**Intro: Text to be read by the viewer**

Taking the form of a video montage, this presentation is made up of a collection of borrowed and appropriated moving images, taken from Ingmar Bergman’s 1966 film ‘Persona’.

So much has been written about this film, a lot of which feels overdetermined, attempting to pin down the films elusive nature. From all that I have read, I will refer to Susan Sontag’s review titled ‘Bergman’s Persona’[[1]](#footnote-1), first published in the ‘Sight and Sound’ magazine in 1967 and her paper ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’ [[2]](#footnote-2), from 1969, alongside my own diagnostic analysis, which brings together connected viewpoints within the field of psychology, philosophy and film theory.

**SCENE 1: “forms that resist being reduced to a story”**

**Sound file:**

The opening to ‘Persona’ begins with a physical intensity of feeling the very presence of the film as an object. An unexpected, destructive nature, in which Sontag describes the film as inciting 'terrifying caesuras', defining how, the director Bergman, has devised a style of 'narrative form' to engage with the viewer's consciousness.

With reference to the exhibition ‘Film as Sculpture’[[3]](#footnote-3), held at the WIELS Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels, in 2013, the press release for this show reflects how this ‘new generation of artists’, working with the ‘contradictory mediums’ of film and sculpture, captured a ‘problem’. Described as having ‘grappled’ with sculptures ‘solid’, stubborn materiality, alongside the ‘temporal and immaterial’ nature of film, the artists were defined as having created ‘hybrid objects’, that consequentially left neither medium ‘pure’ or ‘unquestioned’, rather, “building blocks to be used in new ways and given new meaning.”

**SCENE 2: unlived zones**

**Sound file:**

In 'Where Film Meets Philosophy : Godard, Resnais, and Experiments in Cinematic Thinking'. Hunter Vaughan describes how directors, such as Bergman, have drawn attention to the notion of cinema being "aware of its artificiality as staged fiction"[[4]](#footnote-4), in which he portrays the cinematic camera as a device which takes on the role of being anthropomorphic, to translate inner subjective states, such as flashbacks of memory and dreams; techniques where truths are kept visible, by encapsulating tensions inside and outside the frame.

Quoting R. E. H. Gordon; an artist and writer in the field of Visual and Critical Studies, in his short essay titled the 'Frame', he reflects on the uncertain nature of the frame as an 'ambiguous' zone which he describes as being “between the is and the is not”, who's undeveloped potential enables a space with which to 'imagine' within. Defining the “absence of objectively definable meanings” as that which should not to be 'lamented', rather, to be creatively celebrated, Gordon refers to the creative nature of the frame as opening up ‘new modes of perception’, describing the ‘opportunity’ to see differently as offering “alternative perceptual frameworks”, that enables things ‘previously invisible’ the ability to ‘come into focus.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Gordon references Judith Butler in ‘Undoing Gender’ from 2004, referring to her use of the terms 'unlivable zones' and 'non-space', to describe "a space in which the inability to be recognized by others can undo one's ability to recognize oneself". Gordon defines the failure to feel a sense of personhood as experiencing 'moments of discontinuity' and 'breaking points', through which "points of emergence for fantasies of a different way of perceiving” can evolve.

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**SCENE 3: symbols of rejection**

**Sound file:**

Drawing upon our recent discourse session in which we discussed the paper 'What do pictures want?', I quote W.J.T. Mitchell, who, in an attempt to suspend the readers disbelief, asks: "We want to know what pictures mean and what they do: how they communicate as signs and symbols, what sort of power they have to affect human emotions and behavior." [[6]](#footnote-6) Reflecting on the totemistic nature of a family photo as a symbol of kinship, here Elizabet tears the photo of the little boy in two, a physically destructive act and a symbolic gesture which eludes to her rejecting the role of playing mother.

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**SCENE 4: solitude**

**"Solitude is a condition of peace that stands in direct opposition to loneliness. Loneliness is like sitting in an empty room and being aware of the space around you. It is a condition of separateness. Solitude is becoming one with the space around you. It is a condition of union. loneliness is small, solitude is large. loneliness closes in around you; solitude expands toward the infinite. loneliness has its roots in words, in an internal conversation that nobody answers; solitude has it's roots in the great silence of eternity."[[7]](#footnote-7)**

**Sound file:**

In ‘The Life of the Mind’ Hannah Arendt defines the act of solitude as "that human condition in which I keep myself company". Referring to solitude as a form of doubling, in which she describes loneliness as, that which "comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company...It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and who answers.” In this sense, Arendt reflects upon an inner ‘dialectical’ criticality, through which, in solitude we must learn to turn to another part of the self.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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**SCENE 5: the split self**

**Quote, to be read by the viewer:**

**"Practical life cannot be suspended in an everlasting contradiction. The opposites and the contradictions between them do not vanish, however, even when for a moment they yield before the impulse to action. They constantly threaten the unity of the personality, and entangle life again and again in their dichotomies. Insight into the dangers and the painfulness of such a state might well decide one to stay at home, that is, never to leave the safe fold and the warm cocoon, since these alone promise protection from inner stress."**[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Sound file:**

In this confrontational scene, Sontag identifies how Bergman rather quickly dispenses with a simple reading of his film from a 'psychological point of view'. Here Elizabet's psychiatrist makes it known to her that she has seized the nature of her case, understanding that Elizabet’s confrontation with her own career as an actress has led to the refusal to continue playing roles. Deciding that the psychiatric ward is of no use to Elizabet, the psychiatrist decides instead to send her, with nurse Alma, to her summer retreat, to work through her silent experience. Sontag refers to the summer retreat as allowing Elizabet to 'bide her time', where she can attempt to find a sense of sincerity, with which to bring her 'inner’ and ‘outer' selves together.

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**SCENE 6: the ‘lacunae’ effect**

**Sound file:**

Sontag adopts the term ‘lacunae’ to identify how Bergman places considered ‘gaps’ as a loosely structured form of narrative, with which he leaves explanations unfilled. lnthe renditions that follow, I will highlight how Sontag manages to accomplish an unbiased and rounded interpretation of the characters Alma and Elizabet.

Sontag portrays Elizabet’s hesitancy to communicate as a ‘severance with dialogue’ and, as I quote; “a means of power, a species of sadism, a virtually inviolable position of strength from which to manipulate and confound her nurse-companion, who is left charged with the burden of talking."Here, Elizabet is charged with what Sontag defines as creating a ‘void’ with her silence, through which she defends Alma as having been ‘provoked’, falling into what she describes as ‘a trap’.

Identifying how Bergman has created a space in which we can empathize with Alma, she draws attention to Alma’s vulnerable state as a selfless act of a nurse, who, through her care for her patient has found herself facing her own ‘inescapable anxiety’. If we were to consider Alma’s apprehension of what she doesn’t understand of Elizabet’s silent illness, as a naïve innocence, that consequently leads Alma to feel like she has given away too much of herself, through what Sontag distinguishes as ‘overly generous’ confessions, we could sympathize with Alma as having fallen victim to Elizabet’s silence.

In contrast, Sontag then aestheticizes Elizabet as having an ‘unconfessional nature’, with an authoritative power, that she defines as resonating a sense of limitlessness, an ‘ethical purity’ and an ‘ideal plenitude’, which she defends as harbouring an ‘unchallengeable seriousness’, that is not to be filled with unconsidered speech, but to be contemplated. This other interpretation by Sontag, then leads us to reconsider Alma’s *incessant* talking as a selfish act, in which Sontag illustrates how Alma has, in effect, forgotten her duty to her profession and has allowed herself to ‘fall-into’ her own 'spiritual vertigo'.

In both renditions Sontag considers the consequential reactions of Alma and Elizabet’s understanding and misunderstanding of one another’s respective speech and speechlessness, as she considers Bergman’s use of language and silence as “instruments of fraud and cruelty”, in which she grants necessary attention to the response of each character, to contemplate their actions in their own defence.

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**SCENE 7: aesthetic reflexiveness**

**Sound file:**

In this scene, Sontag refers to the 'fragile’ and ‘perishable’ nature of the film as having an 'aesthetic self-reflexiveness' which resonates the destructive nature of knowledge, by describing how the film appears to 'consume' what it knows, as if it has literally ‘collapsed’ under the weight of its own story. Sontag refers to the anthropomorphic nature of the film medium, describing the inherent emotional power and material violence, as having been 'used up' and having died 'before our eyes', creating a force which she defines as going beyond the control of the director, by harbouring a sense of ‘formal-magical apprehension’, only to ‘magically reconstitute’ itself.

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**SCENE 8: acting-in and acting-out**

**Sound file:**

Through this scene, I refer to Sontag’s interpretation of Alma and Elizabet’s polarized characters, in which I quote Sontag who defines their polarities as being that of “violence and powerlessness, reason and unreason, language and silence, the intelligible and the unintelligible." Here, Sontag makes a quick reference to the psychological diagnosis of ‘dissociation of personality', regarding Alma and Elizabet as being multiple identities of one person, referring to them as being “bound together....in a passionate agonised relationship".

Sontag translates the title of the film ‘Persona’ using the Latin interpretation, which symbolically refers to ‘the wearing of masks worn by an actor’. Sontag makes a clear distinction between the complexity of Alma’s mask, as opposed to the simplicity of Elizabet’s mask, she defines Elizabet’s mask as being one of ‘muteness’, identifying how she chose to wear this mask, to free herself from what Sontag characterizes as a ‘bondage’, of having to speak or explain the impasse she appears to have faced during her role as an actress in the film.

In contrast, Sontag refers to the psychological state of Alma’s character, during, what she describes as Alma witnessing an ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘hysterical anguish’, when experiencing a self-revelatory ‘unmasking’ of herself as a once composed and professional nurse. Sontag visually describes Alma’s mask as having many layers, through which we see her former ‘health’, ‘optimism’ and ‘normal life’ being lost, only to reveal what Sontag describes as a ‘violent nature’ that she portrays as having been uncovered within Alma’s spirit.

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**SCENE 9: re-framed frames**

**Sound file:**

Quoting Sontag, this scene is; “repeated twice in its entirety, the first time showing Elizabet's face as she listens, the second time Alma's face as she speaks”, here, Bergman further plays with the perplexity of our interpretive viewing, directing frames to re-experience scenes that are not exactly doubled, but re-framed, to encourage multiple ways of viewing.

Sontag describes how each of the two sequences; “closes spectacularly (and) terrifyingly with the appearance of a double or composite face, half Elizabeth's and half Alma's”, she portrays how Bergman inserts such dramatic and fragmented images to make, in what she describes as; “a statement about the complexity of what can be seen and the way in which, in the end, the deep, unflinching knowledge of anything is destructive. To know (perceive) something intensely is eventually to consume what is known, to use it up, to be forced to move on to other things.”

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**SCENE 10: an insatiable appetite**

**Sound file:**

In this scene, Sontag defines how Alma appears to have, I quote; “gradually assumed the problems and confusions of her patient”, literally taking on what Alma believes to be Elizabet’s ‘burden’, yet, unlike Elizabet’s apparent control withheld in the silence of words, Alma acts-out her despair, revealing her desperation in words that she cannot take any solace in. Referring to other contextual readings of this scene as hypothesizing 'a conscious cannibalism', Sontag defines such a reading to be, I quote; "a parable of the predatory energies of the artist, forever scavenging life…a vampyristic theft of personality...a compulsion to exchange strength and weakness."

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**SCENE 11: this is as much as I know**

**Sound file:**

Wrapping-up this presentation, in light of Sontag’s unbiased and rather matter-of -fact review of this film, unpicking the psychological, haunting nature of a film such as this, it has become much more apparent to me, how myself and other viewers may compare the feeling of being left to dangle, to an imagined sense of feeling haunted. Breaking down this psychological interpretation, I now understand how this indeterminate, yet sensed feeling will reside, unless we are able to let go of the desire to want to know resolute meanings, which this film will never give.

Sontag references Bergman directly, quoting him as having confessed that; “all the meaning resides in the work itself”, to reaffirm how Bergman, in his position as the films creator, he is still unable to offer ‘no further explanation’ or add anymore clarity to the film. Finalizing her review, Sontag returns to the chaotic nature of the ‘film-as-object’.

1. Susan Sontag. *'Styles of Radical Will'*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1969. p123-145 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IBID., p3-34 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *‘Film as Sculpture’*. Source: <http://www.wiels.org/en/exhibitions/471/Film-as-Sculpture>. 2013. Cited: 18th October 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hunter Vaughan, '*Where Film Meets Philosophy : Godard, Resnais, and Experiments in Cinematic Thinking'.*New York:Columbia University Press. 2013, p9  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R.E.H. Gordon. *‘The Frame’* In: *’Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline’*. James Elkins and Kristi McGuire eds. New York: Routledge. 2013. p128-130 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William John Thomas Mitchell. ‘What do pictures want?’ Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2005. p28 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kent Nerburn. *'Simple Truths: Clear & Gentle Guidance on the Big Issues in Life'*. New World Library.2005. p55 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hannah Arendt. ‘The Life of the Mind’. New York: Harcourt, 1978. p185 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Carl. G. Jung. ’*Memories, Dreams and Reflections*’. Random House. 1989. p346 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)