As she stops the car, Alma’s curiosity becomes too much to bear. We see her anxious eyes dart to the pile of mail in the passenger seat next to her, an open envelope—the insufferable taunt—resting on top. In one frantic motion, she snatches up the letter, almost as if one second more might render her immobile, racked with guilt for secretly reading her patient’s, Elisabet’s, letter. Alma, a nurse, has been charged with Elisabet, a famous actress gone mute, for the summer. While Alma has spilled her most intimate secrets to her patient, never has the silent Elisabet reciprocated, making the contents of the letter all the more seductive. She puts on her glasses and begins to read. We, too, read as Alma reads, line by line, the camera alternating between intimate shots of Alma’s face and a full-frame view of the typewritten letter—a frame that is slightly shaky, as if to mimic her nervous grasp on the paper. Slow, calculated raindrops drip in the background, the only sound in the scene, each heavy, prolonged drip adding to the anxiety. We find ourselves wrapped up in the suspense, eagerly anticipating each new line, hanging on every phrase that is slowly, painstakingly revealed—a deliberate tension that lends heightened importance to Elisabet’s words. After every line, we see Alma’s downcast eyes and intermittent pauses as she gradually processes the letter’s contents. We read the final lines, which refer to Alma, mocking the secrets Alma had formerly confessed to Elisabet: “Sometimes she cries over past sins—an episodic orgy with a totally strange boy followed by an abortion. She claims that her notions of life don’t accord with her actions.”

It is at this point in Ingmar Bergman’s film, Persona, that Alma has been betrayed—a catalyst for her breakdown and the escalating chaos that ensues until the ending credits. By the end of Bergman’s visceral film, nurse and patient become one—a slow and strange fusion of personality and being. In the scene described above, we are hearing Elisabet’s voice for the first time—a direct line to her mind through typed script, albeit in a detached fashion. The letter, then, provides an avenue into Elisabet’s thoughts beyond what
was available to her nurse, which should appease Alma, who desperately seeks to bond with her patient. And yet, it achieves the exact opposite; the letter’s harsh, critical words initiate Alma’s downfall—a turbulent collapse of blissful optimism into total insecurity. In Alma’s quest to connect with Elisabet, something goes awry, putting her very sense of self at risk. How could a person rely so wholly on someone—seek so desperately for a connection, so much so as to reveal her most intimate secrets, her most shameful act—who is, in reality, completely untrustworthy? It is almost as if Alma deliberately sought out the least dependable confidante.

In a way she doesn’t quite understand, Alma needs to connect with Elisabet, a need that echoes in numerous, increasingly desperate attempts to get her patient to open up emotionally. Yet, despite all her efforts, her pursuit is ultimately futile. Time and time again, Elisabet remains stubbornly silent—an accumulation of futility that should have hinted at Elisabet’s cruel perception of her as a mere object of fun and derision. Alma, however, never adds up these clues. In his own *Confessions*, Saint Augustine offers insight into an undying and perhaps foolish endeavor such as Alma’s. Citing experiences from his youth, he explains a misguided mission for human approval, stemming from the desire “to simply love and be loved” (Augustine 24). For Augustine, this overwhelming desire obscured all sense of reason, giving way to lust and ambition—anything that would secure the human approval he so badly sought. In other words, an innate need for human connection, “to love and be loved,” actually fostered self-delusion. Augustine’s self-delusion shielded him from what he now considers absolute truth—obedience to God. For Alma—housed with only Elisabet on a private beach—embedded longing for human approval can only be satisfied by one source, Elisabet herself. In an uncontrollable way, Alma relies on Elisabet for this approval, her need for connection battering against Elisabet’s wall of silence—a need so desperate it is ignorant of reason, skewing the reality of the situation, allowing Alma to be ever-hopeful.

Alma exists peacefully under this self-constructed bliss, cheerfully interacting with Elisabet, laughing and smiling in tranquil beach scenes, attempting to engage Elisabet in conversation. Her most notable effort to breach Elisabet’s silence is confessing her most intimate secret, an unexplainable, spontaneous orgy on the beach with a strange girl and two young boys—an
odd event she cannot quite make sense of, even if, in that moment, her body seemed to follow a sort of primal instinct in response to desire. With misplaced trust, she subjects her most haunting insecurity to Elisabet’s judgment, perhaps unconsciously relying on her avowed silence to keep her secret. Even though Elisabeth is devotedly silent, Alma still has to live alone with her, so such a confession puts everything on the line; a harsh judgment may forever disrupt their relationship, leaking into their daily interactions, or at least, damage Alma’s cheerful perception of a peaceful coexistence. It almost seems too risky, yet Alma takes the risk in complete faith, hoping such an honest act will encourage Elisabet to reciprocate. Her reliance on human connection again trumps her reason. Alma’s faulty, yet unbridled happiness reflects Augustine’s youthful rapture—lustful, mischievous, and self-indulgent—that later comes to haunt him. Like Augustine, Alma is, “seduced . . . because [she was] in the mood to be seduced,” only later coming to terms with the self-destructive actions guided by her insatiable need for Elisabet’s active friendship (Augustine 28). Consequently, reality is thrust cruelly in her face, expectations of confidence thrown aside. Upon reading the letter, Alma is suddenly forced to accept her own self-delusion, her misguided trust, her doomed distance from the unreachable Elisabet. Her complete unawareness leaves her all the more blindsided, intensifying the sting of betrayal.

In her letter, Elisabet reveals that it is fun to study Alma, as an actress might study a character, and we, too, are studying Alma, increasingly realizing her need for human approval, even if baffled by her attempts to achieve it. In the face of her own self-delusion, Alma, distraught and confused, transforms into someone unrecognizable from the kind-hearted, optimistic nurse we have watched thus far. Instead of cheerfully reciting excerpts from novels on the beach, suddenly Alma is laying broken glass in her patient’s path and threatening her with the scald of boiling water. In a last, desperate resort to connect with Elisabet, she launches an assault. It seems that any connection, even one that arises from violence, might comfort Alma. The fulfillment of Alma’s need is somehow dire. Elisabet, however, is forever silent, forever unreachable—a mere mirage to torment Alma’s desire, driving her into a type of insanity—her past notions colliding with her insufferable present. With her staunch silence, Elisabet is almost like Augustine’s God, who can only be known through Scripture—a crude medium that, at first, struggles to fulfill
Augustine’s “[longing] for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart” (39). Many times, he questions the very existence of God. In *Persona*, Elisabet is not really there at all, and without her presence, without her approval, neither is Alma. It is here that Bergman presents a bewildering paradox: Alma, try as she might, cannot reach Elisabet, and yet, their *personae* begin to merge. Two entities become one. As viewers now intimately linked with Alma, we see her and know she exists. And yet, Alma dissipates right before our eyes. With this disappearance, Bergman suggests that there is much more at stake in Alma’s reliance on Elisabet than mere want for human approval.

Psychologist R. D. Laing offers insight into the dissolving of a trusted presence before our eyes, emphasizing the importance of social interaction in the validation of existence. In his study of the patterns of human behavior, *Self and Others*, he claims that, in society, “‘persons confirm one another in a practical way’” and that society is “‘termed human in the measure to which its members confirm one another’” (Martin Buber, qtd. in Laing 81). In other words, we only become human through our interactions with others, who must confirm our existence, as we, in turn, confirm theirs. Laing proposes there are different levels of both confirmation and what he calls “disconfirmation,” a type of communication that denies another’s presence or significance, which both have pivotal roles in self-development (Laing 82). Alma’s need, then, runs deeper than human approval; her very sense of being depends on Elisabet. At first, though, Alma had falsely believed she was being genuinely confirmed by Elisabet. She enjoyed a happy existence until forced to see her ignorance. If she had not read the letter, she may have continued in this way, perhaps suggesting that a genuine confirmation can exist, even if it is not the intent of the confirmer, as long as the person being confirmed believes it to be genuine. In other words, confirmations can be products of self-delusion and still potentially serve a positive purpose, that is, until they are revealed as fabrications. Even though it was never Elisabet’s intent to confirm Alma, Alma believed it was, making the betrayal all the more detrimental, removing that validation of existence that she now must try to regain.

Bergman seems to challenge Laing’s proposed criteria for existence, posing the question of how far we are willing to go to exist, crafting a scenario for Alma that will test her resilience. From the beginning, she is thrown into
a game of survival. She is isolated with a mute, presumably mentally ill patient, who will not—perhaps cannot—fulfill her needs, forcing Alma to resort to violent, rash actions, a kind of primal defense removed from the once civil, nurturing nurse. In this about-face, Bergman derides Alma’s reliance on Elisabet, and perhaps, more broadly, human interdependence, as he shows the ridiculous, desperate lengths Alma is willing to go to prove her own existence. His mockery rings in her failure and her loss of propriety. With Alma’s downfall, he again reveals a problematic paradox: we are so desperate for human validation, so willing to viciously fight for our existence, that in the process, we may resort to something completely removed from human civility, a primal violence that we may not recognize.

As Bergman demonstrates with Alma, we will fight for confirmation of existence. For Alma, this fight somehow includes an act of confession. By revealing her most troubling insecurity, her greatest sin, she believes she can reach Elisabet through openness and raw emotion—she needs to reach her—and yet her appeal is accompanied by a haunting shame she cannot shake. When she is explaining the odd, sensual experience of the orgy to Elisabet, the act of confessing fosters anxiety: Alma shields her face, paces uncomfortably around the room, lights a cigarette, and breaks down in hysterics. And yet, Alma’s obvious discomfort does not quite make sense, as, at this point in the film, she is still living pleasantly under the delusion that Elisabet is the ultimate listener, even admitting aloud that she is glad she has someone to finally understand her. Augustine, in his own Confessions to God, knows “[n]othing is nearer to [God’s] ears than a confessing heart,” yet, like Alma, he remains tormented by sins of his youth, most notably, sexual dependency that seemed inherently wrong (Rom. 10:9, qtd. in Augustine 26). Alma full-heartedly relies on Elisabet and Augustine knows God’s forgiveness, so where does this shame in confessing stem from?

The notion of sin itself speaks to a sense of wrongdoing, implying that there exists a moral code that must be followed, a predefined idea of how life should be lived. In the opening of Persona, Alma reveals her plan to marry her boyfriend Karl-Henrik, raise his kids, and maintain her job, proclaiming, “It’s all been decided. It’s nothing to ponder over. It’s a huge feeling of security.” While she claims this neat plan provides “security,” we see her lingering doubt, as she must reassure herself several times that “It’s good.” For
Augustine, his security, which he realizes much later in life, comes from the absolute power of God, yet he was once guided by “moral conventions of the world” which cast “a criterion of a good life” (21). Both Alma and Augustine speak to the overwhelming force of societal pressure attempting to mold and shape the life they lead, in part a structure for a happy existence, “a good life.” Alma knows what society expects of her, and yet, by watching her reassure herself, we can see that she cannot quite trust it, perhaps realizing its limits. She knows to marry Karl-Henrik is good and right, but is forever tormented by a memory of sexual deviance—a defiance of societal code that is actually complete bliss for Alma, an overwhelming euphoria she never felt before. Here, Bergman reveals the stifling side of societal influence, which suffocates deep-rooted desires in the name of civility and perhaps even limits happiness. Alma was happy, later realizes she should not have been happy, and cannot reconcile the two. She does not actually regret the orgy, nor did she experience physical resistance when it occurred, but the guilt is imposed on her by societal judgment. The shame Alma displays to Elisabet, then, comes from this clash of desire with expectation, an expectation so demanding that it creates inner turmoil, manifesting physically in her obvious anxiety.

While Augustine faces a similar inner conflict, his insecurity stems not from societal expectations, but from the divine conventions of God’s will, against which he measures his flawed and lustful youth. This suggests that Augustine’s guilt operates at a higher level than Alma’s; his shame is not rooted in human terms, and he admits that his peers actually encouraged his sexual exploits, “I was ashamed not to be equally guilty of shameful behavior [as others]” (27). Augustine, in a way he did not understand, felt the wrongness of his actions, yet relished sexual desire, keeping a concubine for many years. In his Confessions, the source of his shame is an unrealized blindness to God, giving into both societal pressure, as well as the encouragement of his friends, and an innate sex drive. Augustine could almost feel God’s presence without yet recognizing He was there, but still he could not stifle his urge.

Both Alma and Augustine’s experiences suggest an underlying sexual dependency—a sometimes uncontrollable, biological urge—that inevitably clashes with others’ guiding expectations, resulting in necessary sexual repression. Just as Alma only feels regret after the fact, Augustine, despite all his lamenting, never actually renounces the human libido. Neither can help
but give in, even as Alma jeopardizes her “decided,” secure future and Augustine shields himself from finding God. They cannot help their actions—and can even relish them in the moment—but, overwhelmed by inner conflict, they cannot understand them either, so they have no other option but to turn to an external source, a confessor. Alma turns to Elisabet, and Augustine turns to God. Confession, then, emerges as a way to reconcile inner confusion and its accompanying shame through interaction with another. In a reflection on friendship, Augustine explains the power of human interaction to influence our thoughts. He explains how the mere presence of another can both create “a nest of love and gentleness” and erase shame in acts of wrongdoing—“a seduction of the mind” that can encourage deviation from God (29, 34). Collective action somehow sheds the shame in devious acts, simply because it is shared, somehow understood as acceptable by more than one person. On the beach, Alma would never have participated in the orgy without the presence of the strange girl, who for a brief moment eliminated the shame in the act, as all members willingly and blissfully took part in shared desire. The presence of another person—the mutual acceptance of the act—allowed Alma to exit the parameters of propriety, if only for that moment. She turns to confession as a similar escape. Lured by the false pretense of a developing friendship, Alma needs Elisabet in yet another fashion, as a way to help her reconcile past actions and secure her place now. For Alma, confession is powerful relief, however misinformed, and her anxious tears turn to laughter. Yet, Alma’s relief is short-lived, a product of her own delusion, as her confidante mocks her, reinforcing the very shame she sought to alleviate, initiating her downward spiral. Her downfall suggests that the outcome of confession relies heavily on the confessor, who can either validate or forgive one’s actions or subject them to critical judgment. Relying on a confessor, then, implies a leap of faith, and Bergman seems again to ridicule our complete dependence on others in Alma’s misplaced reliance on Elisabet and resulting loss of sense that seems almost laughable.

Augustine has a way out that Alma does not. By turning to God, he can transcend the bonds of human interdependence, or, at least, has another external force to rely on, to reconcile and repurpose his past sins. While Alma discovers the flawed side of relying on a human confessor, Augustine believes in a totality in God—an unchangeable, all-knowing, and forgiving force that
the Scriptures describe. Perhaps Alma had a similar view of Elisabet pre-betrayal, but ultimately, she is forced to see the truth; for Augustine, though, there is nothing else—God is absolute reality, an “unmoved stability” (34). Through confession, he is able to surrender his existence to something greater than himself, his past sins, doubts, and flaws relieved through complete reliance on a higher power. And yet, Augustine would never have converted without the guiding influence of others, without the human interaction and debate that lead him to his truth. As he hunts for answers, his mother’s devout faith broods in the back of his mind. A story of the conversion of a respected rhetorician—much like himself—causes him to rethink Christianity, and even the very moment of his conversion is sparked by conversation with his friend Alypius. Even Augustine, who now knows God as absolute truth, needed the aid of others to arrive at this knowledge, a knowledge that seems to secure his place in the world. Only through a type of human dependence could this security be gained.

It is that sense of security that Alma so viciously fought for. Somehow realizing its benefits, Alma could not escape the lure of human connection. She fails miserably in desperation to find it, and yet, even though Bergman may want us to mock her, there is something beautiful in her efforts, something we can recognize. Our very existence, like Alma’s, is a perpetual struggle, continuously pulled in different directions by conflicting sources of societal pressure and desire, harboring confusion, shame, and anxiety that we cannot quite reckon with on our own. However, we aren’t alone, for the mere presence of others can give us hope for attaining comfort and validation, even though the very thing we depend on for relief can cause us the most hurt. But somehow it’s worth the risk. Through others, we have a chance to escape from the overwhelming and perplexing world that consumes us, if only for a little while. A chance. Even that is worth fighting for.

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WORKS CITED


Lopert Pictures, 1966. Film.