

Cinema history: the seventh seal

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Ingmar Bergman's film, *Seventh Seal*, reflects his views on life in an allegorical fashion. Bergman utilizes the setting of a medieval, plague-ridden landscape to metaphorically investigate the existence of god and meaning of life. The film follows the knight, Antonius, as he returns from the Crusades with his squire, Jons. Bergman uses black and white to enhance the mood. The film's vivid imagery and powerful score challenge the viewer to interpret the film's messages and assign them meaning. The film investigates the deepest philosophical questions of humanity.

Compared with Akira Kurosawa's film, *Ikiru*, the *Seventh Seal* expresses a darker outlook on the world. Bergman's cinematic masterpiece remains a relevant work of art in a world that struggles to address the deepest questions of religion and the phenomena of simply being alive. *Seventh Seal* begins with a shot of the heavens as a powerful orchestrated piece of music plays. A passage from the Book of Revelation is recited, "And when the Lamb had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour," (Revelation 8: 1).

Antonius and Jons lie on a beach of pebbles. The land is framed proportional to the sky, juxtaposing the kingdoms of heaven and earth. A chess set sits to the right of Antonius. The camera pans away from him, zooming in on the chess pieces. It symbolically equates Antonius as a piece of the game. A man cloaked in black approaches, revealing himself to be death. He states that he has come for them. Antonius challenges him to a chess match. Death agrees that if Antonius is able to defeat death he shall go free. The game is continued throughout the film.

As Antonius and Jons move along their journey, death continuously lurks as an ominous force. The film constantly makes references to death and uncertainty through the presents of the plague. The sky in the background is often cloudy as though God is absent from the heavens and oblivious to the suffering on earth. In one scene, Jons seeks directions from a man who appears to be sleeping; the man is dead and rotting. Not only is the man unable to provide direction, but there is also no divine direction. The plague represents the absence of God and humanity's uncertainty when faced with unexplainable destruction.

In a scene later in the film, death impersonates a confessional priest. He listens as Antonius speaks about the mystery of god, stating, " Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should he hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? " Death, who embodies the complete absence of life, remains silent. Bergman depicts mans suffering, metaphorically addressing the inabilities of humanity to comprehend the purpose of both the human self and the divine.

The plague challenges faith, as an incomprehensible punishment inflicted for unexplainable reasons. It leaves the populous to deal with the absence of divine direction. This is demonstrated very powerfully throughout the film. Jof and his fellow actors dance and sing on a small village stage. The actors represent innocence and good nature. Abruptly, religious music interrupts the actor's production. A procession of priests, baring crosses and incense,

marches through the village. They sing in unison as shirtless men accompanying them whip themselves and each other.

The entire village drops to its knees as the horrifying parade of suffering passes. This demonstrates the absence of God. The religious, unable to comprehend the suffering that is the plague, torture themselves in an attempt to appease God. This phenomenon is continued when Antonius witnesses a young girl tied to a post. She is deprived of water and whimpering in pain. The authorities believe her to be bewitched by the devil and the cause of the plague. The girl is to be burned alive. This event communicates the true horror of humans left to suffering and doubt.

The actor Jof and his wife Mia represent natural beauty and good nature. The scenes with them bring a warmth and happiness to the, dark suffering depicted. The lighting is often softer and brighter around Jof and Mia, contrasting them with the bleak atmosphere of the film. Antonius befriends the actors, and they all share a picnic of milk and wild strawberries. The simplicity of this meal is symbolic. It represents the beauty that exists in simplicity itself. Antonius reminisces about his life before the Crusades and his love for the wife he left behind.

He expresses his ongoing burden of faith stating, “ Faith is a torment did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out there in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call. ” This statement embodies the questions presented by Bergman throughout Seventh Seal. The Seventh Seal concludes with Antonius knocking over the chess pieces in order to distract death from Jof and Mia. Death claims Antonius and his companions as Jof has

a vision of them in the distance doing the dance of death. The viewer is left with powerful messages concerning the existence of God and meaning of life. Comparing the film with Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru*, it is apparent that both share similar ending themes. The protagonist in each film pursues a selfless action. In *Ikiru*, Watanabe, the protagonist, abandons the bureaucracy he has been a part of for so long in order to fight to create a local park. *The Seventh Seal* depicts the game of chess between Antonius and death. Antonius knocks over the pieces, allowing his friends to escape. Both films protagonists fight for things bigger than themselves.

Bergman and Kurosawa explore similar themes, but the *Seventh Seal* maintains a darker outlook on the world. Bibliography " Analysis of the Church Scene in Bergman. " Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Web. 3 Mar. 2010. . Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. Print. " *Det Sjunde Inseglet (1957)*. " The Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Web. 3 Mar. 2010. . Holy Bible: English Standard Version. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Bibles, 2001. Print. " Norman N. Holland, Meeting a Movie: *The Seventh Seal*. " College of Liberal Arts and Sciences | The University of Florida. Web. 28 Feb. 2010. .