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“For Me, Film is Face”: Self and Identity in the Films of Ingmar Bergman

Brad Mitchell

Spring 2016

## I. Introduction

The filmography of Ingmar Bergman is often described in terms whose aptness is hard to deny, but whose connotations can be a bit hazier – “dark,” “serious,” and “melodramatic” are often used to describe his films, doubtless due to particular themes reoccurring throughout his works. Repeatedly expounded are ideas of life and death, God and Satan, light and darkness. These ideas sometimes manifest themselves literally, such as the character of Death in *The Seventh Seal*, and sometimes exist as struggles his characters face, such as a priest’s crisis of faith in *Winter Light* or Isak Borg’s struggle with living in *Wild Strawberries*. At other times these ideas are shown directly to the viewer on the screen: cinematographer Sven Nykvist, who worked with Bergman on many of his films, reportedly sat in the church where *Winter Light* was filmed for an entire winter day in order to observe how the light moved throughout the space. Bergman, who made films “entirely for his own sake” [Shargel 49] was well aware of these themes in his films, and stated that his films have definitive and intentional meanings. Tied to all of these themes, but less immediately apparent in most of Bergman’s work, is the idea of the self. Whether Bergman directed any of his films with the intention of some philosophical exploration of the self explicitly is unclear, but his films undeniably harbor very interesting ruminations on the topic. Bergman repeatedly expressed a strong interest in the human face, emphasizing how strongly the face can represent the *känsloliv* of a character. [Shargel xii] This is a word defined as the “inner life”, “emotional life”, or “life of the mind”, and the interest in this aspect of characters indicates an interest in identity. The motif of personal identity is clearly present in some of his films, but works in much more subtle ways in other films, and the human face is often utilized in these films to make a statement about identity (such as the

similarity in appearance of Alma and Elisabeth in *Persona*). The face of characters has always been an extremely important part of films, and usage of the face turned out to be an important tool for Bergman in achieving his vision throughout his filmography.

The question of personal identity and how to define it has long been an important topic in metaphysics. It has been written about from the time of The Enlightenment and is still written about often in contemporary philosophy. The questions of how to define a person and how to reconcile any of these definitions with the way we, as humans, change over time physically as well as mentally<sup>1</sup> is an extremely difficult one, and the philosophical canon is replete with attempts to answer these questions. I intend to analyze several of Bergman's films through the lens of two conflicting arguments on the topic – Descartes' idea of identity as being the product of a mind-body dualism and Hegel's master-slave dialectic – as well as with considerations of the ways in which Derek Parfit's treatise on personal identity can influence this discussion. The essential point of disagreement between Descartes and Hegel on this subject is that in Descartes' system, a singular person can have a well-defined identity, while Hegel's master-slave dialectic asserts that another consciousness is necessary for one consciousness to have an identity. I will attempt to determine the degree to which, as well as the manner by which, Bergman's films may support either of these views, and whether specific films can be said to agree with either view. I will also attempt to view these films with regards to Parfit's conclusions on personal identity, and try to determine if perhaps Bergman would agree with Parfit's assertion that "the question of identity has no importance." [Parfit 4]

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<sup>1</sup> I will forego the discussion of whether mental capacity can be reduced to something physical, as the answer would have no effect on the assertions made here.

The master-slave<sup>2</sup> dialectic outlined in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* by Hegel describes the way by which a consciousness can arise. Hegel argues that for a consciousness to fully realize itself as a distinct entity (i.e. make the distinction between “I” and “not I”), it must come in contact with another consciousness. In his own words – “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.” [Hegel 116] When these two consciousnesses come face to face with each other, however, a tension arises. At first, the two are recognizing each other, but each is also recognizing that the other is recognizing him. In this state, the two consciousnesses cannot distinguish themselves, as they are only each defined by the other. This builds tension in the dialectic, since each consciousness wishes to be on its own, and each wants to dominate the other. Here the one dominating would be living for itself, while the other consciousness would be living for another (and thus would seemingly have no life of its own). This becomes a state of deadlock that can only be broken by one consciousness becoming recognized as master by the other consciousness (the slave). It seems at first that the only way to settle this is a fight to the death between the two, but both consciousnesses realize that by killing the other, he would be destroying the only recognition that can establish him as a consciousness. At some point, the consciousness that has the greatest fear of its own annihilation must give in. Now the victorious consciousness can kill the other, but knows that he must not do this, or else he will cease to be

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<sup>2</sup> The translation of “master and slave” is sometimes translated as “Lordship and Bondage”, which some scholars take to be a much more appropriate translation. The term “slave” is a term that carries a lot of weight and history with it, and it can therefore cause misinterpretations of the meaning of a “slave” in this dialectic. I will describe Hegel’s work in terms of “master-slave” here, as it does not affect the way that the dialectic plays out, but it is important to note that the “slave” in this dialectic is not a slave in the sense that we have come to understand it (i.e. the “slave” in the dialectic is not legally owned in any way by the master). This is especially important to keep in mind in regards to the discussion of analogous relations between characters in the film that is to follow.

a consciousness. The victorious consciousness instead enslaves the other consciousness, creating the relation of master-slave. Here the slave works for the master and satisfies his desires. This, however, is still an asymmetric and unstable relation between the two. This is rectified by the fact that the master slowly begins to rely on the slave. The master wants recognition from an equal, but he has made the slave into a lesser consciousness. Now the master gets to the point where he is incapable of caring for himself, and is therefore dependent on the slave, while the slave has cultivated strength and skill. Through this development and through the fact that the slave was the only one to confront death during the death struggle, the slave begins to regain some of the power in the dialectic. The master may control the slave, but the slave is independent through his labor – he is a craftsperson, and is no longer alienated from his labor, while the master has become dependent on the slave, and thus becomes enslaved in a way himself. The dialectic is an evolving situation filled with tension, and tension exists throughout its entirety. The master feels very independent and powerful at first, but eventually becomes dependent by asserting his will on the slave, and resents this dependency. The slave becomes subservient out of fear, but eventually gains independence through fulfilling the will of the master. The power relations between the two change, but tension holds the master and slave together throughout the dialectic. Hegel's description of this dialectic ends in a still unresolved state, with the two consciousnesses still progressing towards a higher unity in consciousness.

The Cartesian view on identity is much simpler than Hegel's once the foundations of Descartes' mind-body dualism are understood. Descartes argued that the mind and the body are two completely separate entities where the mind is something that thinks but has no

physical manifestation while the body is a thing with a physical manifestation that does not think. It is important to note here that a Cartesian mind is more like what would normally be referred to as a soul – something that exists and that defines a person but that does not have any physical properties. Descartes, however, believed that a person is defined not only by the soul, but by the body as well, and that a single person is the joining of a body and a mind where each could exercise some influence on the other (interestingly, he believed that the place where this joining occurred was the pineal gland). Here it is clear that an identity can arise from a solitary being and that this identity is defined simply by a mind and body working together. Descartes is able to argue this way because he presupposes the existence of a higher power who can create and order these minds.

Derek Parfit's treatise, "Personal Identity", is a work that is much more difficult to summarize, mainly due to the fact that it is fairly short already and heavily reliant on thought experiments to make its main argument, but also due to the general subtlety of the argument. The central conclusion of his treatise is that "what matters in the continued existence of a person are, for the most part, a relation of degree." [Parfit 26] What Parfit is suggesting here is that the idea of having an identity is not so concrete as the way that we tend to think about it, and that an "I" can be defined by degrees rather than a binary system of either "I" or "not I".<sup>3</sup> Parfit does not attempt to create a comprehensive description of identity here, but uses this

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<sup>3</sup> Parfit's argument is worth reading, but here it suffices to know only this conclusion, as I will not rely on the methods of argument by which Parfit reaches his conclusions to reach my own conclusions. In the event that a specific aspect of Parfit's argument is alluded to here, I will provide a short explanation of the parallels.

idea that identity is a matter of degrees to make the claim that identity is a matter of little importance.

So how can Bergman's films be of any use in this tradition of philosophical ideas about what constitutes an identity? Bergman was, after all, a dramatist, not a philosopher. He was also, however, clearly interested in many ideas that are often discussed in the realm of philosophy, and used his camera to explore these ideas. Where the discursive methods of philosophers come up short, often more abstract approaches to difficult ideas can prove helpful in gaining some idea of how these ideas play out. A film is able to force an image into the mind of the viewer in a way that text cannot. Bergman's films are not equivalent to a philosophical text – they do not systematically delineate any ideas of their own. They are, however, a useful tool for seeing the ways in which certain philosophical ideas can be said to work when applied, and for propounding ideas of their own in regards to the same issues that philosophers are concerned with. Where philosophers such as Parfit logically and systematically lead the reader to conclusions about identity in their writings, Bergman makes his statements about identity by *showing* ideas to the viewer, such as the struggle of a consciousness to establish itself or the ways in which two identities intertwine. In this way, the films of Bergman can be said to make a meaningful contribution to the philosophical discussion of identity not only by demonstrating or advancing ideas of philosophers, but by presenting interpretations or variations of their own on these ideas. An aim of this paper is to explore this contribution.



## II. Lordship and Bondage

A dialectic is often present in Bergman's films as a means of establishing the identity of the characters. This dialectic typically involves a power relation or a power struggle. This relation and the way it evolves not only differs from Hegel's dialectic, but also differs between each film. Through these power relations, Bergman presents his own version of the dialectic in each film.

*Persona* is not an exact display of Hegel's dialectic at work, but it is a clear depiction of the struggle between two consciousnesses to form a distinction between "I" and "not I". Tensions arise between the two characters as a result of this struggle, and the power relation between Alma and Elisabet is constantly shifting. These readily apparent aspects of the film are all important aspects of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, and the plot of the film immediately seems to fit well into the mold of this dialectic. The isolation of two characters and the struggle between the two seems to strongly parallel the struggle between two conscious beings that Hegel describes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Alma is Elisabet's caretaker, fulfilling her desires – this seems to be in the mold of a character that is subservient to another. When Alma is asked to take a letter Elisabet wrote to the post office and reads it to find out that Elisabet had been observing and analyzing Alma throughout their stay at the beach house, a battle occurs between the two, calling to mind the life-or-death struggle that must occur in the dialectic. There is a clear notion of the two characters being reflected in each other and of one only being defined by the other – Alma is shown several times to see herself in Elisabet, stating that she feels that the two are the same. This is shown visually in a scene where Alma is woken

by Elisabet in the middle of the night and the two stare into a mirror together. Towards the end of the film, Alma even finds herself having to assert that she is *not* Elisabet. However, the struggle between the two characters has a multitude of significant variances from the dialectic outlined by Hegel. Despite Alma's servitude, Elisabet does not seem to be playing the part of the master. Her desires are attended to by Alma, but she is not directing Alma in any way. In the only physical conflict that occurs, a clear winner does not arise – Alma seems at first to be victorious in her will by forcing Elisabet to speak, but when Elisabet storms out, Alma chases after her frantically apologizing. This scene does serve as an example, however, of a shifting power relation between the two women. When Alma reads Elisabet's letter stating that Elisabet is somehow studying Alma, we are forced to question who is really in the position of power. Before this point, it is easy to see Alma as holding the power, as she is helping out Elisabet, who is unable to care for herself. However, the knowledge that Elisabet is using this time to study Alma immediately changes the tone of the power relation to one where Elisabet is in control of Alma. Tensions arise from this point, and build into Alma becoming furious with Elisabet for being dishonest. She chases Elisabet around the house, and eventually picks up a pot full of hot water, threatening to throw it on her. At this point, Elisabet yells "Stop!" Alma is victorious here by forcing her will upon Elisabet and making her speak, but the power soon shifts again, as Elisabet storms out and Alma chases her, crying hysterically. Here the shifting of Bergman's power relations play out differently than Hegel's.

At the end of the film, the two are separated. Elisabet is shown packing her bags, but never leaving. This is followed by scenes of Alma packing up and organizing the house, followed by Alma leaving by herself. This would seem at first to suggest that the two had merged into

one. However, some images in the film suggest otherwise. The first shot of the film shows two metal beams being heated and melted into a single beam, and the final shot shows the two beams becoming separated. This contrasts with the idea of merging by suggesting a complete separation of the two identities, and Bergman himself has confirmed this to be the case. In a 1971 interview with John Simon, the interviewer asked Bergman about the scene with Alma leaving alone at the end, saying that “A lot of people have taken this to mean that the whole thing takes place in Alma’s mind.” Bergman responded “It does not. You see Elisabet for a very, very short moment. She’s in the studio. She’s at work.” [Shargel 87]. This negates the interviewer’s question, but is also confirmation from Bergman that the scene of Alma leaving alone does not signify that the two have become one. This resolves the apparent contradiction, and us that the situation has been resolved – Alma has firmly established Elisabet as “not I”, but was only able to do so through a power struggle with Elisabet. This is an emergence of an identity through a dialectic, though one that differs in many ways (as shown above) from Hegel’s dialectic. This is Bergman’s dialectic.

Another clear power struggle is present in *The Silence* – this time between two sisters, whose identities are never fully revealed and who seem to be two parts of the same whole.<sup>4</sup> Anna is lively and adventurous, going along with each whim that occurs to her, and is subservient to her feelings. Meanwhile, Ester is sickly and intellectual, but seems passionless and unsure of herself. These roles are muddled, however, in regards to the young boy Johan, who is travelling with them. He calls Anna mother, but Anna fails to be there for him as much as

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<sup>4</sup> The treatment of Ester and Anna as two aspects of a single person is a common interpretation [Ebert, Braudy]. Here they are also treated as such, and this idea is used to further the arguments presented.

Ester can, even in her poor health. Johan himself seems unable to sort out his affections for these women. At times he is reluctant to let Ester touch him, and at times he runs into her arms. Johan is an outsider to the relation between these two women, and it is through his eyes that the viewer sees the struggle between the two women. This struggle, however, is mostly one-sided. Ester is sick from the beginning of the film, and Anna becomes more and more negligent of taking care of her as the film progresses. Ester, however, does hold some power of her own. At one point, Anna says to Ester "I can't believe I used to be afraid of you." This shows that Ester's sickness has diminished some power that she previously had over Anna. Ester is still able to inflict pain on Anna, however. Anna flaunts her ability to charm men in front of Ester, but when Ester shows up to a room where Anna is with a man, Anna breaks down into hysterics, realizing her inability to form a meaningful connection with a man despite her ease in acquiring their attentions. Anna's pursuit of the attentions of men is a hollow one, serving to highlight her physical power over Ester, but giving her no sense of any upper hand in the overarching power relation between the two. In this way, Ester still holds some power over Anna. Even so, Anna eventually emerges victorious in the struggle as Ester's sickness overtakes her. This end is further accentuated by the acceptance of Johan as Anna's son in the end of the film. Anna creates life, while Ester is sickened by any act that could do so. Anna's life continues uninterrupted while Ester gasps for air, struggling to pull life out of the silence.

When *The Seventh Seal* is discussed in the context of philosophy, it is often in regards to Kierkegaard, particularly in reference to Kierkegaard's knight of faith<sup>5</sup>. The character of the

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard discussed a "Knight of Faith" in several of his works. This knight is an individual who has placed complete faith in God, believing that through Him, even the absurd can be realized. This belief lets the knight act freely in this world.

knight in *The Seventh Seal* seems to be a clear parallel to Kierkegaard's knight, or at least a character on the path to becoming one: the knight struggles with his faith in God through the film, but ultimately is accepting of Death. This idea has been presented often in film essays and reviews [Dowdall, Manqué], but a view of the film through the lens of Hegel is less common. It is clear, however, that Bergman presents a dialectic in the film – that between the Knight and death. A typical struggle with ideas of dying would perhaps be a weaker connection to a dialectic, but in the film death is personified and given form. This form then proceeds through a power struggle with the knight that plays out on screen. Again tensions arise, tying the two together. The power relation, however, is different here – the Knight cannot have power over death. Run as he might, death eventually catches up with him. This is something the Knight must be acutely aware of through the film. When first confronted by Death, the Knight is asked if he is ready. He replies “My body is, not my self.” This establishes the fact that the knight must become ready for death, and the film chronicles this journey. No promise of immortality is ever given to him – were he to win the game of chess, he would only be temporarily free from death. The knight knows this, and chooses to stay on the move away from death. He knows that the best he can do is buy himself more time. Despite the apparent hopelessness of this struggle against death, the Knight's journey does in fact serve a purpose – that of preparing himself for death, and thereby establishing his identity. It is only when the Knight has fully prepared himself for death and accepted his role in the power relation he shares with Death that he dies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The way in which preparations for death are relevant to the question of identity may seem unclear to the reader here. These ideas are explored further in the following section.

In an interview regarding his “Faith Trilogy” (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, *The Silence*), Bergman stated the main idea behind these films: “We’re saved not by God, but by Love. That’s the most we can hope for.” [Shargel 45] A person who does not love, who is isolated, is dead. The way to be alive and to define oneself is through interactions with and love for another. Bergman stated that he hated the isolation that Sweden forces upon its people: that they live too far away from each other to ever learn how to properly interact. This distance, this isolation prevents the person from having an identity. This is not the exact same idea espoused by Hegel, but it shares the commonality that isolation is detrimental to establishing one’s identity. Bergman went even further to say “What matters most of all in life is being able to make that contact with another human. Otherwise you are dead, like so many people today are dead.” [Shargel 46] Here Bergman is stating the importance of not existing in a solipsistic universe. For Descartes, this was a non-issue, as a person could always identify oneself in comparison to God. One cannot believe in solipsism if one believes in a God. In a crisis or loss of faith, however, one loses this God through which one can establish an identity. Here one must enter a new dialectic, and Bergman says that this dialectic must be with other people. This is the main idea behind the “Faith Trilogy”, and it is exhibited differently in each film.

The priest (Tomas) in *Winter Light* faces a crisis of faith. He is attempting to enter into a dialectic with God, yet all he receives is silence. This creates despair for him. His attempts at having a relationship with God keep him from experiencing relationships with other humans. This is a different type of isolation – a self-imposed one. The film is about the inability of Tomas to obtain a distinct “I” through a tenuous relationship with a God that he does not fully believe

in. He can only do this through interactions with another human – through establishing the “not I”. This film is a story of Tomas’s denial of this possibility. Marta (his mistress) is constantly attempting to convince him to marry her, but he denies her due to his position as priest as well as his extant love for his dead wife. Both of these obstacles bring Tomas no joy, however, and he persists in his life of self-imposed solitude. Marta is told by the organist at Tomas’s church that his image of his wife is far removed from the reality of who she was when alive. We also see Tomas’s unsure faith in action when a villager and his wife come to visit him, asking counsel for a state of depression that the villager has entered as a result of news that the Chinese will soon have an atomic bomb and will destroy everything with it. Here Tomas is unable to ameliorate any of the villagers anguish, and can only utter platitudes about keeping faith in God. This is very little comfort to the villager, and after Tomas expresses his fears and doubts about God in a later meeting with the villager, the villager commits suicide. In both the case of his wife and God, Tomas clings to an ideal that he fails to commit faith in. Because of this, he lacks an identity, and he denies his only chance of realizing an “I” and a “Not I” through denying the advances of Marta. Bergman is showing here how isolation from other humans results in despair, and along with this despair comes a lack of an established identity. Tomas’s establishment of “I” is lost in the folds of his wife and of his God, neither of whom he can make contact with.

A struggle in the face of God occurs again in *Through a Glass Darkly*. Karin states late in the film that she is waiting on God, but this is shown only as a symptom of her insanity. Karin’s schizophrenia and delusions are a powerful marker of an inconsistent or ill-defined identity. Karin has moments of lucidity, stating her doubts as to how real her experiences with voices

behind the wallpaper in an upstairs room of the house, but spends most of her time suffering from delusions and uncertainty, and these delusions produce a sort of isolation from her family. When her delusions come to a head and she believes that a spider-god is attempting to take her, Karin is only able to be calmed by sedatives administered by her brother and her husband. Karin's struggle is to establish a reality, which is a necessary condition for an identity to emerge – a constantly shifting grasp on reality is not suitable for establishing what is “I” and what is “Not I”. The only thing that anchors her to the earth are the efforts of her loved ones, and it is through this that Karin takes the first step towards a consistent reality. Karin, however, is not the only character in the film who struggles with an isolation. Her father, David, is a writer who seems to place much higher importance on his work than on his family. Through the film, however, David becomes aware of this isolation and starts to develop his relationship with his son and with Karin. Through breaking this isolation, David can enter in a dialectic with his son, and he states that love is what saves him from despair.

Despite faith playing a heavy role in these films, Bergman seems to deny the Cartesian idea of identity through the existence of an ethereal soul. Bergman instead presents dialectics in his films that serve to establish identities of the characters. This is in the vein of a Hegelian dialectic, but not an exact replication of one. Many of these films (particularly the “Faith Trilogy”) are stories of the struggle of characters to find an identity in the face of a God who is either silent or absent. Bergman repeatedly shows that identity is established not through a God, but through other humans.



### III. Identity and Death

The central claim of Parfit's treatise on identity is that "Certain important questions do presuppose a question about personal identity. But they can be freed of this presupposition. And when they are, the question about identity has no importance." [Parfit 4] This contrasts Descartes' view that identity is a clearly defined concept, being tied to a soul that is eternal and unchanging. From this idea that questions of identity have no importance, Parfit draws the conclusion that death (or death as is commonly regarded) also loses its importance. Parfit believes that, due to this conclusion, it is ultimately important to focus on life, and that anxieties about dying are unnecessary. The concluding paragraph of his 1995 paper "The Unimportance of Identity" makes this clear:

Consider the fact that, in a few years, I shall be dead. This fact can seem depressing. But the reality is only this. After a certain time, none of the thoughts and experiences that occur will be directly causally related to this brain, or be connected in certain ways to these present experiences. That is all this fact involves. And, in that redescription, my death seems to disappear. [Parfit 45]

Here Parfit refutes the power of death by deconstructing normal views of identity. Bergman, however, seems to take death much more seriously through his filmography. Many of Bergman's films deal with death in some way, and death is generally presented as a struggle or a fear. Characters in many of Bergman's films are running from death (sometimes literally) or are reluctant to come to terms with their own death. These characters clearly hold a different view of death than Parfit, and they can be seen to represent Bergman's own fear and

uncertainty about death. In the 2006 documentary *Bergman Island*, Bergman tells director Marie Nyreröd that, during the period in his life when the films discussed here were being made, he was terrified of death and thought about it frequently. These films can therefore be seen as a product of Bergman's struggle with this topic and as his attempt to conquer this fear.

This struggle in the face of death is (unsurprisingly) most apparent thematically in the film where it is most apparent visually – the personified figure of Death in *The Seventh Seal* spends the film chasing after The Knight, who cunningly postpones his own death through a game of chess. The simple fact of Death being personified is a representation of how small its power is portrayed compared to how it is typically viewed. The idea of death is pervasive and inescapable, but The Knight is at least able to take into his own hands some part of his own death. The character of Death is small and comprehensible, and one can imagine having hope in the fight against the character of Death. The Knight, however, eventually stops running away from Death, and by doing so, realizes the ultimate powerlessness of death to harbor any finality. Bergman shows us this when he shows all of the characters dancing along with death on a hill. For these characters, death has little importance (as, according to Parfit, it should), and for The Knight, accepting his identity in light of the silence of God dissolves the power of death. The Knight can never have power over death, but he can diminish Death's power. Death clearly takes The Knight in the end, as it does all other characters. But the dance of death is a visual representation of the lack of importance dying holds. By showing the characters dancing on the hill, Bergman diminishes the significance of the event of their deaths and taking away its finality. This parallels Parfit's idea that one should focus on life due to death's inconsequentiality. It is important to note, however, that even in the end of the film, Death is

shown as a character to be feared. Here Bergman is showing us that what mattered was the way The Knight lived, but is also acknowledging the power of death. This is Bergman's visual affirmation of life in the midst of the imminence of death.

Isak Borg, the aging professor from *Wild Strawberries*, faces a loneliness and alienation from his family members in his old age. The film shows him resolving issues that he has had in the past with his family as his life comes to a close. The film opens with a dream sequence where Isak is walking through a street where he sees a faceless figure, a clock with no hands, and a hearse that turns out to be carrying his own body. Clearly the film begins with Isak uneasy about his own death. We soon see his bitterness towards the other characters in the film, and especially towards family members. In the beginning of the film, Isak is alone, bitter, and isolated. This is not his personality, but a shield erected to protect himself from others who he believes will wrong him in some way. By lowering this shield, Isak is able to engage with others and escape his solipsism. In this way, he establishes an identity. We see Isak in the end as a welcoming and kind figure, and this figure goes into death as peacefully as only one who has released resentments can. Again here Bergman is treating death very seriously, but is also showing that acknowledging and facing its gravity leads to some sort of peace with death, and therefore diminishes its power.

In *The Silence*, death is treated differently, as the characters hold a different significance. The death of Ester is treated by Anna as a relief, and Anna even admits to wishing that Ester would die. Here the death of a character is synonymous with the death of an aspect of a personality. This is a deconstruction of identity in the same way as the splitting of a brain

described by Parfit<sup>7</sup>. There is a blurred line between “I” and “not I” in the two characters, and therefore the death of one is not necessarily the death of an “I”. Bergman’s uncharacteristic treatment of this death in such an unfeeling and unemotional manner is further evidence that Anna and Ester are two parts of the same person. Anna treats death as inconsequential, but Ester clearly thinks otherwise, shouting in defiance as she lays dying. And when Ester does die, Anna moves on with her life, as this is the way she wanted to be: free of her intellectuality, free of her sickness. Here Bergman is showing death as not an end – in fact, he does not show the act of dying at all – but as a progression. Here death is not shown as the end of an identity, but as the evolution of one. The identity of the Ester/Anna character changes by degrees with Ester’s death, and therefore this death lacks importance. This progression is a visual display of Parfit’s ideas about death.

The struggles of the characters in these films seem to be mirrors of Bergman’s own struggle to make peace with death. Bergman certainly treats death with apt gravity in these films. However, many of them make a statement about identity through death that takes away death’s finality. Through these films, Bergman is showing different manners in which characters deal with death. The death of many of these characters loses its significance in light of the way the identities of these characters are handled by Bergman, and by the way the characters are shown to live on after death. These films are Bergman’s attempt to show how his own great fear of death could be ameliorated.

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<sup>7</sup> Parfit describes a scenario in which a person’s brain is removed and split into two brains, each of which are placed in a separate body. This presents a problem in that the one person could not have suddenly become two people, yet each of the two bodies has a psychological continuity with the original and could therefore claim to be the same identity as the original. Parfit uses this to justify his idea that identity is not a matter of importance in these situations.

#### IV. Psychological Continuity

Many philosophers have argued that what makes a person stay the same through time is psychological continuity. This is essentially the idea that for a Person B to be Person A, who existed at a previous time, Person B must have all the memories of Person A. The origin of this idea is commonly attributed to Locke, who disputed the Cartesian view that a soul constitutes an identity. Locke was not committed to the idea of a soul as something material or as immaterial, and he therefore needed some way to define identity outside of a soul. Locke famously described identity as “forensic”, meaning he was interested in it as a basis of justice. For this reason, a thorough and comprehensive way of defining identity was not necessary for his philosophy. Locke believed that we exist in multiple states of consciousness through time, and these states are linked together through memory. For Parfit, an identity is constituted by the sum-total of states of consciousness, and that identity is a matter of degrees, indicating a lack of belief in a comprehensive way to define an identity. Parfit in fact took this idea even farther, stating a belief that asking questions about identity is a fruitless task and that the question of identity has no importance whatsoever. This argument is very similar to Locke’s, but makes a stronger point about identity. Just as Locke takes identity to be states of consciousness linked through time by memory and uses this idea as the foundation for his normative philosophy, Parfit accepts psychological continuity as a way to attempt to define an identity, and uses this idea to present problem cases for typical views of identity. He then uses these problem cases to show how fruitless attempts to define an identity are. The views of both Locke and Parfit on this matter stand in contrast to Descartes’ idea that the self is an unchanging soul permanently unified to a body. For Descartes, continuity is permanent

throughout time as a product of his mind-body dualism, and a person is the same throughout time. Many of Bergman's films play with the idea of psychological continuity to make statements about the identity of the characters or about the nature of identity itself.

Problems with psychological continuity are particularly apparent in *Persona*. As the identities of Elisabet and Alma intertwine, so too do memories. As Alma opens up to Elisabet and shares some of her most personal memories, such as that of an extramarital sexual encounter on the beach with an unknown boy and a subsequent abortion, Elisabet grows ever closer to her. This culminates in a scene towards the end of the film where Elisabet's husband shows up at the beach house and seems to mistake Alma for Elisabet. Despite Alma's assurances that she is *not* Elisabet, she soon seems to believe that she is. This is marked most strikingly by the fact that Alma suddenly seems to hold the memories of Elisabet. In a turning moment of this scene, Elisabet – who has been standing behind Alma this whole time, seemingly invisible to Mr. Vogler – takes Alma's hand and places it on Mr. Vogler's face. At this moment, Alma seems to suddenly believe that she *is* Elisabet. She tells Mr. Vogler "I love you, just as I had loved you before." This is a clear indication that Alma now shares the memories of Elisabet, and the fact that the moment in which Alma becomes Elisabet is marked by her displaying the memories of Elisabet shows Bergman's support of psychological continuity as a basis for identity.

In *The Silence*, continuity is called into question as Ester becomes sicker and sicker, leading to the rise of Anna as the superior personality. Viewing the two as one, there is a clear question of identity in terms of continuity in regards to Ester's death. At the beginning of the film, Anna and Ester make a whole. With Ester's death, however, Anna is the only part that goes

on living. Anna has killed a part of herself – the sickly intellectual part – in order to live a freer life. Along with this, however, she has destroyed the memories that were carried along with that part of her. This raises the question of whether Anna is now the same person as she was before. There is a degree of continuity here for Anna, but she has lost part of her memories. These memories, however, are full of anguish and sickness. Anna seems better off without them: the rest of the film shows Anna as a much more calm character, lacking in the previous histrionic behaviors. The death of these memories is, for Anna, practically equivalent to the death of the sickly part of her. Here, however, the character of Johan plays an important role. The boy is an outsider to the psyche of the characters of Ester and Anna, and therefore serves as a check on the memory of the two characters. As Ester dies, it is easy to believe that Anna would simply forget her and move on with her life, glad to be rid of the sick and brooding weight in her life. But the viewer has seen in the film the relationship that Johan had with Ester, and knows that Johan will not forget Ester. Ester may no longer be a part of Anna, but she will always exist in the memories of Johan, and Johan is shown at the end of the film still travelling along with Anna. Anna will never fully be able to forget Ester as long as Johan is around. In this way, there is some form of continuity from Ester and Johan, and by reason of this, the identity of Ester still lives on in Johan. Here Bergman has shown psychological continuity as a basis for the establishment of identity and has also shown a scenario that makes a larger statement about identity as a whole. By showing Johan as the only mode through which Ester lives, the film raises the question of how identities can carry on after the death of a body. Through this film, Bergman shows this to be at least a justifiable concern, and this concern calls to question how comprehensive any definition of the identities of Anna or Ester can be. This uncertainty

calls to mind Locke and Parfit's lack of concern about the matter. Bergman shows through this film the complexities of identity and of continuity.



## V. Conclusion

Films from this period of Bergman's career (the mid 1950's through the mid 1960's) put on display a lot of Bergman's inner feelings, fears, and passions in the way that only films controlled at the helm by an auteur can. But these films also harbor contributions to different philosophical ideas involving identity. In these films, passions and ideas come together in a way that is only possible through the art of film, but Bergman proved through these films that the camera can be an effective tool for making statements about identity. A dramatization of power struggles and dialectics at play can often have a unique (and, at times, more resounding) effect on a viewer than texts such as Hegel's description of a particular sort of dialectic can on a reader. In this way, Bergman is able to strengthen ideas about dialectics. Where Locke describes a way in which an identity can be defined well enough for purposes of his philosophy moving forward, Bergman can show these ways in which identity can be defined through characters and the ways in which they relate to each other. The ideas of philosophers such as Parfit carry many subtleties that can become much clearer and more apparent through dramatization, and Bergman is able to use philosophical ideas such as psychological continuity in ways that differ from how Parfit or Locke might use them. Bergman achieves all of this through the films discussed here while also employing his own ideas to further the discussion on identity which harbor subtleties of their own. Through this, Bergman is able to display views on identity to his viewers which transcend systematic characterization. These films present their own sort of philosophy – one that can only be presented through the language of film.

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