

## Document Citation

Title	<b>The seventh seal</b>
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Source	<i>University of California Press Journals Division. Film Quarterly</i>
Date	1959
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	42-44
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Det sjunde inseglet (The seventh seal), Bergman, Ingmar, 1957

uniquely available in the cinema, and then only to its masters.

The film is set in fourteenth-century Sweden, at the height of the black plague. Disease, pestilence, fear are everywhere. Women give birth to monsters—children with the heads of calves—and death may at any time, and for anybody, overtake life. A young woman is suspected of being intimate with the Devil, and is to be burned as a witch. Priests drag gigantic crosses and lead supplicants through the streets, lashing

each other with thonged whips in a desperate attempt to pacify the "God who lives forever." A church muralist, with the relish of a man who knows he is doomed, records these events so that future congregations will be properly impressed and frightened.

It is into this gloomy but dramatically rich situation that Bergman places his leading characters—principally a knight and his squire, returned to Sweden after ten years at the Crusades, disillusioned. The knight is now engaged in a double quest—to perform some one significant act, and to discover, if he can, the meaning of life. To provide a form for this potentially unruly content, a limit is placed on the knight's time. As the film opens (after an astonishingly evocative shot of a large-winged bird hovering in the empty sky) the knight is found resting on a rocky beach. It is dawn. Close to the knight is his squire, asleep. And beside him lies, open and prepared, an ornate chess set. Suddenly the sound of the sea and of the wind is cut; the knight looks up and finds himself confronted with Death. In order to buy the time that he needs for his quest, he challenges Death to a game of chess. The game continues at intervals throughout the film, and although the issue is never in doubt it provides the film with a constant reference point and the setting for a running relationship between Death and the knight. The knight is plagued, not so much by the prospect of death, as with the knowledge that he can neither kill God within him nor find a belief that God exists, either now or in an afterlife. The present life, filled with suffering and despair and inhumanity, would have no meaning—only nausea and disgust—if there were no prospect of deliverance. Thus death has to be a transition to something else—to an afterlife which will explain and justify the present. His squire, with whom he has a continuing argument, and who is silenced (under protest) only by death itself, is much more of a rationalist. Less idealistic, with a hedonist's relish of life, he knows death only as an end to life, and as such it has to be resisted.

These two attitudes are most completely contrasted during a brilliantly staged scene—the



THE SEVENTH SEAL: Bengt Ekerot (*Death*) and Max von Sydow (*the knight*).

burning of the witch. The knight, willing to go anywhere for knowledge, asks the girl for her secrets, but her replies are enigmatic, almost flippant. She is tied to a ladder and raised above the pyre. The knight sees hope in her eyes, the squire only the despair of someone looking at a void. And then, significantly, she dies on the ladder. She has been saved from the executioners, but the knight's questions have not been answered.

In the end Death also is a disappointment. At the moment of his triumph over the knight he is silent, and declares that in fact he has no secrets. Thus the argument between the knight and his squire goes unresolved, and if the film ended here we would be left with a sense of despair and, almost, of personal loss.

However, woven into this central engagement are a number of other characters whose lives and attitudes are made to bear upon the knight's quest. There is a group of strolling players, whose director, Skat, seduces the wife of a blacksmith and, to escape his wrath, feigns suicide. Resting in the bough of a tree from the exertion of what might have been his most important performance, he is startled to find that Death is sawing down his refuge. The blacksmith and his wife, representatives of common-sense self-indulgence, continue, awed for a moment (ironically, by the false death) but, to all intents and purposes, not seriously involved.



Death will be a shock when it comes to them, but that's all. The remaining members of his band remind us of the holy family, and their names are the same, save that the child is called, not Jesus, but after the archangel Michael. Resting with this family in the bright sun of a Swedish summer afternoon, and eating wild strawberries with them, the knight has a temporary respite from doubt. Later, just after Death has captured his queen, he is given the chance to save their lives. Aware that Mary's life has been called, the knight upsets the board and temporarily distracts Death, so that Mary and Joseph, with their child, are able to make their escape. Thus, although failing in his larger quest, the knight performs a solitary significant act, and has a minor triumph over Death. And here, probably, is the substance of Bergman's argument. Both the knight and the squire are, by their philosophical positions, unable to dispatch the problems presented by death, but Mary and Joseph never commit themselves to this argument and are, in fact, aloof from it and from the double scourge of pestilence and a reactionary church. Calm and serene, they are the only ones who in the end are saved.

Death comes as a relief only to a woman whose life earlier had been saved by the squire, who hoped to make her his housekeeper (hoping also that in the meantime his wife has died). She kneels before Death and says—with her only line of dialogue throughout the film, and with as close as she ever gets to a smile—"It is finished." "Consummatum est"—the last words of Christ on the cross. The Apocalypse is at hand.

The various internal dramas of the film are brilliantly controlled by Bergman. His skill in staging a scene, in composing it, in moving the camera, and in obtaining performances of stature from a varied cast is breath-taking. He owes much to his cameraman, Gunnar Fischer, who also photographed *Smiles of a Summer Night* and several other Bergman films, and it is only in minor places that Bergman might be thought to falter, although the choice of music (by Erik Nordgren) seems oddly theatrical. Perhaps his principal dramatic achievement, in the script as much as in the direction, is to leave us with a

feeling always of character, never only of symbol. In a piece which is nonetheless rich in symbolic imagery, the characters emerge as people. Twice when we might otherwise question the real humanity of the knight, Bergman introduces the character of his wife, first by allusion and then, near the end, in person. The knight is humanized and made more significant by this personal extension and also by his relationship with the squire. Both of these parts are brilliantly played—the squire with a kind of well-mannered and articulate sensuality by Gunner Björnstrand, and the knight by Max von Sydow, tortured, twisted with doubt, but always a knight, always with the authority and integrity of his position. Bengt Ekerot, as Death, avoids most of the mediæval clichés and, although of course deprived of the opportunity for a personal relationship with any of the characters, is still not impersonal; not only a symbol, but a character who is capable also of personal doubt.

The film is a successful period piece in the sense that it creates the precise period and locale which permit the story and the characters to develop. But the references to contemporary times, the age of anxiety and of the atom bomb, are not hard to find. The title, and some of the narrative, is taken from the Revelation of St. John the Divine (chapters five through nine), but the allusions, in dialogue and in song, owe as much to Nordic mythology as to any Biblical origin. The film, made through Svensk Filmindustri, is an extraordinary major studio production—a remarkable, personal work, which establishes Bergman (for those who had any doubt) as the leading European director.

—COLIN YOUNG.