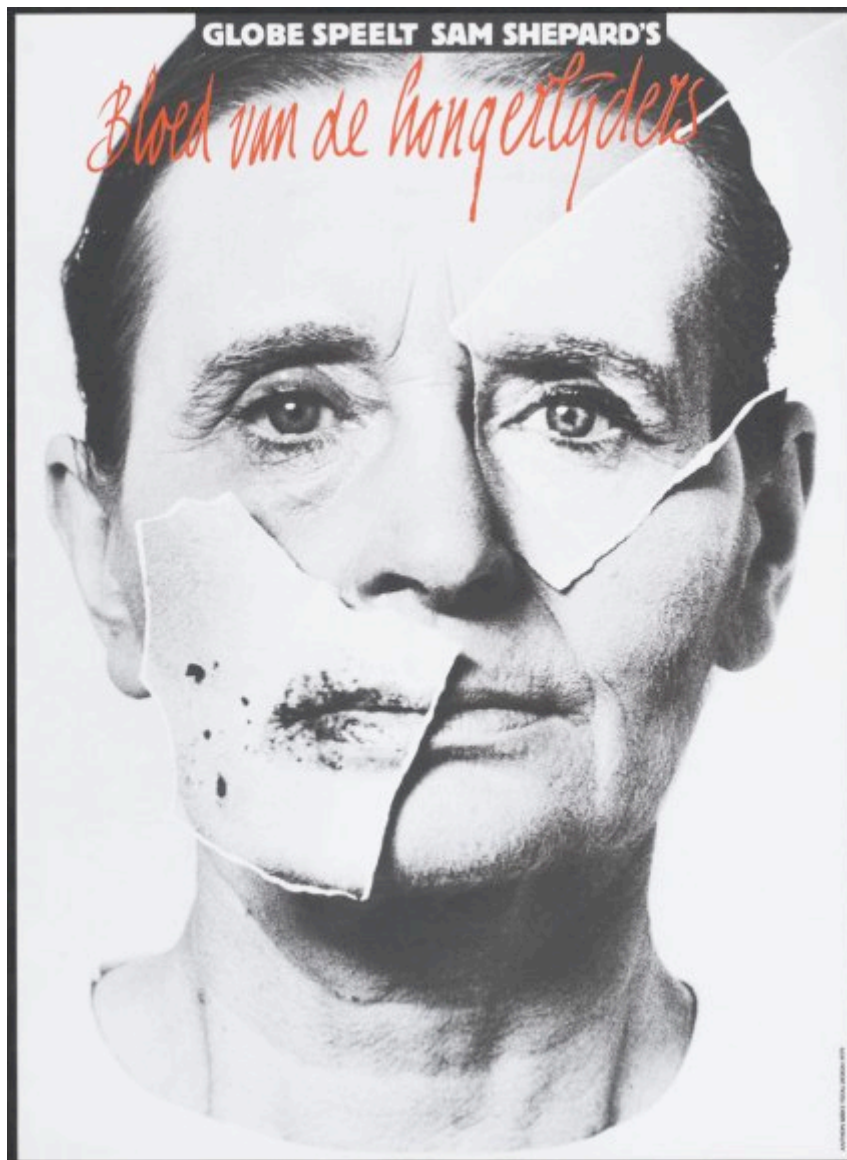


When the face becomes a mask
By Robin van der Burgh



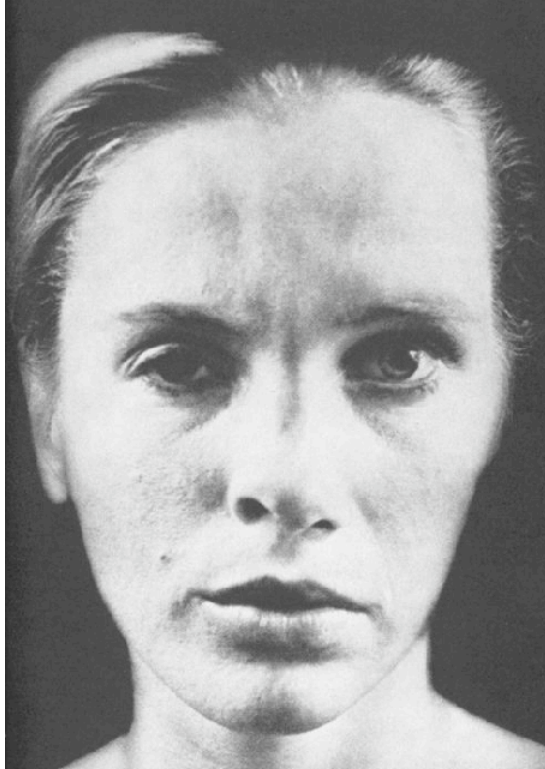
[Anton's Beeke](#) poster for the theatrical play "Bloed van de Hongerlijders" (Blood of the starving ones) is a complex, yet at the same time striking "in your face" like work. Attempting to create an image that contains a deeper psychological meaning, Beeke executed the work while making use of different techniques. First of all there is the photograph, depicting a man. His face is seen frontal, his gaze is directed straight in the camera. Considering the fact that his hair growth is slightly thinned out, the facial skin reveals signs of age (wrinkles, irregularities), we may assume it's a man in his early fifties. Furthermore present are yet two other photos. Where the first photo seems ordinary in the way it is presented (one recognizes a portrait that is, consistent with the convention, merely showing the face of the person depicted and partially the neck), the two other photos are peculiar. They are both cut-outs from other photos, as a [collage](#) pasted on the first picture. If there is a difference between these pictures and the ones underneath remains uncertain, for we can't see them. Nevertheless the picture pasted in the upper right corner (the left side of the man's face) apparently doesn't differ much from its "plain" counterpart on the left: the symmetry matches. A slight

incongruity can be noticed in the intensity of brightness: the eye on the pasted picture is lighter than the other eye. But apart from this the likeness is appropriate. This surely isn't the case in the other pasted picture on the opposite side in the lower left corner. Here the difference is evident at first eye: the skin around the mouth is heavily deformed with symptoms of what could be the consequence of an accident or even worse, such as a disease like syphilis. Though discovering the true nature of the injury remains an act of speculation, the incoherence with the underlying layer is undeniable: the skin's distinct defacement on the pasted picture is absent on the left side. We see a normal mouth without the irregularities; the artist's intervention is much more explicit. More questions arise: What has happened to this man? Are we dealing with a [Janus](#)-like figure, perhaps a schizophrenic madman? And what could the artist's intention be? Might Beeke have been pointing out an ambiguity with which we would be confronted with while attending the play? Presumably the answer behind these questions lies hidden within the layers of this work. Until we see it, we can only speculate.



Seeing the poster for the first time, I immediately thought of two other images, which are at least as confounding in their outspokenness as the collage Beeke created. The first image I was thinking of was Anthony Hopkins playing [Hannibal Lecter](#) in the movie [Silence of the Lambs](#). At some point in the movie, the insane Lecter is shown while wearing a mouth-covering muzzle, preventing him from biting the people around him. Hopkins' intense look in the camera, used for posters to promote the movie, became a famous image over the years and contributed to the cult status the movie later got. Not only the frontal view, but also the facial features bear resemblance to

the man in Beeke's poster. This might explain my association of the poster with madness. Regarding the poster from this view, the use of layers could refer to a form of schizophrenia, or to put it differently, the hidden "otherness" that people with a mental disease suffer from. The other side of a personality that can be as much as ugly as "decent" as a man at first eye might seem.



The other image I was relating to is another movie poster, though I myself saw it first as the cover of the film's scenario book: [Ingmar Bergman's "Persona"](#) (1966). Even people who have never seen any movie by Bergman would still get a sense what the movie is about when seeing this particular photo. Two women, both apparently of the same age, are fused together in one single face. Judging from the asymmetrical elements in the face, it quickly becomes clear that a face like this can't be natural and that it must have been constructed by someone, using the women's faces at half. Yet still we can't overlook a number of feature related similarities: both women are Caucasian, blonde and share the facial lineament of the cheek. The face, of which the photo was taken with much brightness, so as to mark out the characteristic features, distinctively gazes at us, just like the man in Beeke's picture. Plainly centered in the middle of the frame it almost seems as if both women, presenting themselves as one, invite the viewer to tell their story. Although I won't go deeper into the movie's contents, indeed the story is about two entirely different women that, after fate brought them together, become very close and share each other's intimacies. One of them who is a celebrated actress, diagnosed with a mental aberration and refuses to talk, the other who is a modest nurse, looking up to her patient and cherishing the dream of being friends – and – alike. Indeed after spending time together in the perfect quietness of the Swedish country they become friends, but soon conflicts arise, after which both women regain consciousness of their sole selves and depart, one experience richer, back into their past lives.

Surely the photo is much too modest to suspect any of these intricacies, but the effect the poster brings about can be compared to the “Bloed van de Hongerlijders” poster: one is inclined to think of a story that relates to matters as personality and – to some agree – psychology.

Until now I haven't paid any attention to what the story *itself* is about. I imposed an obstruction to myself, that is, to analyze and deconstruct the poster on its external characteristics, neglecting the actual subject matter. So far I consider my text successful in keeping to this restriction. Nevertheless I feel obliged to give a short summary of what the story is about, quoting briefly the content of the story, “Curse of the Starving Class”¹:

Winner of a Obie Award, Curse of the Starving Class is a darkly comic exploration of the American family psyche. The play focuses on the dysfunctional Tate clan -- the drunken dreamer of a father, burned-out mother, rebellious teenage daughter, and idealistic son -- as they struggle for control of the rundown family farm in a futile search for freedom, security, and ultimately meaning in their lives.²

Sources:

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silence_of_the_Lambs_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silence_of_the_Lambs_(film))
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ingmar_Bergman
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persona_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persona_(film))

¹ Curse of the Starving Class, i.e. the original English title of the play.

² Curse of the Starving Class by Sam Shepard

<<http://www.theatrezone.org/productions/past/curse/curse.htm>>