

sources and biographical background:

1. Bergman's childhood as a parsonage boy:

"As a child I was sometimes allowed to accompany my father when he traveled about to preach in the small country churches... While father preached away...I devoted my interest to the church's mysterious world of low arches, thick wall, the smell of eternity, all the strangest vegetation of medieval painting and carbed figures on ceilings and walls. There was everything that one's imagination could desire: animals, angels, saints... All this was surrounded by a heavenly, earthly, and subterranean landscape of a strange yet familiar beauty. In a wood sat Death, playing chess with the Crusader. Clutching the branch of a tree was a naked man with staring eyes, while down below stood Death, sawing away to his heart's content. Across gentle hills Death led the final dance toward the dark lands.

But in the other arch the Holy Virgin was walking in a rose garden, supporting the Child's faltering steps, and her hands were those of a peasant woman... I defended myself against the dimly sensed drama that was enacted in the crucifixion picture in the chancel. My mind was stunned by the extreme cruelty and the extreme suffering."

2. Bergman's preoccupation with death:

"That's why I made it. It's about the fear of death. It freed me from my own fear of death."

3. Bergman's one-act allegorical play, Painting on Wood (in Focus on The Seventh Seal, res.)

4. Bergman's anxiety over the atomic age (note parallel to Galileo):

"In my film the Crusader returns as the soldier returns from the war today. In the Middle Ages man lived in terror of the plague. Today he lives in fear of the bomb."

cinematic style:

Note that The Seventh Seal was made at a cost of merely \$125,000.

1. combination of naturalism (tavern scene, flagellant sequence) and allegory (chess game, death of Skat)
2. compositional qualities of frame
3. lighting--Death always lit from below in sharp, high contrast; Mia lit from above (spiritualized, "halo" effect). Compare gloom in interior shots and night scenes with sunlit, idyllic scenes with Jof and Mia.
4. camera angles--low angle shots make Death seem more imposing; low angle long shots of Knight and Squire on horseback emphasize burdensome sky; high angle long shots reduce significance of human figures, may suggest overwhelming Fate.
5. focus--soft focus gives abstract quality to trees, suggesting nonrepresentational painting (close-up of Death); focus-in-depth draws attention to skull mask in picnic scene, reminding us of death's presence.
6. music--Mia's avowal of love for Jof is accompanied by the same motif heard with Jof's vision of the Madonna; similarly, Death's arrival at the castle is accompanied by variation of theme during flagellant sequence.

problems of interpretation:

1. Compare with medieval allegory:

"Philosophically, The Seventh Seal differs from medieval allegory in two respects: the metaphysical uncertainty that characterizes Bergman's film has little in common with the a priori assumption of an orderly universe, which underlies original allegory; and the central character in the prototypical allegory is not haunted by doubt; his problem is the forgetfulness of God, and God emerges not as an enigma but as a father figure anxious to reach and save His straying child."--Birgitta Steene

2. The role of art and the artist figure:

"The painter's mural can only depict a chronicle of devastation, and the strolling players attempt a variety of artistic effects without success. One actor masquerades as Pan to perform a rite of seduction, and in another scene adopts the guise of Death to pretend suicide, only to find that Death penetrates his mask as readily as his mistress sees through his false beard. Another actor is forced to imitate a bear, and his comic dance becomes a crucifixion. A bawdy song to accompany a seduction is interrupted by the greater performance of a religious procession depicting the Calvary, and Joseph's gentle hymn to Christ can only create a temporary illusion of a peaceful haven along the torturous route through the labyrinth."--Eugene Archer

3. Does the film affirm a traditional Christian perspective or a modern existentialist vision?

The Seventh Seal is "perhaps the first genuinely existential film."--Andrew Sarris

"The Knight ends as he began, believing, but anguished by the silence of God. Ironically enough, he has been answered, but this he cannot know. For in his final game of chess with Death, he has enabled Jof and Mia, the young couple whose innocence has deeply moved him, to escape with their child."--Vernon Young

criticism:

1. The Seventh Seal is one of the easiest films to illustrate with stills.

"This striking visual quality is obviously the peculiar strength of The Seventh Seal... Those who see the cinema as a glorified extension of the art of photography will doubtless continue to consider The Seventh Seal one of Bergman's greatest films. Those who see the cinema as essentially a matter of movement--not just the physical movement from image to image but the inner movement of thought and feeling it embodies, the movement, one might say, of the director's being--are likely to have fairly restricting reservations."--Robin Wood

2. "Technically the film is impeccable... (it is the sort of film which yields excellent stills, which may or may not be a good thing)... If a filmmaker sets out to make a cosmic drama of Life and Death, with a lot of Christian symbolism thrown in, he must expect to be judged by the most rigorous standards, and by such standards The Seventh Seal fails. It never finally convinces us, as it obviously intends to, that all its horrors, the rapes, tortures, flagellations, burnings, are valid expressions of a pessimistic world picture only lightly touched with hope; they remain, if not exactly sensational, at least rather pointless, overstating a case that should not need such determined emphasis." --John Russell Taylor

Ingmar Bergman on Making Films

When I was ten years old I received my first, rattling film projector, with its chimney and lamp. I found it both mystifying and fascinating. The first film I had was nine feet long and brown in color. It showed a girl lying asleep in a meadow, who woke up and stretched out her arms, then disappeared to the right. That was all there was to it. The film was a great success and was projected every night until it broke and could not be mended any more.

This little rickety machine was my first conjuring set. And even today I remind myself with childish excitement that I am really a conjurer, since cinematography is based on deception of the human eye. I have worked it out that if I see a film which has a running time of one hour, I sit through twenty-seven minutes of complete darkness -- the blankness between frames. When I show a film I am guilty of deceit. I use an apparatus which is constructed to take advantage of a certain human weakness, an apparatus with which I can sway my audience in a highly emotional manner -- make them laugh, scream with fright, smile, believe in fairy stories, become indignant, feel shocked, charmed, deeply moved or perhaps yawn with boredom. Thus I am either an impostor or, when the audience is willing to be taken in, a conjurer. I perform conjuring tricks with apparatus so expensive and so wonderful that any entertainer in history would have given anything to have it.....

People ask what are my intentions with my films -- my aims. It is a difficult and dangerous question, and I usually give an evasive answer: I try to tell the truth about the human condition, the truth as I see it. This answer seems to satisfy everyone, but it is not quite correct. I prefer to describe what I would like my aim to be.

There is an old story of how the cathedral of Chartres was struck by lightning and burned to the **ground**. Then thousands of people came from all points of the compass, like a giant procession of ants, and together they began to rebuild the cathedral on its old site. They worked until the building was completed -- master builders, artists, laborers, clowns, noblemen, priests, burghers. But they all remained anonymous, and no one knows to this day who built the cathedral of Chartres.

Regardless of my own beliefs and 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 work 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.

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 realizing 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, between the gangster's whim and the purest ideal.

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 the 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.

From Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman
(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960)