassals I infused the characters of Jof and Mia with something that was very important to me: the concept of the holiness of the human being. If you peel off the layers of various theologies, the holy always remains My present conviction manifested itself during this time. I believe a human being carries his or her own holiness, which lies within the realm of the earth; there are no otherworldly

explanations. So in the film lives a remnant of my honest, childish piety lying peacefully alongside a harsh and rational perception of reality Suddenly I realized, that is how it is. That one could be transformed from being to not-being—it was hard to grasp. But for a person with a constant anxiety about death, now liberating. (360-369)

A brief moment of comfort amidst the arduous complexities of facing the Crusades, the plague, and Death is all that Antonious Block needs to solve the riddle that does not require an intellectual or chivalrous approach, but rather, a contented heart that is willing to alleviate its own burdens through mere acceptance. We learn from Block's experience and from Bergman's autobiography that the doubleness exhibited in *The Seventh Seal* does not need to be examined as two sides in constant battle over who would win, but rather, two sides acknowledging their different and predetermined roles.

Alternately, examining Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (1973) is an immensely surreal experience that transports the viewer into a sea of allegorical doubleness, however this time the spiritual journey is not a confrontation between a warrior and Death, but a confrontation between a Christ-like thief and an alchemist who helps him confront his fears. Here the thief is not only trying to escape death, but to achieve immortality—all through questioning his own existence and why he was put on Earth. On a grander scale, the film explores sentiments similar to those found in *The Seventh Seal*; however, it does not adopt Bergman's introspective approach, but a very aggressive and secular one. Indeed, the film exhibits no shame in exploring the taboos of mankind.

The film opens with a sequence of a man who resembles Christ. For the first twenty minutes, not much is said, but the viewer also experiences a sense of uneasiness while watching different scenes of vibrant hedonism, excess, brashness, and gore—which produces the feeling that

Jodorowsky seems to have intended. From the very first scene we can see the alchemist shaving the heads of two unidentified naked women, in what could be interpreted as a purification ritual yet it evokes a sense of discomfort that is illustrated throughout the film. We then learn that this man is a thief, a mere man who wishes to find his way to enlightenment. The thief then encounters the alchemist who conveys to him that he is “excrement” and that he “can change himself to gold.” This figurative expression is best explained by Alessandra Santos in her titular book, *The Holy Mountain*:

These lines hide a few important elements for an interpretive filmic analysis. First, the notion that we are all made of bodily functions, or excrement, desacralizing the body and the grandiose entity of what makes us humans, i.e. our rationality, logic, achievements and the ability to hold a spiritual search such as the one conducted in the story. Secondly, they allude to the film’s symbolism, and the ‘alchemical’ plot of the Thief’s initiation. The transmutation of base matter into gold is at the crux of the Thief’s transformation, wherein the plot of a promised revelation holds up. In all its visual complexity, the film operates under the premise that the most debased segments of society hide true treasures, whereas those in power—the elite—retain control through empty deception. The Holy Mountain not only proposes that enlightenment and immortality are not possible, but that the most mundane aspects of life conceal the most meaningful searches. (59-60)

Santos does an excellent job in exploring what it means in the film to be referred to as “excrement” in terms of how the thief is guided by the alchemist to find meaning in what could be labelled as a degrading aspect of living—which is arguably how we tend to find meaning when we explore parts of ourselves we do not wish to confront.

The beauty of *The Holy Mountain* is that its doubleness lies within its relationship with the viewer, as well as in the film in and of itself. Without paying close attention to the bigger picture, one could so easily lose track of what actually goes on or lose interest in the film altogether. However, the film sets an excellent example of what life today looks like in the way that it involves excessive and gruesome voyeurism, a sense of detachment from reality, and distraction from what matters both to the individual and the collective.

After the thief goes through the spiritually cleansing ritual with the alchemist, he (the alchemist) then wisely teaches him about what he truly needs to feel whole: “[Y]ou want to know the secret” he says, “but man can achieve nothing by himself.” He then begins to introduce the thief to his companions on the journey of enlightenment in seven different vignettes, involving the “industrialists and politicians” of the planet, the most powerful people on Earth who happen to be thieves like himself, yet more deadly ones. Each one of those thieves represents one of the planets of our Solar System, and of course each of them represents a vice similar to the seven deadly sins but with an industrialist/political twist.

We first meet Fon from the planet Venus whose father is an offensive version of God or “the creator of this empire.” Fon has many wives, and his purpose is to beautify the human body, as well as create artificial faces and makeup for corpses. Then comes Isla from Mars, who creates and sells mystical weapons for believers of all religions, bioweapons such as carcinogens, in addition to drugs that “create delusions of grandeur.” Thirdly, we meet Klen from Jupiter who lives in a sea of wealth, materialism, shallow hedonism, and lustful art. Sel is the fourth thief from Saturn, and her focus is children and governments, where she owns a factory that crafts war toys in order to condition children from birth to grow up into war machines. The fifth thief is Berg, and he is from Uranus. He is the financial advisor to the president, and in his vignette he

advises the president to eliminate four million citizens, to which the president decides to set his gas chamber plan in motion. In the sixth vignette we meet Axon from Neptune. Axon is the chief of police whose purpose is emasculating one thousand men whom he calls “heroes,” and those heroes are brainwashed by him in order to attack civilians and protestors. The seventh and final vignette belongs to Lut from Pluto, who is an architect that sells coffin-like shelters for workers, similar to communal housing and tower blocks.

Together with the protagonist, the thieves all go through another cleansing ritual where they burn their self-image—presented as wax figures for each thief—before they embark on their journey to the top of the holy mountain to achieve immortality. Here we do not have a game of chess between the protagonist and the antagonist, but rather the entire film is depicted as a comical game where humans bleed a blue-colored liquid out of tubes protruding from their heads, and Christ-like figures worshipped by the masses are made out of edible cake.

On their journey to the top of the holy mountain, the thieves continue to go through obstacles and purifying revelations. They shave their heads, experiment with psychedelic drugs, and stumble upon the Pantheon Bar whose inhabitants very much resemble Homer’s lotus-eaters in the *Odyssey*, Book IX, indulging in epicurean and hedonistic activities after they once sought to climb the holy mountain and achieve enlightenment and immortality. The group continues on its journey but before reaching the top, the alchemist advises the main thief (the protagonist) to go back to his people and lead them, as this has been his purpose all along. It was never about immortality for him, but about “changing the world.” The rest of the group, however, continues the climb and then the alchemist points to a round table at the top with hooded men seated around it. He asks the remaining thieves to meditate for three hours before attacking the hooded “immortals” in order to achieve their long-anticipated immortality.

The thieves then reach the hooded immortals only to find out that they are plastic figures, hooded mannequins that portray the illusion of immortality. While the last words uttered before the dance of Death in *The Seventh Seal* are “this is the end,” in *The Holy Mountain* the alchemist exclaims “nothing has an end”:

I promised you the great secret and I will not disappoint you. Is this the end of our adventure? Nothing has an end. We came in search of the secret of immortality. To be like gods. And here we are. . . mortals. More human than ever. If we have not obtained immortality, at least we have obtained reality. We began in a fairytale, and we came to life! But is this life reality? No. It is a film. Zoom back camera. We are images, dreams, photographs. We must not stay here! Prisoners! We shall break the illusion. This is Maya. Goodbye to the holy mountain. Real life awaits us.

(Jodorowsky 1:50:04-1:52:02)

In one final epilogue, the alchemist reveals that none of this was real, not the mountain, not the climb, and not the so-called achievable immortality. He confirms that it was all an illusion created by him for the thieves and simultaneously for the viewer. However, he also suggests that what they have reached is not reality either; they started with a fairytale and ended with a film within the film.

While Bergman chose to situate *The Seventh Seal* in a rural and medieval setting that showcases the vastness of human emotion and spirituality in a monochromatic palette, Jodorowsky on the other hand chose to situate *The Holy Mountain* in a colorful bombardment of extrospection. Bergman portrayed the struggle with one’s fears in the form of a man on a journey trying to escape the inevitable while he tries to decipher what his own feelings mean. Jodorowsky chose to explore the outside world of a man also struggling to face his fears. This

compares to how it is said that the right brain is calculating, logical, and thinking in words, while the left brain is abstract, and thinking in colorful and disorganized imagery. Whether we choose to believe in a game of chess to be able to defeat death, or a fictional mountain to achieve immortality, the inevitable always finds a way to run its course regardless of where man may end up on the journey of self-discovery and enlightenment. The passage of time remains inescapable regardless of the ambiguity of its interpretation.

Chapter 2: *Wild Strawberries* – Doubteness and Life (The Man)

Ten months after *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries* was released in 1957, thus enabling Bergman to complete two masterpieces in the same year. In this chapter I will discuss how the backdrop has changed but the questions remain the same: Is life worth living? Have I gained the clarity that I have always sought? In *Wild Strawberries* professor Isak Borg is not a battered knight returning from the Crusades but a sullen and egotistical old man battling his own loneliness. However, these questions are not posited by the professor to serve a purely intellectual purpose but are a continuation of the quest for self. In *Between Stage and Screen*, Egil Törnqvist explains Bergman's motives as a filmmaker rather well:

Wild Strawberries is usually described as a film in which the search for God and for a meaning in life are replaced by more immanent questions. This is not altogether true. The metaphysical questions appear also in this film. Isak Borg's behavior during a long life cannot be separated from his existential situation in the shadow of death. Like *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries* is in its essence a filmic counterpart of *Everyman*, the medieval morality play about Man who in the face of Death is confronted with his deeds in life. (126)

If life is examined through a knight's evasion of the concept of death in *The Seventh Seal*, then life will be examined in *Wild Strawberries* through a man's past and simultaneously present and future. As life is examined through his eyes, Borg embarks on a journey to receive an honorary doctoral degree that has been fifty years overdue. Throughout his journey, he relives memories of childhood, his old love and family. Then his intrusive thoughts of old age and death force him to start reevaluating the life that he has lived and the choices that he has made. In this chapter, I

will also be comparing Bergman's work in *Wild Strawberries* to Andrei Tarkovsky's (1932-1986) film, *Mirror* (1975).

In the opening scene of the film, we hear an introductory loud drum reminiscent of the medieval atmosphere in *The Seventh Seal*, as if to remind us of the thematic continuity and also concerns undiscovered aspects of both Bergman and Isak Borg's personalities. Isak Borg (played by Victor Sjöström) is a distinctive character, if the viewer is new to the works of Bergman, but a modern component in a multilayered personality if you know not to take his films at face value. Borg proclaims: "In our relations with other people, we mainly discuss and evaluate their character and behavior. That is why I have withdrawn from nearly all so-called relations. This has made my old age rather lonely. My life has been full of hard work, and I am grateful" (Bergman 0:50-1:20). We are then distracted by the title sequence before we soon find Professor Borg in his bed, dreaming about his own death. In a dream sequence, we find a petulant old man nearing eighty who wanders the streets of a deserted city, only to find a figure resembling himself with a blank expression collapsing into black smoke, and a boldly ticking clock. One of the most prominent symbols in the film is the clock. We can hear and see clocks throughout the film, a constant reminder of the relentless passage of time. This symbol is particularly poignant in the context of the film, as Professor Borg is trying (and failing) to avoid the reality of his own mortality.

We then catch a glimpse of a hand protruding out of a coffin, the hand of the dead-yet-moving Borg reaches out and holds the hand of the living-yet-dreaming Borg. Professor Isak Borg is seemingly done with all human interaction, yet he is fearful of the thought of death and what awaits him beyond. He is a man still holding on to his own exaltation, despite wanting the viewer to believe otherwise.

In *Cinema 1*, Gilles Deleuze frequently referenced the American logician Charles Sanders Peirce in his analysis of Bergman's directing style:

Our work begins with the human face. . . The possibility of drawing near to the human face is the primary originality and the distinctive quality of the cinema. A character has abandoned his profession, renounced his social role; he is no longer able to, or no longer wants to communicate, is struck by an almost absolute muteness; he even loses his individuation, to the point where he takes on a strange resemblance to the other, a resemblance by default or by absence. Indeed, these functions of the face presuppose the reality of a state of things where people act and perceive. The affection-image makes them dissolve, disappear. (99)

In relation to Peirce's analysis, we can clearly characterize this mirroring image of Borg seeing dead or vanishing versions of himself as personifications of his deepest fears. Furthermore, it is not just different versions of Borg that we encounter, but also closeups of his face both as the camera zooms in on him, or as he recurrently looks at himself in the mirror. This "loss of individuation" is especially apparent throughout the film as we are transported back and forth between Borg's past, present and dreaded future through his memories, daydreams and nightmares.

After the professor awakes, we learn that he is about to embark on a journey to Lund to receive his honorary degree, a journey significant in its duality—both portraying Borg's journey through life and Bergman's journey as a director. Professor Borg is then visited by his daughter-in-law Marianna who wants to accompany him on his trip to Lund as she needs a ride, and as soon as they start their journey, we notice their apparent disparity. "What do you have against me?" Borg asks to which Marianna responds:

You're a selfish old man, Uncle Isak. You're utterly ruthless and never listen to anyone but yourself. But you hide it all behind your old-world manners and charm. Beneath your benevolent exterior, you're as hard as nails. But you can't fool us who have seen you at close quarters. Remember when I came to you a month ago? I had a stupid idea that you might help Evald and me. So I asked to stay with you for a week or two. Remember what you answered? Perhaps you've forgotten, but you said, 'Don't try to draw me into your marital squabbles. I don't give a damn. You and Evald must make the best of it. I have no respect for mental suffering, so don't come lamenting to me. If you need therapy, you'd better see a shrink.'

(Bergman 15:53-17:05)

Borg is ironically surprised by his own cold-heartedness, apologizes to Marianna, and decides to take her to his old summer home, where he starts reliving another dreamlike sequence, but this time it is that of an old memory rather than an alarming nightmare. He narrates: "The place where wild strawberries grow! Perhaps I got a little sentimental. Perhaps I got a little tired and felt a bit sad. It's not impossible that I began to think of this and that, associated with places where I played as a child. I don't know how it happened, but the day's clear reality dissolved into the even clearer images of memory that appeared before my eyes with the strength of a true stream of events" (19:20-20:20).

In that dream we meet his cousin Sara (Bibi Anderson) who was picking wild strawberries and is then accompanied by Isak's older brother. Through that dream sequence we learn that Isak was in love with his cousin Sara, and that his brother ended up stealing her from him, an apparent story line that is related to the bitterness that Professor Borg possesses. "I was overwhelmed by feelings of emptiness and sadness, but was soon awakened from my reveries," confirms Borg. He is then awakens from his daydream by a hitchhiker (Bibi Anderson again) who is also named

Sara, and she joins the ride to Lund with her friends Anders and Viktor. During the ride Borg tells Sara that she reminds him of the Sara he once loved right before they stumble upon a couple whose car broke down.

Now everyone is in the car with Professor Borg, including this new couple; Sten and Berit, and their bickering, remind Borg of his old and unpleasant marriage. During Sten's conversation with Marianne in the car he very fittingly says: "We ridicule each other. She has her hysteria. I have my Catholicism. So, you see, we need each other. It's only egoism that we haven't killed each other" (39:00). A quote that underlines the internal struggle that Borg feels within himself, right before we catch a glimpse of an emblematic frame; an image of everyone inside the car representing Professor Borg's life and psyche—Marianne as his nagging conscience, the angry couple as his failed marriage, and the feisty Sara in the back as his youthful memories and heartbreak.

After Marianne manages to kick the bickering couple out of the car, they make a quick stop for gas and Professor Borg decides to go pay his mother a visit, and Marianne joins him. During the visit, Borg is yet again confronted with another image of a blank clock that his mother shows him; perhaps this clock is associated with the monotony and repetition of his daily life. Professor Borg's life has been marked by blandness and predictability, and the clock serves as a powerful symbol of the tedium that has encased his existence. Marianne also stands there during that encounter and watches in dismay as she realizes that Professor Borg is exactly like his mother despite the age difference, which also means that her husband Evald (Borg's son) is bound to meet the same fate of growing old into a hollow shell of a man.

After visiting his mother, Borg falls asleep in the car as Marianne drives, and yet again he falls into another dream sequence, referring to these sequences as "vivid and humiliating

dreams”. This time he is visited by young Sara, his cousin, who confronts him with a mirror in one of the most pivotal exchanges in the film:

Have you looked in the mirror, Isak? Then I'll show you what you look like. You're a worried old man who's soon going to die, but I have all my life before me. That hurt your feelings, after all. . . Yes, it hurt because you can't bear the truth. The truth is that I've been too considerate. And so became unintentionally cruel. . . you don't understand. We don't speak the same language. Look in the mirror again. No, don't turn away. Listen to me. I'm going to marry your brother Sigfrid. Love is almost a game for us. Look at your face now. Try to smile! There! Now you're smiling. As professor emeritus, you ought to know why it hurts. But you don't know. You know so much, and you don't know anything. (Bergman 54:24-56:00)

Borg listens to Sara's humiliating confrontation with an initial reluctance to admit the pain he has carried within himself all these years. Then he finally exclaims—"but it hurts so!"—and with that turning point, we glimpse Professor Isak Borg realizing the extent of his hollowness. He is a man who at the beginning of the film, before embarking on his journey, lied to all of us as well as himself when he said, "I am grateful." The screen then cuts to a melancholic Borg watching Sara and Sigfrid happily in love through a window, serenaded by Erik Nordgren's powerful soundtrack that adds to the gloomy ambiance, and then we see a dark and cloudy sky through the window. This vivid switch from a happy couple to the gloomy sky emphasizes Professor Borg's sense of isolation and detachment from the world around him. Additionally, Bergman's use of light and dark images is also striking; almost all the dream sequences feature dramatic contrasts between bright exteriors and dramatic interiors, which creates a subtle yet unmistakable sense of tension within the viewer—quite like how Professor Borg felt throughout the film.

The symbolism does not end there, however, as the following scene depicts a protruding nail and Borg's wounded palm—a homage to Jesus Christ, and perhaps a nod to a man in search of faith through his own stigmata. This dream sequence happens right before Borg's 'final judgement'. A man appears and leads Borg into a dream sequence that resembles a trial. The man asks him a couple of medical questions to which Borg is not able to answer, and then he starts to guilt-trip Borg as he asks him what a doctor's first duty should be: "A doctor's first duty is to ask for forgiveness. . . You have been accused of guilt. I'll make a note that you haven't understood the charge. You are incompetent. You are also accused of some minor but still serious offenses. Callousness, selfishness, ruthlessness" (1:02-1:05). To these accusations, Borg tries to plead that he is old and has a weak heart that is not able to tolerate such harshness. However, the man confronts him with an old memory of his wife cheating on him and his indifference to her infidelity. The man then tells him that the punishment for years of apathy is his current vacant loneliness.

Borg emerges from this sequence and expresses to Marianne that he "feels dead although he is alive" to which Marianne says that he and Evald (his son and her husband) are very much alike. Of course, Borg's living nightmare does not end there; Marianne then decides to tell him about her pregnancy and her conversation with Evald where he coldly told her, "We act according to our needs. . . Yours is a hellish desire to live and to create life. Mine is to be dead. Stone-dead" (1:15:10-1:15:30). This is a realization that brings Marianne to the conclusion that she is trapped in a family of soulless men. During that heartfelt discussion between Professor Borg and Marianne, we finally get to see both of them warming up to each other and having an honest conversation.

As Borg is getting ready for his ceremony, he begins to say that he has discovered something after the day's events, but we never actually get to hear him say what it is. In the book edited by Felicity Colman, *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers*, Giorgio Agamben wrote:

Bergman's intense interest throughout many of his films of this period is not in what is hidden, but 'hiddenness' itself. What reemerges later in his filmmaking as more overt breaks with continuity and contingency bubbles. . . just beneath the surface. These films, to a lesser or greater extent, are not merely cinema but occur in a medium that does not disappear in what it makes visible. We are always perceiving too much to be contained in a fiction, but never enough for the well to overflow completely into chaos. . . We can see past acts, and events unfurl and open up even as we experience the present, giving us a growing sense of opportunity, of a break in the melancholy into something more irruptive. (355)

This idea of "hiddenness" in Bergman's films—one that is specifically portrayed here, examines how he was interested in giving his audience the room to interpret his films with an open mind, and not with the definitiveness that suggests exactly how a film should end. A theme, I believe, he intended for the sake of maintaining the ambiguity of his own life.

Towards the end of the film, Borg is finally awarded his degree, a merit that does not involve any form of self-actualization, much like all the empty pursuits that accomplish nothing but rather yield an evocation of a life gone to waste. Through *Wild Strawberries*, Bergman was able to access his own childhood, fears and dreams, in addition to the troubled history of his family. However, the closing scene shows us a smiling Borg, who seems to have found peace within his inner struggles. In the conflict between the wish for death and a love of life, who ends up winning? In *Ingmar Bergman: Cinematic Philosopher*, Irving Singer contends that the film

thematizes the relation between life and death but does not allow either theme to become dominant: “The resulting ambiguity operates as a dramatic theme, raising recurrent doubts about the possibility of any benign harmonization between the two phenomena” (35-36).

A seemingly content Borg lays smiling in bed after making amends with his housekeeper, his son, and his daughter-in-law and is yet again transported to another final dreamlike sequence involving his own parents. Has Borg really found the answers he spent all his life looking for? The symbolism in the film serves as a means for the exploration of these questions, giving us the viewers a glimpse into the nuanced world of the human psyche. The beauty of *Wild Strawberries* is that it was written while Bergman himself was hospitalized and questioning his very own existence. The recurring dreams and nightmares that a bedridden man would go through are very much what the viewer experiences throughout the film. The series of unsettling dreams that we experience throughout the film are symbolic of both Professor Borg and Bergman’s inner turmoil. They also represent their repressed desires and fears, which are brought to the surface through Professor Borg’s encounters with the passengers of the car as well as members of his family.

In *The Demons of Modernity: Ingmar Bergman and European Cinema*, John Orr argues that Professor Borg does not represent a fragment of Bergman himself, but rather Evald, Borg’s son: “Let us say first why Bergman’s film is not autobiographical. For a start, Isak Borg is a figure from a previous generation who could have been Bergman’s father, not a facsimile of self. His memories are not historically memories of Bergman’s childhood but Bergman’s imagination of a previous generation. It is true that Borg’s character may combine, as Bergman has suggested, elements of his father and himself but if anything, the nearest figure to Bergman would be Borg’s son Evald.” (53)

However, declaring that statement to be true in any sense would be more of an offense to Bergman's work and his mastery of symbolism and doubleness. Through the character of Isak Borg, Bergman was able to weave together various elements of his own life and experiences, creating a poignant meditation on the human experience and what it means to be alive. Elements in the film such as Bergman's depiction of Borg's broken relationship with his son—which mirrors his own broken relationship with his father, recurring props and objects such as actual mirrors and clocks, as well as the imagery of nature itself all create a reality within the dreamlike setup. We witness Professor Borg's journey through the Swedish countryside, which serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and how he is blind to it all despite living through it. This journey is another method allowing Bergman to use aspects of himself in constructing the character of Isak Borg. As explored in chapter one, the inclusion of a scene with wild strawberries is shared with *The Seventh Seal*. We witness it here again, both as the titular subject and a recurrent theme shared by Professor Borg, his parents and Sara. Additionally, the recurrent use of mirrors, and Sara repetitively asking Professor Borg to 'look in the mirror' are an open invitation from Bergman to look within and self-analyze, much like what he did in *Wild Strawberries*.

To prove Bergman's apparent mastery of said doubleness, one can simply refer to his own words in his autobiography *Images: My Life in Film*:

I discovered what the name of the leading character—Isak Borg—really meant. Isak Borg equals me. I B equals Ice and Borg (the Swedish word for fortress). Simple and facile. I had created a figure who, on the outside, looked like my father but was me, through and through. I was then thirty-seven, cut off from all human relations. It was I who had done the cutting off, presumably as an act of self-affirmation. I was a loner, a

failure, I mean a complete failure. Though successful. And clever. And orderly. And disciplined. I was looking for my father and my mother, but I could not find them. In the final scene of *Wild Strawberries* there is a strong element of nostalgia and desire: Sara takes Isak Borg by the hand and leads him to a sunlit clearing in the forest. On the other side he can see his parents. They wave to him. One thread goes through the story in multiple variations: shortcomings, poverty, emptiness, and the absence of grace. I didn't know then, and even today I don't know fully, how through *Wild Strawberries* I was pleading with my parents: see me, understand me, and—if possible—forgive me.

(Bergman 26)

Bergman's directorial style can be compared to that of the Soviet-born prodigy, Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986). Born over a decade after Bergman and dying years before him, Tarkovsky was also known for his deeply philosophical yet more existentially surrealist films. Both Bergman and Tarkovsky were influential in their own rites and in terms of their artistic visions yet differed notably in their articulation, delivery, and methods of storytelling. While Bergman's psychologically complex narratives are often characterized by internal conflicts and mirroring images that reflect a man's isolation, despair, and the constant search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, Tarkovsky's narratives are more abstract, nonlinear and purely philosophical.

To create a more vivid comparison, I will be specifically focusing on Tarkovsky's film, *Mirror* (1975). At first glance, one could easily find similarities between *Wild Strawberries* and *Mirror*. *Mirror* is a loosely autobiographical film that tells the story of Alexei who lives in the USSR. The film is structured around a series of vignettes that move fluidly between different time periods and perspectives of Aleksei's childhood, youth, and adult life in no specific order,

as well as excerpts of some of Tarkovsky's favorite poetic works. Overall, the film blends autobiography, history, and surrealism, in addition to black and white/color footage to create a deeply personal yet evocative experience that one cannot quite place in one cinematic box.

We never actually get to meet Alexei as an adult but only encounter him through fragments of voice-overs and phone conversations. One of the most powerful dialogues that take place in the film, and one that very much resembles Professor Borg's opening narration, is a phone conversation between adult Alexei and his mother where she asks why his voice is coarse. He says in response, "I haven't spoken to anyone for three days. I even liked it. I think it's good to keep silent for a while. Words can't express everything a person feels. Words are flaccid" (Tarkovsky 20:10-20:50).

In *Film as Philosophy*, Jerry Goodenough writes: "In our everyday lives we seek to construct narratives with as great a degree of objectivity as possible. But should we then do this within the world of art? Cinema has always been seen as the most linear of all art forms, reflecting its material linearity as a single long strip of film moving through a projector. And since we regard our lives in the same linear fashion, so too do we try to interpret our films. It is this quest for objectivity that is under attack here." (19) Perhaps this "quest for objectivity" is what brings us to the significant difference between Bergman and Tarkovsky.

While both films share various similar undertones and motifs, Tarkovsky is barely concerned with the "quest for objectivity" at all; instead, he is mostly consumed with the idea of creating cinematic poetry through his interchanging use of slow-motion black and white shots, then fast paced color shots. Bergman's smooth transition between shots and scenes—a technique that almost always leaves the viewer deeply moved by the characters on screen—is met by Tarkovsky's sporadic switches that could drive a viewer to madness.

The dreamlike narrative is adopted in both motion pictures; however, *Wild Strawberries* exemplifies an old man's memories and present-day encounters that remind him of past experiences, traumas and heartbreaks. It is clear in depicting Borg's journey, yet ambiguous in its destination, or rather, the meaning of the destination is left to the viewer to come to terms with. *Mirror*, on the other hand, embodies a beautiful collage that recounts everything and nothing—there is no destination and therefore the journey does not add up. You observe and speculate, yet you are not quite sure what it is you are speculating about. You know that Alexei is struggling, and you as a viewer might be able to identify several aspects of that struggle to relate to, yet you cannot ascertain what the struggle truly represents.

The endless quest for meaning and identity is a common theme between both films, but how do the directors choose to portray them? While both films evoke intense emotions of loss of identity and the search for man, *Wild Strawberries* takes us through a journey of dreams that suggest various meanings, whereas *Mirror* presents the viewer with multiple dreams with meanings that seem indeterminable. This sense of loss is not something Bergman aimed to solve in *Wild Strawberries*, however. He posed the general notion of wasted time and regret, feelings that are more common than we might like to admit. We discern Isak Borg's bittersweet character when we can see him smiling in his bed before the screen turns to black at the end of the film, but we are not quite sure if he would ever awaken from that final slumber. Egil Törnqvist yet again touches upon the ambiguity of this final scene in *Between Stage and Screen*:

Even if the film's pre-credit sequence clarifies that Isak does not die at the end, the final images suggest that this is precisely what happens. In the image of the parents, the past (the childhood memories) and the future (the hope for a happy reunion with them after death) mingle. The image of them surrounded by a lovely summer archipelago is an

image of paradise pointing in two directions. The spatial distance between Isak and the parents corresponds to the temporal distance, backwards towards childhood, forwards towards life hereafter. (126)

The last dream sequence shows us Sara, his old lover, pointing and directing him towards his parents in the distance, so is that a childhood memory? Or is that Isak in the afterlife? Would a bitter old man such as Isak Borg finally find the contentment he has always longed for? That is left for us to decide, if we wish to decide at all. Paisley Livingston cautions us against available interpretations: “Various critics have attempted to situate Bergman’s work within an existentialist philosophical tradition, which would appear especially appropriate insofar as many of Bergman’s characters grapple with and articulately talk about death, illness, solitude, anxiety, and the meaning and value of life. Yet the case for reading Bergman as an existentialist, and his fictions as expressions of existentialism, rests on surprisingly flimsy grounds” (560).

If we are to compare Bergman’s approach to Tarkovsky, or Isak Borg to Alexei, we could again describe them as the right brain and left brain of man, respectively. As discussed in chapter one, where Antonius Block is the right brain that complements the left brain of the thief in *The Holy Mountain*, here again the same notion could be applied. Isak Borg is the accomplished scientist experiencing loss, pain, hollowness and heartbreak. Alexei is the tortured artist affected by his political surroundings, incapable of finding his creative voice. Both men are on an endless quest for self, yet they are unlikely to arrive at their destinations anytime soon. In both cases, nonetheless, the passage of time remains inescapable regardless of the ambiguity of the path.

Chapter 3: *Persona* – Doubleness and Identity (The Woman)

In this final examination of Bergman, we move on to *Persona* (1966), the most cathartic film on the roster. Almost a decade after *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*, Bergman transports us into a sharper analysis of the theme of duality. In *Images: My Life in Film*, Bergman spoke profusely about his mental state in the year 1963 when he was appointed as head of the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm. Two years later—in a manner similar to how he had started writing *Wild Strawberries*—his life began to deteriorate, and in a way that suggests the doubleness between film and audience that shall be discussed in this chapter, he had begun to irritably question his purpose in life and the reason behind his art:

I was beginning to ask myself: Why am I doing this? Why do I care so much? Is the role of the theater finished? Has the mission of the art been taken over by other forces? I had good reasons for thinking such thoughts. It was not a case of developing an aversion to my professional life. Although I am a neurotic person, my relation to my profession has always been astonishingly non-neurotic. I have always had the ability to attach my demons to my chariot. And they have been forced to make themselves useful. At the same time they have still managed to keep on tormenting and embarrassing me in my private life. The owner of the flea circus, as you might be aware, has a habit of letting his artists suck his blood. (50)

While this vivid image of artists sucking the blood of a flea circus owner could falsely describe Bergman's own situation, it is heavily emblematic of what is to come in *Persona*, where two women, Elisabet Vogler (played by Liv Ullman) and Sister Alma (played by Bibi Andersson), observe and psychoanalyze one another. At first glance Elisabet, the actress, willingly drives herself into muteness, while Alma, the nurse, learns about her story from the

psychiatrist who assigned her the case. Here, life is mostly examined through the perspective of a vulnerable woman and the complexity it brings with it. Both Elisabet and Alma learn about themselves through learning about the other. Much like the mirroring images of a man and his shadow in *Ohio Impromptu*, both women here could be emblazoned as mirroring doubles—in spiritual darkness and vital awakening.

The film opens with a young boy sleeping on a white bed, in a white room, trying to cover himself with a white bedsheet, yet he does not seem to be able to cover himself fully. This sterile, hospital-like environment along with the apparent discomfort of the boy are the first elements of the film we notice; we are not sure, however, who this boy is or what he symbolizes. The boy then sits up and starts observing fast flickering images of rolling film, which include the faces of our two protagonists, Elisabet and Alma. The resemblance between their faces is highly noticeable.

What is also worth mentioning is that one of the flickering images we see is that of a nailed palm or what is also known as stigmata, which is an exact duplication and recurrence of a similar scene in *Wild Strawberries* as one of Isak Borg's nightmares, and, of course, emblematic of the crucifixion of Christ. It is also an unmistakable homage to Bergman's spiritual journey throughout all his films, and his unrelenting urge to find the answers to his many questions. Other than posing many questions in that mysterious introductory scene, it also worth noting that out of the three Bergman films discussed in this thesis, *Persona* (and its intro) is the most nonlinear in its artistry and storytelling—and in this way may allude to Bergman's own malcontent and muddled emotional state at the time. In her essay, "Bergman's *Persona* through a Native Mindscape," Birgitta Steene referred to the boy as a "Bergmanian illusionist, a magician whose hand, moving across a screen door, becomes a wand that conjures forth a woman's face

and transforms dead material into live images, which in turn initiate the master narrative at the moment the screen becomes a door in the hospital where Alma and Elisabet will first meet” (40).

The boy then disappears, and we are introduced to sister Alma who opens the door to an empty and sterile room, perhaps the same room where the young boy was trying to sleep. We learn that sister Alma is a young nurse who is to be taking care of Elisabet Vogler, a famous theater actress who abruptly forsook talking during one of her performances. The psychiatrist informs sister Alma that Elisabet is physically healthy but there seems to be an unknown reason for her abrupt silence, and it is Alma’s job to try and help Elisabet to speak again or at least keep her company until she decides to do so herself. In *The Demons of Modernity*, John Orr describes Elisabet and the doubleness between her and Bergman as “an uncompromising modernist. The heroine of *Persona* challenges with her voluntary silence the very possibility of art’s continuation. Bergman is often said to enthrone this silence, to participate in Vogler’s mute protest by matching her interruption of the performance with his own radical disruptions of cinematic and dramatic convention” (180).

After their first encounter, Alma tries to get herself out of this assignment as she asks the psychiatrist if it would be a better idea to find a more experienced nurse to deal with Elisabet since she suspects that Elisabet is mentally too strong to be affected by Alma’s attempts to make her talk. It is made clear that Alma is still taking care of Elisabet, and we see her switching on the radio for Elisabet to put on a play, to which Elisabet psychotically laughs at first, then nervously switches off the radio herself. Alma is confused by Elisabet’s reaction and puts on music instead before she leaves the room, where an awkward silence is elicited between the audience and Elisabet as she stares blankly and unblinkingly at the screen, lets out a sigh and abruptly covers her face as the screen fades to black.

The intensity of *Persona* is that it may appear as a simple oeuvre of one-on-one interactions, but almost every single monologue in the script is unmissable. We can tell that Alma is still unsure of her capabilities, and in another dream sequence we find her waking up in a sterile room similar to the room in which the boy wakes up, talking to herself while facing the audience, and wondering what is wrong with Elisabet as she recounts her simple ambitions and what she is grateful for, before going back to sleep. In the next scene we watch Elisabet in her hospital room as she watches the news in horror, taking in a scene from a Vietnamese protest where a monk sets himself on fire. We begin to understand why she is in the mental state that she is in.

Another rather political scene of Elisabet appears halfway through the film as well, where she holds a photograph of a young Jewish boy holding up his hands in surrender during the Second World War. These two specific scenes perhaps play the role of giving the audience some insight into how Elisabet views the outside world—that is, the reality outside her theater life—which arguably explains why she chooses to fall into silence. Elisabet is horrified by this state of things and no longer feels that she could control the events of her own life, much like Bergman himself felt at the time. This is how Bergman chose to explain those two specific scenes in *Images: My Life in Film*:

Mrs. Vogler desires the truth. She has looked for it everywhere, and sometimes she seems to have found something to hold on to, something lasting, but then suddenly the ground has given way under her feet. The truth had dissolved and disappeared or had, in the worst case, turned into a lie. My art cannot melt, transform, or forget: the boy in the photo with his hands in the air or the man who set himself on fire to bear witness to his faith. I am unable to grasp the large catastrophes. They leave my heart untouched. At most I can read about such atrocities with a kind of greed—a pornography of horror.

But I shall never rid myself of those images. Images that turn my art into a bag of tricks, into something indifferent, meaningless. The question is whether art has any possibility of surviving . . . If in spite of this I continue my work as an artist, I will no longer do it as an escape or as an adult game but in the full awareness that I am working within an accepted convention that can give me and my fellow beings a few seconds of solace or reflection. (68-69)

What is rather interesting about this discussion is that time and again, Bergman proved to be a master of expressing exactly how he felt in his films and the scripts he wrote in terms of his personal experience. His films rarely—if ever—served a political agenda, and he was in fact criticized at times for making self-serving films for which he encountered no obstacles in rendering these “catastrophes” useful to his art. He said, “I am unable to grasp the large catastrophes. They leave my heart untouched. At most I can read about such atrocities with a kind of greed—a pornography of horror,” while farther along in *Persona*, Alma mirrors that sentiment when she admits to Elisabet that she confided in her out of “sheer exhibitionism” (56:24).

Returning to the sequence of events in *Persona*, and after Elisabet watches the Vietnamese protest on television, Alma is back in the sterile room with Elisabet. She reads her a letter sent from her husband, the letter that also includes a photograph of Elisabet’s son. Whether he is the same young boy who was trying to cover himself and uncomfortably fall asleep at the beginning of the film is never revealed; however, Elisabet takes the photograph and tears it in half. Afterwards, the psychiatrist speaks to Elisabet and advises her to leave the hospital and move to a beach house with Alma. Up until that moment, everything is occurring inside the sterile environment of the hospital and we are not given much insight into what exactly is going on in

Elisabet's mind. In addition, the emphasis on the psychiatrist's character is not given much weight until that scene. Instead of just delivering her lines of recommendation that Elisabet's stay in the hospital is not doing her any good, we are presented with the most crucial discussion that lies at the core of the film:

You think I don't understand? The hopeless dream of being. Not seeming to be, but being. Conscious and awake at every moment. At the same time, the chasm between what you are to others and what you are to yourself. The feeling of vertigo, and the constant hunger to be unmasked once and for all. To be seen through, cut down . . . perhaps even annihilated. Every tone of voice a lie, every gesture a falsehood, every smile a grimace. Commit suicide? No, too nasty. One doesn't do things like that. But you can refuse to move or talk. Then at least you're not lying. You can cut yourself off, close yourself in. Then you needn't play any roles, wear any masks, make any false gestures. So you might think . . . but reality plays nasty tricks on you. Your hiding place isn't watertight enough. Life oozes in from all sides. You're forced to react. No one asks whether it's genuine or not, whether you're lying or telling the truth. Questions like that only matter in the theater, and hardly even there. (Bergman 20:05-22:10)

This scene performs an important role since nothing at all has been mentioned about the psychiatrist. The viewer knows absolutely nothing about the psychiatrist and her background, yet Bergman so eloquently gave her the power of speaking through his voice and directly to the audience. In *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography*, Peter Cowie quotes Bergman in a chapter fittingly entitled, "Whose Silence?" As he once said, "[W]hen I was younger, I had illusions about how life should be. Now I see things as they are. No longer any questions of 'God, why?' or 'Mother, why?' One has to settle for suicide or acceptance. Either destroy oneself or accept

life. I choose now to accept it” (217). These statements once again suggest the sentiments of the psychiatrist analyzing Elisabet’s behavior. Bergman was yet again situating himself in a seemingly silent position that was masked as acceptance. He seemed to be claiming that he was no longer questioning God or directing his anger at him, yet his art suggested otherwise.

After the hospital encounter between Elisabet and the psychiatrist, both Alma and Elisabet move to the secluded beach house where Elisabet starts feeling more at ease, and from here on out the entire film starts shaping up as Elisabet observing Alma, not the other way around. Elisabet seems to have forgotten about the outside world and therefore no longer feels the need to be defensive, yet she still chooses to stay silent. Alma, on the other hand, starts opening up more, and steadily replaces her role as the nurse with that of a burdened young woman who just needs someone in whom to confide. In *The Demons of Modernity*, John Orr describes this move from indoor sterility to the secluded outdoors:

Here film and dream intermingle, sometimes as daydream, sometimes as nightmare.

Ambiguity is everywhere, in every word, in every gesture, in every cut. The *mise en scène* follows suit. There is no rural idyll here in Bergman’s settings. The island retreat and the rugged coastline are recurring tropes of threat and fear. This is a barren isolated world so that the great loneliness Bergman detects in the psyche is played out on

landscapes at their most forbidding. (17)

As the film progresses, the viewer becomes more and more aware of Bergman’s attention to detail. Face closeups of both actresses at all times, always wearing similar colored outfits (either light shades or dark shades), camera shots dividing their faces and bringing up only half of each, all most certainly bring us to the Jungian theory of *persona* which loosely revolves around how individuals usually wear replicas of their faces or masks separate from their original faces, only

to reflect how they choose to situate themselves in society or how society potentially perceives the role they play. In other words, the identity that an individual chooses to portray, and in this case the identity of Elisabet as the despondent actress or the identity of Alma as the slowly unravelling nurse, could be the identity of Bergman as a man still in search of himself and what he holds dear—his art and how he delivers it, or his constant search for meaning. Additionally, Elisabet’s behavior and choosing to emotionally distance herself from Alma could be explained in terms of an artist who wishes to silently observe a subject’s mannerisms. On the one hand, the film presents us with Elisabet on the same side as the viewer, carefully observing Alma. At the same time, Elisabet is shown as detached from both Alma and the viewer, alone in this limbo of silent observations where she is unsure of where exactly she belongs. In *Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher*, Irving Singer explains Elisabet’s muteness and her experience with Alma in the hospital, and afterwards in the beach house:

Elisabet’s experience with Alma and in the hospital has been cathartic. Though her own silence is a performance in response to what each person undergoes in being human, she has managed to play through this fantastic part until it no longer interests her. She then leaves it, as the psychiatrist said she would, just as she leaves all her parts. Her career in the theater has given her the training that she can use for this eventuality. And though it has now occurred on a vastly larger stage, her interlude with Alma will have served as a rehearsal for the more finely attenuated simulacra that occur within the fictional settings of her professional endeavors. (177)

Moving forward to the beach house, we now see a transition from the domineering sterility of the hospital setup to a less claustrophobic landscape where the rest of the film takes place. Elisabet and Alma are now spending time in a secluded beach house, and it is hinted that the

location is much more relaxing and accommodating for Elisabet specifically, which is also confirmed in a brief narration by Bergman himself. Even Alma looks much more relaxed as well, and it is clear that she has become more comfortable around Elisabet and no longer feels the need to remain guarded. This is particularly rendered as both women lay on the beach and Alma suggests reading an excerpt from her book to Elisabet:

May I read you something from my book? Or am I disturbing you? Here's what it says: 'All the anxiety we carry within us, all our thwarted dreams, the inexplicable cruelty, our fear of extinction, the painful insight into our earthly condition have slowly crystallized our hope for an otherworldly salvation. The tremendous cry of our faith and doubt against the darkness and silence is the most terrifying proof of our abandonment and our unuttered knowledge.' Do you think that's true? I don't believe that. To change . . . but I'm so lazy. And then I feel guilty about it. Karl-Henrik scolds me for not having any ambition, for going around like I'm sleepwalking. I think that's unfair. I graduated highest in my class. (Bergman 23:44-24:50)

In that definitive moment, we begin to witness Alma's shift from nurse to wounded woman, from someone who was put there to help Elisabet to someone crying out for help herself, in contrast to Elisabet the perceived patient who starts shifting from her position as a mad artist to a sane confidante. Alma starts opening up about her views on the world and how her fiancé makes her feel inadequate despite believing herself to be ambitious and content, and that directs our attention once again to the questions that Bergman wanted to ask himself. This is an argument that interests John Orr in *The Demons of Modernity* as well:

The film then poses the question: who is curing whom? Here Elisabet's strategy of silence becomes truly fascinating. The silent patient soon leaves her sickbed and

dominates the talkative nurse: the summer stay elicits long confessions from the carer, not the patient. And instead of the talking cure, the spoken word signifies a growing departure from sanity—the growing madness of the carer as ‘the patient’ becomes calculating and sane. (40)

As the film progresses, Alma eases more and more into her new role and steadily abandons her role as a nurse. Of course, the fact that she is the one carrying the entire monologue by herself helps the audience witness this shift with a contradictory aura of foreboding ease. Through this shift, the entire ambiance of the film takes a darker turn, even though the setting is no longer that of the hospital.

To underscore this premonition, Alma carries on with her outspoken thoughts about how she imagines humans should always believe in having a purpose even if that purpose is entirely subjective. We begin to uncover more elements to her character, such as her naïveté and innocence and how she intrinsically wishes to bury her head in the sand, even when she claims to be ambitious. As an ensuing monologue demonstrates, she even admits to the childishness of her thoughts, yet that does not stop her from dreaming about having a simple life with a monotonous routine:

You know what I think about sometimes? At the hospital where I took my exam, there's a home for old nurses who were nurses all their lives and lived for their work and were always in uniform. They live in their little rooms there. Imagine believing so strongly in something that you devote your entire life to it. Having something to believe in, working at something, believing your life has meaning. I like that.

Holding on tight to something, no matter what—I think that's how it should be.

Meaning something to other people. Don't you agree? I know it sounds childish, but I

believe in that. (Bergman 25:01-25:48)

Afterwards, she begins to recount to Elisabet the details of an incident where she cheated on her boyfriend and participated in a distasteful sexual encounter at the beach with three strangers, and at that moment the uncomfortably voyeuristic feelings are inescapable for both the audience and Elisabet. However, during this period, Alma begins to visibly unravel as she frees herself from the shackles of her professional facade. She goes through a complete spectrum of emotions—we see her shame and remorse as she cries and repeats that she feels so comfortable opening up to Elisabet, and that nobody before gave her the chance to talk freely, nor listened to her.

Meanwhile, Alma's infatuation with Elisabet becomes more apparent—almost like an analogy of someone slowly falling in love with the first person who allows him or her the freedom of personal expression. That analogy is confirmed through Alma's words when she tells Elisabet that she views her as someone that she aspires to be. It is also revealed through that monologue that she does not view herself as worthy of her comparison, despite the resemblance she sees between the two of them. From that moment on, the line between both characters begins to blur:

People should be like you. You know what I thought after I saw a film of yours one night? When I got home and looked in the mirror, I thought, 'We look alike.' Don't get me wrong. You're much more beautiful. But we're alike somehow. I think I could turn into you if I really tried. I mean inside. You could be me just like that . . . though your soul would be far too big. It would stick out everywhere! (Bergman 35:29-36:05)

Evidently, this was Bergman subtly signaling to his audience that this is no longer a simple interaction between two individuals. The profundity of the one-way exchange is how it situates us in a position of questioning. The physical resemblance between the two characters has been visible since the first scene when both women appear together; however, it may have been an overlooked detail. Bergman was not going to risk misinterpretation or allow his audience to lose touch with the plot halfway through the film. With a seemingly straightforward way of proclaiming—‘we look alike’—Bergman is able to effortlessly blur the line between doubleness and identity to foreshadow what takes place afterwards. Birgitta Steene not only articulates this fluid amalgamation in her essay, “Bergman’s *Persona* through a Native Mindscape,” but also draws our attention to the mysterious boy from the beginning of the film who may also have been dreaming about his absentee mother (Elisabet):

This kind of ambiguity about the identity of a dream mind also characterizes our response to Bergman's *Persona*. Whose fantasy are we watching? Is it Alma's, who, in her infatuation with a well-known actress, dreams up this woman's destiny? Is it Elisabet's dream we are exposed to as she withdraws into her own psyche? Or is the boy staging his own dream, sprung from his longing and search for a mother? Or is the boy a personification of the dream machine, an instrument and a mind who substitutes for Bergman, an alter ego buried deep in the director's childhood, in a realm that Bergman has acknowledged, again and again, as his source of inspiration? (40)

One of the crucial scenes of the film occurs after Alma’s extended vocal purging, when the camera focuses on Elisabet’s back and we hear someone (allegedly Elisabet) telling Alma to go to bed. We never get confirmation as to who actually speaks those words, but the camera directs us to assume that it is Elisabet. In what serves as an interlude between part one and part two of

the film—part one being the assumption of Elisabet’s madness and part two denoting the shattering of that image—we watch Alma as she sleeps and Elisabet emerging out of nowhere into Alma’s bedroom through a breeze of floating curtains. Elisabet watches as Alma sleeps, then leaves the room, abruptly stops and traces back whilst Alma senses her presence and gets up from her bed. The two women embrace in ethereal space, and then turn and face the camera until the screen fades to black.

This scene may appear as though separate from the entirety of the film, but it signifies exploring the shadow, or the dark side of being human. As humans, we may choose to shy away from facing the darkness that lurks within us, yet that was clearly not Bergman’s approach. We could again read this scene as suggesting a doubleness between Elisabet and Alma, where the shadow side of Elisabet’s persona provides an invitation for members of the audience to explore their own shadow side as well. In *The Demons of Modernity*, John Orr describes Bergman’s approach to splitting the shadow from the persona as what creates unsolvable interpretive problems:

Act one of *Persona* is a model of ambiguous clarity, but after the splitting of the reel that conveys Alma’s growing anger, act two disintegrates space and time in the attempt to convey the impossible—the act of psychic implosion that defies all film language and cannot finally be read with any conviction at all. In the fractious encounter of the two women that marks the second part of *Persona*, we can see Bergman’s camera as a Hadron Collider trying to split the subatomic particles of mind, the basic elements of consciousness previously unknown to us. If Bergman’s protagonists all hit a brick wall in their search for transcendence, then Bergman’s critics all hit a brick wall in trying to read this film. *Persona* delves further into inner darkness and here there is no limit to

what Bergman can do. His true claim to transcendence thus lies within the film medium itself. He transcends the limitations of the film world because he can never transcend the world beyond it. (42-43)

The turning point of the film between Elisabet and Alma, or the exact moment of exploring the shadow side for the remainder of the film, occurs when they both write letters and Alma decides to take the letters to the post office. After her drive into the city, Alma realizes that Elisabet's letter is unsealed and decides to read it in her car. It is worth noting that even when we hear Elisabet's thoughts for the first time (or second time, if we count the words she spoke to Alma the night before) they are read silently through a handwritten letter, and there is much deliberate emphasis put on the intensity of this silence as not even Alma read the letter out loud:

Dear friend, I could live like this forever. The silence, the seclusion, reducing my needs, feeling my battered soul finally start to straighten itself out. Alma pampers me in the most touching way. I think she's actually enjoying it here and that she's very fond of me, perhaps even a bit smitten in a charming, subconscious way. In any case, it's a lot of fun studying her. Sometimes she cries over past sins—an orgy with a strange boy and a subsequent abortion. She complains that her notions about life fail to accord with her actions. (Bergman 42:19-43:12)

As Alma finishes reading the letter we simultaneously watch as her illusion of Elisabet breaks down and we find the confirmation for Elisabet's strong mental health. The total impression is much like a façade that crumbles under the brutal reality of living a lie and its consequential rude awakening. After reading the letter, Alma initiates some sort of a silent treatment to try and mirror Elisabet's silence. We also watch her leave a piece of broken glass on the floor, either to deliberately hurt Elisabet or to force her to finally speak, and she succeeds in hurting her. The

silence between both women intensifies and becomes more and more unbearable until we are distracted by another montage of burning film and stigmata, similar to the one from the beginning of the film. This is when Alma decides to confront Elisabet and urges her to speak about anything or utter even the fewest of words. Alma then breaks down, admits that she saw the unsealed letter and decided to read it, and starts accusing Elisabet of using her and creating a comfortable environment for her to talk about things she has never spoken of before in a self-serving manner for “study material” only to discard her and discuss her shameful secrets with someone else. Her words steadily become crueler as both women now have fully transitioned into dark-colored attire to signify their transfer into the realm of the shadow.

The altercation becomes more violent and physical as both women slap and spit at one another, until Alma threatens Elisabet with a pot of boiling water, to which Elisabet finally screams out—“No, don’t!” (51:55). Yet, even when she speaks, and we know for a fact it is now Elisabet speaking, we are still denied the satisfaction of seeing her speak. We only watch Alma’s satisfaction in both making Elisabet speak and transferring a fraction of her own insecurity to Elisabet. There is then a continuous spiraling and unravelling that takes place within Alma as she battles the feelings of betrayal and shame, and we get to question the reasoning behind this erratic display of emotions. Elisabet, on the other hand, does nothing but stare back at Alma and laugh silently at her gullibility concerning the entire universe she lives in but seems to face with child-like inexperience. Irving Singer is able to articulate the relationship between Bergman himself and Elisabet’s silent expressions in *Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher*:

Within the totality of Bergman’s oeuvre, *Persona* illuminates the two prongs in his thinking about the possibility of interpersonal oneness by mingling the positive and negative strands. The final outcome of Elisabet’s revulsion against the unreality of her

previous life is neither idealist nor romantic. Reality itself has not altered. Her principal mode of protest had been her self-imposed silence as an expression of her horror about the silence of the universe and presumably of the God whom theologians had taken as the explanation of its existence. Her suddenly wanting to smile or laugh at the world that engulfs her can be interpreted as a realization of the absurdity of everything, both in herself and beyond, within the theater and outside. This is what she is now going back to. (176-177)

Meanwhile, Alma continues to struggle with this internal unravelling as she attempts to justify her actions to herself, Elisabet and the audience all in one go:

Does it have to be like this? Is it really so important not to lie, to tell the truth, to speak in a genuine tone of voice? Can a person really live without babbling away, without lying and making up excuses and evading things? Isn't it better to just let yourself be silly and sloppy and dishonest? Maybe a person gets better by just letting herself be who she is. No, you don't understand. You don't understand what I'm saying. There's no reaching someone like you. The doctor said you're mentally healthy, but I wonder if your madness isn't the worst kind. You act healthy, and the worst thing is, everyone believes you. Except me, because I know how rotten you are. (Bergman 54:34-55:30)

Still unable to control her outbursts, Alma attempts to apologize to Elisabet for her behavior and as mentioned earlier, refers to her actions as “sheer exhibitionism” (56:24). We find her almost gaslighting herself as she starts blaming herself for her own erratic behavior as she falls to the ground and starts crying desperately—like a wounded animal lashing out at anyone who tries to approach her. There is another scene that resembles the one where Elisabet walked into Alma’s room earlier, but this time the scene is more aggressive and uncomfortable and Alma

walks in on Elisabet as she sleeps. Bergman explained his thought process behind creating this scene in *Images*:

After the major confrontation, it is evening, then night. When Alma falls asleep or is on the verge of falling asleep, it is as if someone were moving in the room, as if the fog had entered and made her numb, as if some cosmic anxiety had overwhelmed her, and she drags herself out of bed to vomit, but can't, and she goes back to bed. Then she sees that the door to Mrs. Vogler's [Elisabet's] bedroom is partly open. She enters and finds Mrs. Vogler unconscious or seemingly dead. She is frightened and grabs the telephone, but there is no dial tone. She returns to the dead woman, glancing slyly at her, and suddenly they exchange personalities. This way, exactly how I don't know, she experiences, with a fragmentary sharpness, the condition of the other woman's soul, to the point of absurdity. (89-90)

In that final symbolic soul exchange, we briefly meet Mr. Vogler, Elisabet's husband, who for some reason seems to believe that Alma is Elisabet despite her repeated protests that she is not Elisabet. However, she then agrees to play along only to lose her composure once again as she cries out, "[G]ive me a sedative. Toss me aside. I can't go on! Leave me alone! This is shameful, all of it! I'm cold and rotten and indifferent. It's all just a sham and lies!" (1:06:02-1:06:23)

The concluding confrontation between both women is a harrowing duplication of the same scene repeated twice, once from each woman's perspective. Alma confronts Elisabet as she finds her covering the picture of her son which she ripped in half at the beginning of the film and tells her they need to talk about it. The monologue is painful to watch as Alma describes in detail how Elisabet thought having a child would give her purpose in life only to regret it later. Alma does not stop there; she continues in her humiliating speech as if her words are spoken directly from

Elisabet's psyche, as if none of it is actually happening on screen—but rather inside Elisabet's/Alma's head. The first time is a closeup on Elisabet's face as she watches and listens to Alma in horror, and the second time is a closeup on Alma's face as she enjoys the suffering she inflicts on Elisabet through speaking her shameful thoughts out loud about wanting to kill her child. Bergman explained that scene in *Images*: “[She] meets Mrs. Vogler, who now is Alma and who speaks with her voice. They sit across from each other, they speak to each other with inflections of voice and gestures, they insult, they torment, they hurt one another, they laugh and play. It is a mirror scene” (90).

A rather rapid sequence takes place as Alma seemingly sobers up from her trance, repeats the exclamation—“I am not like you”—then starts begging Elisabet to utter the word “nothing” through a series of disconnected words. Denoting to Bergman's words I have previously referenced—“the owner of the flea circus has a habit of letting his artists suck his blood”—we witness Elisabet sucking the blood out of Alma's arm in a vampirized expression of absorbing or consuming her. Elisabet finally utters the word “nothing.” She is back in her hospital gown, Alma is back to being sister Alma in her nurse attire, and the film abruptly ends with Sister Alma cleaning up the abandoned beach house. There is no sign of Elisabet there, as if she had never been there, and a huge sculpture head appears and takes up the entire space of the screen before we catch a glimpse of film crew behind their cameras. Much like the abruptness of this epilogue, we cannot be ultimately sure if the woman—be it Elisabet or Alma—is ever able to achieve a spiritual illumination. We cannot determine which side of the human being's identity wins the battle, or if that brief “nothing” is all there ever is to it. In *Ingmar Bergman: Magician and Prophet*, Marc Gervais states that the film could be interpreted as “the two women being two facets of the same person, or one personality being absorbed by another, or the problematic

interrelationship between the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the subconscious, the id and the superego” (98).

Moving on to Jean-Luc Godard (1930-2022), I will explore his film, *Vivre sa vie* (1962), in relation to Bergman’s *Persona*. Here we do not have two women struggling with their retrospective images, but one woman, Nana, struggling with herself and the outside world in which she is situated. Due to the fact that the film was released four years prior to *Persona*, several researchers have chosen to believe that Bergman was imitating Godard’s French New Wave cinema approach, especially in terms of how *Persona* seems to deliberately pose a nonlinear narrative where the stories of Elisabet and Alma are both separate and intertwined. Christopher Orr compares *Persona* and Bergman’s approach to “Brechtian film” in his essay, “*Persona* as Brechtian Melodrama”:

Persona remains the most avant-garde of Bergman's films in the sense that its self-reflexive devices disrupt the spectator's involvement in the events of the narrative and call attention to the film's status as material object. In this respect, *Persona* can be placed within the context of what was in 1967 an emerging subgenre of the art cinema: the Brechtian film. Starting from Brecht's theory and practice, proponents of Brechtian cinema called for films that would reject the Aristotelian catharsis of emotions in favor of interrupting the spectator's identification with the film's narrative through the alienation effect, thereby allowing the spectator to reflect critically on the ideological issues being presented. (88)

I quite disagree with the notion of placing *Persona* under the subgenre of the Brechtian film, especially when one begins to compare it to *Vivre sa vie*, despite the similarities of the two films. Godard first communicates with his audience that this would be a rather disjointed film in

presenting twelve separate vignettes, each of which is given a separate intertitle. In the first vignette, we do not get to see Nana's face nor her husband Paul's, but we see them sitting in a bar, and we gather from their exchange that Nana wishes to leave him in order to pursue a career in cinema. Despite having just introduced them and bearing in mind that both of them have their backs facing the camera, the dialogue between them still manages to become weighty as Nana accuses Paul of not loving her, while Paul accuses her of deciding to leave him because he is poor. Paul then proceeds to tell Nana that one of his father's students wrote an essay describing birds where she wrote, "A bird is an animal with an inside and an outside. Remove the outside, there's the inside. Remove the inside and you see the soul" (9:13-9:25). This is Godard's first attempt at prompting his audience to view *Vivre sa vie* with a superficially introspective eye.

In the rather short second vignette, we learn that Nana is desperate to find two thousand francs as she is about to lose her apartment, and in the third vignette, we watch her as she tearfully watches an adaptation of *Joan of Arc* at the cinema—where the titular character silently speaks the words, "God knows our path, but we understand it only at the end of the road" (16:21), through a title card as she accepts her death. We slowly observe Nana as she loses herself and her principles—first in losing her apartment, then reluctantly in accepting to undress for her photographer who would supposedly help her publicize her image for her cinematic career. In the fourth vignette, we watch her get interrogated by the police for stealing money from a woman on the street. During the interrogation, the policeman asks Nana if she has someone to ask for help or money—to which she replies, "I don't know, I . . . is someone else" (23:46).

The steady unravelling of Nana does not end there. After her police interrogation, Nana shamefully walks down a street and notices that she is passing by an area known for its street

prostitutes. She then decides to pick a man up herself and she gets paid four thousand francs. Afterwards, Nana meets with an old friend, Yvette. They sit down to have dinner as Yvette catches Nana on how her husband abandoned her, which led to her eventually becoming a prostitute. Yvette then decides to introduce Nana to her procurer, Raoul, and they sit down to talk but the scene abruptly ends with gunshots on the street, as an injured man enters the restaurant and Nana flees the scene.

As the film progresses as a discontinuous narrative, we learn that Nana has given up on her dream of becoming an actress since that dream has proven to be unattainable. She encounters Raoul once again and this time he fully initiates her into his prostitution business. This entire vignette is focused on Raoul explaining all aspects of how to become a professional prostitute to Nana, as we watch different closeups of Nana's face, half of her head, or her back from different angles. The ninth vignette is entitled, "Nana wonders if she is happy," and serves as proof that Nana in fact is not happy, as she dances in an awkward scene in front of uninterested men.

In its second to last vignette entitled, "Nana, the unwitting philosopher," the film only begins to scratch the surface of what could be explored as its true plot—where Nana strikes up a conversation with a stranger she meets at a bistro. To merely make conversation, the man begins to tell her the story of *The Three Musketeers* where Porthos had to blow up a cellar, but after placing the bomb suddenly began thinking about how his feet were placed one in front of the other in order for him to move. Porthos then ended up dying because thinking about his feet had forced him to stop moving, which led to the bomb exploding with him inside the cellar. This analogy of a man dying as a result of thinking is not taken well by Nana as she asks the man, "[W]hy must one always talk? Often one shouldn't talk but live in silence. The more one talks,

the less the words mean” (1:07:09-1:07:20). The man then proceeds to pour his thoughts out for the remainder of the vignette in what is arguably the most important scene of the film:

I believe one learns to talk well only when one has renounced life for a time. Speaking is almost a resurrection in relation to life. Speech is another life from when one does not speak. So, to live in speech one must pass through the death of life without speech . . . there is a kind of ascetic rule that stops one from talking well until one sees life with detachment . . . We balance, that's why we pass from silence to words. We swing between the two because it's the movement of life. From everyday life one rises to a life we call superior, the thinking life. But this life presupposes one has killed the everyday too, elementary life . . . One cannot distinguish the thought from the words that express it. An instant of thought can only be grasped through words . . . Lies, too, are part of our quest. Errors and lies are very similar . . . One searches and can't find the right word. That's why you didn't know what to say, you were afraid of not finding the right word. That's the explanation . . . One must work. It needs an effort. (Godard 1:09:14-1:12:07)

In this long and seemingly irrelevant exchange, we catch a glimpse of what Godard intended to convey with his film, despite its deliberate flakiness. In a scene that could easily be compared to *Persona* as a whole, we find ourselves immersed in a conversation between two strangers about the significance of silence when one finds it hard to vocalize the right words, and the significance of not giving up on the act of attempting to explain oneself—despite the madness of the world. The final vignette is yet again significant in its role of humanizing Nana, in an otherwise completely detached film. Nana no longer wishes to be a prostitute and decides to talk to Raoul about her desire to quit. However, Raoul has different plans for her. He decides to sell

her to another procurer against her wishes, and during that exchange, Nana is abruptly shot and is left to die alone in the street.

If we revisit Christopher Orr's overview of Brechtian film, we might situate *Vivre sa vie* in that category in terms of how it deliberately detaches its audience instead of immersing them in the cinematic narrative. *Vivre sa vie* succeeds in alienating its viewers, but what exactly is the purpose of forcing alienation upon them? Godard invited us to empathize with a character through a film which uses a method that strictly opposes the concept of empathy. *Vivre sa vie* is without a doubt a Brechtian film from a certain standpoint, yet in my opinion the Brechtian method does not serve the plot as a whole. Godard evidently succeeded in giving his audience the space to analyze the film as outsiders, without absorbing them in Nana's troubles. We are able to observe Nana's deterioration as she loses her path, yet every time we begin to empathize with her, we are interrupted by a new vignette or an encounter that does not add to the substance of the film, despite the denseness of its topic.

Conversely, what Godard impersonally presented in *Vivre sa vie*, Bergman was able to personally depict in *Persona*, and for that reason we cannot suggest that *Persona* adopts the Brechtian film method. Perhaps if we choose to remove Bergman as a human being from his films, we could then analyze his films in the Brechtian sense. However, that would be an outright sabotage of the entire essence of what he dedicated his entire life to—which is creating personal, relatable, and immersive films, despite their recurrent element of imagined and dreamlike sequences. After distancing her reading of Bergman from Brecht's deliberate use of alienation, Susan Sontag was able to express how this personal element also allows us to distinguish between Bergman and Godard as filmmakers in her essay *Bergman's Persona*:

A character in Bergman's films who perceives something intensely eventually consumes what he knows, uses it up, is forced to move on to other things. This principle of intensity at the root of Bergman's sensibility determines the specific ways in which he uses new narrative forms. Anything like the vivacity of Godard is outside his range. Bergman's work is characterized by slowness, deliberateness of pacing. Hence, the excruciatingly unmodulated quality of *Persona*, a quality only very superficially described as pessimism. It is not that Bergman is pessimistic about life and the human situation but rather that the quality of his sensibility, when he is faithful to it, has only a single subject: the depths in which consciousness drowns. If the maintenance of personality requires safeguarding the integrity of masks, and the truth about a person always means his unmasking, cracking the mask, then the truth about life as a whole is the shattering of the whole façade—behind which lies an absolute cruelty. (79)

Through Sontag's analysis we can draw a clear comparison between Bergman and Godard, and ultimately between Bergman and other filmmakers who explore similar themes. Bergman's films purposefully do not evoke a sense of urgency to tell a cinematic story or a clear-cut plot, he rather explores his own psyche and consciousness through unhurried depths. This analysis, on the other hand, cannot be used to describe Godard's films. Watching Godard's films one can almost always identify this sense of "vivacity" as Sontag refers to it, and this pace more often than not distracts the viewer from the introspection that one desires to go through after experiencing any of Bergman's films.

Conclusion: Versions of the Self in a Spiritual Context

Saint John of the Cross wrote of the “dark night of the soul” in the sixteenth century. This concept that has been examined and reexamined throughout the history of literature and the arts. It has also been explored rather informally as a period of psychological pain and growth in man’s journey towards spiritual renewal. The term itself suggests that purpose and uncertainty often go hand in hand; doubleness, therefore, is inescapable. Without getting into a tangential analysis of Saint John’s writings, the reason why I chose to refer to this religious concept is that it still rings true in our present day and age. The “dark night” is symbolic of the journey towards finding faith, and the reason why it is dark is because finding that faith is not a guaranteed destination and is usually accompanied by a sea of unknowns. As in life, sometimes Bergman’s films end with an abrupt “nothing,” whereas at other times his work reaches an emblematic peacefulness that seemingly lessens the protagonist’s spiritual frustration.

I have argued throughout this thesis that Bergman’s craftsmanship in creating different versions of a troubled self is what makes his films distinctively his in terms of giving us clues into his life as a filmmaker and a man in search of some sort of spiritual understanding. This is demonstrated in the first chapter through a comparison between *The Seventh Seal* and Jodorowsky’s film, *The Holy Mountain*. We find the protagonists of both films on a spiritual journey that brings them to a confrontation with different depictions of death—and the attempt to evade it or accept it. In *The Seventh Seal*, Antonious Block is already aware of where he stands in terms of faith and his belief in the existence of a god. However, his journey could be described as a dark night of the soul that moves in a backwards motion—not towards faith, which he already has, but towards indifference to what is to come after death. *The Seventh Seal* is quite literally a dance with death.

As explored in the second chapter, *Wild Strawberries* and Tarkovsky's *Mirror* are films in which the journey towards spiritual understanding is laden with more complex obstacles. Borg and Alexei are not men attempting to evade death, but rather men facing the complexities of their quotidian lives and their awareness of the inescapability of their pasts. If the first chapter signifies the journey or the dark night of the soul in an analogy of death, the second chapter signifies that same journey through an analogy of the mundane side of life. Bergman expresses the quotidian through the portrayal of Borg, who would only be able to move forward and accept what is left of his life if he could be reconciled with the pain that his past has caused him as something that would always remain an aspect of his experience.

The third chapter brings with it an exploration of the dark night of the soul through the struggle with one's identity. Here the journey is not to evade death or face the burdens of the past and the mundaneness of the present but to face one's own internal demons in choosing whether the dark side or the good side of one's identity would win. In both *Persona* and Godard's *Vivre sa vie*, the women lose themselves to their desires. In *Persona*, we watch as Elisabet and Alma break each other down in a battle of feeling insecure, living with shame, and not being able to determine whether they are intrinsically good natured or living out an exhibitionist nightmare. *Vivre sa vie's* Nana, on the other hand, does not live long enough to experience a cathartic dark night of the soul which inevitably leads to the symbolic bittersweetness of the journey being "dark" due to its uncertainty.

For the reasons explored throughout this thesis, the doubleness in Bergman's quest for self could not be separated from his films, and in some instances, could not be separated from the doubleness he explored through recasting some of his regular actors as well. To better explain this notion, we could explore the roles that actress Bibi Andersson portrayed, and her

significance in the films discussed in this thesis. In *The Seventh Seal*, Andersson plays the role of Mia, the unwitting performer who is only concerned with earthly matters such as her family and gathering strawberries. Mia does not believe in her husband's biblical dreams—perhaps denoting to her lack of faith altogether—yet she plays an important role in bringing Antonious Block some comfort amidst his battle against Death. In *Wild Strawberries*, Andersson plays the role of Sara, Borg's cousin and his old love, and the hitchhiker that he meets on the road to his ceremony. Andersson's portrayal signifies a character who young Borg was deeply in love with and deeply wounded by, and another character who brings old Borg a sense of joy and nostalgia through his otherwise bleak life.

These two roles are minor and trivial in comparison to Andersson's role as sister Alma in *Persona*. Much like the journey of each of the protagonists in Bergman's films, Andersson's roles alone could be analyzed as having their own separate journeys. If her roles in *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries* signify a sort of lighthearted nonchalance, her role in *Persona* signifies the heaviness of the realities that man inevitably faces. Indeed, watching her change and transform from one character to the next is in and of itself a cathartic experience that could not be taken lightly.

The fact that all aspects of Bergman's films share an air or a theme of connectedness, even the continuity of his characters throughout seemingly unrelated films, is significant in a way that perhaps elevates his work over that of other directors. In studying three of his masterpieces, I have been able to demonstrate that the theme of doubleness is important to both the construction of his major characters and to how his life is related to the characters themselves. However, what I was not expecting to discover is how it is almost impossible not to relate to his films on a personal level. This is a man who has the rare gift of telling his lifelong story through the eternal

art of filmmaking, and a man who does not shy away from admitting that his films are at times self-serving at best. Yet, in his perceived selfishness he succeeds in defining what it means to be an auteur regardless of what his journey may entail. To conclude, I would like to revisit one final excerpt from his autobiography *Images*:

What a difference between the meaningless, stressful administrative work at the theater and the freedom I had experienced filming *Persona*! At some time or other, I said that *Persona* saved my life—that is no exaggeration. If I had not found the strength to make that film, I would probably have been all washed up. One significant point: for the first time I did not care in the least whether the result would be a commercial success. The gospel according to which one must be comprehensible at all costs, one that had been dinned into me ever since I worked as the lowliest manuscript slave at Svensk Filmindustri, could finally go to hell (which is where it belongs!). Today I feel that in *Persona* I had gone as far as I could go. And that in this instance, when working in total freedom, I touched wordless secrets that only the cinema can discover. (Bergman 95-96)

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