

The Seventh Seal:
A Philosophical Mood at 24 Frames Per Second

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CMLT280 – Global Film
May 13, 2007

The Book of Revelations – comprising St. John's vitriolic, passionate prophecies of God's eventual judgment of the world – speaks of the metaphysical “seals” that will be opened before the vials of wrath are to be poured down upon the earth; in a word, the book speaks of the eventual apocalypse and the methodology through which it is to be brought about. Written during the brutal reign of Nero, the Book of Revelations is often seen as a sharp, bitter castigation of the Emperor; although in a religious context, the book fits squarely within the apocalyptic literary tradition of the early Christian era, in a historical context it stands as a fascinating lens into the tyranny and brutality of the era. Likewise, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, which co-opts its eerie, elegant, and philosophical title from a passage in Revelations describing the final stage in Christ's ushering-in of the apocalyptic era, has a unique cultural and historical perspective—yet another lens—through which the nihilism, existentialism, doubt, political conflict and deep moral complexity of the nuclear post-WWII era is examined and interpreted artistically. The political and cultural environment of the Cold War, seeped in despair and pessimism, was a ripe climate for the emergence of philosophical movements that reflected upon the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, as well as the existential dread of mass culture – and the individual spirit, or *dasein* – approaching violent non-being. *The Seventh Seal*, which deals allegorically and agonizingly with the philosophy and metaphysics of humans' relationship to God and their encounters with the idea of death, is a complex and ultimately successful meditation on the global ramifications of such an existential outlook; while not a strict translation of existentialism's tenets onto the silver screen, the film resonates as the ambitious personal statement of a devoutly philosophical auteur. A complete, shot-by-shot exploration of the existential themes of *The Seventh Seal* could occupy several volumes; instead, herein, we will explore the manner in which the film's early scenes, which provide remarkably insightful and painstakingly detailed introductions for the three key players in the philosophical drama – Sir Antonius Block, his squire Jons, and Death incarnate – establish it firmly and immediately within the tradition and scope of existentialist literature.

The term “existentialism” was explicitly adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre,

author of the movement's landmark text, *Being and Nothingness*, released the very same year as *The Seventh Seal*. Through the wide dissemination of the postwar literary and philosophical output of Sartre and his associates — notably Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus — existentialism became identified with a cultural movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. Among the themes of the existentialist literary “mood” (as Sartre liked to call it) are nothingness, the absurd, alienation, engagement with politics, authenticity of existence, personal freedom within the modern world, and the ideality of values within the skewed value system of a society facing extermination. Freedom, a particularly prominent point of philosophical inquiry in the post-Nazi/intra-Soviet era, was viewed by the existentialist community as a paramount societal need; similarly, with the four horsemen of the new political apocalypse hovering out in the distance, God and His command over the actions and phenomenological experience of mankind were rejected in favor of atheistic nihilism. As Hazel Barnes, translator of *Being and Nothingness*, explains, “Sartre's endeavor is to explain man's predicament in human terms without postulating an existent God to guarantee anything. He argued that there was one value — namely freedom itself — that did have a kind of universal authority. To commit oneself to anything is also always to commit oneself to the value of freedom” (Sartre 1956, p.xxxii). Echoing the dark, esoteric examinations of being and existence undertaken by Sartre and his ilk, Ingmar Bergman crafted *The Seventh Seal* with an attention to detail and symbolism that rose to the challenge of presenting philosophy on screen. From the outset, the attuned audience will immediately identify Sir Antonius Block, a stoic knight returning to Sweden from the Crusades, as an archetypal figure of the intellectual in search of God. Within the first scene alone, his stoic demeanor, his subtle yet strong choice of words, and his immediate recognition of the pale man who stands before him connote both deep wisdom and deep sadness. Bergman's exposition in the screenplay gives context to Block's dark and quiet demeanor:

The KNIGHT returns to the beach and falls on his knees. With his eyes closed and brow furrowed, he says his morning prayers. His hands are clenched together and his lips form the words silently. His face is sad and bitter. He

opens his eyes and stares directly into the morning sun which wallows up from the misty sea like some bloated, dying fish. The sky is gray and immobile, a dome of lead. A cloud hangs mute and dark over the western horizon. High up, barely visible, a seagull floats on motionless wings.

This brief expository note acts as a lens to understand our protagonist's complex, existential outlook. His reluctance to pray – “eyes closed... brow furrowed” – alludes to a loss of innocent, unquestioning faith while the pall of death, both figuratively and literally, hangs over him. The environment surrounding him is described nihilistically, with melancholy and perhaps macabre references to tangible nuclear doom; expressed with perfect acuity on the screen, the screenplay's references to the sun “wallow[ing] up from the misty sea... the sky... gray and immobile, a dome of lead...a cloud hangs mute” evoke images of atom bombs detonating on distant atolls and over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And yet, observing his prayers, we are led to assume that the unquestioning faith of his past – and, indeed, the violent faith he participated in during the Crusades – has been eschewed and replaced with a dialectical and radically individualistic faith that grabs at the shadows and demands they reveal themselves to be God. An existentialist reading of his demeanor and introductory actions would posit him among the most serious of all early existentialists – Søren Kierkegaard. According to Kierkegaard, “the singularity of existence comes to light at the moment of conflict between ethics and religious faith” (plato.stanford.edu). Drawing here on George Hegel as emblematic of the entire tradition, Kierkegaard, in his book *Fear and Trembling*, argues that a life becomes meaningful when I “raise myself to the universal” by bringing one's immediate (natural) desires and inclinations under the moral law, which represents my “telos” or what I ought to be (Kierkegaard 24). We can interpret Block's dedication to prayer, in spite of the darkness that surrounds him, as a meaningful, intellectual attempt to reconcile protean religious inclinations with a deeper sense of ethical obligation toward understanding, and perhaps fixing, the world. According to Bergman scholar Dennis DeNitto, “the logic of the Knight might be that if he can perform an act that he considers meaningful, then the universe is not entirely absurd, some power beyond the physical is controlling our lives. This seems rather an equivocal proof of God's existence, depending as it does on individual evaluation. The Knight, however, is desperate

and strains to hear even in the slightest sound what he can identify as the authentic voice of God”
(DeNitto 75).

The knight's initial conversation with Death personified sheds light on the film's existential intentions; its brute simplicity, as well as its esoteric overtones, bely its utter darkness and its deep roots in existential philosophy. The conversation, significant in every turn of exchange, proceeds as follows:

KNIGHT
Who are you?
DEATH
I am Death.
KNIGHT
Have you come for me?
DEATH
I have been walking by your side for a long time.
KNIGHT
That I know.
DEATH
Are you prepared?
KNIGHT
My body is frightened, but I am not.
DEATH
Well, there is no shame in that.

The curtness of the exchange, as well as the intelligence and understanding exercised by both the knight and Death, indicate a clear relationship between humanity and the nameless but ever-present specter of death incarnate. One may interpret the exchange, which continues with an exhortation to play chess in exchange for the protraction of the knight's life, as a comic allegorical exercise; indeed, the instantaneous familiarity expressed by both characters has a rather humorous undertone, and many audience members might find comedy in the mere idea of a conversation with death (a concept now thoroughly explored through comic television and film, but rather radical at the release of *The Seventh Seal*). Nevertheless, the astuteness of the knight's responses to Death's ominous axioms has its roots in the central existential concept of “existence preceding essence”; one might expect a weary knight to have difficulty communicating with an utterly alien form such as death incarnate, who may or may not exist solely in the imagination of Sir Antonius. However, according to Sartre, “so long as one apprehends the world practically, in a seamless and absorbed way, things present themselves as meaningfully co-ordinated with the projects in which [one is] engaged; they show me the face that is

relevant to what I am doing. But the connection between these meanings and my projects is not itself something that I experience... So long as I am practically engaged, in short, all things appear to have reasons for being, and I, correlatively, experience myself as fully at home in the world. The world has an order that is largely transparent to me” (Sartre 225). This existentialist tenet is expressed fully in Block's demeanor; apprehending the world practically, the random appearance of Death on a remote beach in Sweden is not an alien experience to approach confusedly or irresolutely. Rather, the knight's struggles with finding God among the death and madness of the modern world – expressed heartbreakingly in his church confession to Death, “Why must God hide in vague promises and invisible miracles? ... What will become of us who want to believe but cannot?” -- have conferred upon him a transcendent, powerfully transparent hermeneutic with which he apprehends the appearance of Death as an unremarkable, predictable moment: “My body is frightened, but I am not.” He does not question Death's *raison d'etre* so much as he pre-empts it with a knowing “Have you come for me?” From this, we may understand that Block understands death's existence as preceding its essence. This attitude—embracing death openly while searching for and rejecting God—was the pervasive one in existentialist circles at the time of *The Seventh Seal's* conception and release (plato.stanford.edu).

Despite a fierce attitude of independence and individualism, the philosophy of the post-war era was marked by an obsession with nothingness – its origins, its form, and the despair we face when we learn our place within it. In analyzing Martin Heidegger's pre-existential thought, Sartre theorizes, “anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself. Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over. A situation provokes fear if there is the possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation” (Sartre 1965 p88). While not a direct political dogma, Sartre clearly articulates here the notion that man faces a precipice – one threatening our being and our conception of ourselves as existent beings – leading into Nothingness, and our own actions, be they moral on a global political scale or on a personal level, are the catalysts of our own fate. In a manner of speaking we are thus

brought face-to-face with our own finitude, our collective or personal "deaths" as the possibility in which we are no longer able to be anything. This is, perhaps, the key inspiration for beginning such a film with an encounter with death; as Dennis DeNitto explains, "the main problem concerning Death [in *The Seventh Seal*] is whether he is to any degree a free agent or is completely controlled by an omniscient and omnipotent deity that has already planned every move of the game of life. Evidence for the latter view includes Death's own statement that there are no secrets and he knows nothing, although he is infuriatingly ambiguous in everything he states and we share the Knight's sense of frustration... On the other hand, if Death is not a free agent, why does he trick the Knight into revealing his strategy? Or is it possible that Death is a natural force, a manifestation of the rhythms of nature that has no purpose beyond regeneration of itself?" (DeNitto 75) By asking us to grapple with these questions – not to mention ones that DeNitto omits, including, perhaps, why Block claims to be a better chess player than an immortal and potentially omniscient being from the outset, or why Death is unable to decode Block's insistence that he wants to play chess for "[his] reasons" -- immediately, Bergman sets the stage for the film's cleanly laid-out battles between death, ideology, Christianity, and theism, among other forces. Our immediate encounter with Bergman's depiction of death, or Sartre's "nothingness," acts, in many ways, as a spur to an authentically existential thought process; without wasting a frame of film, Bergman invites us to come to see that we "are" not anything but must "make ourselves be" through various choices. In committing ourselves, and watching Block do the same, in the face of death — that is, making ourselves aware of the nothingness of our identities if not defended right up to the end — the roles that we have hitherto thoughtlessly engaged in in alienation now become something that we must own up to, or become responsible for. This is clearly mirrored in Bergman's screenplay. Rather than expect Death to provide a solution or a reprieve, Block faces annihilation and assumes absolute, almost disobedient, control over his environment; as explicated in the script, "The KNIGHT holds out his two fists to DEATH, who smiles at him suddenly." Whether or not Death is a free agent is left in ambiguity. Nevertheless, the free will of the knight – as puzzled as he is by the absence of God – is unquestionable. Asserting, at least momentarily, his right to fend off the approach of certain death,

Block assumes the airs of a Nietzschean ubermensch, challenging the divine and transcending a “traditional” death.

Thus the big question of existentialism echoed in the first scenes of *The Seventh Seal* is, simply: Are we responsible for our descent into non-existence, or are we part of a cosmic comedy outside the realm of our own control? The existentialists, with the exception of Albert Camus on occasion, steered clear of the domain of esoteric comedy, but the overall philosophical mood of the 1950's, with the pall of real death or metaphysical non-being hanging over the heads of the world, was addressed with literary ingenuity and a keen eye on what Robert McNamara called “Mutual Deterrence” -- the doctrine that stated that “it is important to understand that assured destruction is the very essence of the whole deterrence concept. We must possess an actual assured-destruction capability, and that capability also must be credible. The point is that a potential aggressor must believe that our assured-destruction capability is in fact actual, and that our will to use it in retaliation to an attack is in fact unwavering” (atomicarchive.com). The absurd, theatrical threat of potential non-existence, heightened by the politicians with their fingers on the buttons and the philosophers with their minds set on the harrowing metaphysical implications of widespread cultural nihilism, played out as a drama of tension, release, and brinkmanship that brought the psyche of the western world to its knees. This intense, strange phenomenological outlook serves as the context for Ingmar Bergman's film, which finds him “exorcising his own demons, his own dread of the eternal darkness... to his surprise and delight this process has appealed to audiences in practically every corner of the world. It is as though for the first time in the movies someone had dared to ask in public those most intimate and basic questions that each of us asks in private; to illustrate and analyze on screen the doubts and fears, yearnings and aspirations, for which most filmmakers cannot find a visual language” (criterionco.com). It is rare that a film so elegantly captures the weight of pure philosophy, but in *The Seventh Seal*, Bergman succeeds – brilliantly, admirably, and authentically.

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