

Ingmar Bergman's Appropriations of the Images of Death in *The Seventh Seal**

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The Seventh Seal has been generally acknowledged by film critics as Ingmar Bergman's medieval morality play.¹⁾ Indeed, the simple framework of *The Seventh Seal* would seem to fit in this clichéd generic label. While the film is an allegory loaded with Christian symbolism, it is also a very simple story of a medieval knight's return from the Crusades during the time of the plague. A reading of the film as morality play would make the Knight Antonius Block an Everyman figure symbolizing the universal encounter with death. David Bevington refers to the film's central motif—the Dance of Death—as the “late medieval fascination...[of] the cult of death” (794). In a program note, Bergman

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1) All references are to the e-script of *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman. No pagination.

drew an analogy between the late medieval experience of plague and the modern fear of nuclear holocaust, declaring that:

In my film the Crusader returns from the Crusades as the soldier returns from the war today. In the Middle Ages man lived in the terror of the plague. Today they live in fear of the atomic bomb. (Steene, "Doomsday" 5)

Bergman's comments would appear to justify a reading of the film as medieval morality play in that it allows the mid-fourteenth century to say something about 1957 and the post-war death anxiety that the vista of nuclear holocaust and manmade apocalypse raised. Some critics thus argue that the film's trapping of the past only disguise the questions and assertions of modern man. That modern man lives in the shadow of nuclear catastrophe is not primary to the film, but it allows one to share the confusion of the Knight Antonius Block and his companions: what is the meaning of life? This search for knowledge illuminates not only Bergman's medieval film but all his mature films, say, *Virgin Spring*, *Persona* and *Shame*, and *Wild Strawberries*. Indeed, in terms of fears of death on a mass scale, Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* could as well serve for the 21st-century audiences as useful metaphor for concern about eco-disasters caused by global warming and climate-change, say, earthquakes, tsunami, flooding, and pestilences (HIV, AIDS, SARS, etc.). However, what interests me here is not Bergman's analogy between the late medieval experience of the epidemic disease and modern fear of death on a mass scale. I am more interested in the tradition of *ars moriendi* that Bergman adapts and adopts in the film, especially in the final scene in which the juggler Jof sees the Dance of Death in the open countryside at daybreak, not alone but with his family intact in the escaping wagon after a compellingly hurried journey through

the wild night of darkness.

To say that the motif of the Dance of Death is an important concern of the film is an understatement. Death anxiety is central to the works of Bergman, in particular *The Seventh Seal*. *The Seventh Seal* is about mortality, playing gingerly with the medieval images of death, namely the skull, the face of Christ, the procession of flagellations, the figure of Death, and the *danse macabre*. Yet, the Bergman scholarship in the past decades does not seem to take the film's medieval tradition of *ars moriendi*, the art of dying well, very seriously, if it is aware of it at all.²⁾ Explained away perhaps as a universal concern of death or a manifestation of a pre-modern religiosity, the film can be interpreted as doomsday metaphor and therefore be easily dismissed. However, if we are to take seriously the film's medieval images of death, we must also take seriously the medieval concept of dying well. If death is a central theme of *The Seventh Seal*, perhaps we need to look past simply the film's "death anxiety" and talk about something beyond it from a medieval perspective.

My paper therefore aims to explore the film's underlying question not only of the nature of death, but of the nature of life in realistic relationship to death in light of the medieval art of dying well. In a sense, the film serves as modern *memento mori*, a reminder of death and our mortality, which through regular contemplation of the transience of human existence should ideally lead us to prepare ourselves properly to meet death. Such an enquiry of the medieval tradition of *ars moriendi* and *memento mori* strives to open a new way to appraise the images of death that Bergman appropriates in his best-known medieval film.

Earlier in the film, Death—black hooded and white-faced—comes to claim

2) See the bibliography listed in Steene's 2005 reference guide to Ingmar Bergman.

the Knight.

Block asks “who are you?”

Death replies, “I am Death.”

Block counters, “Have you come for me?”

Death confirms, “I have long walked by your side.”

“So I have noticed,” Block acknowledges with a grim humor.

He then asks for a respite by challenging Death to a game of chess. It seems that the hidden polemic in the dialogue between The Knight Block and Death is not about the nature of Death. Neither is the Knight actually expressing his fear of death at this moment. Instead, the Knight is asking Death to answer him a question which has been asked throughout Western history, a question which throughout the history has been addressed philosophically, as well as religiously and theologically: “What is the meaning of life?”³⁾ Bergman called *The Seventh Seal* an oration in which numerous voices pose the same question (quoted in Cowie 141). While engaged in the game of chess with Death, the

3) The Greco-Roman thinkers were often occupied with the idea of making a good death, and Christianity (both before and after the Reformation) also took very seriously the preparation for death. This western tradition is indeed vast. The most famous one perhaps is that of Socrates as described by Plato in *Phaedo*, chiefly, the fact that the great philosopher died with the integrity with which he had lived—he drank the poison quite readily and cheerfully. The message of this Platonic death, and therefore much of the later thinking which it influenced, is the philosophical reckoning of life and death: if you want to die well, then you must first live well. The Christian era was greatly influenced by the Greco-Roman thinkers, and also took very seriously the importance of learning to live well and die well, of making a good death by showing one’s accounting book of good deeds on the Judgment Day. To this pursuit of ultimate happiness, namely, salvation, by the fifteenth century an entire genre of literature had developed and continued to flourish into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Knight is also playing for his life, with a hope of committing one worthy act by his doomsday.

Bergman drew direct inspiration for *The Seventh Seal* from his own religious background as the son of a prominent Lutheran clergyman. He has said concerning his childhood:

When one is born and reared in the home of a minister, one has a chance at an early age to catch a glimpse behind the scenes of life and death. Father conducts a funeral, father officiates at a wedding, father performs a baptism, acts as a mediator, writes a sermon. The Devil became an early acquaintance. (quoted in Stubbs 63)

In another interview, Bergman recalled how the trips he accompanied his father to small countryside churches where the medieval wall paintings and carved figures of the Dance of Death fascinated him. He put in plain words:

There was everything that one's imagination could desire, angels, saints, dragons, prophets, devils, humans. There were very frightening animals: serpents in paradise, Balaam's ass, Jonah's whale, the eagle of Revelation. All this was surrounded by heavenly, earthly, and subterranean landscapes of strange yet familiar beauty. In a wood sat Death, playing chess with a Crusader. Clutching the branch of a tree was a naked man with staring eyes, which down below stood Death, sawing away to his heart's content. My mind was stunned by the extreme cruelty and the extreme suffering. (quoted in Stubbs 63)

All the motifs Bergman describes appear in *The Seventh Seal*: the opening lines from *Revelations* chapter eight are accompanied by the sight of a sea eagle hovering over the sea; Death appears and engages in a chess game with the

Knight Block, saws away the tree in which the Actor Skat hides and afflicted people with its brutality.

The Seventh Seal opens with a sea eagle hovering in the turbulent grey sky while a voice reads from the *Book of Revelations*: “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” God’s book of secrets is described as a scroll with seven seals. On the day of last judgment, the seventh seal will be broken, and man will know the secrets of God. After the opening of the scroll, however, there will come great destruction, in seven vials of wrath, and then a voice from heaven will proclaim, “*It is done.*” *The Seventh Seal* thus begins with a sense of expectation, corresponding to the warning revealed in the text of *Revelations*, putting the title of the film in its biblical context. The final seal is broken, the Book of God has been unsealed by the Lamb, the one creature who has endured Death and triumphed over its power, and now the answer to man’s universal question will be released. It is important to note that the girl who the Squire Jons rescued in the deserted village has said nothing throughout the film but these words “*it is done*”, in a faint echo of Christ’s words on the Cross. Whether or not God’s secrets are revealed to the Knight and his companions is questionable. But death is definite. In a program note, Bergman said, “*The Seventh Seal* is an allegory with a theme that is quite simple: man, his eternal search for God, with death as his only certainty” (Stubbs 66).

The pervasive late medieval fascination with allegories of death accompanied centuries of recurrent famines, wars, and epidemics, climaxed by the devastating Black Death of 1348. The medieval tradition of *ars moriendi* and *memento mori* turned the chaos of imminent, random death into a meaningful worldview, framing death within God’s providence. Death is a profound Christian theme, from its origin in *Genesis*, through the *Gospels* and

epistles, ultimately finding its resolution in *Revelations*. Death was God's punishment, the result of Adam's disobedience. Adam's fall is a *culpa felix* which necessitated salvation, which required Christ's incarnation. Christ "humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross" to atone for Adam's sin (Php 2:8). *Imitatio Christi*, identification with Christ's death, is a kind of death in this life, death to the worldly goods. The Christian view of God's grand design and man's fortune in life thus revolves around questions of death—how to live well and die well?—its origin and resolution.

The late fifteenth century work entitled *ars moriendi* was so popular that it remained a best-seller in various versions in the next two hundred years. The most widely circulated version was printed by William Caxton at the Westminster press in 1491: over one hundred variant editions were made before 1500 from woodblocks and from movable type, under the title "*Art and Craft to knowe ye well to dye*." The do-it-yourself picture book discusses the transient nature of human existence, with a highlight on the stages through which *moriens* (the dying person) goes. The Christian needed to know in advance the temptations and anguish of the terrible dark hours to come so as to overcome Death. The *moriens* is exposed to five principle temptations: against faith, despair, covetousness, impatience, and vainglory.⁴⁾ Each of these are carefully described with words, and graphically illustrated with woodcuts depicting demons as their instigators and conveyors. The Four Last Things was a common theme of the *ars moriendi* genre, referring to Death, Judgment, Hell, and

4) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* lists five "hindrances" in the art of dying well: lustful desire, malice, sloth, pride, and doubt. See *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Robert A. F. Thurman and *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz. These five "veils" are quite similar to those underlined in the medieval tradition of *ars moriendi*. See <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>> See also Litten, esp. 169-170, 200, 254-55.

Heaven. There are motifs of the *voda morus*, the Triumph of Death, The Three Quick and The Three Dead, and the various *danse macabre* cycles which were associated with churches and cemeteries throughout much of Europe.

In most general terms, all the motifs of Christian allegorical Death were *memento mori*, reminders of death, and therefore reminders of Christ.⁵⁾ While a heightened sense of the reality of death was effected in the medieval time of epidemics, wars, famine, earthquakes and other natural disasters through man's contemplation of the transience of life, there were various *memento mori* as media for that contemplation. It included wall paintings, sculpture, picture books, sermons, everyday objects (such as amber beads, sickle, sword, and hourglass), and daily experiences (say, the withering and falling of the flower, the skeletons, skulls, rotten corpses of family and friends) which called people to remember their own eventual deaths. Watching family and friends suffer and succumb to violent deaths during the time of the plague, medieval men could not help but wonder whether the pestilence had been sent to exterminate all sinners. The plague signified the wrath of God. After all, hadn't this happened once before?

Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, Christianity offered a range of

5) Cf. "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body" (2 Co 4:10-11). Being reminded of death has a fundamentally religious purpose, as when St. Paul thought of death on account of the "hardships we suffered in the province of Asia." "We despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Co 1:8-9). Death is also crucial to the sacraments of the Church: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into life..." (Ro 6:3-4); "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Co 11-26).

explanations of human suffering and death. In the late medieval fascination of the cult of death, chastity, fasting, self-flagellation, and burial rites as the woodcuts in the *ars moriendi* illustrated became hallmarks of good death throughout Europe. Anxieties about the corruptions of the flesh are registered in the strict body regulation demanded of the Chosen People in the Pentateuch and upheld ever since within Judaism's elaborate rituals concerning hygiene, diet, sex, and death. Cleanliness had to be defended against such defiling pollutions as the "bad air" of the organic decomposition from the graveyard. The lusts of the flesh had to be tamed to free the spirit. Disease was regarded as God's punishment for the wicked. But the Old Testament figure of Job struck down with pestilence, as depicted in many sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century woodcuts, served as illustrations of how the Lord visited the righteous with afflictions by way of a special test of their faith. The skull is an emblem of Christian hermits, the sanity of "worldly things or contemplation" of death, inspired by Golgotha, the place where Christ was crucified, as well as the burial place where Adam's skull lay directly under the cross so the blood of Jesus could drip on it, thus washing away the original sin. Skulls are associated with such penitent saints as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Jerome and St. Mary Magdalene. The *danse macabre* was a popular topic of woodblock books that had both text and illustrations carved into wood blocks that were then inked and used to print on paper. Perhaps the finest illustration of the *danse macabre* is Hans Holbein's 1538 book of woodcuts. The first four images of his series showed the Creation, Temptation, Expulsion, and Consequences of Adam's sin, the events which subjected mankind to the dominion of Death. The fifth showed the dead playing musical instruments in a cemetery. The Pope was the first figure "danced" away, followed by the Emperor, and other figures in order of their ranks and conditions. The final image of Holbein's somber masterpiece

shows the ultimate triumph of God over Death—Christ in Judgment over the resurrected multitude. These are all conventional Christian themes of the popular instruction literature, confessors' manuals, illustrations, wall paintings and carved figures in rural churches and cemeteries in much of Europe, where allegories of death played a central role. By the late fifteenth century, the sense of the *danse macabre* began to change from an encounter between the living and the dead into a meditative, introspective experience for the Europeans. The effects of the Black Death were cultural and religious no less than epidemiological. The "plague banner" of the Madonna della Misericordia, Chiesa del Gonfalone, Perugia induced a late medieval culture haunted by the figure of Death.

Perhaps the most well-known *memento mori* is the story of The Three Quick and The Three Dead (in various versions). Three noble men go on a pleasure outing. At the end of their hunting expedition, they enter a cemetery, where three dead corpses stand as if they are waiting for their arrival. The corpses speak: "As you are now, so once were we. As we are now, so you will be." This is the clear message of all *memento mori* images. The *memento mori* bore witness to the fact that death is part of the natural human life-cycle, that "in the midst of life we are in death." Life and death are not opposites. They are part of a whole. The good life is part and parcel of the good death. Thus, the hunting trip reverses the hearts of the three nobles, who start to take heed of their spiritual wellbeing and to learn the art of dying well. The story illuminates the insights of the *ars moriendi* tradition and of the *memento mori*, which served a warning for the rich men, a comfort to the poor, and ultimately a reminder to lead a responsible Christian life. But its basic idea is even simpler: the transience of life and the inevitable force of death. While Death is explored and contemplated, the question defining a good death will always

be asked, and the calling to mind of one's eventual morality will always be exercised.

The Seventh Seal opens with oratorio music and a shot of a lonely sea eagle hovering over the grey sky. A voice reads from the *Book of Revelations*. On a rocky, inhospitable beach, the Knight Block and his Squire Jons appear. On the pebbly beach, the Knight rests in a graceful pose, awake and thinking, his cape spread over his arm, with his chess set by his right side. The Squire sprawls on the stones, trying to keep the light out of his eyes so he can catch the last moments of sleep. Then the Knight is seen kneeling on the shore as if he is praying. Suddenly and soundlessly, Death appears. Death has come to claim the Knight. The Knight asks for a respite by challenging Death to a game of chess. The film imagines the medieval past through a series of signs and images of death that it employs, namely, the figure of Death, the skull, Christ on the cross, and the Dance of Death.

The Dance of Death appears three times in the film. It first appears as a fresco in a rural church where the Knight Block and the Squire Jons visit. While the Knight goes to pray, the Squire talks with a church painter, whose murals depict the Dance of Death and penitents flogging themselves. It recurs when the performance of Jof, Mia, and Skat is interrupted by the Dominican-led procession of flagellants whose somber singing of *Dies Irae* ends the sequence. The third time it appears becomes the most well-known scene in *The Seventh Seal*—in the dawn light, Jof sees the Knight and his companions dancing with Death against the skyline while “the rain washes their faces and cleans the salt of the tears from their cheeks” (Rev. 7) The film ends as Jof leads the wagon along the seashore into a new day, with Mia and Michael safe beside him.

The fresco is an interesting version of the Dance of Death in that it illustrates a scenario including not only the Triumph of Death panel with Death

in crown and gown standing on his throne, a tomb, with bow and arrows, leading the Pope and Emperor in the Dance of Death but also the procession of flagellants. The figure of the flagellant was common in the Middle Ages. Since the time of the Desert Fathers in early Christianity, holy individuals had been encouraged to mortify the flesh. Christianity taught that pain and diseases were not original to God's grand plan. Agony had entered the world through Adam's sin, through which man was condemned to labor by the sweat of his brow and woman to bring forth in pain; after the Fall mankind therefore suffer disease and death. Thus the Bible construed pain as the penalty for disobedience—a notion reinforced by etymology, the word pain being derived from *poena* (punishment). Especially at times of evil crisis, plague, and pestilence, groups of clergy and laymen gathered for collective mortification, flagellating themselves and others, by way of expiation and propitiation of sins. By the Age of Reason, Enlightenment intellectuals regarded pious mortification as a symptom of collective religious mania or derangement. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages, the “fool's dance” or a kind of “dancing-mania,” a craze affecting parts of late medieval Europe, and associated with social fears and disorder was a popular theme of arts and artifacts, e.g., the Flemish artist Peter Breughel the Elder's *St. Vitus's Dance* and those followed the artistic convention in depicting the dancers of Saint-Guy.

In the church, the Knight Block goes dutifully to the confessional. Unaware that Death in his black dressing gown is in guise of the priest behind the grill, the Knight asks a series of questions to which Death does not respond. Most interestingly, it is Death whose inquisition that exposes the Knight's impetus for his quests.

“What are you waiting for?” asks Death.

“Knowledge,” answers the Knight, “I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out His hand towards me, reveal Himself and speak to me.”

The Knight also confesses that he knows his death is forthcoming, but he would like to perform “one meaningful deed” before he dies. He will try to hold off Death in a chess game to gain time so that he can perform such a deed. These two quests the Knight confesses are complementary: the first he pursues with his questions of Death and of the witch; the second he pursues with his act of kindness for the Actor Jof, his wife Mia and their son Mikael. As *memento mori*, the film reminds people that it is this act of kindness—the human capacity for loving kindness—that the Knight can triumph over Death and acquire a meaningful life. As mentioned above, while the Knight goes to pray and confess, the Squire Jons, in the chapel porch, engages a wall painter in a conversation. The painter’s murals depict the horror of the pestilence, the *danse macabre*, and the flagellants’ procession. “But what you said about the plague was horrible,” he tells the painter. Indeed, people do not like to know the truth and grow scared either when they see themselves reflected in art or at the moment when Death shows his face behind the grill of the confessional booth. Realizing that he is tricked into revealing his chess game strategy by Death, the Knight leans back against the stone wall of the church and flexes his hand with valor. He proclaims:

This is my hand, I can move it, feel the blood pulsing through it. The sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with Death.

This message shows the Knight’s will to live, the source of human love and hope. Later in the film, the representations of the flagellants’ procession and the

sight of the face of Christ in *Passion* underpin the film's central motif of the Dance of Death, warning the audiences their impending mortality and reminding them to lead a responsible Christian life. The flagellants might have sprung from one of the church murals that Jons has inspected. "Mobs of people who call themselves Slaves of Sin are swarming over the country, flagellating themselves and others, all for the glory of God," the wall painter told Jons. For the Medieval man, a plague so sweeping and unforgiving could only be the punishment of God upon mankind for its sins. Pope led processions lasting three days and which were attended by monks, laymen and women, according to their conditions of life. The procession of flagellants marched from city to city, stripped to the waist, scourging themselves with leather whips tipped with iron spikes until they bled. They carried candles and relics, tore at their hair, wore ropes around their necks; with people who followed them, they prayed, wept, gnashed their teeth, imploring the mercy of the Virgin Mary. The so-called flagellant movement was an interesting and bizarre episode of the plague. In 1348, processions of men, initially well-organized, walked two by two, chanting their *Pater Nosters* and *Ave Marias*, passed through Austria, Hungary, Germany, Bohemia, the Low Countries and Picardy, summoning the townspeople to the marketplace. The marchers were silent, their heads and faces hidden, and their eyes fixed on the ground before them. Word would travel ahead and the news of the procession usually brought out all the townspeople. The church bells would ring and announce their arrival. Taking part in a procession served as an inexpensive insurance policy that God would forgive them. "Before the arrival of the Death, flagellation was one of the few outlets open to a fear-ridden population; after it had arrived, the worst could be seen, and there were practical tasks, such as burying the dead, available to dampen emotions" (Lambert 221). Indeed, the late medieval ages was a period

of popular religious excitement or overexcitement, of pilgrimages and penitential processions, of mass preaching, of veneration or relics and adoration of saints, lay piety, and popular mysticism.⁶⁾

In *The Seventh Seal*, the rapid-fire montage of Jof and Mia's play and the flagellants' procession brings out a complexity of reactions both to the sound of the procession and the sight of Christ on the cross. The villagers, the actors and the Squire Jons looked on in amazement—most quaked, sobbed, and groaned in fear and agony. In one shot we see the swinging of the incense-burner; on the next we cut to the face of the weeping penitent, and another on Jons' facial expression of horror and detestation. The sequence of the close-ups ends with the somber singing of *Dies Irae* while the flagellants marched on barren ground further away into the land of wilderness.

The Knight wanders out of the village, sensing that Death may be waiting for him to continue their game of chess. He meets Mia and her baby son beside their wagon, and when Jof and Jons join them after the incident at the inn, an interlude of tranquility and happiness begins. Mia offers a bowl of fresh milk and wild strawberries to the Knight and his companions, now including Jof, Mikael, Jons and the silent village girl whom Jons rescued in the deserted village. The mood is that of an open-air communion. The Knight is given hospitality by Mia and Jof—milk and wild strawberries. It is perhaps the most tender in the film and the point where the Knight comes nearest to peace of mind and understanding of the meaning of life (Steene, "Milk" 10-18). The Knight tells Mia:

6) The medieval concept of bodily pain and the Passion, *imitatio Christi*, about the significance of fleshly violence and blood-letting to man's redemption and ultimate happiness, have been avoided, for the focus here has been primarily upon the medieval art of dying well. For a general history of the "sacred pain," see Bynum, 245-59.

I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping. Jof with his lyre. I'll try to remember what we have talked about. I will carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk.

The Knight relaxes, beginning to perceive that Mia's family must be shielded from the stroke of Death. This is the "meaningful act" that the Knight wants to perform before his doomsday. As the Knight moves away from the holy family, he finds Death waiting in a corner of the meadow.

Later, in a moonlit glade, the Knight plays his last round with Death. He loses his queen, but at the moment Jof spots him playing chess game with Death. He is scared and manages to escape with his family while the Knight overthrows the chess pieces to distract Death's attention. Death announces that the Knight will be checkmated at the next move. But Block does not care. He has accomplished his quest to do "one meaningful act" before Death comes.

That the Knight Block wants to perform one worthy act in light of his impending death is worth noting. What of Death, the film's most powerful force in life? The medieval *ars moriendi* tradition and the *memento mori* declare that what is true for the Knight is true for all of us. In Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, dying well is not a gloomy thought, but a very feeling one—death is an integral part of everyman's life that gives meaning to human existence. In this sense, the film serves as modern *memento mori*. Bergman wrote in the introduction to the script of *The Seventh Seal*:

In the 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 "masterpieces" were

terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invaluable assurance and natural humility.

“Is he claiming something for the film, is he reclaiming his own past or is he developing a truth which he wishes to be universally acknowledged?” one may wonder as Melvyn Bragg does (9). It seems to me that the images of death in the film give me primarily an impression that the essential subject of *The Seventh Seal*, following its generic nature of morality play, is, then, as I see it, the fear of death, or to put it in other words, how to live and die well. I would suggest that Antonius Block the man is less important than the worldviews he expresses on the subject of human life and death. The universality of Block's quest of the meaning of life, I believe, lies in that we read Block's speeches with interest chiefly because they describe so well a certain spiritual region through which most of us have passed and anyone in his circumstances might be expected to pass, rather than because of our concern to understand how and why this particular man entered it. Indeed, the world is transient, and men “crawling between earth and heaven” are mortal, and “the rest is silence” (*Hamlet* 5.6.363).

Throughout the film, we see the Knight and his companions deal graciously and realistically with death, albeit from the particular cultural and social paradigms of the medieval art of dying well. Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* redefined the force of religious art, the power of the sacramental, the resonance of a moral-aesthetic imperative. He concludes his introduction to the film referring to the legend of Chartres:

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 holding of the cathedral.

It is noteworthy that Bergman wants to make something out of stone, as the maker of the jar in Tennessee mentioned in Wallace Stevens's poem. My paper examines the medieval images of death in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, seeing them not merely as manifestations of man's death anxiety, but as creative and holistic ways of understanding both life and death from the medieval approaches of the *ars moriendi* tradition and of the *memento mori*. I suggest that such approaches return us to think of the intrinsic connection of life and death and to better appreciate the medieval images of death Bergman appropriates in his best-known medieval film. There is a world of everyman, a landscape dimly lit by the greys of the dawn where the shadow is as important as the living figure and the inwardness of life is as demanding as anything that happens in one's daily life. If we try to escape what are demanded of us, we will, like Jonah, only make more difficulties for ourselves. The world of Antonius Block is a world of everyman, a thinking world, a world trying to answer the questions not only about the nature of death but also about life in its immediate, direct, and so realistic relation with death. The answer is perhaps ever in the making, yet, how to live well and die well will be asked and practiced when everyone of us, like Antonius Block, aims to triumph over Death.

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Ingmar Bergman's Appropriations of the Images of Death in *The Seventh Seal*

Abstract

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Death anxiety is central to the works of Ingmar Bergman, in particular *The Seventh Seal*. *The Seventh Seal* is about mortality, playing gingerly with the medieval images of death, namely the skull, the face of Christ, the procession of flagellations, the figure of Death, and the *danse macabre*. Yet, the Bergman scholarship in the past decades does not seem to take the film's medieval tradition of *ars moriendi*, the art of dying well, very seriously, if it is aware of it at all. Explained away perhaps as a universal concern of death or a manifestation of a pre-modern religiosity, the film can be interpreted as doomsday metaphor and therefore be easily dismissed. This paper explores the film's underlying question not only of the nature of death, but of the nature of life in realistic relationship to death in light of the medieval art of dying well. In a sense, the film serves as modern *memento mori*, a reminder of death and our mortality, which through regular contemplation of the transience of human existence should ideally lead us to prepare ourselves properly to meet death. Such an enquiry into the medieval tradition of *ars moriendi* and *memento mori* strives to open a new way to appraise the images of death that Bergman appropriates in his best-known medieval film.

Key Words

Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal*, *ars moriendi*, *memento mori*, *imitatio Christi*, *danse macabre*, the flagellant movement, Black Death

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