

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Alma (in Bergman's *Persona*) insecure

**Overview** Bergman's *Persona* (1966)—the word *persona*, in Latin, means character, mask, or individual—was the most acclaimed work of the European cinematic flowering of the sixties. Bergman told a story, with a story line—about two women whose personalities are thrown together, and who occasionally merge toward one another; also about the birth and nature of cinema (and art), which has landmarks and a timeline but which is here realized for us in highly allusive camera art. Beyond the 'tangible' story line, as above, there intersect many implications about the nature of personal identity, the anatomy of memory, and serious mental illness.

**Character** Alma is a nurse working in a clinic, and finds herself assigned to an illustrious patient, Elizabeth Vogler, a well known cinema actress who was struck dumb in the course of performing the part of Electra. This woman is healthy, but will not speak, clearly as some way of relating to earlier wounds, like the loss of a child, and it is Alma's difficult task to bring this actress back to speech and her acting career. Alma, though, is beset by personal insecurity—in her sex life, in her attitude to her fiancée, and in her doubts about her capacities as a nurse—and the pressure of working with a strong mute woman, who gradually acquires power over her, is enough finally to drive Alma away from her sanatorium assignment. She is insecure to start with, and must cope with more pressure than she is able to endure.

**Parallels** Rather than look for parallels to this unique film, one might better look for parallel concerns, to those of Bergman in this film. The philosophy of personal identity—cf. entry in *The Stanford (online) Encyclopedia of Philosophy*—addresses the delicate issue of where one personality ends and another begins. Bergman offers perspectives, onto the porosity of personality, which resemble philosophical concerns with the 'fusion' of minds in dialogue. In literary critique—say in that of Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)—characters demand an author, rather than the usual reverse. We are reminded that art and the artist are in fact both *needed*, and not to be taken for granted; the point is made in *Persona* at the times when the simulation of a burnt cinema reel reminds us both of the fragility of the art operation, and of its value to us.

### Illustrative moments

**Confessional** Though assigned to Mrs. Vogler, as nurse and companion, Anna quickly becomes the less executive person of the two, and slips into dependence on her patient, around whom, partly because of her patient's refusal to speak, she (Alma) gradually becomes the dependent. She 'confesses' to her patient—who has asked for nothing—an early sexual encounter, between herself and a girlfriend, and two boys met on the beach, which remains powerful and satisfying to her to the present, and which interferes with her efforts to feel passionate about her fiancé. Confessing to a mute listener attracts Alma, yet in the end she regrets taking advantage of this 'ready-made opportunity.'

**Anger** While running an errand for her patient, in the local village, Alma makes the mistake of opening an (accidentally still unsealed) letter from Elizabeth to a friend. To her amazement, Alma discovers that Elizabeth is making a study of Alma herself, and particularly of her juvenile sexual experiences. Suddenly Alma is aware that Elizabeth is keenly aware of everything she (Alma) says, and that Alma can no longer assume a sympathetic hearing from her patient. Alma is deeply wounded, even angered, by this 'betrayal,' and in anger reacts by leaving a sherd of broken glass on the pathway where Elizabeth walks. This carefully prepared nastiness marks the breakdown of Alma's own self-control, and a new yielding to insecurity.

**Action** Goaded by Elizabeth's letter, and deeply provoked by the difficulty of her whole nursing mission, Alma not only lets her fists fly at her dominant patient, but in one particular moment of fury threatens to throw scalding water on her.

At this threat Elizabeth utters her first words—'no don't !'—in the movie, and for a while open struggle—Elizabeth still silent—dominates the two women. Bergman sustains the bonding of the two in multiple ways, though, joining the two women in filmy memory and in camera shots that show their faces virtually merged, or sharing half and half the full visage of a human face. Action gives Alma a pathway forward from insecurity, and the closer she and her patient come to relating, the more risk-ready the insecure Alma becomes.

**Retreat** In the end we watch Alma climb onto a bus taking her away from the sanatorium where she has been working with Elizabeth. In the background is the gray crashing Atlantic. What has Alma learned or given? She has discovered the costs of indiscretion, she has deepened her patience, but she has discovered, in her insecurity, the reason why she can only push herself too hard. She does not ultimately trust her powers, nor does she feel confident about her engagement and fiancé. Where she has been, though, in profound dialogue with another person—the two women have come increasingly to resemble each other, and to behave in sync—suggests immersion in the mystery of personhood—that we can pass in and out of certain others—without which she will never have realized her potential.

### **Discussion questions**

Have we to think that Elizabeth is learning from Alma, as Alma is from her? Is their mutual experience enriching to each of them? Are they in any sense lovers?

Has Alma made any progress in strengthening herself? Has her self-confidence grown, from struggle with her patient?

How does Alma react to Elizabeth's husband? Does she make love to him as an act of spite—or of identity—toward Elizabeth?