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A game of chess, strawberries, and emptiness revisited

Rich Heffern | Apr. 1, 2010

The dance of death at the end of "The Seventh Seal"

Earth and Spirit

Beautiful, grotesque, disturbing, darkly terrible, inspiring, tragic, funny, deeply spiritual, shockingly antireligious -- all of these equally describe the late Ingmar Bergman?s 1956 film about a 14th-century knight (Max von Sydow) returning from the Crusades to his plague-ridden homeland. ?The Seventh Seal? has become one of the cinema?s living legends. I watched it recently for the second time. I saw it first in 1964, when I was 19, just out of high school seminary. It shook me to the roots then.

When Death (a sardonic, humorous Bengt Ekerot) pays the knight a visit, he is challenged to a game of chess that continues throughout the film, as the knight, with his squire (Gunnar Björnstrand) and their various followers, travel through their homeland, witnessing the horrors not only of the plague but the church?s opportunistic exploitation of it as an excuse to scapegoat, burning ?heretics? and the mentally ill.

Few works in the history of art have visited the ground that Bergman trod, or ask the questions he asked. We?re in the territory of such giants as ?*Hamlet*,? ?*King Lear*? or *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Early in the film the knight wanders into a country church and confesses to a shadowy figure behind a screen, saying: ?I want God to put out his hand, show his face, speak to me. I cry out to him in the dark but there is no one there.?

More piercing questions are asked when the traveling group meets a party of soldiers who are about to burn a young girl as a witch. As the flames roar up into the sky and the terrified, mentally-ill urchin is hoisted aloft, the squire interrogates the knight:

?What does she see? Can you tell me? Who will watch over that child now? Is it the angels, or God, or the devil, or only the emptiness? Emptiness, my lord! Look at her eyes. Her poor brain has just made a discovery. Emptiness under the moon. We stand powerless, our arms hanging at our sides, because we see what she sees, and our terror and hers are the same.?

The knight can only sob: ?That poor little child. I can?t stand it ...?

When the knight loses the chess game, he announces to Death: ?And now you will divulge your secrets.?

Death replies: ?I have no secrets. I have nothing to tell.?

When Death arrives finally to collect the knight, his squire, servant girl and family, the squire -- existentialist to the end -- says: ?I could have given you an herb to purge you of your worries about eternity. Now it seems to be too late. But in any case, feel the immense triumph of this last minute when you can still roll your eyes and move your toes.?

Bergman was not presenting only a polemic against religion. The film brims with a lust for life. The knight, after sharing a tranquil, very human, almost eucharistic interlude with a traveling troupe of actors -- Jof and Mia and their infant son, Mikeal -- lifts up a wooden bowl of strawberries and says poignantly:

?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?ll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. And it will be an adequate sign. It will be enough for me.?

The end is somewhat ambiguous -- a dance of death with figures silhouetted on a ridge against a glowering sky while a narrator quotes from the Book of Revelations. It can be taken as either tragic or triumphant, depending on your viewpoint. Whether Bergman wished to inspire hope or despair in his audience is a secret he himself knew, though my guess is he was happy either way.

Bergman presents death personified as an implacable, workmanlike evil, a ferryman to nothingness. But in the five decades or so since this film arrived, we have come increasingly to see death as a part of life. We assert now that if there is something wrong with death, then there is something wrong with being alive. Though we see death as an evil when it visits the young and innocent, our views about the Grim Reaper have become more supple.

Does spirituality progress, like medicine or engineering? Perhaps so.

A sense of life?s meaninglessness in the 1950s had a stiff wind behind it. Logical positivism informed the sciences and philosophy, draining them of meaning. The Cold War threatened total annihilation in 30 minutes. God had even been proclaimed dead.

Over the decades something has gradually sunk in: The accumulated body of knowledge in modern physics, for example, has reminded us that the reality that underlies our existence is a riddle wrapped in an enigma stuck into the heart of a puzzling mystery. Infinitesimal particles pop into existence out of sheer nothingness then vanish back into the never-never land of quantum uncertainty. Emptiness, the bogeyman some of Bergman?s characters so recoiled from, is seen as fecund, pregnant with possibilities. Faith asserts, with physics and cosmology more in our corner now, that somehow, some way, something like bird song and pulsing life will always come around again.

Awe and wonder in the face of the huge mysteries of our existence stir our spiritualities to life.

Yet Bergman?s questions about evil and existence continue to confound us. We?re only a smidgen closer to final answers than we were in the 14th century, but his beautiful, wondrous examination of humanity?s strengths and weaknesses is a true gift.

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