

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)

## OVERVIEW

*The Seventh Seal* (released 1958) was written by Bergman as he convalesced in a Swedish hospital. He felt a breath of inspiration, and with true instinct realized that this film would be one of his highest creative moves. It touches those themes, of the kind of presence God has, the darkness of suffering and death, and the high stakes of daily life, which were to raise him above the norm directors of his (or any) time. The plot of the Knight's return, through a landscape scarred by the horrors of the Black Plague, leads this noble but cynical returnee, to a finally no-win chess game with Death. The Knight finally makes it back to his castle and wife, but not much farther, for the Death awaiting us all has arrived for him. Death has decisively won the chess match.

## STORY

The story opens in 14th century Denmark, as a Danish knight and his squire return from the Crusades. From frightful evidence along their route they realize that their country is in the grips of a terrible plague. Immediately after their return the Knight finds himself confronting a monk-like figure, dressed all in black, and self-presenting solely as death. The knight knows that his own time is near, but he challenges Death to a chess match, there at the seashore, believing that he can guarantee his continued existence at least as long as he can sustain his challenge.

Here the story widens, as the knight and his squire make their ways home to their castle, but as different characters—plague victims, vagabonds and jongleurs, simple village dwellers—enter the action and events, we return several times to revisit the knight and death at chess by the rocky seashore; the main theme is thus never lost.

Among the contributing figures, of this journey through plague battered Denmark, the knight meets an itinerant juggler and visionary (Jof) with his wife and small child; a painter who is creating a fresco of The Dance of Death—and whom the knight, who is both a sceptic and an aspirant, when it comes to death, criticizes for contributing to the religious fervor which has sparked the disastrous sequence of religious Crusades. The knight and his squire come upon a young woman who is about to be burned at the stake, on suspicion of being a witch—another victim of the ardent religiosity of the time, of which Bergman cannot resist the attraction despite his horror at the dangers of unchecked religious ignorance. A number of other scenes follow, in which the knight and squire immerse themselves in the sights and acts of a plague ridden land, and of small town yokel culture, in which sexual license, rough sensuality, and plenty of Rabelaisian horseplay surge through the squalor of everyday life. As the knight nears his castle, in which he has invited Jof, his wife, and infant to take temporary shelter, he and the squire come again upon the young woman who is about to be immolated. By this time she has gone mad with her terror and pain.

In the final scene, having been vanquished and scheduled for death, the Knight and his retinue appear to Jof, who has visionary powers, being led away by Death, over the hills in a ghostly *danse macabre*.

## Encounters with Death

**Chess game** The Knight is just returning home from the Holy Land, where he has been fighting in the Crusades. He is tired, disillusioned, and eager to return to his Castle, which lies on the other side of a forest, from the point at which the film action begins. As he enters the area of that action he sees a figure

on the beach, whom he cannot ignore. It is Death in the stark garb of a monk. The knight, who has been playing a chess game with himself, and is in the midst of the game, decides to challenge Death to a match. He figures that as long as he wins, he can defer his own death. His challenge is accepted, and breaks up his own self-match, clearing the board for the challenge game.

**Confession** As he and his squire continue on horse, toward his castle, the Knight encounters a group of local actors, who are getting ready to perform in a nearby town. He bonds especially with a young couple and their baby, and sees through them vignettes of high spiritedness, and rumors of the fast advancing plague, the Black Death, which is voraciously striding across the countryside. The Knight stops at a chapel to confess and to pray, and finds that the black robed confessor is in fact Death himself, and that a mural going up on the nave depicts an obsessive Dance of Death. Before learning the identity of the confessor, the Knight reveals his survival strategy, to keep playing chess with the Devil, as a way of postponing Death. The confessor (who is death) smiles.

**Loss of chess game** As the trip home nears its goal, the Knight completes a final chess match with Death, loses, and hears Death proclaim that at their next meeting the Knight will die. Meanwhile the troupe arrives on the other side of the forest, at the Knight's castle, and the Knight once more rejoins his wife, and his possessions. Jof, the actor, is with the Knight and exercises his from-the-start claimed visionary powers; on a distant hill he can discern in silhouette a linked-hand dance, led by death, including the Knight, whose turn has come at last.

## THEMES

**Death.** Death, both as a result of mortality and especially plague, dominates the landscape of Denmark, in this film, but so does the personalized form of Death, that forever confronts the Knight (and us) in the present story. The figure of Death the chess player, garbed in black, is a minatory sub-text to which every part of the present script refers.

**Plague.** The urgent pressure of Death is of 'existential' interest to Bergman, as to us all, but it is of special fury here, because the Scandinavia in which the film is set is in the midst of the 14th century Black Plague. Immediately upon returning from the Crusades, as he rides toward his Castle, the knight becomes aware of the plague-destroyed corpses strewn over the landscape.

**Penitence.** A band of penitents, struggling to bear rude semblances of the Cross, passes through the village where the knight finds himself: among the chanted wails, begging for mercy from the Lord, Bergman finds his way to highlight what he considers both the profound and the benighted characteristics of mediaeval Christianity, as it grapples with a plague estimated to have killed 200,000 million people in Europe, by the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century.

**Nature.** The ocean, in particular, insists on its ever present liminal closeness. Like death, here, the ocean is just off the center of the board, lapping at the ankles of the film's participants. Fields crossed by horse, the sky cluttered with apocalyptic debris, *danse macabre* silhouettes starkly stretched across the sky: all these natural snapshots empower the sense of high stakes danger in life.

## CHARACTERS

**The knight.** The knight is a skeptical, self-questioning nobleman, who has just returned from the Crusades. He is in constant struggle with Death, both around him and inside him.

**Jof.** Is a juggler and entertainer, as well as a visionary. He has a wife, Mia, and a young son.

**Mia.** The pretty young wife of Jof, she treasures her young son, Mikail. Loving, but ironic, toward her imaginative and dream directed husband.

**Death.** Death is a stark figure, dressed all in black, who resembles a severe monk. He eventually wins his chess match against the Knight.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### THE KNIGHT

**Character** The Knight is a stark straight-standing flaxen haired noble of a man, who has returned discouraged and tired from his efforts as Defender of the Faith on the Crusade. Returning to a land ripped apart by the Black Plague, which stripped the population of Europe in half, during the 14th century, the Knight knows that Death is everywhere, and upon seeing a black cowed figure, sitting by the seashore, he knows at once that the time for his own final confrontation has arrived. The symbol for that confrontation will be the chess match which at first we see Death playing against himself. The Knight challenges Death to play him. The several glimpses we have, of the Knight playing chess with Death, prove that the latter has the upper hand, and even after a loss can retrigger a new match. There will be no end to the games by which black cowed antagonist wears the Knight away. Yet the Knight moves staunchly and nobly through this forbidding landscape of death, standing for life, sharing compassion, and eating gratefully at simple people's tables. He is a noble figure, if doomed.

### Illustrative moments

**Noble.** From our first sight of the knight, riding home from the Crusade, we mark a man of superior breeding, self-respect, and openness to the world. He serves Bergman as a kind of representative for the human cause, as Prometheus was for Aeschylus.

**Simple.** Though he is a nobleman, the knight has been around, and knows how to comport himself around 'simple folks.' He is at his best with Jof and Mia, eating strawberries and claiming the moment for its existential intensity.

**Innocent.** The Knight is unaware of the extent of plague disaster in his own land, and as he rides home, with the squire, he several times discovers that what appeared to be a live person is a hollowed and eyeless skull.

### Compassionate

Upon leaving the Church, at which he has confessed to Death himself, the Knight encounters a young girl who is being carted away, to be burned at the stake for 'consorting with the devil.' The Knight wishes to alleviate her suffering, and assures her that she has nothing to do with the devil, but when she protests that everything in and around her *is* the devil, he understands her, and feels deep sympathy. He stares into her eyes, and sees nothing of the evil, but only terror.

**Skeptical.** The knight is dubious about the value of religious rite, to mitigate both the horrors of plague, and the pressure of personal death. When he visits the church, in which frescoes are being painted, he blames the religious mind for fomenting the kind of ignorance which lies behind plagues and religious wars.

**Exhausted.** When he finally encounters his wife again the knight is speechless with exhaustion. He has been struggling to get back to his land, and now he feels himself beset with death and plague.