

Ingmar Bergman: **THE SEVENTH SEAL/DET SJUNDE INSEGLET** (1957, 96m)
*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian video introduction to this week's film](#)

Zoom link for *all* Fall 2020 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:

<https://buffalo.zoom.us/j/92994947964?pwd=dDBWcDYvSlhPbkd4TkswcUhiQWkydz09>

Meeting ID: 929 9494 7964
Passcode: 703450

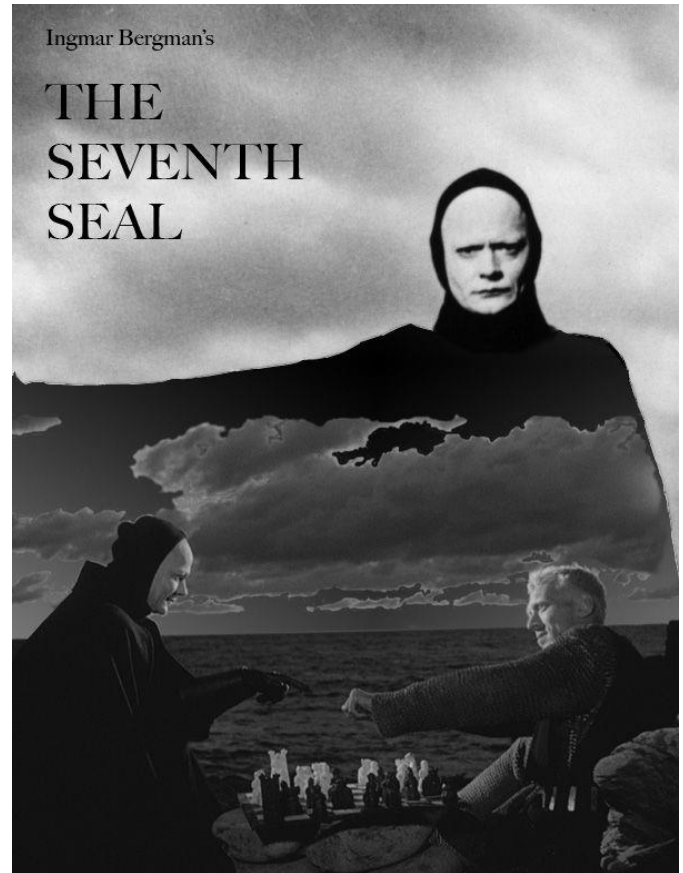
DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY Ingmar Bergman
PRODUCER Allan Ekelund
MUSIC Erik Nordgren
CINEMATOGRAPHY Gunnar Fischer
EDITING Lennart Wallén
PRODUCTION DESIGN P.A. Lundgren

The film won the Jury Special Prize and was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 1957 Cannes Film Festival.

CAST

Gunnar Björnstrand...Jöns, squire
Bengt Ekerot...Death
Nils Poppe...Jof
Max von Sydow...Antonius Block
Bibi Andersson...Mia, Jof's wife
Inga Gill...Lisa, blacksmith's wife
Maud Hansson...Witch
Inga Landgré...Karin, Block's Wife
Gunnel Lindblom...Girl
Bertil Anderberg...Raval
Anders Ek...The Monk
Åke Fridell...Blacksmith Plog
Gunnar Olsson...Albertus Pictor, Church Painter
Erik Strandmark...Jonas Skat

INGMAR BERGMAN (b.14 July 1918, Uppsala, Uppsala län, Sweden—d. 30 July 2007, Fårö, Gotlands län, Sweden)



directed 61 films and wrote 63 screenplays. (Bio from WorldFilms.com) "Universally regarded as one of the great masters of modern cinema, Bergman has often concerned himself with spiritual and psychological conflicts. His work has evolved in distinct stages over four decades, while his visual style—intense, intimate, complex—has explored the vicissitudes of passion with a mesmerizing cinematic rhetoric. His prolific output tends to return to and elaborate on recurrent images, subjects and techniques. Like the Baroque composers, Bergman works on a small scale, finding invention in theme and variation. Bergman works primarily in the chamber cinema genre, although there are exceptions, such as the journey narrative of *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and the family epic of *Fanny and Alexander* (1983). Chamber cinema encloses space and time, permitting the director to focus on mise-en-scène and to pay careful attention to metaphoric detail and visual rhythm. Perhaps his most expressive technique is his use of the facial close-up. For Bergman, the face, along with the hand, allows the camera to reveal the inner aspects of human emotion. His fascination with the female face can be seen most strikingly in *Persona* (1966) and *Cries and Whispers* (1972). In his autobiography, Bergman claimed that he was always trying to generate his mother's face; hence, a psychological and aesthetic need are realized in this cinematic signature. Of the early period, *Wild Strawberries* stands out for its narrative invention in a fluid manipulation of flashbacks, reveries and dream sequences. Its penetrating psychological investigation of the

closing of the life cycle established Bergman's preoccupation with the relationship between desire, loss, guilt, compassion, restitution and celebration. *Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953)/*Naked Night*, more allegorical than *Wild Strawberries*, is likewise designed around a journey motif of existential crisis. In

contrast, the Mozartian *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) displays Bergman's romantic, comic sensibility. The early period concludes with two symbolic works, *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *The Virgin Spring* (1959), both set in the Middle Ages. The extreme long shot in *The Seventh Seal* of Death leading the peasants in silhouette across the horizon now forms part of the iconography of modern cinema. The second stage of



Bergman's cinematic evolution shifts to the chamber style. Intense spiritual and psychological themes are explored in the "Silence" trilogy (*Through a Glass Darkly*, 1962, *Winter Light*, 1962, *The Silence*, 1963), and *The Shame* (1968), *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and *The Passion of Anna* (1969), three films all set on the island of Faro. With its dialectical editing and expressive compositions, *The Silence* is considered one of Bergman's most artfully structured films. *The Passion of Anna*, with its innovative application of red motifs, marked Bergman's first use of color photography. Between these two trilogies came *Persona* (1966), a work many critics consider Bergman's masterpiece. *Persona* shares a similar look and ambience with the Faro trilogy, and has direct links with *The Silence* in its focus on the antagonistic relationship between two women. Yet, with its distinctly avant-garde style and rhythm, it stands apart from any other of Bergman's films. Ostensibly concerned with identity crisis and the role reversal of a nurse and her mentally ill patient, the subtext of the film explores the nature of the cinematic apparatus itself. The narrative is framed by opening and closing shots of a film strip, projector and light, which lead into and out of the figure of a young boy. With his directorial hand, the boy conjures up a gigantic close-up of the female face. In a now celebrated sequence, the two faces of the female protagonists dissolve into one. (The figure of the precocious, magical child, previously seen in *The Silence*, would later reappear in the autobiographical *Fanny and Alexander*, 1983.) Sadomasochistic behavior, along with problems of role reversal and denied maternity, form the tortured core of both *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers*, the masterwork of the late period. In contrast to the spare decor, sharp black and white photography and disjunctive editing *Persona*, *Cries and Whispers* is a 19th-century Gothic period-piece featuring rich colors, draped, theatrical decor and muted dissolve editing. The film revolves around three sisters, one of whom, Agnes, is dying, and their maid, Anna. Bergman evokes religious iconography, with each of the three sisters

representing various theological concepts. The dying Agnes, set in cruciform position, returns as a resurrected savior/prophet. The exquisite Pietà/birth shot of Agnes and the Maid, as well as the revolutionary dissolve red-outs, are highlights in this brutal and beautiful film. Even the minor

films of Bergman's later period, such as *Face to Face* (1976), *Autumn Sonata* (1978) and *From the Life of Marionettes* (1980) continue to explore and refine recurrent themes and techniques. In the underrated *The Touch* (1971), Bergman examines the theme of marriage, with an inventive subtext of the Persephone myth, in a visually expansive way that distinguishes it from the more conventional *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). The cycle of Bergman's work appropriately concludes with *Fanny and Alexander*, an epic of family romance, touched

with elements of fairy tale, horror and ghost story. All the preoccupations of Bergman's extraordinary career flow through the imagery, action and stylization of the film. Continuing his exploration of family relationships, Bergman drew inspiration from the marriage of his own parents to write the autobiographical screenplay for *The Best Intentions* (1992), which Bergman entrusted to director Bille August after announcing his retirement from filmmaking. As an artist, Bergman pays homage to music and theater in general, to Bach, Mozart and Strindberg in particular. His work seems a synthesis of the internalized Swedish sensibility and harsh Scandinavian landscape, yet he speaks to a universal vision of human passion. Although apparently not influenced by other filmmakers, with the possible exception of Carl Dreyer, Bergman himself has had a wide-ranging influence on a generation of filmmakers. A unique and powerful presence, his genius has made an extraordinary contribution to the art of the cinema."

VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM (b. 20 September 1879, Silbodal, Värmlands län, Sweden—d. 3 January 1960, Stockholm, Sweden) acted in 44 films and directed 44. Derek Malcom wrote in *The Guardian*: "Ingmar Bergman's choice of Victor Sjöström, then 78, to play Isak Borg in his 1957 film *Wild Strawberries*, was partly his way of paying tribute to a filmmaker whom he much admired and by whom he was deeply influenced. Sjöström made films both in Sweden and America and was one of the chief reasons for the pre-eminence of the Swedish cinema just after the first world war. Between 1917 and 1921 he made four films of such technical mastery and luminous power that it was only a matter of time before Hollywood lured him across the water. These films, full of the almost masochistic obsessions of Swedish Protestantism, but also extremely beautiful in their depiction of the elemental forces of nature, caused Sjöström, together with his equally famous fellow director Mauritz Stiller, to be characterised as a

gloomy Swede, even though he both acted in and made comedies too. And in America his three most famous works - *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924), *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) and *The Wind* (1928) - each dealt with human suffering. *The Wind* is almost certainly the best - a silent classic, revived in recent years by producer/ director Kevin Brownlow with a Carl Davis score, which gave the great Lillian Gish one of the finest parts of her career....Sjöström made other films in Hollywood, most of which, including *The Divine Woman* (1928) with Greta Garbo, have been either destroyed or lost. He was one of the very first group of film-makers whose work convinced often skeptical critics, most of whom had been trained in literature and the theatre, that the cinema was capable of being a fully-fledged art form."

BIBI ANDERSSON (b. 11 November 1935, Kungsholmen, Stockholm, Sweden—d. 14 April 2019 (aged 83) Stockholm, Sweden) has acted in 91 films, 13 of them directed by Ingmar Bergman. Some of her Bergman films are *Scener ur ett äktenskap/Scenes from a Marriage* (1973), *Persona* (1966), *Ansiktet/The Magician* (1958), *Det Sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Smultronstället/Wild Strawberries* (1957), *Sommarnattens leende/Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955). Some of the others are *Det blir aldrig som man tänkt sig/Shit Happens* (2000), *Babettes gästebud/Babette's Feast* (1987), *Quintet* (1979), and *An Enemy of the People* (1978).



MAX VON SYDOW (b. 10 April 1929, Lund, Skåne län, Sweden—d. 8 March 2020 (aged 90), Provence, France) appeared in 150 films and television series (12 films directed by Ingmar Bergman), among them *Kursk* (2018), *Game of Thrones* (2016, TV series), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), *Shutter Island* (2010), *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *Pelle erobreren/Pelle the Conqueror* (1987), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Dune* (1984), *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Utvandrarna/The Emigrants* (1971), *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), *Såsom i en spegel/Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Jungfrukällan/The Virgin Spring* (1960), *Ansiktet/The Magician* (1958), *Det Sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Smultronstället/Wild Strawberries* (1957).

Garry Giddins: "The Seventh Seal: There Go the Clowns" **(Criterion Essays)**

In recent years, *The Seventh Seal* has often been honored more for its historical stature than its prevailing vitality. Those who attended its first international rollout and were changed forever by the experience are now second-guessing their attachment to a work so firmly ensconced in the realm of middlebrow clichés. Its Eisenhower look-alike Reaper, emblematic chess game, and Dance of Death have been endlessly emulated and parodied. Worse, *The Seventh Seal* quickly assumed, and has never quite shaken, the reputation, formerly attributed to castor oil, of something good for you—a true kiss of death. A movie that's good for you is, by definition, not good for you.

So it's a relief to set aside the solemnity of cultural sanction, along with the still-frame images that have adorned greeting cards, and return to Ingmar Bergman's actual film: a dark, droll, quizzical masterpiece that wears its fifty-something years with the nimble grace of the acrobat Jof, who is the film's true prism of consciousness. Not that its historical importance should be forgotten. As the picture that launched art-house cinema (along with Bergman, leading player Max von Sydow, and distributor Janus Films), *The Seventh Seal* holds a place in movie annals as secure as that of *Battleship Potemkin* or *Citizen Kane* or any other earthshaking classic you care to name.

Other imports had found appreciative audiences in the United States before *The Seventh Seal* passed through customs, including Kurosawa's *Rashomon* in 1951 and Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* in 1957. But the effect of *The Seventh Seal's* American debut at New York's Paris Theater in October 1958, reinforced eight months later by the opening of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, was transformative. With that one-two punch, cinema catapulted to the front line of a cultural advance guard that—shoulder to shoulder with modern jazz, abstract painting, Beat writing, theater of the absurd—sought to undermine the intractable mass taste promoted by Hollywood, television, and the Brill Building.

Everything about Bergman's late-fifties work startled American filmgoers: the high-contrast cinematography and unsettling (endlessly reproduced) imagery; the scorching beaches and bleak glades; the fastidiously blocked compositions and credible invocations of the distant past; the magnificent company of actors; the taut plotting and elliptical dialogue—all handled with psychological astuteness, deft symbols, mordant wit, and equal attention to religious-ethical concerns in a possibly godforsaken universe and familial conflicts in an undoubtedly sexual one. At a time when the films of Carl Dreyer were largely neglected, Bergman advanced a Scandinavian aesthetic that rivaled, and in some respects trumped, that of the eminent novelists Knut Hamsun and Pär Lagerkvist, proving to a generation of eager moviegoers that cinema was a global pursuit of infinite promise, worth living for and talking about late into the night.

The Seventh Seal opens with a gorgeously baleful sky and a gliding eagle, almost frozen against the gathering clouds. A fourteenth-century knight and his squire, lately returned from the slaughter of the Crusades only to face the slaughter of the black death, are asleep on the beach. A long shot shows the sea

and sky and rocky shore as though uncovering the world for the first time. The grim insinuations of this glossily disarming start are promptly borne out in the appearance of a decomposing face and a recurring skull that could not be more symbolically playful if it had “Memento Mori” stamped on its cranium. As one of the film’s several mischievous artists and performers observes, with archness worthy of Alfred Hitchcock, “A skull is more interesting than a naked woman.”

In 1958, American reviewers emphasized the film’s foreignness, its cerebral artiness. In his enthusiastic *New York Times* notice, Bosley Crowther described it as “essentially intellectual” and “as tough—and rewarding—a screen challenge as the moviegoer has had to face this year,” which evokes all the appeal of an algebra problem or a firing squad. Few called attention to the film’s comic sensibility and its affinity with other movies and cultural strategies of the period, which in retrospect are harder to miss.

Bergman uses as his central narrative device one of the oldest and most persistent paradigms in Western culture: the questing, idealistic hero (tall, gaunt, easily awestruck) and earthy, practical lackey (squat, well fed, ironic). The Don Quixote and Sancho Panza template has endured numberless variations, reversals, and buddy-buddy deviations, from d’Artagnan and Planchet to Vladimir and Estragon, from Mutt and Jeff comedy teams to singing cowboys and their dumpy sidekicks. Bergman’s version, as played by the magnetically craggy and prematurely aged Max von Sydow (he was all of twenty-eight) and the square-jawed Gunnar Björnstrand, promises, briefly, to be a conventional riff on righteous master and trusty servant. But a rude scowl from the latter indicates an unbridgeable gulf between them. Their most memorable conversations are not with each other.

The knight, Antonius Block, seeks proof of God or the devil, and gets no satisfaction from a strangely clueless Death (Bengt Ekerot), who may be the hardest-working man in eschatology—playing chess to harvest one soul, sawing down a tree to claim another. Block, the chess man, hopes to win his reprieve from Death by beating him through “a combination of bishop and knight,” though he knows better than most how utterly inefficient are the combined forces of religion and the military. “My indifference to my fellow men has cut me off from their company,” he laments. Unlike the blithe entertainer Jof (Nils Poppe), whose family he apparently saves by diverting Death’s attention, Block is not permitted visionary glimpses of God’s beneficence, but he sees man’s villainy, cloaked in religious avowal, everywhere. When Death finally arrives to claim him and his group, only Block blubbers in prayer. In contrast, his squire, Jöns, insists on his right as a man “to feel the immense triumph of this final moment, when you can still roll your eyes and wiggle your toes.”

Jöns, the caustically plain-speaking singer of bawdy songs, is one of Bergman’s (and Björnstrand’s) greatest characters. Stronger than the knight because he is more secure in his agnosticism, he is not indifferent to man. He is instead contemptuous of military deliverance (“Our crusade was so stupid that only a true idealist could have thought it up”) and religious pageantry (“Is that sustenance for modern people? Do they really expect us to take it seriously?”), and doesn’t need a diversionary ploy to save Jof from the perfidy of men. Jöns gets



many of the best lines, which resonate with the kind of verbal incongruities that Samuel Beckett had recently unleashed, especially as he tries to console the cuckolded blacksmith, who tells him, “You believe your own twaddle.” “Who says I believe it?” Jöns replies. “But ask for a word of advice and I’ll give you two. I’m a man of learning, after all.”

In the end, Jöns and Block share the same fate, chained hand to hand in the Dance of Death that only Jof can

see. He and his wife, Mia (Bibi Andersson), and their child escape the holocaust, after inviting Block to participate in a sacramental meal of milk and wild strawberries. We don’t know for how long they will be spared, but more than any of the other characters, they are us, neither courageous nor craven; they are devoted more to family than to God (or to the gods of war), and consequently live in God’s grace.

The angelic Mia is one of five women in the film, of whom only the libidinous, chicken-gnawing Lisa, the blacksmith’s wife, is seen in the Dance of Death. Six centuries before movie magazines, Lisa sets her cap on the closest thing she can find to a matinee idol, the actor Skat, and seduces him while his partners Jof and Mia sing a song about the devil shitting on the shore. The other women are the knight’s Penelope-like wife, risking plague to welcome him home; an alleged young witch, bound for the stake, who takes the fanatics at their word, embracing the devil they insist lurks everywhere; and the silent maid (Gunnel Lindblom), saved from one rape but perhaps victimized by others. These three do not fear death—the last two welcome it with evident relief—and are absent from Jof’s vision of Death’s humiliating dance. Is it because they embrace death that they are spared that mortification (for they, too, have been reaped; we have seen the witch’s final throes and heard Death’s promise to harvest them all), or are they absent from Jof’s vision simply because it is Jof’s vision? He has never seen the knight’s wife or the witch, and has shown only a benign indifference to the mute maid.

Bergman’s religious symbolism, which distinguished *The Seventh Seal* from his previous films and marked many of those to follow, paralleled a turnabout in the work of his fellow Swede Pär Lagerkvist, a man no less attuned than Beckett to existential paradox. Lagerkvist, whose dramatic

work Bergman had directed as recently as 1956, had been Sweden's most celebrated writer for nearly forty years when, in the 1950s, his concerns took a sharp turn toward religious inquiry in a series of short novels, beginning with *Barabbas* and *The Sibyl*. His primary theme must have registered with Bergman: did God create man or did man create God, and does it matter once the bond of faith is accepted? Having lost faith on the eve of apocalypse, Block, like Lagerkvist's pagans at the dawn of Christianity, needs God to show himself.

Bergman acknowledged a correlation between his vision of the Middle Ages and the midcentury fear of atomic devastation. As an ardent filmgoer, he could not have been unmindful of the ongoing welter of end-of-days scenarios, sublime and ludicrous. *The Seventh Seal* opened in Stockholm in February 1957; in the preceding two years alone, apocalypses, holocausts, plagues, eschatology, and resurrection informed, among many other films, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Ordet*, *Night and Fog*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, *Forbidden Planet*, *The Wrong Man*, *Moby Dick*, *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, *The End of the Affair*, *The Night of the Hunter*, *The Burmese Harp*, *Land of the Pharaohs*, and *The Ten Commandments*. Dozens more were on the way, including a few about Jesus, the most egregious of them with von Sydow in the starring role.

Yet of those films only *The Seventh Seal* maintains throughout a peculiarly modernistic insistence on doubt. It embraces doubt the way most of the others embrace piety, futility, or melodrama. Only *The Seventh Seal* achieves uncanny timelessness by convincingly re-creating the time in which it is set. No self-respecting Egyptologist is likely to use a still from *The Ten Commandments* in a historical study. But in 2008, John Hatcher illustrated his book *The Black Death: A Personal History* with Renaissance artworks, plus a shot of Bergman's *Dance of Death*, which feels entirely appropriate. Nor have the film's moral concerns dated—its disdain for religious persecution, trumped-up wars, and the deals most of us desperately make with Death to delay the inevitable. Meanwhile, Jof and Mia ride off into the sunset with their infant acrobat-in-training son: for the clowns, there is no final curtain.

Andre O'Hehir: "Dirty jokes, hot witches, and a chess game with Death" (Salon, 2009) Deep in an audio interview that's half-buried among the extras on the [Criterion Collection's](#) new double-disc DVD set of "[The Seventh Seal](#)," Max von Sydow drops an odd little film-history bombshell. When [Ingmar Bergman](#) contacted him about a role in that 1957 film, von Sydow says, Bergman first suggested that he should play Jof, the lovable clown and family man who survives the Black Death together with his wife and child. How

might the entire history of art-house cinema -- and von Sydow's subsequent career playing Nazi officers, tormented intellectuals and Jesus Christ -- have been different?

Ultimately, a boyish comic actor named Nils Poppe took the role of Jof, and von Sydow was reassigned to play Antonius Block, the brooding knight who is returning from the Crusades, alongside his wisecracking, cynical squire (Gunnar Björnstrand, in a performance that may outdo von Sydow's). Tormented by religious doubt and fear, Block plays a memorable game of chess with Death, buying just enough time for Jof's family to escape the latter's clutches. This seemingly insignificant casting detail offers an important clue to "*The Seventh Seal*," the movie that launched the international art-house movement -- and a movie that has acquired, as a direct result of its iconic stature, a totally unjustified reputation for humorlessness, obscurantism and difficulty.

Faced with an overwhelming glut of classics and art films on the DVD market, and a perennially distracted audience that is largely unfamiliar with anything made before the mid-'70s, Criterion is repackaging many of the most famous titles in its catalog. (Alain Resnais' "*Last Year at Marienbad*" has been reissued in a similar deluxe edition, and it's also worth a fresh

look.) After 52 years it may be that the penumbra of intellectual seriousness around "*The Seventh Seal*" has finally dissipated, and the endless TV-commercial and greeting-card parodies of its images have faded from memory. If so, it's about goddamn time, because if you simply sit down and watch the movie without prejudice, it's full of surprises.

First of all, from this distance "*The Seventh Seal*" looks an awful lot like a genre film. To be specific, it's a low-budget 1950s costume drama featuring knights, witches, clowns, sadistic monks,

supernatural beings and a handful of cheesy effects. It's got suspense, violence, horror, a cute baby and laughs ranging from sweet-tempered to crude, along with a modicum of philosophical heavy lifting. Sure, it's an unusual genre film in several ways: It's in Swedish, the pace is leisurely (though certainly not sluggish) and the setting meticulous, the cinematography is distinctive and there's a bit more of that philosophical dimension than you'd automatically expect.

There's no doubt that in von Sydow's soul-gnawing character we can detect the idiosyncratic influence of latter-day agnostic or atheistic thinkers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. But to yank those elements out of the larger tapestry of the film, as if they explained or justified it -- which is exactly what many of its 1950s viewers did -- reflected a class-based combination of ignorance and bigotry. Difficult as this may be to imagine today, many educated people viewed film as a lowbrow to middlebrow, borderline-disreputable form. For Bergman's work to succeed with that audience, it had to be



defined as categorically different from, and superior to, mainstream movies.

Bergman was always a dramatist, and even a showman, before he was an intellectual. He had worked in the commercial Swedish film industry for years before making "The Seventh Seal," and his favorite American filmmaker, as he often said, was the consummate Hollywood craftsman George Cukor ("The Women," "The Philadelphia Story," "Adam's Rib," et al.). Bergman had no international audience at the time he made "The Seventh Seal," and certainly no aspirations of becoming a global artistic avatar. He hoped that the Swedish audience that had enjoyed his earlier romances and comedies would follow him into more personal and adventurous terrain. (It did.) In that sense, "The Seventh Seal" belongs to the same category as "Hamlet" and Joyce's "Ulysses," works intended to engage a broad audience that were taken hostage by a specialist elite.

As Gary Giddins observes in an essay for the Criterion set, critics like the New York Times' Bosley Crowther described "The Seventh Seal" as an "essentially intellectual" work that was prodigiously challenging to the viewer and loaded with mental and moral nutrition. Crowther was doing his damndest to get his theatergoing, symphony-going Manhattanite readers to check out a film that was set in the Middle Ages and made by an unknown Scandinavian, and I guess it worked.

It would never have occurred to Crowther that such an analysis might drive future generations away from the film en masse, just as it would never have occurred to him to situate "The Seventh Seal," as Giddins does, within the 1950s tradition of apocalyptic or eschatological films: "Kiss Me Deadly," "Godzilla," "The Night of the Hunter," "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." You want dark, brooding allegories on the fate of humanity after the death of God? Start with those.

Furthermore, all the pronouncements about the intellectual and philosophical heft of "The Seventh Seal" have obscured the question of what kind of movie it is, and what it's really about. I imagine that those who haven't seen "The Seventh Seal" envision the chess game with Death as a morbidly serious confrontation, and the closing Dance of Death sequence as a purportedly profound (and probably risible) metaphysical moment.

But the film's Death (Bengt Ekerot) is a drily comic figure, not a skeletal specter but a fully corporeal medieval bureaucrat in a black cape. As Death tells Block, he has "no secrets" and knows nothing about God or the afterlife; he's delighted to relieve the tedium of his rounds with a game of chess. (As the film makes clear, Bergman didn't invent this idea, but drew it from medieval church paintings.) The Dance

of Death, in which Death leads Block, his squire and several other characters "into the shadowy country," is another image borrowed from medieval iconography and is seen only by Jof, who is prone to fanciful visions. (Earlier in the film, he sees the Virgin Mary, wearing brilliant blue robes and a golden crown, playing with the Christ Child.)

As Bergman's uncertainty over the casting of von Sydow may suggest, it's not quite clear who the hero of "The Seventh Seal" is. With his Hamlet-like self-torment and his quasi-modernist alienation from everyday life, von Sydow's charismatic Block appealed to many mid-century intellectual viewers. But Jöns, the squire played by Björnstrand, is the film's true existentialist man of action, closer to Dirty Harry than to Hamlet, who sets aside pointless metaphysical questions in order to save other people's lives and enjoy what remains of his own. Face to face with Death at the end of the film, Jöns urges Block to get off his knees and stop praying to a God who either isn't there or isn't listening: "Feel the immense triumph of this final moment, when you can still roll your eyes and wiggle your toes."

As he would show over and over again in later films, Bergman was hypnotized by the same questions that hypnotize Block, but that doesn't mean he thinks they are healthy. Block

has wasted his life on religious faith and religious doubt, which are depicted as universally destructive. For all his noble mien and wartime experience, Block only becomes heroic in his last days on earth, and only to the extent that he moves past self-indulgent rhetoric and glimpses the sacredness of ordinary life. In helping to save Jof, his beautiful wife, Mia (Bibi Andersson), and their baby -- an intentional echo of the Holy Family -- Block has displayed true Christian morality for the first time, in

a world where that faith has become a vicious caricature of itself.

I would go one step further and suggest that Block is only deluding himself that he has saved Jof and Mia, which is a lot better than deluding himself that he is serving God by killing Arabs. The young couple are traveling performers who live by their wits, not the naive innocents Block takes them for. They outrun the Grim Reaper under their own steam, at least for now, and find salvation in another sunny day with their infant son, while the lantern-jawed knight mumbles on his knees in the darkness, awaiting transport to an afterlife he no longer believes in.

If "The Seventh Seal" is a regular movie, designed to thrill us, delight us and frighten us rather than deliver some kind of dour philosophical-religious lecture, it does have something to say about those big abstractions. It's a movie that argues we have to overcome religion and philosophy, or find some way to integrate them into everyday life, to have any



chance of leading a fulfilling existence. Not only does Bergman *not* privilege the life of the mind, he shows us a character so paralyzed by it that he barely notices his physical life until it's almost over.

It's only stretching the truth a little to say that "The Seventh Seal" was meant as a diatribe against the self-exile of bohemian intellectualism and wound up being seen as its apotheosis. Perhaps Bergman and his audiences were likewise seduced by the romance and nobility of von Sydow's character, who refuses to stop asking unanswerable questions and who dies courageously. Living courageously, as Jöns does, would have been better. Predictably, he gets the best exit line. When told to be silent in the presence of the great lord Death, Jöns refuses to be deferential: He will, he admits, but "under protest."



20 Great Ingmar Bergman Quotes on Storytelling (Intrusional Scripts)

1. 'I write scripts to serve as skeletons awaiting the flesh and sinew of images.'

2. 'I am so 100 percent Swedish... Someone has said a Swede is like a bottle of ketchup – nothing and nothing and then all at once – splat. I think I'm a little like that.'

3. "I usually take a walk after breakfast, write for three hours, have lunch and read in the afternoon. Demons don't like fresh air – they prefer it if you stay in bed with cold feet; for a person who is as chaotic as me, who struggles to be in control, it is an absolute necessity to follow these rules and routines. If I let myself go, nothing will get done."

4. 'First, I write down all I know about the story, at length and in detail. Then I sink the iceberg and let some of it float up just a little'.

5. 'No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul.'

6. 'I would say that there is no art form that has so much in common with film as music. Both affect our emotions directly, not via the intellect. And film is mainly rhythm; it is inhalation and exhalation in continuous sequence.'

7. 'I make all my decisions on intuition. I throw a spear into the darkness. That I must send an army into the darkness to find the spear. That is intellect.'

8. 'I was very cruel to actors and to other people. I think I was a very, very unpleasant young man. If I met the young Ingmar today, I think I would say, "You are very

talented and I will see if I can help you, but I don't think I want anything else to do with you.'"

9. 'The theatre is like a faithful wife. The film is the great adventure – the costly, exacting mistress.'

10. 'No other art medium – neither painting nor poetry – can communicate the specific quality of the dream as film can [...] And manufacturing dreams, that's a juicy business.'

11. 'Old age is like climbing a mountain. You climb from ledge to ledge. The higher you get, the more tired and breathless you become, but your views become more extensive.'

12. 'I'd prostitute my talents if it would further my cause, steal if there was no way out, killing my friends or anyone else if it would help my art.'

13. 'I don't want to produce a work of art that the public can sit and suck aesthetically... I want to give them a blow in the small of back, to scorch their indifference, to startle them out of their complacency.'

14. 'The demons are innumerable, arrive at the most inappropriate times and create panic and terror... but I have learned that if I can master the negative forces and harness them to my chariot, then they can work to my advantage... Lilies often grow out of carcasses' arseholes.'

15. 'I have come to a certain belief, which is based on three powerful effective commandments. Thou shalt be entertaining at all times. Thou shalt obey thy artistic consciousness at all times. Thou shalt make each film as if it is thy last.'

16. 'Only someone who is well prepared has the opportunity to improvise'.

17. 'A film causes me so many worries and such a lot of reactions that I have to love it in order to get over it and past it'.

18. 'To shoot a film is to organise an entire universe'.

19. 'I don't watch my own films very often. I become so jittery and ready to cry... and miserable. I think it's awful'.

20. 'We walk in circles, so limited by our own anxieties that we can no longer distinguish between true and false, between the gangster's whim and the purest ideal'.

Stephen Holden "In Art's Old Sanctuary, a High Priest of Film" (NY Times, 2007)

Certain screen images, no matter how often they are parodied, resist the demolition of ridicule. Take the image of a knight playing chess with Death in Ingmar Bergman's 1957 allegory, "The Seventh Seal," set in a medieval world reeling from the plague. This will always be Mr. Bergman's defining signature: a joke perhaps, but also not a joke.

If you revisit "The Seventh Seal" with a smirk on your face, you will likely be struck anew by the power of this life-and-death chess match and the scary ashen face of a black-robed Death. What may seem the essence of portentous symbolism when taken out of context retains its primal force within the film. You are inescapably reminded that in the metaphysical and emotional struggles portrayed in Mr. Bergman's films, the stakes are all or nothing and extremely personal.

"Not a day has gone by in my life when I haven't thought about death," Mr. Bergman mused in "Bergman

Island,” a recent, extraordinarily intimate documentary portrait, filmed on the island of Faro, where he lived in semi-isolation for four decades. The image of a chess game, he said, was inspired by a painting in a church he visited as a boy with his father. Until many decades later, when he underwent anesthesia that left him unconscious for several hours, he harbored “an insane fear” of death. Losing, then regaining, consciousness partially alleviated that fear, which seeps into the core of many of his finest films.

Mr. Bergman’s ruthlessly honest investigation of his demons is what lends such images their crushing weight. However fictional, they are undeniably truthful expressions of one artist’s personal torment, redeemed by fleeting glimpses of eternity and redemption in a long, dark night of the soul.

Intimations of divinity, he says in the documentary, can be found in classical music, in which he finds “human holiness.” And his use of classical music, especially in what to me is his greatest film, “Persona,” adds an incalculable profundity to his work.

Even Mr. Bergman’s comedies have a powerful undertow of sadness, of time rushing by and of dark shadows gathering. Geography has a lot to do with it. The chilly winter light of his films, most of them exquisitely shot by Sven Nykvist, emanates from a sun low on the horizon. Looking for the sun is tantamount to searching for God.

In Mr. Bergman’s films, the figure of his own father, a stern Lutheran preacher and fearsome disciplinarian, is almost indistinguishable from the recurrent image of a remote and punishing God. In the autobiographical “Fanny and Alexander,” the 10-year-old hero’s terrifying stepfather is the kind of authoritarian figure who could haunt your nightmares for a lifetime. Most recently, that vengeful patriarch appears in “Saraband,” Mr. Bergman’s bleak and brilliant 2003 epilogue to “Scenes From a Marriage,” his 1973 masterpiece.

An existential dread runs through the entire Bergman oeuvre. Among the major directors who spearheaded the international art film movement after 1950, he was the one most closely in touch with the intellectual currents of the day. Freud and Sartre were riding high, and Time magazine wondered in a cover story if God were dead. Attendance at Mr. Bergman’s films was a lot like going to church. Though many of those films are steeped in church imagery, God is usually absent from the sanctuary.

As a college student and avid art-film goer in the early 1960s, I was overwhelmed by Mr. Bergman’s films, with their heavy-duty metaphysical speculation and intellectual seriousness. In those days, you would no more argue with Mr. Bergman’s stature than you would question the greatness of the modern Western literary canon; like Mann, Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, et al., Mr. Bergman was an intellectual god whose work could reward a lifetime of analytical study.

Today the religion of high art that dominated the 1950s and ’60s seems increasingly quaint and provincial. The longstanding belief that humans are born with singular psyches and souls is being superseded by an emerging new ideal: the human as technologically perfectible machine. The culture of the soul — of Freud and Marx and, yes, Bergman — has been overtaken by the culture of the body. Biotechnology leads the shaky way into the future, and pseudo-immortality, through

cloning, is in sight. Who needs a soul if the self is technologically mutable? For that matter, who needs art?

That may be why Mr. Bergman’s spiritual malaise seems less relevant than his flesh-and-blood experience. No filmmaker has explored relationships between men and women with such depth and passion. His achievement is inseparable from that of the extraordinary actresses — like Bibi Andersson, Harriet Andersson and, most of all, Liv Ullmann (with whom he made 10 films) — who people his work and who embody both the women in his life and his own feminine side.

Whereas the majority of men in Mr. Bergman’s films are selfish, grown-up little boys, at once grandiose, lecherous, feckless and narcissistic, the women whom they love and betray are their connection to what really matters in everyday life.

“I usually say I left puberty at 58,” he jokes in the documentary. From the evidence of his life — five marriages and many affairs — the men in his movies are unvarnished reflections of himself.

In “Saraband,” Ms. Ullmann’s character, Marianne, visits her former husband, Johan (Erland Josephson), 30 years after “Scenes From a Marriage.” As much as she remembers their furious strife, she is able to forgive. Through all the darkness of Mr. Bergman’s films, the humanity glows.



Melvin Bragg: *The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseglät)*. bfi publishing, London, 1993.

“Regardless of my own doubts, which are unimportant in this connection, it is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. In former days the artist remained unknown and his art was to the glory of God. He lived and died without being more or less important than other artisans; ‘eternal values’, ‘immortality’ and ‘masterpiece’ were terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invulnerable assurance and natural humility.”

Bergman wrote this in the introduction to the script of *The Seventh Seal*. The interest lies not only in the statement itself but also in his decision to place it as a signpost to what is his most widely known and arguably most influential film. Is he claiming something from the film, or is he reclaiming his own

past or is he declaring a truth which he wishes to be universally acknowledged?

For there is a catch, in the paragraph which immediately follows:

“Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy. Thus we finally gather in one large pen, where we stand and bleat about our loneliness without listening to each other and without realising that we are smothering each other to death. The individualists stare into each other’s eyes and yet deny the existence of each other. We walk in circles, so limited by our own anxieties that we can no longer distinguish between true and false.”

...Like many other great artists, Bergman can face both ways.

As some of his films redefined the force of religious art, the power of the sacramental, the resonance of a moral-aesthetic imperative, so others appear to cast out all of that and, with no less skill and with no less art, stand for the bleak and alienated individual of twentieth-century modernism.

Yet the undertow of religious essentiality in art persists in his introductory remarks. Having described the legend of Chartres—burnt down and reconstructed by thousands of builders and craftsmen, none with a name, so that ‘so one knows to this day who built the cathedral of Chartres’—he concludes with what reads like a profound credo:

“Thus if I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of those artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon’s head, an angel, a devil—or perhaps a saint—out of stone. It does not matter which; it is the sense of satisfaction that counts. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.”

There is more than a suggestion there that art is religion whether we believe it or not. That in the end it will last only as long as it aspires to or fits into some collective cathedral which is alone the lasting temple of art. It is noteworthy that Bergman wants to make something out of ‘stone’. Obviously a metaphor, but just as obviously he wants to be associated with what appears to be the most lasting of materials—forgetting, for the moment, Ozymandias. The cathedral can be seen as the sum of all great art—all art, in Bergman’s view—strained through a religious vision or even an unconscious intention. It can also be seen as the collective endeavor which film-making is and which is so much a part of his enjoyment and

commitment to it. And the cathedral, where congregations gather to see the great illuminated stories in glass, to watch the ritual performances on the stage of the altar, to follow, through the calendar, the great epic of Christianity with its heroes, its villains, its disputes and digressions, its strange character parts, its compelling story-line, can be seen as the cinema of the pre-celluloid era.

Even though he himself has contributed vividly to the cinema of alienation, the cinema of the dispossessed individual, the post-Christian, fallen world of the second half of this century, we must take his seriousness about the connection between art and religion for what it is: the governing test of a film-maker whose intelligence and curiosity have inspired some of the finest films ever made. Bergman, in my opinion, is one of the dozen or so master film-makers of the century; and one of the marks of his genius, when he is at his best, is the

intensity of what can only be called a vision of life. This can be almost unbearably bleak, though relieved by stoicism in *Winter Light*; eroticism in *Summer with Monika*; womanism and tenderness in *Cries and Whispers*; or religion, in a line which takes him back to his beloved Chartres, in *The Seventh Seal*. His thesis would be challenged by many who would produce pagan, heathen, secular, atheistic, even irreligious artists, and whole centuries of artistic achievement which only by the loosest connection, could be said to qualify and pass

the Bergman test. Yet for him it was, and is, a profound and informing truth. And if ever it needed an exemplar, *The Seventh Seal* is first in line.

...We must take him at his word and see *The Seventh Seal* from the outset as Bergman’s attempt to keep that link: the link between creation and worship and the link between the mid-twentieth century, the Middle Ages, the New Testament and much deeper into the past.

Yet even when we look at the artefacts from ancient Mexico, Egypt, Assyria, or Aboriginal Australia and so many antique civilisations, let alone the variety of work left by the Greeks, we are struck both by the religious and the secular nature of the works. Those clearly designed to fit in with the governing theology, bow to the belief of the tribe, conform to worship, and those made by ‘man/woman the maker’ for the sake of the thing itself, for the hell of it as opposed to the Heaven of it. Even in Chartres there are carvings which show the carver showing his own skill, taking a little of the glory to himself as well as offering so much to God. Even in that which is ostensibly devoted to the imperative of worship, there is always space made by the individual, the artist, the mischief-maker perhaps, the side of Bergman which gives him the skills to be the worshipper through cinema and in cinema that he aimed to be....



Lindsay Anderson, the British film director who did the commentary for Thames Television's two-hour study of Bergman, said that in *The Seventh Seal*. 'Bergman influenced a whole generation of film-makers and film-goers.' I would suggest that this influence spreads now beyond one generation. As television recycles old movies and art-houses reach out for cheap and cult re-runs, the Bergman oeuvre grows in importance both as an example of what one man could achieve on what were very often small, even meagre, resources and as a number of films which take on territory few dare enter with any confidence. There is a Bergman world. It is a landscape lit by the finely modulated greys of Northern European light; it has intensity and intelligence in equal measure; it can be charming and comic and erotic and playful, but this is a place where the shadow is as important as the living figure and the inwardness of life as demanding as anything that happens in the world outside. It is a cultivated world, a thinking world, above all perhaps a world trying to answer the questions which cannot be answered. For many, the clearest statement of all Bergman's preoccupations is expressed with the simplicity of genius in *The Seventh Seal*.

...The story is simple enough. A Knight and his Squire return from the Crusades. Their country is ravaged by the plague. They meet Death and the Knight makes a bargain: as long as he can hold him off in a game of chess, his life will be spared. As they journey through their native country they encounter artists, fanatics, mere rogues, but everywhere the presence of Death, who proceeds to win the game by fair means and foul. At the end, all but the artists are gathered up by him. Intellectually the film is bound together by two strands of the Knight's desperate search for some proof, some confirmation of his faith, and the Squire's view that there is nothing beyond the present flesh but emptiness. ...

Throughout the interview Bergman maintained that he used his films to face up to his personal fears. 'I am afraid of most things in the world that exist,' he said.

In *The Seventh Seal* he was facing up to his fear of Death. 'Death is present the whole time in this picture and everybody in this picture reacts differently to Death. After that picture I still think about Death but it is not an obsession any more.' The making of the movie as a therapy? Or does the picture coincide with a phase in Bergman's life through which he would have travelled without making the movie?

Death appears as a monk, I said. 'Or a clown,' Bergman replied. The ambiguity could not be more succinctly stated. ...More than twenty years on from the making of it, Bergman introduced me to an interpretation which seems less convincing as the film goes on but is certainly a strain which

the character Death can bear. If he is 'like' a monk, then he is the devil's monk, but monklike he dresses and indeed later in the film he impersonates a monk to gain an advantage over the Knight. If he is a clown, with all the wisdom and weary overview of life that a Bergman clown would bring to bear, then he is like Lear's Fool and playing a most serious role, clown as the true voice of reality, not clown as comic.

'He is a man,' I said, 'not a presence.'

'Yes,' Bergman agreed. 'That is the fascination of the stage or the cinema. If you take a chair, a perfectly normal chair, and say "This is the most fantastic and wonderful chair made in the whole world"—if you say that, everybody will believe it. If the Knight says, "You are Death," you believe it.'...

"I was teaching at the Theatre School in Malmo [this was in 1955]. There were some youngsters there, eight or nine of them, and I was looking for a play to put on for that's the best way of teaching. I couldn't find anything, so I took it into my head to write something myself. It was called *A Painting on Wood*.

It is a pure training play and consists of a number of monologues. All except for one part. One pupil was being trained for the musical comedy section. He had a good singing voice and looked very handsome, but as soon as he opened his mouth it was a catastrophe. So I gave him a silent part. The Saracens had cut his tongue out. He was the Knight. I worked it up with my pupils and put it on.

Then, if I remember aright, it suddenly struck me one day I ought to make a film of the play; so I started on the script. The whole thing developed quite naturally. My stomach had been in bad shape and I sat writing this film in Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm while it was being put to rights. I handed the script to S.F. (Svensk Filmindustri) and S.F. said 'No thank you.' But then came the success of *Smiles of a Summer Night* and I got permission to make it, providing I did it in thirty-five days. So I shot in thirty-five days and it was ever so cheap and ever so simple....

Cowie then points out elements in *A Painting on Wood* which found their way into the final film script: the fear of the plague, the burning of the witch, the Dance of Death. However, there is no chess game between Death and the Knight (who is without speech, as noted, in the play; in continuous dialogue with God in the film), nor are the artistic clowning 'holy couple' of Jof and Mia—Joseph and Mary with their infant—there. The smith and his strumpet wife are there but, Cowie concludes, 'Only one character may be found full-blown, and that is Jons the Squire, whose dialogue in play and film is almost identical line for line. Gunnar Bjornstrand, who



played the part in Bergman's original production, transferred it to the screen.

The deeper preoccupations of the film can be traced back to Bergman's childhood in an intense—for him suffocatingly, oppressively tense—Christian home where the great questions of the relationship between Good and Evil, God and the Devil, Man and God, Man and Death and Redemption were part of daily life and conversation. His father, a pastor in the Lutheran Church, addicted to all its high rituals and strict forms, was the tyrannical domestic Godhead. Although he rebelled against his family and background, his introduction to *The Seventh Seal* shows how close he kept to it in essentials. 'He often,' writes Cowie, 'signs his scripts with the initials S.D.G. (Soli Deo Gloria—To God Alone the Glory) as J.S. Bach did at the end of every composition.'

In the 1950s, when Bergman was in his late thirties, the religious significance of Death informed at least three films: *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, and *The Magician* (also known as *The Face*).

In 1955, he was still influenced by medieval frescoes he had seen as murals in Swedish churches. At the beginning of the play *A Painting on Wood*, Bergman states that his story is taken directly from a fresco in a church in southern Sweden. Bergman's cultural well was deep and his taproot to Scandinavian culture profound. Swedenborg and Kirkegaard dasmuch as Sibelius and Swedish history influenced him. But most of all in his own language there was Strindberg. There were also those whose influence could be directly felt, such as playwright Hjalmar Bergman.

The theatre and opera invade many of Bergman's films in content, style, casting and tone. ...I would like to point out yet another influence on Bergman which is rarely given its full weight. Radio. Bergman wrote prolifically for Swedish radio and the medium fascinated him as much as it fascinated the young Orson Welles. The three primary elements in radio are: the utter reliance on words and sounds; the necessity for strict linear story-telling; the collusion with the imagination of the listener. All these qualities are found in many a Bergman film and *The Seventh Seal* is one of the finest examples.

...Between leaving home in the late 1930s and making *The Seventh Seal* in 1957, Bergman roared to glory....*The Seventh Seal* was the seventeenth film he had directed. He had scripted six other films which were directed by others and worked on many other scripts with other writers. His stage productions, if one includes amateur productions, are too numerous to list, but he managed about three or four major productions a year from 1944 to 1956. He also wrote twenty-three stage plays, as we have said, and worked on dozens of radio plays...

It is possible to trace a very great number of cultural influences in the script and film [of *The Seventh Seal*], and Peter Cowie notes some of them: Picasso's picture of the two acrobats; Carl Orff's 'Carmina Burana'; Strindberg's *Folk Sagas* and *To Denmark*; the church frescoes which Bergman went especially to see in Haskeborga Church. Just before beginning *The Seventh Seal* he directed for radio the old *Play of Everyman* by Hugo von Hofmannstahl, in which Max von Sydow was highly praised for his 'pious emotional power'.

The budget was between 700,000 and 800,000 crowns (\$150,000). There were only three days on location—principally the opening sequence and the other hillside shots. One of those was the famous Dance of Death shot, which was



improvised at such short notice that one of the actors (playing the blacksmith) had a stand-in. The weather and the location and the light were perfect and Bergman grabbed it in one take.

It was a film full of improvisation. The greater part was shot in the studios at Rasunda. Bergman is delighted to tell you that in one deep-forest sequence you can, if you look hard enough, see the plate-glass windows of a block of flats, and that the stream in the forest was in fact the overflow from a loose pipe which threatened to flood the place.

The great scene with the flagellants was shot in a single day—extras coming from local geriatric homes. Bergman has often described it as a time of enormous fun.

He had his film family about him. Actors from the theatre, actors he had worked with before in film, actors who seemed to him to bring a new dimension to screen acting: intelligent people acting intelligent parts seriously and well. The film was dedicated to Bibi Andersson, who was to work with him on more films and to live with him, as did several of his leading actresses. 'He had two sides to his talent,' she has said, 'one intuitive, chaotic, one disciplined, certain about amounts of money and amounts of days.' Liv Ullman said, 'It's like being with a lover, a lover who cares, you want to give of your best.' 'His background taught him to listen,' said Max von Sydow, 'and to feel and to try to find out what is going on beneath'....

In *The Seventh Seal* he had actors of the highest quality, a cameraman he was still deeply satisfied with (although he was to fall out with Gunnar Fischer and take up with Sven Nykvist), a script which had begun as a play and been reworked several times—when I shoot the picture, I have already planned how to edit it,' he told me. Above all, on that idyllic set with its little copses and open spaces at Rasundam he had total control. That is central to everything with Bergman. 'Like a flu, like a virus—I have to be involved—everybody in the studio has to be infected by the virus. What I want are people of high standards and integrity who like to play the game with me.'

...Within those few [opening] minutes the story of the film is all foretold. The plot is fixed: the Knight will challenge Death and he will fail because Death cannot lose. The plague will accompany them on their quest but so will the grace of innocence. Strong, even primal images obtain—the sky (the Heavens), the sea (the Womb), the stony beach (the Life/Death of Man), the hovering sea eagle (the Soul of Man). Everywhere the indifference of Nature. Bergman allows you many interpretations with the simplest of techniques. Death appears as a monk, reappears as a skull in monk's clothing, will soon reappear as an actor's mask. Death is the ultimate final challenge, the final reality and yet part of our play.

The music marks each movement, with unselfconscious emphasis. The 'Dies Irae' is played over the sky which is violently featured, half blinding light, half dark,



poised to usher in the Revelations of the opening of the seventh seal. A medieval dancing sound sets off the Knight and his Squire on their travels, a sound soon to be punctured by the 'Dies Irae' which punches behind the dead skull. After that the Squire's ironic and funny comments on the skull's 'most eloquent', gravedigger humour again point to another strand—the Knight's unrelenting seriousness, the

Squire's agnostic and wry worldliness....

Perhaps it is this which makes *The Seventh Seal* such a satisfying film in a film which it is so easy to return to and remember: that each scene is at once so simple and so charged and layered that it catches us again and again.... You could tell the story to a child, publish it as a storybook of photographs and yet know that the deepest questions of religion and the most mysterious revelation of simply being alive are both addressed.

COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, FALL 2020, SERIES 41:

Sept 29: Marcel Camus, *Black Orpheus/Orfeo Negro* (1959)

Oct 6: Luis Buñuel, *The Exterminating Angel/El ángel exterminador* (1962)

Oct 13: Jean-Pierre Melville, *Le Samurái* (1967)

Oct 20: Sergio Leone, *Once Upon a Time in the West/C'era una volta il West*, (1968)

Oct 27: Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris/Солярис* (1972)

Nov 3: Werner Herzog, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God/Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972)

Nov 10: Richard Rush, *The Stunt Man* (1980)

Nov 17: Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire/Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987)

Nov 24: Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Three Colors; Red/ Trois couleurs: Rouge/ Trzy kolory. Czerwony* (1994)

Dec 1: Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

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