

Manifestations of the Grotesque and Carnavalesque Body in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*

Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film *The Seventh Seal* (*Det Sjunde Inseglet*) remains arguably his best-known work. If one talks of the existence of a genre of medieval film, and subsequently, the existence of a theory of medieval film, then *The Seventh Seal's* exclusion from a discussion of what constitutes medieval film might well be unthinkable. The question of whether or not one can conceive of a concept of medieval film theory *per se* depends to a certain extent upon the idea of whether or not one can talk about the existence of medieval film as a distinct genre with given generic characteristics and expectations. Talking in terms of genre risks pigeonholing a film, and early reception of *The Seventh Seal* in mainstream film criticism appears to have proceeded along those lines.

Pauline Kael refers to the film as "Bergman's medieval morality play" – a clichéd label if ever there was one – implying that the work functions as an essentially linear narrative of *psychomachia* propelled towards an *inevitable* conclusion. The external framework of *The Seventh Seal* would seem to lend weight to this assertion. After all, the film does concern itself with death, playing very gingerly with what David Bevington calls the "late medieval fascination...[of] the cult of death." Bevington notes how "the Dance of Death, features Death playing on a fiddle while all ranks and conditions of men march to his tune." This is the film's central motif that appears on the church wall and gives it its famous end scene.¹ Moreover, *The Seventh Seal* appears to toy far too eagerly with the

¹ Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 794.

conventional notion of the Middle Ages as a period uniquely obsessed with, and characterised by, death. A reading as morality play ensnares the film within the restrictive chains of an allegorical hermeneutics that makes the Knight Antonius Block an Everyman figure symbolising the universal encounter with death and mortality and further entraps the Middle Ages within the aforementioned paradigm.

Perhaps it would be useful at this juncture not to think of death in terms of metaphysical/metaphorical allegory, but rather as the kernel of a culture of anxiety about mass holocaust and the extinction of human civilisation that characterised *The Seventh Seal's* 1957 moment of production and initial reception. As such, this article will seek to articulate a more open-ended reading of the film as Bergman's manipulation of an idealised medievalism that in turn functions as a template for the analysis of an imagined culture of mass death and cataclysm transposed from the post-war world. Bearing this in mind, and informed by Lacanian film theory and Bakhtin's work on carnival and the grotesque body, I will argue here that *The Seventh Seal* as a film specifically dealing with the Middle Ages problematises issues of parable and exemplarity, becoming a work that usefully questions the desirability of reading medieval film texts within the constraints of allegory.

In a programme note released by Svensk Filmindustri to coincide with the film's release, Bergman 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

terror of the plague. Today they live in fear of the atomic bomb.”² Bergman’s comments would appear to justify a continuation of thinking about *The Seventh Seal* within a self-contained and restrictive allegorical hermeneutics that seems to acknowledge the medieval period’s value only in terms of its direct relationship to the contemporary moment. Through the prism of the Cold War the film could be read as a symbolic interpretation of fears concerning nuclear holocaust. In addition, Birgitta Steene suggested that the film could serve for 1970s audiences as a useful metaphor for concern about eco-disasters as a partial replacement for atomic apocalypse.³ *The Seventh Seal* is interesting precisely because it allows the mid-fourteenth century to say more about 1957 and the post-war concern with death on a mass scale that the prospect of nuclear holocaust and manmade apocalypse raised. Does Block’s search for a meaningful faith, for a meaningful way of understanding himself and interpreting his own experience more adequately reflect the need for the nuclear age and the post-war world to find a faith in which to believe in, or rather its failure to find it and its loss of faith? Perhaps what one might suggest is that the contemporary production moment of 1957 turns to the medieval world precisely because the Black Death provides an *actual* experience of an apocalyptic situation that the nuclear era preferred to keep wishfully theoretical. In a sense, Bergman in 1957 has to turn to fourteenth-century Sweden to satisfy his need to view death and the process of identification with the inevitability of dying in a fashion that seeks to minimise the voyeurism of the (male) spectator’s cinematic gaze.

² Steene, 5.

³ Quoted by Birgitta Steene in her introductory essay “The Seventh Seal: Film as Doomsday Metaphor” included in the volume of essays *Focus on The Seventh Seal* which she edited for the fifteenth anniversary of the film’s release, 5.

The medieval experience of plague is represented as engendering a culture of death that in turn buttresses an ostensibly universal and transhistorical Christian paradigm, where a Kierkegaardian exploration of the dread of mortality is explored. In the film, the response to death is neither strictly individualised nor intersubjective, as the individual responses of Squire Jöns, the flagellants and the Knight exemplify. On this point, it is perhaps worth considering Ernest Becker's idea that for a child, death "is not a single thing, but it is rather a composite of mutually contradictory paradoxes...death itself is not only a state, but a complex symbol, the significance of which will vary from one person to another and from one culture to another."⁴

Becker's point about the cultural complexity of death and the even greater complexity of cultural responses illuminates the essential problematic of a mid- twentieth-century film trying to explore death in the mid-fourteenth century. The film has to carry a historical imagination large enough to represent mortality and dying in a manner that can plausibly convince audiences. It has to be remembered that film functions as a series of images arranged in sequence to construct a viable narrative that either accidentally or deliberately privileges storytelling above historical accuracy. In other words, cinema's worth as a medium of historiography and its creation of *historiophoty* (historical narrative in film) should always be open to sceptical debate. Juxtaposing the differing viewpoints on historical film of R.J. Raack and Ian Jarvie, Robert Rosenstone paraphrases the latter's argument that "the moving image carries such a 'poor information load' and suffers from such 'discursive weakness' that there is no way to do meaningful history on film."⁵

⁴ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 19.

⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, 26.

Jarvie's point has particular relevance for the study of medieval film, given the great distance of the medieval period from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Any attempt at doing medieval history on film faces the aforementioned dual handicap. Confronted with these sorts of epistemological gaps, *The Seventh Seal* has to rely predominantly upon its narrative diegesis and its semiotic motifs to create a credible medieval verisimilitude.

The film imagines the medieval past through the multitude of visual motifs that it employs, asking the reader to 'paint' rather than read that past through a series of recurring signs. Bergman drew direct inspiration for *The Seventh Seal* from his own background as the son of a prominent Lutheran clergyman: in his 1958 review of the film the critic Henry Hart noted how Bergman had accompanied his father to small countryside churches where the medieval paintings and carved figures fascinated him. In his own 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, while down below stood Death, sawing away to his heart's content.⁶

Bergman's comment illustrates the seeming fascination that the Middle Ages had for him and the idiosyncratic valency of his own serviceable brand of medievalism. And *The Seventh Seal* certainly abounds with medieval clichés: the background setting moves between dense forest and deserted, plague-ridden villages; brutish yokels mock itinerant

⁶ Hart's review is among a selection of eight reviews included in *Focus on The Seventh Seal*, 62-3.

actors playing a cuckold farce that becomes a moment of self-mimesis – a play within a ‘play’. Two years after *The Seventh Seal* he directed *Virgin Spring*, an exploration of faith and redemption rooted in a retelling of a fourteenth-century Swedish legend concerning the rape of a devout virgin by a group of goatherds. In both films, Bergman is apparently playing with diametrically opposed concepts of medievalism that synthesise primeval and atavistic violence with a fervency of religiosity that the sanitised contemporary age lacks. Bergman’s cinematic Middle Ages are a period where men attempt to rape women with impunity (Jöns prevents Raval’s possible rape of the village girl) and burn them at the stake for being witches, like Tyan, blamed for misfortunes such as the Black Death. Put rather more crudely, Bergman uses his medieval settings to explore Kierkegaard’s notion that “with sinfulness was posited sexuality”, and, as I shall discuss, the capacity/incapacity of the body to function as a mould for the formation of a viable and lasting sense of individual subjectivity.⁷

All the motifs Bergman describes appear in *The Seventh Seal*: the opening lines from Revelation chapter eight are accompanied by the sight of a sea eagle hovering over the sea; Death appears and engages in a chess game with Block and saws away the tree in which the adulterous Skat hides. This working out is symbolised by the medieval motifs which the film appropriates, namely the skull, the face of Christ, the figure of Death, and the *danse macabre*/dance of death. Except for the *danse macabre*, all are linked by the fact that they are representations of the *human* image: *The Seventh Seal*’s semiotic language, if not exactly written on the body (as a classically Foucauldian site of discipline and control) is constantly expressed and problematised through Christ’s body

⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 47.

and flagellation and is almost always constructed through the face. If that semiotic language depends largely upon those motifs as a set of signs that can be read as formulating an iconography that justifies reading the film as a medieval film, then it can also be read on another level as constructing a uniquely personal code or iconography that plays upon the *contradictory* superfluity and the necessity of the body – a point best exemplified, I feel, in the representation of the flagellants’ procession.

A plurality of reactions emerges in the juxtaposition of the fool’s play and the Dominican-led procession of flagellant supplicants: the rapid-fire montage brings out the unity and disunity of experience and reaction both to the sound of the procession and the sight of the face of Christ. In one shot we see the swinging of the thurible; in the next we cut to the face of the weeping penitent, before cutting back to the cynical and contemptuous expression on Squire Jöns’ face. As such, *The Seventh Seal* presents the spectator with its own diegetic audience that, in Susan Hayward’s words, “[serves] to draw us, the extra-diegetic audience, into the screen and thereby into the illusion that we too are part of the diegetic [spectacle].”⁸

Through a mixture of close-up and cross-cutting, it is established as a *mise-en-scène* where the imagined extra-diegetic audience is doubly privileged with individual interiority and collective audience reaction that makes it possible to subtly, yet devastatingly expose, to paraphrase Linda Williams, a system of *excess* that involves “the

⁸ Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed, 84-5.

gross display of the human body.”⁹ As Sarah Shabot Cohen suggests, the concept of the grotesque is implicitly connected with the idea of excess, with Bakhtin’s idea of the body in a perpetual state of flux and of becoming, of being resistant to *and* eagerly transgressing whatever limitations are placed upon it. In the openly voyeuristic spectacle of the flagellants’ procession, it is the inanimate representation of the dying Christ that inspires flagellation, writhing, tears, gazing and ecstasy. Thus Christ’s body, to paraphrase Bakhtin, is grotesque, precisely because its corporeal agony is “never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates [other bodies].”¹⁰

Its monstrosity is compounded by its conformity to the three forms of cinematic bodily excess that Williams identifies: pornography, horror and melodrama. She talks of melodrama as referring to “a much larger system of excess”¹¹ and that “under the extended rubric of melodrama”, genres, notably pornography and horror, are considered “as a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more ‘dominant’ modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative. Melodrama can encompass a broad range of films marked by ‘lapses’ in realism, by ‘excesses’ of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive.”¹² The lapse into primal and infantile emotion in *The Seventh Seal* is often

⁹ Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 208.

¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, 317

¹¹ Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 209.

¹² Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 208.

precluded by the close-up shots of faces that reveal the shock of the encounters with either the figure of Death or with Christ crucified.

If one common reaction dominates in the film, then it is shock: there is shock on Block's face in the confessional when he realises that he has just inadvertently betrayed his best chess move (Bishop-Knight) to Death. The solemn looks on the monks' faces become horror on the faces of Jof and Mia. The agony on the monstrous visage of Christ seems to imprint itself upon Block's face. Throughout *The Seventh Seal*, shock is the prevailing emotion: individuals are constantly shocked into a deeper awareness of their bodies and those around them. The Dominican monk arrogantly declares that, "God has sentenced us to punishment. We shall all perish in the black death" and damns those around him as "you insensible fools" who "shall die today or tomorrow, or the next day, because all of you have been sentenced."¹³ And yet, Jöns' strident assertion of an independent subjectivity illustrates his Althusserian awareness of how the fear of death helps in the maintenance of the ideological apparatus of the medieval Church. Citing Kierkegaard's dread of death, Ernest Becker talks of how "the flood of anxiety is not the end for man. It is rather, a 'school' that provides man with the ultimate education, the final maturity."¹⁴

And yet shock is an emotion that they constantly deny and seek to battle against, almost inevitably in vain. Block is shocked by the first appearance of Death and even more shocked by his frank admission that, "I have been walking by your side for a long

¹³ Bergman, *The Seventh Seal*, translated by Lars Malmström and David Kushner, 39.

¹⁴ See Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 87-8.

time.”¹⁵ He is furthermore temporarily shocked by his unwitting betrayal of his chess-game moves to his opponent, and by Death’s sudden re-appearance in the midst of the happy gathering around the wild strawberries (again another popular Bergman motif). More tellingly, there is the shock on Jof and Mia’s faces when their merry fool-playing is disrupted by the flagellants, and the terror on the face of Raval, the seminary rector turned opportunistic brigand, when his plundering of the dead and attempted rape of the living is discovered by Jöns. Despite his cool demeanour, even he is shocked by his own encounter with the self as death. When he asks for directions from what he and Block presume to be merely a sleeping individual, and finds himself confronted with a corpse that is merely a grotesquely disfigured distortion of a human self. The face is recognisably human but the absence of eyes and facial flesh shatters the possibility of the face being *identified* as a recognisable individual with a visible identity. In these instances, one can see the self ‘shocked’ almost in a greater ontological awareness of its own consciousness and the physical body it possesses, an echo of Bakhtin’s argument that the grotesque body “is a body in the act of becoming” and “continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”

However, I want at this point to argue that there is an emergent disjuncture between the *grotesque* and the *monstrous*. It is important to note how *The Seventh Seal* favours close-up shots of Christ’s face over those of the body. On a non-ideological level Christ is both, but it is the facial visage rather than the bleeding torso that becomes the locus of *repellent* monstrosity. The body/corpse is clearly imbued with material symbolism, but throughout the film, it assumes secondary importance to the face as a conveyor of meaning. The

¹⁵ *The Seventh Seal*, 14.

preponderance of close-up and extreme close-up shots in the film of the face singularly underscores this: facial expressions convey messages from one subject in one shot to another subject in another shot. If one takes for example the shot of the crucifix in the church synchronised with the tolling of the bell, one can see how the torso and its wounds are excluded from the frame, whilst the face either screeches in agony or leers at the viewer with a comic sneer.

Yet the face is the same monstrous face that has so repelled Block and has provoked the film's initial crisis of alienation. Instead, the Christ-face – a repeated motif in the film's early scenes – is itself a vision at once agony-ridden and suffering, then cruel and mocking. One might elaborate upon this by citing Bakhtin's formulation of carnival with its embrace of an anti-classical aesthetic that Robert Stam describes as favouring "the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, the oxymoronic, the miscegenated."¹⁶ And it is the recognition of the flagellants' procession as *spectacle*, as *carnival*, that allows for *The Seventh Seal's* metafilmic critique of un-selfquestioning ideological reinforcement and transmission through exaggerated visual display. Through the absence of a universal response of emotional identification with the tortured, bleeding body of Christ, the door is opened to view the body as potentially monstrous. Stripped of *Gestalt* identification, Christ risks slipping even further into what René Girard defines as the partaking of "all sacred creatures...[in] monstrosity, whether overtly or covertly; this aspect of their nature can be traced to the monstrous double."¹⁷ Block's desire to find his suffering and metaphysical doubt dissipated within the crucified Christ as an exterior projection of the

¹⁶ Stam, *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, 262.

¹⁷ Robert Mills in his essay "Jesus as Monster" quotes from Girard's concept of 'the monstrous double'. See "Jesus as Monster" in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, edited by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, 28.

self – what Lacan terms *Gestalt* – is a vain desire. The ultimate inability of Block and his squire (either overtly or subconsciously) to identify with Christ crucified as what Lacan terms “the Ideal-I” comes to represent the frustration of “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – in this case that of Christ.”¹⁸ All the time, *The Seventh Seal* eagerly explores how viciously and savagely the battle for “the Ideal-I” swings between the lifeless image of Christ and the all-too-alive image of Death.

Not only does *The Seventh Seal* turn to the 1340s to relieve 1957 of its anxiety about mortality, it also imagines the Middle Ages as a period with a particularly macabre sense of humour that dealt with death by laughing and joking at it. It should not strike us as particularly surprising that Jof and Mia end up performing a song about the appearance of Death on a beach. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s view of the medieval period, laughter was to be regarded as a grotesque force; in his formulation of the concept of the chronotope playing the fool was akin to becoming other – this precludes Jof, Mia and the baby from the process of *Gestalt* that identifies the remaining central characters with Death. Joy and laughter recur throughout *The Seventh Seal* with a threatened, yet somehow unshakeable, resolve. In keeping with Bakhtin’s idea of carnival as being essentially in favour of a so-called “aesthetic of mistakes”, what Rabelais called a *gramatica jocosa* (“laughing grammar”), laughter seems to come in all the wrong places. The village people do not laugh at the troupe’s cuckold farce, but are all too ready to laugh when Raval pushes Jof onto a wooden trestle table and forces him to perform a fool’s dance under pain of death. At the end of *The Seventh Seal* roles are reversed: it is Jof and Mia’s turn to be voyeurs

¹⁸ Lacan, “The Mirror-Stage” in *Contemporary Film Theory*, edited and introduced by Antony Easthope, 34.

and to watch the others play in the *danse macabre*. What one might care to draw from this is that 1957 turns to the fourteenth century, and the notion that the medieval period turns death into a form of carnival as a more soothing way of dealing with its own anxieties about cataclysm and mortality.

The Seventh Seal thus relies heavily upon the assumption that the Middle Ages, as a period when death was all too common, offers a superior way of handling the above issues; yet as the reaction of shock shows, medieval humanity did not differ greatly in its contemporary peers in its reaction to dying. The *danse macabre* was only a means by which it could visually represent death (and even that is challenged by Jöns); instead it becomes incorporated into the film's semiotics, weighed down with an allegorical significance that perhaps modern audiences might be better advised to interrogate and resist.

BRIAN GOURLEY
School of English
Queen's University Belfast

BMAGTHOIREALAIGH@hotmail.com

Select Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky
- Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. London; New York: Free Press: Collier Macmillan, 1973
- Bergman, Ingmar. *The Seventh Seal*, trans. David Kushner & Lars Malmström. Rev.ed London: Lorrimer, 1984
- Bevington, David, ed. *Medieval Drama*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975
- Bildhauer, Bettina & Mills, Robert. *The Monstrous Middle Ages*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2003
- Easthope, Antony, ed. *Contemporary Film Theory*. Longman Critical Readers. Harlow: Longman, 1993
- Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2000
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie. London: Oxford UP, 1946
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror-Stage" in *Contemporary Film Theory*.
- Miller, Toby & Stam, Robert. *Film & Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford; Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000
- Rosenstone, Robert A. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1995
- Steene, Birgitta. *Focus on the Seventh Seal*, trans. David Kushner & Lars Malmström. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*