

An Approach to Bergman

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Chapter 3



The Penetrating Dream Style of Ingmar Bergman

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In 1966, the year that Ingmar Bergman made *Persona*, he discovered that all of his movies were dreams: "Of course I understood that some of my films were dreams, that part of them were dreams. ... But that *all* my pictures were dreams was a new discovery to me." In this paper I intend to describe the particular dream style of Bergman—what it reveals about the nature of dreaming and its relationship with the film medium, and what it reveals about Bergman and the particular nature of his creative process. I will use *Persona* as my primary example because I think it is his best film in its emotional power, its innovative use of the medium, and its insight into dreaming and the creative process.

The General Context of Dreams

Before turning specifically to Bergman's films, I want to establish the general aesthetic context from which I approach dreams and identify the key assumptions on which it is based. First, I assume that dreaming is not merely analogous to art, as most dream theorists suggest, but is itself an

art medium that is universally practiced. This means that every dreamer is an individual artist with a distinctive style. And this style is manifest in the dream canon; it is accessible to critical analysis; it is a resource for adaptations to other, more conventional media such as film; it shapes meaning; and it combines unique and conventional elements. I am not presenting here arguments for this thesis, which is the subject of a book in progress entitled *Dream Stylistics*. Rather, I am offering it as the basic context for my discussion of Bergman, since it affects the kind of questions I ask and the assumptions I hold.

For example, I assume that Bergman's dream films differ markedly in style from those of other filmmakers who also use cinema as a medium to express their dreams. The others who come most readily to mind are Fellini and Buñuel, both of whom have been making dream films for many years that move fluidly among various psychic modes and statements about the relationship between films and dreams that sound remarkably similar to those of Bergman. Bergman's dreams are revelations. In his tragic vision, he uses them as exorcism in a psychological and religious sense; his dreams move inward structurally, revealing inner landscapes of the secret self. That is what I mean by the "penetrating" dream style of Ingmar Bergman. In contrast, Fellini's dreams are wish fulfillments. In his comic vision, he uses them as narcissistic play in an aesthetic sense; his dreams move in circles like a circus parade of the self, with his own ego at the center. Buñuel's dreams, on the other hand, are nightmarish traps. In his satiric vision, he uses them as subversive anarchy in a political sense; his dreams move outward structurally, defying conventions and pursuing the phantom of liberty. I am assuming that not only the films of these three artists differ in style, but also their personal dreams on which they are based.

My next basic assumption is that understanding how dreams work illuminates other forms of art, particularly with respect to the creative process and adaptation. Dream adaptation moves in both directions. Not only are dreams adapted to a wide range of media and not only do they form the basis of certain recognizable styles (such as Surrealism) and familiar genres (such as dream visions), but other art forms are absorbed and adapted into dreams and help to generate new dream genres and archetypes. Fellini has revealed that he sometimes dreams of Picasso. In Jack Kerouac's Book of Dreams, he announces that he has a personal genre that he calls Tolstoy dreams, which center on conflicts with his father and which are clearly rooted in nineteenth-century Russian fiction. Stan Brakhage's dream journal also reveals a variety of images freely adapted from paintings, novels, and films by other artists. For the forthcoming Dreamworks Anthology that I am co-editing, I have collected dream reports and adaptations from over 100 artists working in a variety of media and find this two-way process of adaptation to be very common. It is not necessarily limited to artists but applied to all dreamers: we have all had dreams that have been influenced by art we have experienced in waking life. In fact, dreams may be an evolutionary mechanism that mediates between our genetic programming and cultural imprinting. This idea seems to be gaining support from the current physiological dream research, particularly that of Michel Jouvet, and from the content analysis of thousands of dreams collected by Calvin Hall.

Since movies and television have greatly increased the number of moving visual images we absorb each day, these two media have undoubtedly altered our dreams, which process these images, and have perhaps accelerated our rate of change. Think of a dreamer living in the Renaissance. What forms of access would be or she have during waking life to moving visual images? Perhaps riding a horse or in a carriage, or walking past paintings and statues and through buildings; the access was extremely limited. But we in the eighties are daily bombarded by thousands of pre-packaged moving visual images on television and in the movies that we can absorb almost directly into our dreams. We also have greater access through the accelerated motion of cars and trains, which Bergman has used as framing structures in two of his key dream films—the car ride in Wild Strawberries and the train ride in The Silence. In both films we see the landscape flashing by through the windows like moving pictures on a screen before plunging into dream sequences or more highly symbolic action. My main point is that our media of art and transportation have transformed the imagery of our dreams, which in turn have helped to transform us. I think it is no accident that one of the dominant dream genres of our times is the driving dream-not only because automobiles are a convenient symbol of power and control, but also because they are a primarily daily source of moving visual imagery.

Bergman's Dream Style²

In dealing with the creative process, Bergman's dream films all embody a series of three polarities that mediate between inner and outer experience: first, the spontaneous emergence of images from the unconscious versus the conscious selection of external forms that are imposed with rigorous discipline and craft; second, the centripetal nature of the film medium, which depends on artifice and deception, versus the centrifugal representation of external reality, which may present an inner emotional truth; and third, the isolation of a narcissistic artist like Bergman whose work is preoccupied with self-analysis versus the communal demands of the medium and the cooperative participation he elicits from his collective troupe of artists and coworkers and from his audience. This movement between inner and outer experience dominates the structure of Bergman's dream films.

The meaning of any one film by Bergman is greatly enriched by the context of the whole canon because they are all woven together by recurring names, faces, characters, situations, images and themes that create a tapestry of recurring dreams. Moreover, this pattern of recurrence with variations creates the effect of fluid transformations and displacements so characteristic of dreams.

For example, the name *Vogler* means "bird-catcher," thus evoking Papageno from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which has obviously had such a great influence on Bergman. He assigns this name to the mute illusionist in *The Magician*, the silent actress in *Persona*, and the seductive demon in *Hour of the Wolf*. These three characters have to be understood in relationship to each other; all three Voglers have an almost magical power over others that can be both illuminating and destructive. Bergman also uses first names in this way and interweaves them with

complex effects. The first name of the Vogler figure in The Magician is Albert Emanuel, which links him with two other characters who also belong to a troupe of players: Albert Emanuel Sebastian Fisher (also known as "Bird"), who is the demonic actor in The Ritual, and Albert, the circus leader, in The Naked Night. Throughout the canon, there is a procession of repeated first names, such as Alma, Mary, Anna, Andreas, Johan, Eva, Karin and Elisabeth. Vergerus ("one of the verge, one who bends") is the family name of rational establishment figures who are altered by the forces of passion; the skeptical scientist who is tricked in The Magician, and two cuckolded husbands—the cynical architect in The Passion of Anna and the reasonable doctor in The Touch. In both The Passion of Anna and The Ritual, Winkelman ("man in a corner") is the name of a character who is trapped in an impossible, humiliating situation and must resort to some kind of violence to escape. Begman calls attention to this symbolic use of names at the end of The Passion of Anna when he visually moves away from Max von Sydow, whose image gradually blurs and disintegrates as the narrator observes: "This time he was called Andreas Winkelman." This remark identifies him as another version, not only of Anna's dead husband named Andreas, but also of the many victimized heroes who star in Bergman's movies and who are ultimately based on the Christian archetype.

A similar pattern of interwoven repetition occurs with faces, which represent similar or contrasting roles, enriching the films with ironic variations and intensifying the effect of fluid transpositions. In The Magician and The Ritual, which both deal with the same basic conflict between eccentric artists and the bourgeois establishment, Ingrid Thulin plays the female member of the troupe who is married to the leader; Gunnar Bjornstrand, on the other hand, plays the man of science who is hostile to the artists in The Magician (a role related to his performance as the cynical squire in The Seventh Seal), while in The Ritual he is the leader of the troupe. The Ritual is also linked to The Naked Night by the face of Anders Ek, who plays a childlike member of the troupe in both films. In the former, he is associated with fire and is a master at humiliating others, while in the latter he is Frost, the "icy" clown who is a prime object of humiliation. Ek plays a priest in The Seventh Seal and Cries and Whispers, which both focus on death; in the former, he is a zealous. self-flagellating believer, while in the latter he is disillusioned with equal intensity. In both The Hour of the Wolf and The Passion of Anna, Max von Sydow plays the poor, vulnerable quest who is pitted against the rich. cynically destructive host, played by Erland Josephson. While Bibi Andersson is the unfaithful wife in both The Passion of Anna and The Touch, she is called Eva Vergerus in the former and Karin Vergerus in the latter; Max von Sydow plays the lover Andreas Winkelman in one and the cuckolded husband, Andreas Vergerus, in the other.

Starting with *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), Bergman's later films begin to become more dreamlike. At this point, the line between reality and dreams tends to dissolve. Bergman notes the exact moment in the film when it occurs:

The horrifying—the real dream—is always when you dream it very realistic. It is only a small turning of the screw into unreality. . . . In the middle of the picture *Through a Glass Darkly*, when Karin stands at the seaside and says three times, "Here comes the rain," that's the exact feeling of dreams, and then

everything turns over. You stop watching from the outside and become part of the madness inside. 3

These later dream films have the following characteristics: they tend to reduce the earlier, more diffuse and conventional plots to primary configurations; there are fewer characters; the tone is consistently dark and ominous; the psychic intensity is unrelieved by comic subplots; the structure moves inward toward a greater psychological penetration; situations are primordial, involving incest, madness, vampirism and death. As Gaston Bachelard says, "The narrower the ray of light, the more penetrating its vigilance." The light in the later films of Bergman is as narrow and penetrating as a laser and frequently as destructive. Bergman claims to draw this cruel light directly from his dreams: "It is the strong, unmoving sunlight which is always most frightening. My cruellest dreams are flooded with unbearable sunlight." Yet, the primary value of these later films lies precisely in this kind of extreme penetration. As Rilke has said:

Works of art always spring from those who have faced the danger, gone to the very end of an experience, to the point beyond which no human being can go. The further one dares to go, the more decent, the more personal, the more unique a life becomes.⁶

This statement applies to Bergman very well.

As a means of pursuing an experience to the very end, Bergman has developed a series of personal dream genres that rework the same basic motif with thematic variations that become increasingly penetrating. One example is the woman's journey—a psychic journey of self-exploration made by two women, one a controlled artist and the other a sensuous, childlike creature who seems more emotionally needy and desperate; these two women move back and forth between fusion and alienation as they face death and despair. At the root of this genre, I think, is Bergman's desire to understand the cold mother who rejected him when he was a needy, contact-seeking child and to somehow fuse himself with her. The two women thus represent two conflicting aspects of his own psyche.

The chief components of this genre first appear in *Prison* (1949), the first film that Bergman wrote and directed and which contains the seeds of his later works. Inside the frame that is dominated by male artists, one of the story lines presents a contemporary vision of hell: a vulnerable young prostitute is forced by her fiancé (who also doubles as her pimp) and by her older sister, who is cold, cruel and authoritarian, to give up her child, which they murder. The loss of this child is the subject of a recurring nightmare that haunts the mother and helps drive her to suicide.

The first film totally dominated by this two-women motif is significantly called *Dreams* (1955). This low-mimetic melodrama focuses on a mature photographer and a childlike model, who go to another city on business where they become involved in contrasting relationships with two men, who are both exposed as weaklings. While the independent photographer threatens to draw her lover away from his dependent wife and children, the young model acts as a surrogate daughter for her older lover, who has incestuous yearnings.

The next version is The Silence (1963), which departs from low-

mimetic realism and becomes increasingly symbolic. As in *Prison*, the two women are sisters, which perhaps makes it easier to see them as two sides of a single personality. The older sister is a translator, rational but extremely intense. The younger has a pathetic son who yearns for more loving contact with his mother. Largely ignoring him, she desperately seeks erotic adventures with strangers and struggles against her dying sister, whom she hates. Thus the primary emotional conflict is between the two women rather than with the men they encounter. In fact, there are no important men in the film—only a child, an old man who works in the hotel, a waiter who grunts rather than speaks, and a group of transvestite dwarfs. The struggle takes place in an unidentified alien city that is plagued by war, which is symbolically related to the personal combat between the two women.

The next version is *Persona* (1966), where the older woman is an actress who has withdrawn into silence, abandoning her artistic career, her husband, and her pathetic young son; the younger woman is a passionate nurse who recounts an erotic experience with two youngsters, which led to an abortion, and who reaches out emotionally to the actress. The two women go to a deserted island where their identities merge and separate and where they move fluidly between fantasy and reality. Men are abandoned in the film; they are alluded to in conversations, and materialize in hallucinations and in the dream-like frame.

In Cries and Whispers (1973), the personality is splintered into four female figures and the film combines the basic situations from The Silence and Persona. Attended by her two sisters and a maid whom she has befriended, Agnes (like Ester in The Silence) is the older sister painfully dying of cancer, this time of the womb rather than the throat. Ester and Agnes are both independent single women engaged in artistic activities. Marie, Agnes' youngest sister, is, like Anna in The Silence, indifferent to her husband and children and involved only in the beauty and pleasure of her own body; she responds to her sister's imminent death by turning to eroticism. Karin, the older sister, is similar to Elisabet Vogler in Persona. Married to a man who is repulsive to her physically and mentally, she acts in a highly controlled manner, masking her anguish and desperation. Anna, the servant, like Alma in Persona, is devoted to the artistic woman she serves. Having lost her own child, she is eager to adopt the role of loving mother. Despising each other for the different aspects of personality they embody, the three women have come together with Agnes only because the artist among them is dying. As aspects of a single self, the women fear and loathe the death they are awaiting, which is horrifyingly their own.

The parts of the self and the polarities of reason and passion are reintegrated in Jenny, the psychiatrist in Face to Face (1976), who is an elaboration on the character of the female psychiatrist in Persona. Jenny receives help through her suicide attempt and nervous breakdown, not from her cold husband, but from a homosexual colleague; when he leaves her, she survives independently. She is not an artist but a highly competent professional who overestimates the power of reason; her creative abilities are expressed only through dreams, which dominate the film and which repeat the same motifs and images from the prostitute's recurring nightmare in Prison. Jenny's submerged passions are also revealed in two other minor characters—a young psychotic patient

and her hostile young daughter, who feels rejected by her mother. Although Jenny identifies with both of these characters, she gets in touch with her own irrational nature primarily through isolation, night-mares and a return to childhood. Her descent into madness nevertheless leads to emotional growth, which parallels Bergman's own artistic

development as he explored this dream genre.

In Autumn Sonata (1978), the women are quite literally a cold artistic mother and her childlike daughter who has been emotionally crippled by her neglected childhood. Following the death of her lover, the mother comes to visit her daughter and her minister-husband, the observer who narrates the encounter between the two women. One suspects that Bergman identifies with all three characters—the detached male who tells the story, the monstrous artist who can express her feelings only through her art but not in human relationships, and the dependent child whose life is devoted to making contact with the cold, rejecting mother either through hostile accusations, loving forgiveness, or identification. Although she once had a loving nature, the daughter has now grown incapable of love, like her mother; the one exception was the love she felt for her son, who drowned when he was four. There is little hope for either woman, for despite their painful confrontations, they both return to their sheltering personae of the humble martyr and the selfish star.

Bergman's dream films reveal the two-way process of dream adaptation. He claims to adapt some of his own actual dreams into his films. For example, he reports that Cries and Whispers was based on a germinal dream image that haunted him for over a year—four women in flowing white dresses moving through a red room in a gray morning light. He also shows how his own dreams and those of his characters absorb and transform powerful media images. For example, the opening dream in Wild Strawberries, which he claims was a faithful recreation of a dream he actually had, draws specific images from the classic Surrealist films Entr'acte (the funeral carriage without a driver, and the coffin falling out of the carriage) and Un Chien and alou (the hanging sign of the severed eye) and stylistic characteristics from German Expressionism (the stark black-and-white photography and the anthropomorphic buildings with windows and doorways that resemble blinded eyes and gaping mouths). The powerful sequence of Frost and Alma's humiliation at the opening of The Naked Night, which was also based on one of Bergman's own dreams, parodies images from Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin-particularly the silent montage of the pha lic cannons. Bergman acknowledges that Shame, which is one long nightmare, grew out of a TV image: "It was just a face—a Vietnamese face, a foreigner, on television, that was the beginning of the whole thing." We witness Elisabet Vogler in Persona undergoing a similar process of cultural imprinting as she cowers in a corner while watching on television the immolation of a Buddhist priest in Vietnam and as she studies the face of the child in the famous photograph of the Warsaw ghetto, linking it with the photograph of her own son, which she has torn in half. In The Passion of Anna, we see the infamous TV footage of the shooting of a North Vietnamese prisoner through a space between the gazing heads of Anna and Andreas, who will later adapt these images of cruelty into their own personal combat.

This pattern of adaptation is dramatized in a more complex way through Bergman's use of *The Magic Flute*, which must have imprinted

him as a child. When he filmed the opera in 1975, he framed the stage performance with close-ups of the audience's reactions—particularly those of a young girl whose emotional responses are carefully scrutinized by the camera, as if drawing our attention to the process of imprinting. Mozart's opera provides the deep structure for most of Bergman's dream films that offer variations on the basic myth: the archetypal conflicts between men and women, reason and passion, light and dark; the quest for truth and love as defenses against death and despair. In the extremely nihilistic The Hour of the Wolf (1968), Mozart's opera is presented as an inset puppet show that sharply contrasts with the framing narrative, which adapts it. The Magic Flute is used as the supreme example of a work of art that successfully maintains the delicate balance between passion and reason, spontaneity and control, madness and genius; Bergman's story is about an artist who loses control of his art and life as he plunges into insanity. The painter Johan Borg is also compared with Tamino, whose rational harmony is upset by his passionate pursuit of the beautiful, elusive Princess Pamina, whom Bergman transforms into the demonic Veronica Vogler. Mozart's comical bird-catcher, Papageno, whose magical powers are positive, is similarly metamorphosed into the ghoulish puppeteer, who stages the opera and who later directs Johan in his final encounter with Veronica; in the hallucination at the end of the film, he literally changes before our eyes into a murderous bird of prey. Unlike Tamino and Mozart, Johan and Bergman are totally subdued by the forces of passion and anarchy that dominate this film.

Mozart's basic myth is reworked once again, this time with comic irony, in The Petrified Prince, an unpublished screenplay by Bergman that has not yet been filmed. The plot sounds like a pornographic fairytale about a mute, paralyzed, effeminate prince named Samson, who is in thrall to his whorish queen mother, who repeatedly rapes him. Finally goaded into rebellion against his aggressive mother, he unsuccessfully tries to commit matricide. Threatened with castration by a newly arrived father-figure, Samson runs away with a young mother/whore to establish his own nuclear family. Despite the heavy Freudian overlay, the story explicitly suggests a comparison with Mozart's opera. The turbulent queen says her son is "like a sonata by Mozart"; nevertheless, the young mother/whore (her replacement) turns to a Beethoven symphony to restore Samson's powers. In Bergman's fairytale, the passionate Queen of the Night is not offset by the calm, holy, reasonable Sarastro; God and the King are dead. But the other minor characters who help or hinder the young prince in his quest toward manhood and meaning have their historical counterparts. The natural birdman Papageno is replaced by a romantically disheveled Beethoven. The lustful, satanic Moor, who betrays Sarastro and becomes allied with the dark queen, is replaced by Napoleon, who, after a "homeric fuck," restores the Devouring Dowager to the throne. The Magic Flute ends with the queen and her forces of darkness fleeing into the void, the young prince and princess reconciling Eros and Logos, and the old king resigning, confident that pure love will bring wisdom. Bergman's ending is not so optimistic. The passionate queen and the lustful tyrant retain the power and the pleasure, the only things besides death that have "tangible reality." While love is only a word spoken ritualistically to subdue fear, the prince is at last free to use it, and the young couple venture off to face the unknown.

Persona

Of all Bergman's films, *Persona* (1966) best illustrates the process by which the creative mind draws on the individual's reservoir of images to construct both dreams and films. The opening images of the film portray the process of projection and reveal a high degree of condensation; they simultaneously work on several levels, defining and projecting what the film will be. On the literal, physical level, this opening makes a statement about the film medium: it is light projected through space onto a screen in order to create an illusion and to capture hypnotically the attention of the viewer, who must interpret the projected images. The light, then, is the sphere of physical contact between the artist and the viewer.

On the psychological level, the opening montage sequence portrays an individual artist projecting parts of his own psyche onto other, created characters—the self onto others—which is what we all do in life, in dreams, and in art. More specifically for Bergman, as we have seen in the discussion of the two-women dream genre and in his latest variation on *The Magic Flute*, he is projecting himself in order to understand the cold mother who rejected him, an impulse that also lies at the center of *Wild Strawberries*.

The narrative of Persona develops this process of psychological proiection as Bergman fragments himself into five characters—three female and two male. The three women are the artist, the nurse, and the doctor; all have strong public personae, in the Jungian sense of the term. All three function as shadow figures for each other; even the doctor, whose connection with her patient will be explored more fully in Face to Face, identifies with her patient Elisabet Vogler. All three women are present in the film's dramatic reality; in fact, they are the only dramatis personae in this realm. Their interaction underlines the importance of the inner/ outer polarity. The doctor with her white coat of authority is almost pure persona, the outer part of the conscious self; hence, she is not present in any hallucinations. Only Alma and Elisabet are present in all the realms of reality-the prologue, the inner story, and the hallucinations and dreams (or dreams within dreams). Moreover, these two women are contrasted in the way they deal with the persona. Elisabet tries to reject her persona totally in order to get to the authentic inner self, which is the basis for Bergman's identification with her. In contrast, Alma clings to her own persona as nurse in order to give her life order and sanity and she also tries to absorb Elisabet's persona; this is the basis for Bergman's identification with Alma as he too tries to project himself onto Elisabet. The two males are the blind husband and the needy child. Unlike the women, they have no public personae except for their family designation. They are both defined in relation to the mother, which confirms their dependency on her. Both are absent from the primary dramatic reality and are highly symbolic: we are not sure if the man is really blind or actually Elisabet's husband, just as we are not sure that the boy is really her son. The husband appears only in a dream, deep inside the dream world of Alma and/or Elisabet; thus, the two women seem to evoke or create him. The needy child appears in the framing prologue and epilogue; he is either voyeuristically looking in on the story or creating it out of his pathetic yearning. Both males wear glasses, emphasizing their role as viewers and perhaps identifying them with the

audience. The pattern of relationship among these five figures raises the key question of who is actually projecting what on whom.

On the aesthetic level, the opening montage sequence makes a statement about the creative process or the human need to make and transform symbols in order to create meaning. The projection process in this sense applies both to unconscious dreams and conscious art; both media rely almost entirely on projection, both physically and psychically. Wittgenstein used the term in this way to describe the way we form pictures about reality, whether our medium is verbal propositions or music: "The rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of the musical score. It is the rule of translation of this language into the language of the gramophone record." The same rule applies to the language of myth, movies and dreams. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer uses the term *projection* in a way that is particularly relevant to the fragmented images in the opening of *Persona*:

The "sense-image" is not a direct copy of actual experience, but has been "projected," in the process of copying, into a new dimension, the more or less stabile form we call a picture. It has not the protean, mercurial elusiveness of real visual experience, but a unity and lasting identity that makes it an object of the mind's possession rather than a sensation. . . . We can call up images and let them fill the virtual space of vision between us and real objects, or on the screen of the dark, and dismiss them again, without altering the course of practical events.⁹

This is precisely what Bergman does in the opening of *Persona:* he calls up "sense images" that translate real experience and projects them onto the screen of the dark without altering the course of practical events. Langer describes the characteristic development of this kind of projection in terms that will help us understand how Bergman's opening prologue is related to the narrative of the film:

Presentational symbolism . . . grows from the momentary, single, static image presenting a simple concept, to greater and greater units of successive images having reference to each other; changing scenes, even visions of things in motion, by which we conceive the passage of events. That is to say, the first thing we do with images is to envisage a story; just as the first thing we do with words is to tell something, to make a statement. Image-making is, then, the mode of our untutored thinking, and stories are its earliest product.¹⁰

Persona moves from static images, to greater clusters, to the building of a complex story as the sense-images are translated or projected into the language of narrative. But at any point in the film, Bergman can interrupt the story and break it down once again into its component sense-images, retranslating it back into another language. And this is precisely what he does later in the film and in the ending. My main point here is that the structure of the narrative on the aesthetic level is analogous to the structure of the artist's psyche on the psychological level: they both alternately fragment and cohere as they undergo translation and transformation.

The opening montage sequence not only reveals how the mind creates a narrative out of the sense-images stored in the brain, but it links this process more specifically to dreams. While Freud might describe such preliminary images as "hypnagogic hallucinations," which transform

thoughts into pictorial representations during the period leading to the full dream state, current physiological theory offers a more detailed description of the process. During human sleep, the body alternates between two physiological states—REM and NREM. During REM sleep, the central nervous system is highly aroused; there is a functional blocking of sensory input, and an actively induced and generalized inhibition of motor output. The brain waves resemble the waking state with relatively low voltage and mixed frequency, and there are rapid eye movements, from which the state gets its name. William Dement has described it more dramatically as "an awake brain preoccupied with its own delusions in a paralyzed body." It is during this REM state that we have what we normally refer to as dreams.

During NREM sleep, there is also a functional blocking of sensory input, but there are no rapid eye movements and the motor functions of the body are not paralyzed or inhibited—they are simply not being stimulated. The brain activity is characterized by slow waves and spindles. In general, it is a relatively quiet brain in a reclining body. NREM is divided into four stages, through which the sleeper must pass as he or she moves into deeper sleep. In the laboratory, when subjects are awakened during NREM sleep, they frequently report having mental activity, but of a different kind—not the elaborate visual hallucinations we know as dreams, but rather vague thoughts or fragmented images. Here is William Dement's description of the differences between the mental activity during these two periods:

In spite of the thematic continuity, the [REM] report clearly contains much more of the perceptual vividness and organization that is ordinarily associated with dreaming. Compared with REM recall, NREM mentation is generally more poorly recalled, more like thinking and less like dreaming, less vivid, less visual, more conceptual. . . . The impression is that NREM mentation resembles that large portion of our waking thought that wanders in a seemingly disorganized, drifting, nondirected fashion whenever we are not attending to external stimuli or actively working out a problem or daydream.¹¹

In Dream Psychology and the New Biology of Dreams (1969), F. Snyder confirms

that reports from NREM awakenings are usually quantitatively and qualitatively different from those of REM awakenings, NREM reports tending to b brief fragmentary descriptions of thoughts, and REM reports tending to be longer more coherent descriptions of hallucinated dramas.¹²

In *The New Psychology of Dreaming* (1970), which tries to reconcile Freudian dream theory with the current physiological research, Richard M. Jones raises the intriguing question of whether Freud "would have seen in the non-REM findings no less than the 'latent dream thoughts' of psychoanalytic dream interpretation, which he was so careful to conceive of as a product of the waking psyche."¹³

Bergman's prologue seems to introduce the "latent dream thoughts" out of which his dream film is constructed. I am suggesting that the opening montage sequence of *Persona* presents an intriguing analogue for the mental activity of a sleeper moving through the four stages of NREM sleep before reaching the first emergent REM period and the first complex dream of the night, which is the story of the two women. I do not mean to imply necessarily that Bergman consciously intended this

parallel or that it is an accurate representation of the physiological facts, but rather that in making *Persona*, he intuitively apprehends and represents the creative process in a manner that goes far beyond any of his previous works and that integrates his basic Freudian and Jungian

assumptions with more advanced dream theory.

Stage 1 of NREM sleep is the closest to waking activity; the first stage of Bergman's montage focuses on the outside by presenting his external resource—the film medium and its projection process (the film was originally going to be called "Kinematography"). We see a dark screen, then a white square appears. We do not yet know what it is; it could be an abstract figure or a movie screen. Then another oval light appears on the screen and we gradually recognize the lights of a movie projector, which is followed by more easily identifiable images—spinning reels, film moving through the projector, the screen, leader countdown, and flashing lights.

In stage 2 of NREM sleep, we move deeper into sleep; in the second stage of the montage we move deeper into illusion. First, we see an inverted cartoon image of a woman scrubbing as we hear comical music. This footage comes from one of the earliest Swedish animated films. which Bergman may have seen as a child; we have all been imprinted by cartoons at an early age. Moreover, animation is the most unrealistic form of cinema, yet it frankly acknowledges the illusory nature of the medium. Bergman underlines this dimension by allowing us to see the film in the projector and even stopping the image at one point. Next we see the small hands of a child, rubbing together as if performing a magical trick and perhaps evoking the precocious little Ingmar who loved playing with his magic lantern. Then we see live-action footage from a slapstick comedy that Bergman used as an inset film in Prison, his first important work as an auteur. A black skeletal figure of Death pops out of a trunk and chases a dreamer in white. This early film marks one of Bergman's earliest attempts to comically displace his fear of death and to project his psyche into Freudian fragments; the complete version shows the dreamer (Ego) acrobatically struggling against a closet killer brandishing a knife (Id) and a policeman (Super Ego) under the threatening scrutiny of Death and the Devil. This stage of the prologue combines a cluster of three images that reveal Bergman's beginnings as an artist as he applies his hands to his medium to transform cultural images absorbed as a child in order to cope with his own fears. It also introduces the recurring triad of the woman, the child, and death, which plays a significant role in the main narratives of both Prison and Persona.

In stage 3 of NREM sleep, the slow waves of deep sleep begin to appear. In the third stage of the prologue we move deeper into symbolic condensation, with images that serve three functions: 1) they are rich in cultural associations, particularly with Christianity, which had such a profound influence on Bergman; 2) they allude to earlier Bergman films; 3) they establish the basic tone for *Persona*. From a Gestalt approach, we would see the props and settings, as well as the humans and animals, as aspects of the dreamer's personality. The extreme close-up of a dark spider crawling against a light background is no longer a comical version of death or the devil, even though in the inset farce from *Prison* a rubber spider dangled on a string over the head of the terrified dreamer. Rather, it evokes the image from *Through* a *Glass Darkly*, where the mad

heroine sees God as a spider, a cold predatory demander like her rejecting father. This work marked Bergman's new stage of dream films that moved deeper into the psyche.

Next we see a man's hand gutting a sheep with a knife. The close-up calls our attention to the threatening hand and the victim's eye, which were also emphasized in the opening dream from *Wild Strawberries* as well as in *Un Chien andalou*. During the dreaming process, hands and eyes exhibit a strange twitching motor activity. The violence is shot in the overexposed light that Bergman associates with cruelty. The slaughter of the lamb is, of course, central to Christian mythology: it looks backward to *The Virgin Spring* and forward to *The Passion of Anna* (which is full of animal murders, including the killing of sheep)—both variations on the Passion of Christ.

Then we see a spike being driven through a human hand which opens—a powerful image from Christianity that reinforces the sadomasochism so dominant in our culture and in Bergman's dream films. When juxtaposed with the previous image, it suggests revenge against the hand that slaughtered the lamb. It looks back to the hand with ants crawling out of the center in *Un Chien andalou* and the hand with a round jewel in the dream from *Prison*, but it has the basic tonality of *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*.

The montage moves outdoors as we see a close-up of bark that dissolves to a grove of trees, which are potentially a symbol of life within the Christian mythos, particularly here, since they look lovely, peaceful and symmetrical, as they do in the opening montage of *Cries and Whispers*. Yet we must recall that in Bergman's films trees are frequently associated with death, as in *The Seventh Seal, The Magician* and *The Passion of Anna*. In this particular image, the snow on the ground begins to evoke the emotional chill of *Persona*. Then Bergman cuts to an iron spiked gate, where the symmetry is definitely linked to entrapment and where the spikes remind us of the punctured hand. Then the camera pulls back to reveal piles of snow, intensifying the coldness that we will find at the center of the psyche explored in the narrative.

In stage 4 of NREM, we enter the deepest sleep; in the montage we move to a more complex cluster of interior images of deathly figures sleeping in a hospital/morgue. The prologue has now reached the specific situation from which Bergman says he conceived Persona—lying in a hospital suffering from vertigo, pretending that he was a boy who had died. In the four stages, then, we have moved from the external medium to the interior of Bergman's brain. Now we see highly condensed images that continue to allude to past Bergman films and to anticipate works to come; but for the first time he selects the specific images out of which this particular dream film will be shaped. The transitional image is a huge horizontal close-up of an old person's face that looks like a landscape, dissolving the inner/outer boundary. Then we cut to a different angle of the face as we hear the sound of dripping water, which will be used later in the painful scene where Alma reads Elisabet's letter. Next we see a young boy lying on a slab covered by a sheet, and then return to a series of angles and details from the old and the dead. While we watch an inverted image of an old woman lying on a slab and hear the dripping water and a ringing telephone, the film abruptly cuts to the woman with her eyes open as if she has been awakened from the dead. This event

anticipates Elisabet's opening her eyes after she had pretended to be asleep while Alma examined her face; it also evokes parallel inverted shots of Alma in her bed and Elisabet in the viewfinder in the final sequence. The ringing telephone brings contact from the outside like the radio, television and letters that intrude on Elisabet's withdrawal. This entire cluster of images also recalls the scene from The Silence where the same yong boy pulls the sheet off the body of his dying aunt, who surprisingly is still alive. It also anticipates the terrifying hallucination in The Hour of the Wolf where Johan draws a sheet off Veronica Vogler's naked body lying on a slab; despite her appearance of death, she draws him into a frenzied eroticism performed before an audience of ghoulish demons. Once the old sleeper has been awakened, the prologue cuts to the boy getting comfortable in his bed, putting on glasses to read Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time, the same book he was reading in The Silence. The boy looks like Alma, who is short-haired and boyish and who also wears glasses as she later tosses and turns in her narrow bed. When we hear a sudden rush of emotional music, the boy turns around as if something behind him were magnetically drawing his attention. Then he looks directly into the camera and reaches out his hand to make contact or to control what he sees. We discover that it is a strange white screen on which gradually appears an ambiguous image. This should remind us of the opening image of the film prologue—the ambiguous square of light that hypnotically drew our attention to the screen. Once again it is the light that is the source of contact between the self and the other.

This final image of the boy reaching out his hand to touch the woman's huge face, which constantly undergoes transformations on the transparent white screen, is presented as the primary germinal sense-image for the movie: this image frames the inner story, it links the vague NREM mental activity with the dream narrative, it is an adaptation or projection of what Bergman has described as the actual germinal image for the film:

Bibi and Liv had become fast friends; and Sture had taken a photo of them sitting sunning themselves against a wall. The moment I saw that picture I thought: They're devilishly alike! In a strange sort of way they resembled each other. Afterwards I suppose I must have gone into hospital again and recovered from my giddiness. But then the resemblance began going round and round in my head. I thought it would be wonderful to write something about two people who lose their identities in each other; who are similar in some way. Suddenly I got the idea of them sitting comparing hands. And that was the first image—of the two women sitting there comparing hands and wearing big hats.¹⁴

Although the exact image he describes actually appears in the narrative part of the film, here it is pared down to its basic components—the hand and the fused faces of the two women—that have an even greater degree of condensation. On the biological level, this image represents the process of ego individuation—the child separating himself from his mother and establishing his ego boundaries. Like the farcical insert in *Prison*, it reworks cultural imprinting, this time the Warsaw Ghetto photograph, which shows another young boy reaching out his hands in desperation. It alludes to Bergman's earlier film *The Silence* (which belongs to the same genre as *Persona*) where the same boy reached out his hand trying to make contact with his mother and aunt. In that film we saw the boy

placing his hand on another form of "dream screen"—the window of a train through which he saw the elusive moving images of the transported tanks and other signs of war. Moreover, this is a prototypical image for many specific scenes in Persona: Alma, who also resembles the boy, will reach out her hand to Elisabet's face, lovingly for fusion, hostilely for revenge, and theatrically for attention; the visiting husband, who claims he wants to remain like a child, will reach out his hand to touch the face of Alma/Elisabet. On a biographical level, this image represents Bergman's own attempt to understand the cold mother who rejected him, to get inside her mind and become this alienated woman within the film. On a self-reflexive level, it shows the dreaming/filmmaking process. Out of an intense desire for loving contact, a child reaches out his hand to the "dream screen." as if to control what imagery is about to appear and as if he were manipulating a television dial. This act evokes the earlier little hands that made art and Bergman's explicit statement, "A contactseeking child, beset by fantasies, I was quickly transformed into a hurt, cunning and suspicious day-dreamer."15 In the screenplay of Persona (though not in the film), the psychiatrist observes in her final diagnosis of Elisabet, "Personally I would say you have to be fairly infantile to cope with being an artist in an age like ours."16 Apparently Bergman agrees with this judament.

After the opening montage sequence, we see the titles for the narrative, which appear amidst flashing tachistoscopic images of the key figures in the story. These rhythmical visual flashes and the staccato music we hear in the background make this a strong analogue for the first onset of rapid eye movements that introduce the primary images that the narrative REM dream will develop. The narrative begins with a fade to gray; then a dark line quickly appears on the screen, which is as ambiguous as the opening rectangle of light. Then a door opens inward, defining the space as a hospital room as Alma, in uniform, walks into the film and sets the story line in motion. In an interview filmed by Stia Björkman (Ingmar Bergman, 1971), Bergman describes his creative process as pasting a key image on a door that opens inward to develop the situation; he visually dramatizes this metaphor in Persona. From the opening of the film to the opening of the narrative, we learn that cinema is comprised of a light and a line—the visual image and the narrative which together form the process of projection.

The entire structure of *Persona*, both narrative and visual, is controlled by movement between fusion and separation, montage and dissolves, inner and outer experience. The film moves from the external resources of the medium to the inner reservoir of mental images inside of Bergman—from exterior to interior settings, from the outer frame to the inner story, which moves inward from the hospital, to the isolated beach

house, to subjective fantasies.

The primary break in the narrative dream comes between the most agonizing, violent moments—right after Alma deliberately leaves a piece of glass so that Elisabet will step on it, and just before she threatens her with boiling water. The visual choices reinforce the emotional alienation. Once Elisabet is aware of Alma's deliberate act of cruelty, the women are no longer seen in the same frame—one moves out of the frame as the other enters, and then the film cuts from one to the other. The white gauze curtain that Alma pulls back, divides the screen in half and begins

to distance us from the image. When the film suddenly snaps, it breaks along the line of the curtain. Once again we are confronted with fragmented sense-images from the prologue—e.g., the punctured hand and the comical chase by Death and the Devil—and a huge close-up of a human eye that reminds us of our role as viewers. Then we see a blurred image of white curtains parting, as if on a stage, and an elongated figure in black entering the frame; when the image snaps back into focus, we recognize Elisabet entering the beach house and we are immediately plunged back into the emotional turmoil of the story. Through this interlude, Bergman temporarily allows the viewer to wake up and become aware of the artistic contrivance as a means of escaping from the painful identification with the two women; this is precisely the same function that Freud assigned to dreams within dreams. Bergman himself notes the connection:

I have discovered—and it is really fascinating—that a film does not suffer in the slightest from having the illusion broken from interfering with people's tendency to be the object of an illusion, by having them meet the filmmaker face to face. It is a good idea to suddenly wake the audience up for a moment and then plunge them into the dramatic action again, as when you continue to dream after being briefly awakened.¹⁷

This constant alternation between plunging and surfacing lies at the center of Bergman's penetrating dream style, which forces us always to be aware of the double reality—of inner and outer experience, of the self and other, of dream and external reality.

Notes

1. Ingmar Bergman, quoted in a filmed interview "Introduction to Ingmar Bergman" (1967), produced for television by Lewis Freedman

man" (1967), produced for television by Lewis Freedman.

2. This section of my essay draws heavily from a chapter entitled "Self-Exploration and Survival in *Persona* and *The Ritual:* The Way In" in *Self and Cinema: A Transformalist Perspective*, by Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder (Pleasantville, New York: Redgrave Publishing, 1980).

"Introduction to Ingmar Bergman" (a filmed interview).

4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 34.

5. Ingmar Bergman, "Cries and Whispers," translated by Alan Blair, Four Stories by Ingmar Begman (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), p. 81.

6. Rainer Maria Rilke, Lettres (Paris: Stock), p. 167.

7. "Introduction to Ingmar Bergman" (a filmed interview).

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), chapter 4 (4.0141), p. 141.

9. Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 144.

10. Langer, p. 145.

- 11. William Dement, Some Must Watch While Some Must Sleep (Stanford, 1972), p. 44.
- 12. F. Snyder, "The Physiology of Dreaming," in *Dream Psychology and the New Biology of Dreams*, edited by M. Kramer (Springfield, III.: Charles C. Thomas, 1969), p. 76.
- 13. Richard M. Jones, *The New Psychology of Dreaming* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 40. This book was first published in the United States by Grune & Stratton, 1970).

14. Bergman on Bergman, translated by Paul Britten Austin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 196.

and Schuster, 1973), p. 196.
15. Ingmar Bergman, "The Snakeskin," in *Persona and Shame*, translated by Keith Bradfield (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), p. 11.

16. "Persona," p. 99.

17. Ingmar Bergman, "Dialogue on Film," American Film, Jan.-Feb., 1976, p. 39.



Persona



Wild Strawberries



Shame