Woolf and Bergman

"You see, Karin, one draws a magic circle around oneself to keep everything out
that doesn't fit one's secret games. Each time life breaks through the circle, the
games become puny and ridiculous. So one draws a new circle and builds new
defenses."

- *Through a Glass Darkly*

"Something now leaves me; something goes from me to meet that figure who is coming
… How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. How
useful an office one's friends perform when they recall us. Yet how painful to be
recalled, to be mitigated, to have one's self adulterated, mixed up, become part of
another." (83)

- *The Waves*

The individual in the works of Ingmar Bergman and Virginia Woolf is often left in a

rather rough spot. Incapable of the simple blind faith of generations prior but left without a

compensatory structure to give meaning to life, they must forge ahead on their own, struggling to

juggle the manifold perceptions of modern life into meaning. The closed stability of life *before* –

before the World War(s), before the death of Percival, before the loss of belief – is thrown into

sharp contrast against the constantly shifting modern world. Put at its most reductive: in the

works looked at here, the world was once a space of certainty and stability but no longer is. In

semiotic terms, the text of the world signified in a stable and enclosed space, and the individual

had a defined role. However, now, in face of the instability of modernity, the individual is left

like the figures in *To the Lighthouse*'s "Time Passes" who, having "gone down to pace the beach

and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed," are forced

"to consider among the usual tokens of divine bounty … something out of harmony with this

jocundity and this serenity." (133)

This treatment of the individual as adrift in the sea of modern life is by no means unique to Bergman or Woolf. It may as well be a basic constitutive element of modernism. But I think the particular way this structure, in which a previously enclosed and stable semiotic space is opened up to uncertainty and instability, plays a similar central role in their works, often permeating various formal levels, is worth exploring. Both Bergman and Woolf's works reflect a deep thematic preoccupation with the relationship between communication, performance, and selfhood. In their later works both use the structure of the soliloquy and monologue as a means to self-reflexively examine this relationship.

In exploring this connection, I want to look at four works, two movies and two novels, split into two pairings. First I want to briefly cover a pairing of earlier works – *To the Lighthouse* for Woolf and *Through a Glass Darkly* for Bergman – that explore themes of selfhood and uncertain semiotic spaces via dimensions of physical domestic space. Then I will discuss a pairing of later works – *The Waves* and *Persona* – which extend these themes of selfhood and uncertain semiotic spaces via an increased self-reflexivity and a radical approach to the formal "space" of their texts. Whereas *To the Lighthouse* and *Through a Glass Darkly* destabilize the distinctions between inside and outside through their depictions of domestic space, *The Waves* and *Persona* destabilize their own interpretive languages by opening up the traditionally enclosed spaces of their respective forms.

In the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* we see the Ramsays' summer home as it is left untended, as the "outside" consistently creeps inward, and as the text of nature ceaselessly reconfigures itself, remaining unreadable at every turn. In this sense, the process detailed in "Time Passes" can be read as a microcosmic example of previously stable semiotic spaces shifting towards instability. The domestic "space" (both physical and metaphorical) of the

Ramsays, capable of providing meaning to Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay (and the dominant structuring element in the lives of the children) has been destabilized and changed, as Mrs. Bast's repetition of "they'd find it changed" succinctly reminds us. The process of dissolving and reconfiguring the physical domestic boundaries of the Ramsays' summer home leaves the space itself irreparably changed, no longer capable of housing the enclosed and comforting domesticity of the first half of the novel.

This opening of previously closed-off interpretive spaces is echoed in both the role the war plays in "Time Passes" – destabilizing both modern society at large as well as the Ramsay's own personal domestic space – and the positioning of "Time Passes" within the body of the text. This latter point is the destabilization most relevant to the discussion of the later works. In the context of *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes" stands as destabilization writ large, not just in the way it synthesizes decay, the instability of domestic spaces, and the impact of the war within a single section, but also in the way it destabilizes the very "space" of novelistic form through the subversion of novelistic convention. "Time Passes" is an irruption of uncertainty into the text of *To the Lighthouse* at varied levels of signification. Not only is the certainty of character and novelistic progression questioned by the sudden deaths of Prue, Andrew, and Mrs. Ramsay, but the basic certainty of human presence in the novel is questioned as well. Or, to universalize to an even greater extent: the basic yoking of "life" and "human activity" is questioned.

Through a Glass Darkly disrupts the stability of domestic spaces as a means to discuss modern anxieties of selfhood and identity in much the same way that *To the Lighthouse* uses the dissolution and reconfiguration of physical domestic space in "Time Passes" as a springboard for a broader destabilization. These themes of domesticity, dogmatic enclosure vs. interpretive freedom, and reality vs. unreality lie at the core of *Through a Glass Darkly* and are explored at

depth in a manner that I won't be able to do justice here. Instead, I want to focus specifically on

the ways the film destabilizes domestic space by altering the physical relationship of inside to

outside – much like the movement of natural elements into the house in "Time Passes" – and

how it examines the relationship between performance and selfhood.

      The film takes place in a single twenty-four hour stretch and follows Karin, Minus,

Martin, and David in a seaside cottage. Karin, recovering from a mental illness implied to be

schizophrenia, is married to Martin. David is the father of both Minus and Karin. The most

notable way *Through a Glass Darkly* destabilizes domestic space is deceptively simple: the

movie places scenes that would conventionally occur in a specific domestic space (i.e. dinner

would usually take place in the dining room) into a more unstable, less culturally codified space.

An early example can be seen in the images below, where the characters sit down for dinner

outside before David (farthest to the right) moves inside for a moment of respite.

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Fig. 1. "(From left) Martin, Karin, Minus, and David at Dinner" Bergman, (9:57)

 Fig. 2. Bergman (13:10)

Following dinner outside, the characters then walk directly to the small building seen in the left-hand corner of the first image above. Here, Minus and Karin, accompanied by David on guitar, perform a play written by Minus. The content of the play, titled "*The Artistic Haunting* or *The Tomb of Illusions,*" involves Minus's artist character seeking the love of a deceased princess played by Karin. Minus' character proclaims himself "an artist of the purest kind. A poet without poems, a painter without paintings, a musician without notes." and claims "to scorn ready-made art, the banal result of vulgar effort. My life is my work." The princess tells the artist to return at midnight and join her in death so that "You thus perfect your work of art and crown your love. You ennoble your life and show the skeptics what a true artist can do." Upon contemplation, the artist finds himself incapable of this final act, and instead settles for the idea of writing a poem,

composing an opera, or painting a picture of his encounter with the princess. This play within the

film is one of the more particularly direct self-reflexive critiques in *Through a Glass Darkly*.

Upon finishing the play, the characters then walk back towards the dinner table, Minus and Karin

still in costume, as Karin remarks that she'd left her bedroom window open (Bergman, 13:00).

This sequence — dinner drifting into theatrical performance, theatrical performance

drifting back into domesticity — is one of unique importance in the context of this essay. Here

the film directly mingles the "unreality" of the stage with the "real" setting of the house and

highlights the central role performance plays throughout the film's narrative and more broadly

the inherent relationship between performance and domesticity. Karin's movement into the house

while in costume is directly reflective of the contradictory "performances" (or, roles) demanded

of her by the men in the film. Martin's treatment of Karin as both a sexual object and a child-like

victim is summed up succinctly by Karin early in the film when she says "Little Kajsa, you

always say that. Am I so little, or has the illness made a child out of me?" (Bergman, 22:25)

David echoes Martin's child-like view of Karin while simultaneously expecting her to help raise

and tutor Minus. And Minus views Karin as both a maternal and sexual figure.

In other words, the men around Karin view her solely as an object on which to project an

absurd and impossibly contradicting set of roles. This is to such an extreme extent that the

moment of divine tranquility and experience Karin relays to Minus takes place in her own

version of reality, outside of the mutually understood reality of Minus, Martin, and David. I mean

"reality" in both the literal narrative sense (Karin has a mental illness that the other three don't

and is thus notably "detached" from their mutually-understood reality on a narrative level) and

the more abstract sense in that the trio of men, by viewing Karin solely as an object for them to

project roles onto, literally "don't see" Karin, they aren't poised to make a value judgment on

Karin's "visions" because they refuse to acknowledge the contradictory set of roles they place

Karin in to begin with. In not acknowledging (or even intuiting awareness of) the contradictory

realities they impose upon her they thus can't be trusted to judge the realities Karin imposes upon

herself. Visions or no visions, Karin's experience is consistently ignored (if seen at all) by the

people around her. The experience Karin relays to Minus describes how

> "I walk through the wall, you see . . . one day, someone called me from behind the
>
> wallpaper … so I pressed myself against the wall, and it gave way, like foliage, and I was
>
> inside. You think I'm making it up? I enter a large room. It's bright and peaceful. People
>
> are moving back and forth. Some of them talk to me, and I understand them. It's so nice,
>
> and I feel safe. In some of their faces there's a shining light. Everyone is waiting for *him*
>
> to come, but no one is anxious. They say that I can be there when it happens." (Bergman,
>
> 47:00)

Karin's description recalls Mrs. Ramsays' moments alone listening to the ocean in the way they

describe an interpretive space in which she isn't an object of vision and projection, wherein they

can resolve the contradictions of self and identity:

> "Now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself . . . All the
>
> being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a
>
> sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness . . . This core of
>
> darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought,
>
> exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a
>
> summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest
>
> ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles) but
>
> as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there

rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together

in this peace, this rest, this eternity" (Woolf, 62-63)

Neither Mrs. Ramsay nor Karin are capable of finding this sense of security when surrounded by

the people in their lives. It is only when alone that they are able to simply *be* themselves, rather

than have to perform themselves into being. The relationship between solitude and selfhood

explored in both Karin and Mrs. Ramsay's characters is explored similarly in *The Waves* through

the character of Bernard. Karin's role as a dynamic and independent individual constantly forced

into conflicting roles directly engages questions of performance, role, and audience in a way that

finds strong continuation in *Persona*.

Fig. 3. "Minus's Play" Bergman (17:02)

Having looked at the ways in which *Through a Glass Darkly* and *To the Lighthouse*

engage the basic structure of introducing uncertainty into previously enclosed interpretive spaces

(in this case, the sphere of the domestic via the interplay between inside and outside), I want to move to *Persona* and *The Waves*, with an eye towards how these two works employ the same basic structure in a far more complex, radical, and self-reflexive way. Where *Through a Glass Darkly* and *To the Lighthouse* destabilize the interpretative space of the domestic (in other words, the basic constitutive element in the lives of the characters, particularly given the seaside settings), *Persona* and *The Waves* destabilize the basic constitutive elements of their artistic forms. Namely, narrative voice for Woolf and the cinematic frame for Bergman.

This is the point in which I want to highlight the crucial role monologue and soliloquy play in structuring these works. I don't mean either of these terms in a *strictly* theatrical sense but instead more so as umbrella terms that group a diverse series of self-reflexive techniques that all contain elements *of* monologue and soliloquy, without perhaps satisfying the strictest definition of the words.

The conventional structure (the structure as applied in the theater) of both monologue and soliloquy creates precisely the sort of closed semiotic space that Woolf and Bergman consistently destabilize. By transplanting the structure of monologue-soliloquy out of the realm of the solely theatrical and into non-theatrical forms, both Woolf and Bergman make these destabilizing energies central formal aspects of their texts. The conventional monologue assumes a level of certainty – certainty in the existence of the audience, certainty in the artistic act itself (that is, the monologue's synthesis within the greater performance as a whole), and certainty that the unstable performative act of the theater will be mediated by the "readings" of said performance by the audience – that is dependent on its theatricality and its relatively stable relationship to an audience. Both Bergman and Woolf use monologue and soliloquy as structuring forms in their

texts only to consistently undermine this structure and in doing so draw attention to the inability of their respective works to communicate through stable interpretive languages and techniques.

Both *Persona* and *The Waves* seem to evince a similarly anxious feeling towards monologue-soliloquy and its ability to communicate. Both works steadily disperse authorial authority on various formal levels and seem to carry an ever-increasing doubt as to their own ability to express themselves as they near their respective conclusions. Before moving on entirely from discussion of these terms, I do want to point out that I think soliloquy specifically could be explored much further, especially in terms of how it gets translated from the signifying language of the theater into the language of other forms. The way soliloquy directly acknowledges multiple "levels" of vision seems uniquely self-reflexive. In other words, inherent in the form of the soliloquy is the dual awareness that *within the text* nobody is listening, but *outside* of it the audience sits at attention.

One doesn't need to look too closely to see the basic structuring role monologue plays in *The Waves*. The entire novel is structured around the six characters' monologue-soliloquies with brief interludes detailing a seaside setting as the sun rises and falls. The interest here isn't so much in monologue as a basic structuring element of the text but more particularly the way the text seems to so insistently structure itself around monologue, only to question and undermine the basic formal elements of such a structure. Read broadly, this approach to monologue-soliloquy can be seen as a discussion on the ability to communicate, or, as Bernard's final section will make clear, the ability of any one artistic form to properly communicate. With this framing in mind, the discussion of *The Waves* will focus on two distinct aspects: the interplay of images *between* separate monologues and the growing reservations about the nature of story Bernard expresses in his final section.

The first is relatively simple. As Louis states early on, "The time approaches when these soliloquies will be shared" (39). Images that originate in one monologue, say Rhoda's image that "There are then warm hollows grooved in the heart of the uproar; alcoves of silence where we can shelter under the wing of beauty," (160) reappear in the monologues of other characters, often slightly altered, as Louis soon after notes "There is no respite here, no shadow made of quivering leaves, or alcove to which one can retreat from the sun, to sit, with a love, in the cool of the evening." (169) Here, the enclosed space of the monologue, *the* structuring element of *The Waves*, is consistently broken down and reconstituted. The image drifts from Rhoda to Louis but reconfigures itself in the voice of Louis. Further complicating things is the fact that images don't only move between monologue-to-monologue but also between monologues and the brief third-person interludes that further structure the novel. For example, when the third-person interludes introduce the image of "reeds now fixed as if glass had hardened round them; and then the glass wavered and the reeds swept low" (165) only for Susan to later note how "Life stands round me like glass round the imprisoned reed" (192). Or when Louis' image from the opening sequence of "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps." (9) concludes an interlude far later in the novel: "The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping." (150) which then opens into a monologue from Neville in which he grieves Percival's death falling from his horse: "He is dead. He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown" (151).

This collapsing and reforming of narrative spaces via the usage of monologue reaches its peak in Bernard's final monologue, which makes up the entire last section of the novel, where he remarks "when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call 'my life,' it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not

altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (276). Bernard's narrative uncertainty, his sense that the form he's assumed, the form of the monologue, is hopelessly ill-fit for the task at hand, then moves towards the setting as he notes that "whether there is substance or truth in it I do not know. Nor do I know exactly where we are. What city does that stretch of sky look down upon? Is it Paris, is it London where I sit" (288). Bernard's uncertainty grows even more radical throughout his final monologue, as he begins to question his own selfhood and ability to express himself through words:

> "But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red–even
> they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How
> describe or say anything in articulate words again?" (287)

Much like Karin and Mrs. Ramsay, it is only in solitude that Bernard is able to resolve the uncertainty of his selfhood. Earlier in the novel, Bernard describes the tensions between his complex nature and the social roles he must play:

> "then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard in
> public, bubbles; in private, is secretive . . . They do not understand that I have to effect
> different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who
> alternately act their parts as Bernard." (76)

And it is only as the novel is nearing its conclusion that Bernard expresses an experience of solitude remarkably close to Karin and Mrs. Ramsay:

> "How much better is silence; the coffee-cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself
> like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here for ever with
> bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, being themselves .

. . I would willingly give all my money that you should not disturb me but let me sit on

and on, silent, alone." (295)

Bernard's growing uncertainty, directly commensurate with his shouldering of narrative

duty, is one of *The Waves*' strongest points of contact with *Persona*. Specifically, Bernard's

remarks upon his lack of control and dispersing of authorial authority recall *Persona*'s usage of

montage to draw attention to the artificiality of film and his struggles with performance and

selfhood are reflected in the film's narrative. Bernard's increasing doubt towards not only his

own narrative ability but the ability of story as a vehicle to properly express life, his questioning

on whether "Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? A last ripple? A trickle of water

to some gutter where, burbling, it dies away?" (276) and how "if there are no stories, what end

can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when

we try to tell it" (276) exemplify both *The Waves* and *Persona*'s movements away from narrative

certainty.

In discussing *Persona*, I want to focus on two aspects of the film, both relating to

questions of monologue and the "opening up" of formal space via the introduction of uncertainty.

First, I want to explore the way *Persona* uses montage and self-reflexive imagery to express an

increasing sense of doubt toward itself and its ability to communicate in a manner that recalls

Bernard's meta-commentary on the limitations of story. I then want to explore the similar way

Bergman uses monologue as the basic constitutive element for his manipulation of interpretive

space (for Bergman the cinematic frame, for Woolf novelistic voice) with special attention

towards how *Persona* relentlessly creates enclosed interpretive spaces only to then disrupt them

and highlight their artificial and constructed nature. Narratively, *Persona* explores the

relationship between two women, a nurse (Alma) and an actress (Elisabet) who has inexplicably

stopped talking. As the film progresses and Alma nurses Elisabet back to health the distinctions

between these two characters/identities begin to blur.

First, the usage of montage. Like Bernard as he wonders "should this be the end of the

story, a kind of sigh?", the text of *Persona* seems to take on a life of its own as the narrative

develops, actively highlighting the constructed nature of the narrative and the tensions between

the life the film seems to take on (the unstable interpretive space it opens up) and attempts to

control such interpretive space. To this end, *Persona* opens with an oneiric sequence of images

that both highlights the nature of *Persona* as film and shows the literal construction of cinematic

images. The interpretative "space" in which the film takes place is broken down and

reconstituted before a conventional narrative even begins to take place.

Fig. 4. Bergman (00:37)

Fig. 5. Bergman (01:08)

Another relevant usage of montage occurs at the very end of the film. Following the

conclusion of the narrative proper, *Persona* shifts to an abbreviated montage, one that restates

various suggestive images from the opening sequence, before showing a film projector as it runs

out of film and stops running. *Persona* – much like Bernard's turn as the sole narrator of *The*

Waves – seems to progressively disperse narrative authority, growing increasingly recalcitrant as

to its own ability to signify in any stable way or impose restrictions upon its narrative. The movie

ends not when the characters seem to have reached any sort of resolution or when a sufficient

and linear development of theme has been completed, but when the film runs out and the

projector shuts off.

Finally, I want to discuss *Persona*'s usage of monologue and closeups. In *The Waves*

narrative voice and the formal structure of the text (as a sequence of monologues) form the

constitutive semiotic elements that are altered and made unstable. In *Persona* the structuring of

the text as a sequence of monologues is largely retained, but where *The Waves* uses narrative

voice as a basic element, *Persona* uses the cinematic frame. In *The Waves* the act of monologue

is deeply complexified by the transferal of images between seemingly distinct narrative voices,

but in *Persona* this transference happens on a literal-visual level. Artificially enclosed spaces are

created and dissolved in *Persona* in a manner similar to Woolf's monologues.

This is most strongly articulated in the images below, but the basic structure is as follows:

the creation of a "frame" with a perfectly centered facial closeup (usually engaged in a

monologue) followed by the breaking of this perfectly centered "frame" as uncertainty (usually

another face) moves into the image. By structuring *Persona* around these facial closeups and

framing faces with such incessant equilibrium, Bergman calls attention to the artificial nature of

the cinematic frame and constantly questions the ability of the monologue to convey in a stable

and fixed manner. Much like Bernard's realization that "it is not one life that I look back upon; I

am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan,

Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs," (276) the usage of

monologue in *Persona* is constantly complexified. Contained and stable images begin to engage

uncertainty. Rather than allow these monologues to signify in a stable environment, Bergman

instead consistently disrupts the formal space of the monologue. This complexity, again much

like Bernard's final section, is reflected both on the level of form as well as narrative as the

distinctions between the two central characters of *Persona* begin to blur throughout the film.
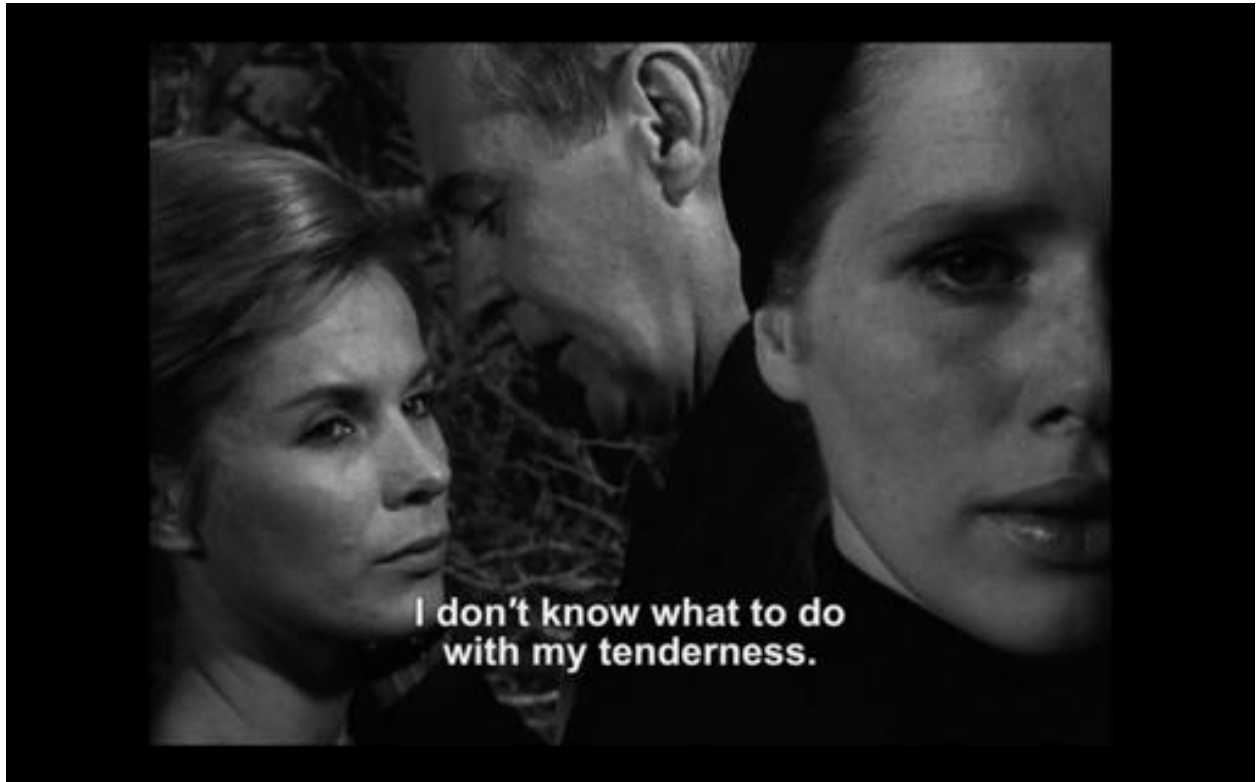
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Fig. 6. Bergman (1:05:11)

Fig. 7. "The Doctor and Elisabet" Bergman (20:53)

Fig. 8. "The Doctor and Elisabet cont." Bergman (20:57)

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Fig 9. Bergman (38:44) Elisabet combining the self-reflexive imagery of the montage sequences with the usage of perfectly centered closeup shots

Fig. 10 Bergman (25:30-26:70) Distance between Alma and Elisabet is defined.

Fig 11. Bergman (25:30-26:70) Then collapsed.

Fig. 12. Bergman (25:30-26:70) Then reconfigured, with Alma's face further centered.

Fig. 13. Bergman (25:30-26:70) Then Alma moves backwards and the camera once again re-centers, this time around Elisabet

Persona's ambiguous relationship towards the efficacy of monologue as a form of communication reaches a fever pitch towards the end of the film when the character of Alma, sitting across a table from Elisabet, begins a lengthy monologue. Initially, we see this speech from Alma's side of the table. That is, all we see is Elisabet's reaction to Alma's speech. This first iteration of Alma's monologue drastically centers questions of unstable interpretative spaces and symbols, like the play from Through a Glass Darkly taken towards an even further reduction. Alma's monologue, shot from her point of view looking out at Elisabet, forces the viewer to search for meaning, for a proper "reading" of her words, in the face of Elisabet. The qualities of theatrical soliloquy discussed earlier — the implicit/constitutive relationship with a stable and willing audience — are turned on their head here. Alma, the "active" monologue-

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speaker, is placed in a visually static role, and Elisabet, the "passive" listener takes on a role of

emotive performance.

Fig. 13. "Monologue pt. 1" Bergman (1:09:07)

Fig. 14. "Monologue pt. 2" Bergman (1:11:35)

Taken alone, this framing of Alma's monologue, with its emphasis on Elizabeth's

performative reaction, would constitute a strong restatement of the ideas articulated here about

open and closed interpretative spaces and the usage of monologue, but *Persona* goes a step

further. Following Alma's initial monologue, the camera flips, and the audience is treated to the

exact same monologue but this time from Elisabet's side of the table, showing Alma's face as she

speaks. *Persona*'s climactic pair of visually inverted monologues is about as succinct an example

of Woolf and Bergman's usage (and destabilization) of monologue as a structuring form as there

is to be found amidst the body of works discussed here. Here at this singular point of interpretive

importance the tendency towards multiplicity in *Persona* reaches one of its strongest points of

articulation. Rather than provide a single "stable" climactic monologue, Bergman instead

provides two distinct versions of the same monologue, forcing the viewer to search for a

"reading" of the words through two entirely different performances.

Taken all together, these various critical pairings and specific examples speak to a similar attitude toward formal space and questions of communication and performance in the works of Ingmar Bergman and Virginia Woolf. Despite both producing works exemplary of a certain modernist style, I feel these connections go beyond such a framework. Their respective artistic developments have oddly strong similarities as they each confront questions of domestic space and the relationship between inside and outside in earlier works before moving towards more radical and self-reflexive questions. In both, the interrogations of domestic space become interrogations of formal space and the "inside-outside" relationship being explored grows far more abstract. The resonant qualities between Woolf and Bergman's works extend beyond the scope of this essay. Subjects such as a shared use of aquatic imagery, their tendency towards sea-side settings in their works, and their exploration of the relationships between role, desire, and selfhood are all open to further and stronger exploration.

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