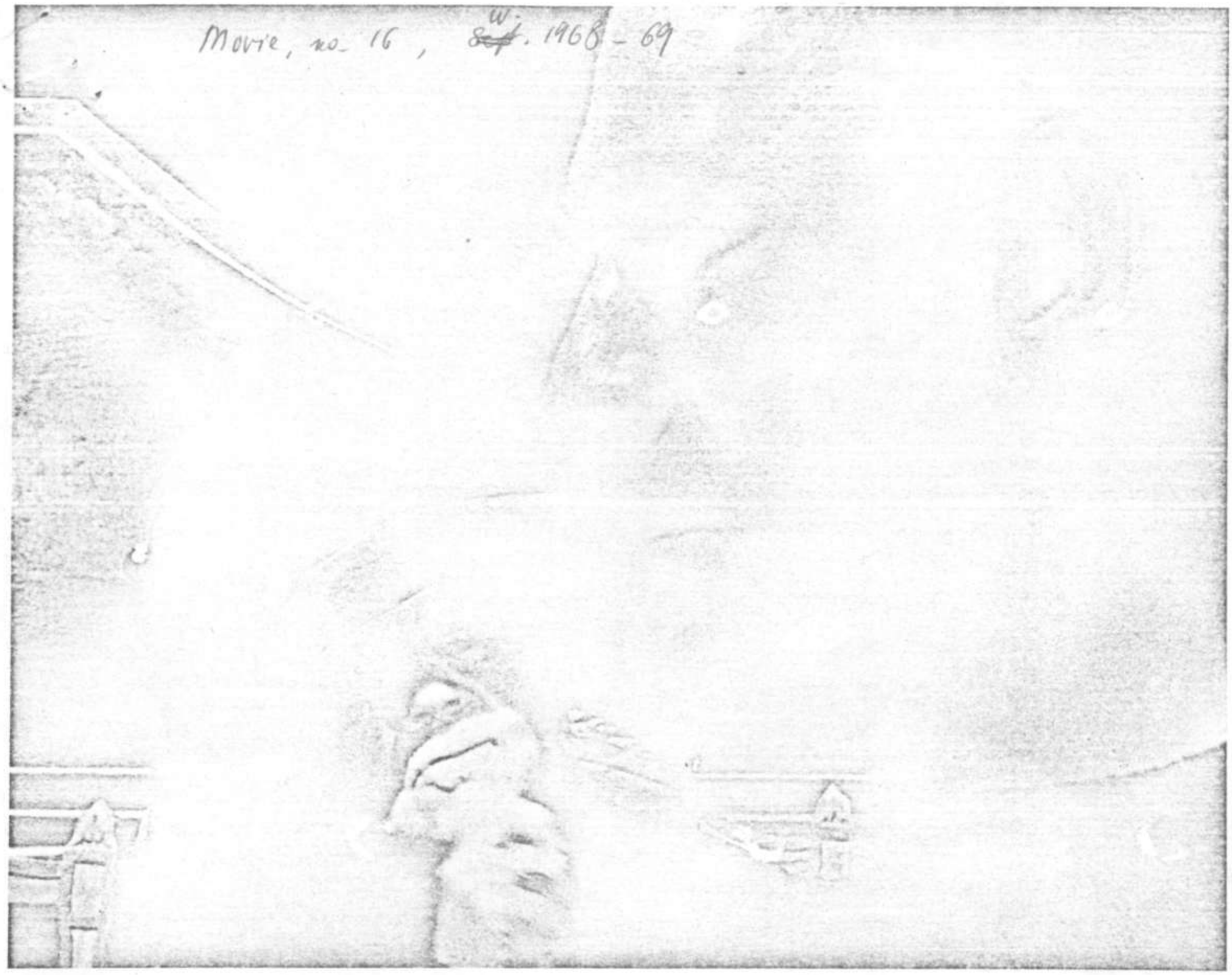
CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

# Document Citation

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | **Hour of the wolf** |
| Author(s) | Robin Wood |
| Source | *Movie* |
| Date | 1968 |
| Type | article |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | 9-12 |
| No. of Pages | 4 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | Vargtimmen (Hour of the wolf), Bergman, Ingmar, 1968 |

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Movie, no. 16, Sept. W. 1968-69



# HOUR OF THE WOLF

*Vargtimmen* derives from a script which Bergman wrote before *Persona*, and provisionally entitled *The Cannibals*. Illness intervened, and out of it grew *Persona*. Bergman then returned to the earlier scenario, revising it extensively. As *Persona* broke new ground, one expected the new film to combine elements of the old and new Bergman, and such expectations are in the event confirmed. But the fact that *Vargtimmen* is such a coherent and satisfying work, with no sense of disparateness, also confirms the organic nature of Bergman's *oeuvre*, and warns one not to talk too glibly about 'the old and the new': *Persona* marked a new stage in Bergman's development, but not at the cost of rejecting its predecessors.

The themes of *Persona* can be traced back readily enough through Bergman's previous work to his early films. Apart from obvious innovatory features of style and method, what strikes one most in it—and what is the outcome of the prolonged and rigorous self-disciplining of the Trilogy—is its artistic impersonality: its distancing and universalising of Bergman's personal concerns. If *Vargtimmen* may strike one superficially as a pre-trilogy throwback, it is because of the evidently close relationship between the protagonist (played, as in *The Seventh Seal* and *The Face*, by Max von Sydow) and Bergman himself. Yet comparison with *The Face* will demonstrate, I think, that the objectifying discipline is as strongly in control in *Vargtimmen* as in *Persona*. The detailed objections to *The Face* —that it was at once too explicit and too obscure, that certain subsidiary elements were neither very interesting in themselves nor meaningfully integrated in the whole, that the overall tone was unpleasant, at once frigid and strident—add up to the primary objection that Bergman was not there sufficiently master of his material. No such objections can be raised against *Vargtimmen*. Here, all the elements are perfectly integrated; when the film becomes momentarily explicit (in Alma's final monologue), this is both in character and justified by the overall form; the obscurities are for the most part meaningful *as* obscurities—the point, that is, lies partly in their remaining obscure; and the film is made with a spontaneity, a passion, and a sureness of expression that suggest, for all the blackness of the content, the work of an altogether freer human being than the one who made *The Face*.

Much has been made of *Vargtimmen*'s references back to previous Bergman films,

*Still: Max von Sydow and the old woman who removes her face (Naima Wifstrand).*



WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

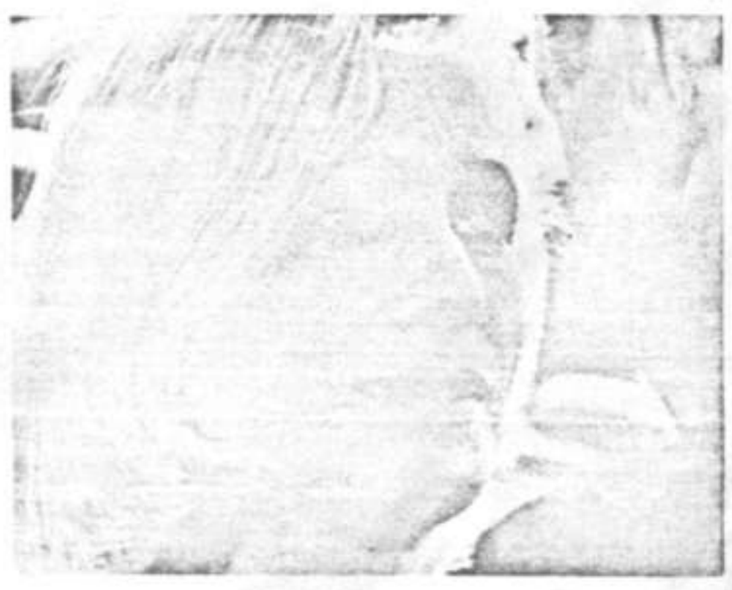
via characters' names and certain characteristic incidents. What seems to me more interesting—and clearly related to the increased objectification—is that this is the first Bergman film to point to a wide (and non-Swedish) cinematic tradition outside his own work. In view of his often expressed admiration for Fellini the film's close relationship in subject, structure and method to *Giulietta degli Spiriti* is perhaps not surprising, any more than is its complementary self-sufficiency (Bergman clearly needn't fear accusations of plagiarism). What *is* surprising is Bergman's use of the traditions of the American horror film, from Whale and Browning to Hitchcock. Not only does the Birdman (as Tom Milne has pointed out) bear an unmistakable resemblance to Lugosi's Dracula, but the face of Baron von Merkens, especially when photographed from below, as at the dinner party, distinctly recalls in its contours Karloff's original Frankenstein creation. The miniscule but apparently human Tamino in the Birdman's 'Magic Flute' performance recalls Ernest Thesiger's homunculi in *The Bride of Frankenstein*. The general framework, with an outsider being initiated into a close-knit, isolated and highly abnormal society, and especially the ending, where in the darkness and mud its members hideously exact a communal vengeance, suggest *Freaks*. The old woman who peels off her face to reveal a decomposing skull and gaping eye-sockets evokes at once the two *Wax Museum* films and Mrs Bates in *Psycho*. The pecking and jabbing Birdman suggests both *Psycho* and *The Birds*, and the shot of von Sydow passing through a corridor thick with sparrows and other wildfowl looks like overt reference (hesitant as one is to associate such seemingly incompatible directors). There are further more generalised references: the castle interiors, for instance, especially in the later sequences, are strongly reminiscent of Hollywood Gothic, from Whale to Corman; the 'cannibal' family suggest vampires, particularly in the way the lips of the father-figure's huge mouth draw back, and there is a reference to their 'fangs' during the nightmarishly edgy and disquieting dinner-table conversation. It is impossible to be sure how many of these references are deliberate, and they nowhere interfere with the film's unity of tone: there is not a moment when we could be watching the work of anyone but Bergman. But by drawing on a popular tradition Bergman to a great extent depersonalises the horrors, at the same time completely realizing the implicit relationship between the traditional horror figures and the psychological terrors for which they deputise.

Göran Persson has called the film 'Bergman's *Psycho*', and certainly it follows a similar progression into ever-deepening darkness and horror, to the ultimate disintegration of the personality. But perhaps, if we are to compare it with Hitchcock, it has more in common thematically with *Vertigo:* we have, again, the hero torn between the world of daily reality and another world, a fascinating abyss, which may represent a deeper and more potent reality or may be an illusion, but which leads by an inevitable process towards disintegration and death. The function of Alma, though she is a far 'deeper' personality, is analogous to that of Midge in Hitchcock's film: both struggle to keep their men in the real world (see, for instance, Alma's efforts to interest Johan in her accounts), and their failure to do so is decisive to the development of each protagonist, hence of each film.

Alma has so far been comparatively neglected by the film's interpreters: a pity, as she represents the film's most striking new development. Alma is, quite simply, the most beautiful character in Bergman's whole work, and quite distinct from the 'affirmative' characters of earlier films like *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*. The jesters of the former and the teenagers of the latter represented an annoying immaturity in Bergman, their innocence seeming frankly a bit of a fake, their vitality and spontaneity highly suspect because never quite natural. In Alma we have a positive figure who is at once mature and convincing, a figure born out of the merciless honesty of *Winter Light* and *The Silence*. She is associated throughout with the idea of fruitfulness. We first see her, big with child, at a table on which lies a heap of apples, some half-peeled; among the objects she handles while unpacking Johan's artist's equipment from the boat is a growing plant. The symbolism of the blossoming apple tree, though quite simple and unequivocal in its meaning, emerges naturally and unobtrusively. What we register first is Alma's spontaneous delight in it, so that the tree is a means of characterizing her as much as a symbol; when, on the first 'manifestation' to Alma (the appearance of the old woman), the tree is barren and bare, the symbolism is allowed to make its effect without directorial insistence. The fact of Alma's pregnancy is talked of little in the film, apart from one key speech; but as a visual presence it assumes great and pervasive importance. Alma, as wife and mother, convincingly embodies the possibility of wholeness and health in life: Johan has praised her as having 'whole thoughts and feelings'—God 'made her in one piece'—and this is dramatically realised through Liv Ullmann's performance. In a film showing ultimate disintegration, she stands for its opposite, at least as an ideal whose attainability, though questioned, is not decisively denied.

Alma is Pamina. The identification is made very plainly during the puppet-theatre performance: at Tamino's words '*Lebt denn Pamina noch?*' ('Is Pamina still alive?'), the camera settles on Alma's face, and returns to it when the Birdman discusses the significance of Mozart's setting of the name afterwards. 'The Magic Flute' connects (indeed, virtually identifies) the perfected union of man and woman with ultimate fulfilment and enlightenment: the Birdman describes how in his setting Mozart separates the syllables of Pa-mi-na, so that they become less a name than an incantation. The relationship of Bergman's film to Mozart's opera is complex and important, containing at once a terrible irony and a positive assertion beyond irony's reach. The irony is implied early, in Johan's remark (while showing Alma the sketches of his 'demons') that the Birdman, 'the worst of all', is 'somehow connected with Papageno'. Mozart's Papageno, half-bird, half-human, is an entirely gentle and amiable child of nature; Johan's Birdman is also a 'child of nature'—of a black and perverted nature, cruel, aggressive, destructive. In the extract from the opera given in the film, Tamino stands in the darkness of ignorance and confusion before the Temple of Wisdom, questioning unseen powers about his destiny. Within 'the loveliest and most disturbing music ever written', Mozart distinguishes Tamino's restlessness and yearning (set as recitative) from the unhurried and formalised responses of the off-stage chorus, accompanied by a melody of breadth and mysterious serenity previously sung by the Priest of the Temple, giving an effect of timelessness: the scene becomes a dialogue between the human world of time (hence of doubt and anxiety) and a world of achieved serenity and illumination where time's tyranny has been overthrown. Much is made in the film of Johan's acute awareness of time: there is the transfixing counted minute (a striking example of Bergman's growing fondness for directly communicating emotional experience to his audiences, as well as showing it), where we share Johan's sense of the unendurable slowness of time and, simultaneously, his fear of its passing; and this gets its visual counterpart later as he strikes matches and obsessively watches their burning. Tamino's question, '*Wann wird das Licht mein Auge finden?*' ('When will my eye find the light?') receives the answer, '*Bald, bald, Jungling, oder nie*' ('Soon, or never'): for Tamino the answer proves to be 'Soon', for Johan 'Never'. The remainder of Mozart's opera is, for Tamino and the listener, a steady progression into ever-intenser illumination; the remainder of Bergman's film, for Johan and the spectator, a descent into ever-intenser darkness. In the latter half of *Vargtimmen* we see no daylight (with the exception of the uncanny and unnatural light of the over-exposed flashback). In one scene Alma-Pamina protects with her hands a flickering candle-flame, in the midst of all-enveloping darkness. It is in this scene that she talks of the coming child

*Stills: Max von Sydow in* Hour of the Wolf *with his ex-mistress (Ingrid Thulin, below) and his wife (Liv Ullmann, right).*





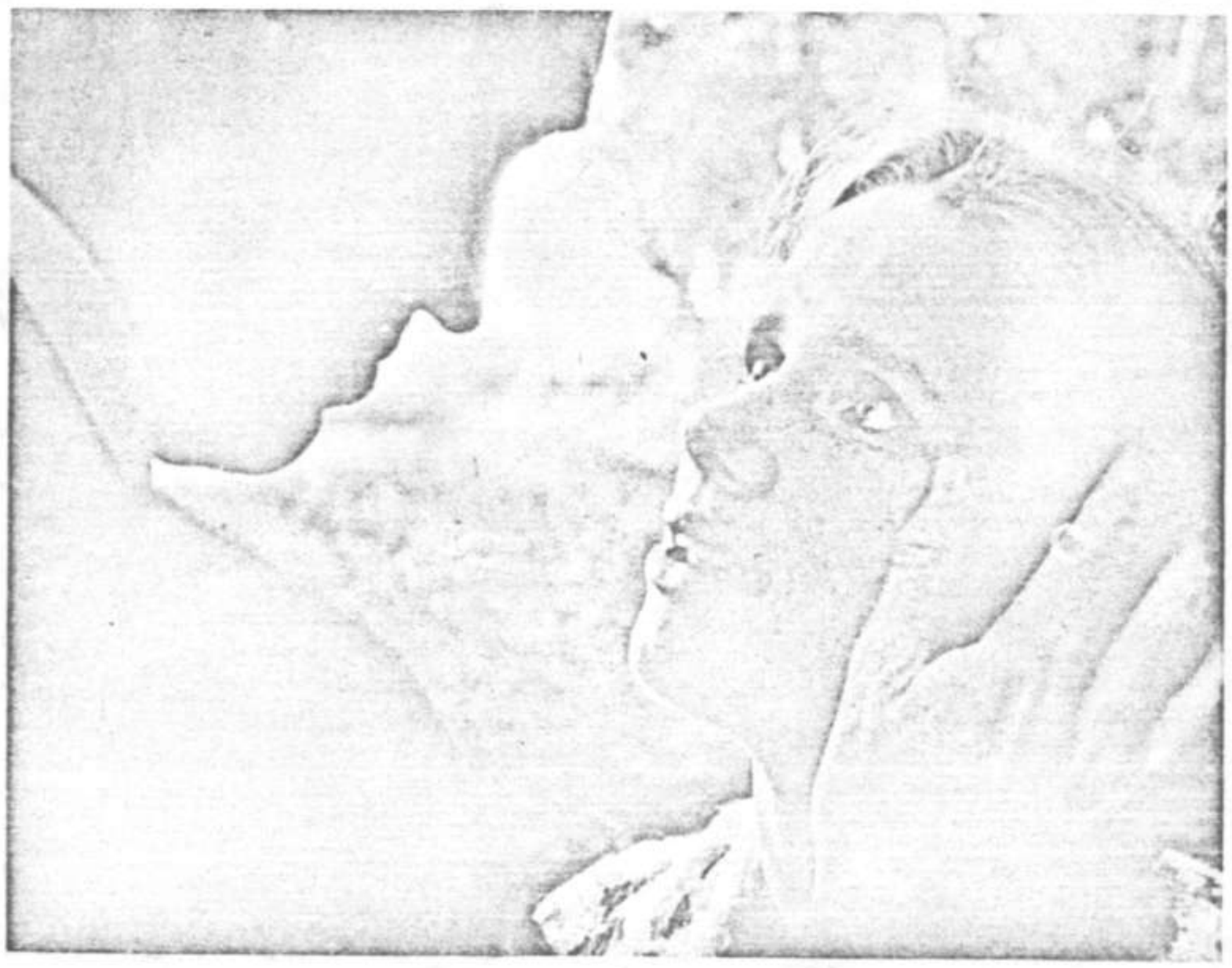
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

'in all this awful darkness'. The question may be asked, Why choose the macabre Birdman to deliver, via Mozart, the film's most affirmative statements? I think we must accept that, on one level, he speaks 'out of character': the affirmation is not felt as negated by the speaker, and one senses Bergman himself very directly behind it. At the same time, it has a valid dramatic function: one of the devil's supreme torments is to hold up momentarily to the lost a glimpse of heaven in the midst of hell.

The concept of wholeness becomes, then, through Alma and the use of Mozart, a very real presence in the film; but it is of no more efficacy against Johan's demons than is the candle-flame against the surrounding blackness. Some have seen those demons as representing the artist's imaginative creations over which, Frankenstein-like, he loses control; or as the side of his personality out of which his art develops. Nothing could be further from the truth. The point is made quite unequivocally that the demons are inimical to artistic creation—their emergence in the first stretches of the film corresponds to a decline in Johan's art. What is more, their destruction of him as an artist is closely paralleled by their destruction of his marriage relationship. The connection is made in the film's one entirely happy scene—that in which Johan sketches Alma as she sits by the blossoming apple-tree, which links marriage, parenthood and creativity in an image of wholeness. It is the potentiality for wholeness that the demons destroy. They are the products of neurosis, embodiments of the power of the past over the present. It is a mistake to see *Vargtimmen* as essentially concerned with The Artist. Johan's speech on the 'utter unimportance of art in the world of men', far from being central to the film, is a point where Bergman's personal concerns of the moment rather roughly intrude: it belongs with *Persona* (and probably with Bergman's new film *The Shame*) rather than with *Vargtimmen*. Bergman uses Johan's art as a kind of shorthand for the creative side of the personality.

The information the film offers relevant to Johan's neurosis can be separated into four sections, and the sort of significance each has, the way it is to be taken, is carefully defined by formal or stylistic devices. Johan's account of his childhood punishment (locked in a cupboard in which he was led to believe there lurked a little creature that would bite his toes off) is given us as a straight statement without flashback or other illustration. We accept it as literal truth: here Johan is remembering the past *as it was*, not being haunted by it in distorted forms in the present. Secondly, by the same token, we accept the fact of Johan's past affair with Veronica Vogler. Thirdly, the flashback showing Johan's experience of murdering the boy is given a disturbing, heightened quality by the over-exposure that suggests nightmarish hallucination. Finally, there are the demons, emanations or projections from Johan's mind, and these include Veronica Vogler herself as she appears in the film—Bergman does not distinguish her from the rest. It is possible for the spectator to relate the parts so that they add up to a coherent and intelligible inner portrait; at the same time, in their presentation they are sufficiently disjunct to convey Johan's sense of an unmanageable confusion.

The childhood experience is clearly formative. Two points especially emerge: an overwhelming terror of castration (the small creature biting off the toes—shades of Edward Lear!), and the culminating emotional identification with the mother, against the father (who was responsible for the punishment): factors commonly associated in neurotic complexes with the development of fears of sexual inadequacy and with the possible formation of compensatory homosexual tendencies. The fantasy or hallucination of killing the boy combines various features relevant to this. The scene partly re-enacts the childhood punishment, the 'small creature' biting Johan's foot. The most obvious interpretation of the scene is that it symbolises an attempt to suppress homosexual tendencies. Johan is greatly disturbed by the boy's presence. The fishing-rod, in the position in which it is filmed, carries very obvious phallic overtones, and Johan's desperate and clumsy attempts to reel in are surely symbolic of a hysterical effort to deny sexual response. The boy then lies on his back in an attitude of erotic invitation; Johan leans over him, then begins to shake him violently. Near the beginning of the film, as he shows Alma the sketches of the demons, Johan says of the one he describes as 'practically harmless', 'I think he's homosexual'. We identify him, I think, with Heerbrand, the man who, almost immediately after Johan's story of the boy, brings him the gun with which he tries to kill Alma. But what seems to unsettle Johan most in the boy's behaviour is the way in which he inspects, critically and perhaps contemptuously, first Johan's sketches and then his catch of three fishes (Bergman's favourite Freudian phallic symbol—see *Prison* and *Waiting Women*). His fears of creative and sexual inadequacy are behind the panic into which the child throws him. Finally, we tend to associate the child with the mysterious boy—presumably Johan's son by a previous marriage or product of his affair with Veronica Vogler (the obscurity here seems unprofitable and annoying)—mentioned by Alma in her accounts ('50 kronor for your boy's birthday'): another 'ghost' from Johan's past. What the scene enacts, in this complex way, is an attempt to destroy by violence the various half-understood pressures from the past. But they lurk on, as it were, just below the surface, like the submerged body that refuses to sink.



From what we gather of the affair with Veronica Vogler (from remarks, and from the fantasy re-enactments) it was characterized by an exclusive and violent sensuality, suggesting that it was at once Johan's attempt to assert his sexual adequacy and an expression of his emotional incompleteness. He passed from it to the potentially complete relationship with Alma, but without having mastered all the arrested and warped aspects of his personality expressed through the affair with Veronica: so Veronica is both dead and alive, as she later appears to Johan in the castle. To reach her, he is forced to undergo a series of humiliations and trials (kissing the old Baroness' foot, watching the old lady remove her face, seeing the Birdman's semi-transformation, etc.) which again suggest a macabre inversion of the initiation of Tamino in *The Magic Flute*. At the end of it is Veronica: not Alma-Pamina, whom he has tried to kill, firing three bullets at her. But Alma is virtually unscathed. It is Veronica who is, apparently, dead; and above her (as Goran Persson has



WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

pointed out to me) hang three lights which at first, in long-shot, look like apertures or bullet-holes. The ambiguity beautifully suggests the unresolved confusions of Johan's psyche, the inner divisions and conflicts of conscious and subconscious.

As for the demons, with their horror-film affiliations, I think it is vain to try to attach detailed significance to individuals: perverted and destructive, they typify all that lives on unmastered in Johan. We can see now, I think, why Papageno, representative of entirely natural and untrammelled sexuality, should become, seen through the distorting glass of Johan's fragmenting psyche, the monstrous Birdman. That the demons are not susceptible to more precise categorization is important: they are an expression of all that Johan doesn't understand within himself. Even the level of reality on which they exist is continually in question, and unascertainable: we feel to the end that there *may* be a castle on the other side of the island with real people in it, seen through varying degrees of subjective distortion.

The 'reunion' with the dead-alive Veronica culminates in Johan's ultimate sexual humiliation. His make-up, the mask of the Great Lover, mockingly applied by the Birdman, now smeared grotesquely over his face, he looks up from his love-making to find the demons watching, gloating with hideous laughter. What we see on the screen is an amazingly vivid and concrete depiction of mental breakdown. Johan is cruelly forced to confront his shattered inner self: 'The glass is shattered,' he says. 'But what do the splinters reflect? Can you tell me that?.' His lips go on moving, the voice obliterated. The camera tracks in until his face, slipping out of focus, seems to decompose before our eyes, to dissolve to water—just under the surface of which floats the corpse of the boy. Johan has been driven to a partial self-understanding: he sees just enough, I think, to grasp the strength of the destructive forces within him, so that all he can do is surrender to them—to surrender all that side of him that responded to Alma, and to the idea of wholeness.

Perhaps the most important thing in *Vargtimmen*, and what relates it most closely to *Persona*, is Alma's partial sharing of Johan's inner experiences. In *Persona* Elizabeth's horrified apprehension of reality was gradually communicated to her nurse, so that the girl's defences of conventional 'normality' were shattered. Here, Johan's increasing awareness of inner horrors is communicated, through the medium of her love for him, to Alma. The sharing is only partial. The greatest obstacle to the psychoanalytical cure of neurosis is the patient's inability to *want* to be cured—his tendency to cling on jealously to his neurosis as if it were his most precious possession. Hence there comes a point at which Johan refuses Alma further access to his world, and from that moment he is lost ('If only I could have been with him the whole time' are almost her last words in the film). Most disturbing of all is Alma's final self-questioning about her failure to save him: did her acceptance of the demons in fact accelerate their domination? Or did her jealousy prevent her from entering into Johan's inner world far enough? We are left pondering the efficacy of personal relationships, even at their most committed. Like *Persona*, *Vargtimmen* is a film that calls everything into question. At the beginning, Alma sat outside at a table, in daylight. At the end she is indoors, surrounded by darkness. The child is still unborn.

The film begins and ends with Alma. On Bergman's own admission, the story of Johan Borg is very personal: that crucial punishment was repeatedly administered to Bergman as a child. Alma and the framework—emotional as much as formal—that she provides is the mature artist's means of distancing, hence mastering, all those unmanageable elements whose presence has so often flawed Bergman's work. The very fact that the film shows Johan's destruction suggests—coming as it does from the present active, open and assured Bergman—the completeness of the mastery. Prophecy is dangerous, but I shall be surprised if *The Shame* doesn't develop strikingly in some form, the new tendencies heralded by *Persona*.

Robin Wood

*Still: Liv Ullmann, Max von Sydow and Erland Josephson in* Hour of the Wolf.



WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)