

Persona's repeated monologue scene and the role of the of the spectator

In this paper, I consider the use of temporal overlapping in the famous double monologue scene in Bergman's modernist classic *Persona* (1966). The repeated monologue scene stands out as perhaps the most puzzling and intriguing moment in the film. The scene shows a nurse, Sister Alma, speaking to the selectively mute Elisabeth Vogler from two different angles. First, we see the whole monologue, with the camera closing in on Elisabeth's face. Second, we listen to the monologue while watching Sister Alma speaking. The scene ends in a horrifying montage of the two faces. It lasts for 8 minutes and comprises 14 shots. To help us recognize the originality of Bergman's use of temporal overlapping, in the first part of this paper, I provide a brief historical context of the use of the device. While we find instances of temporal overlapping throughout the history of cinema, today, it has become a mainstream technique used in many nonlinear films and TV shows. Importantly, Bergman's temporal overlap can still shock many viewers, and it stands out as one of the most original examples of the technique.

A general agreement seems to exist that *Persona* is Bergman's most modernist film. Yet the view that the film's many self-reflexive moments, the repeated monologue scene included, should be understood from a Brechtian point of view is more controversial. Many critics take *Persona* to be influenced by Godard's modernist aesthetics. Famously, the French director took his cue from Brecht's theory of distanciation. An important goal was to disrupt the spectator's emotional involvement to instigate political reflection. As for the monologue scene, in my view, reducing repetition here to an alienation effect is problematic. As I will argue, this scene creates a temporal depth, a kind of stretching of time, which requires much attention and concentration on the side of the spectator. Bergman's decision to let the overlap follow directly after the first appearance of the monologue, the film's framing and unusual close-ups, the lighting, the lack of depth, and the reduction of filmic space need to be analyzed to understand how these stylistic

elements both challenge and keep the spectator emotionally involved in the film. I will argue here that Andre Bazin's discussion on how some films manage to create in the spectator intellectual awareness that does not thwart psychological identification with the characters is highly relevant on this score. In his article "Theater and Film—Part Two" (originally published in French in 1951), Bazin refers to a form of "dissociation within identification." For Bazin, some films find a middle course between encouraging to passive identification and disrupting the viewer's emotional involvement and the cinematic illusion. Instead, reflection and alertness are prompted at the height of illusion. As for the repeated monologue scene, I argue that we are made aware not only of its radical ambiguity but also of our responsibility to contribute to its meaning.