

Seeking God in Early Bergman: The Cases of The Seventh Seal and Winter Light

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Abstract

*The films of Ingmar Bergman have oftentimes been considered depressing and pessimistic. Nevertheless, there is enough material to claim that this is not the case. Two of his early pieces, *Det sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Nattvardsgästerna/Winter Light* (1963) are two of these examples. Both films include similar protagonists who are troubled by their lack or questioning of faith, who in the end find a way out of their angst with the help of secondary characters in the films.*

Keywords: Bergman, philosophy

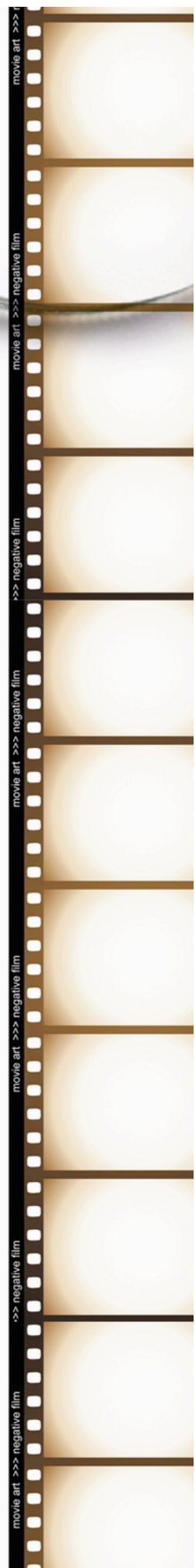


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Seeking God in Early Bergman: The Cases of *The Seventh Seal* and *Winter Light*

There have been few filmmakers who make the audience question things rather than merely amuse them. The Swedish film and theatre director Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007) is one of those few. Often referred to as the “Solemn Swede”, he recognized film as a form of art. Most of his films are play-like with their limited number of actors and locations. They are also highly personal in that they are all attempts for Bergman to question God, religion, or perhaps more personally his own self. One of the common themes in his filmography is the question of whether God exists or not. Two of his films that basically deal with this issue are *Det sjunde inseglet/The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Nattvardsgästerna/Winter Light* (1963). Both of these are early Bergman works with their black and white cinematography; heavy and dark subject matter. In both films, the protagonists are troubled by doubt and confusion about their belief in God. However, although these films are filled with gloomy atmospheres and events, one witnesses an optimistic approach in the end, which is that there is still hope for the protagonists and that it is not late for them to achieve their personal salvation.

In both films the lead characters are prominent people in the eyes of the public. In *The Seventh Seal*, the lead character is Antonius Block, a weary knight who has just returned from the Crusades only to find his native country afflicted with the plague and destruction. As Colin Young (1959) describes in his review “Disease, pestilence, fear are everywhere” (p. 42). He has fought “all for the glory of God” but God does not really seem to care what happens to His own creation and is indifferent to the troubles the mankind faces. At this point Antonius begins to reconsider his belief in God. He wants proof that God exists and he is “waiting for knowledge”. He starts to convince himself that God has forgotten about the people He Himself created. This is further supported by the church artist’s claims that “People think the plague is a punishment from God”, and that “they lash each other to please the Lord.” Bothered by these questions, Antonius is confronted with Death, in his black cloak and with his chalk-white face. He grasps that his time has come. To acquire time he suggests Death that they play chess. In the



meantime he will perform one significant act for someone other than himself and try to find evidence to learn whether God exists or not. He is not afraid of Death for he believes that “death has to be a transition to something else - to an afterlife which will explain and justify the present.” Hence he assumes there is a probability that his questions might be answered in afterlife.

The fact that Antonius has left his native country and his wife to fight in the Crusades makes his doubts even more painful. As a Crusader he has to believe in God so that he can fight for Him.

However, after he returns to Sweden from the Crusades, he starts to question if they have meant anything at all. He does not regret that he has spent ten years of his life fighting though, as he states later in the film. Strangely enough, at some point we are convinced that he actually believes in God. He remarks one of the most memorable quotes of the film, which is “To believe is to suffer. It is like loving someone in the dark who never answers.” This

may further imply that Antonius has lost faith in the power of the prayer, as can be seen in the first scene where he tries to pray but then stops and one can sense the uneasiness on his face.

In *Winter Light* the audience meets the lead character – a pastor – in the first scene of the film as well: Tomas Ericsson. We watch him give a sermon from beginning to end and Tomas’ expression indicates that he is tired-out just like Antonius of *The Seventh Seal*. He may be considered a hypocrite as he does not seem to believe in what he does, or does not practice what he preaches. We later learn that he has lost his faith following his wife’s death. This is also related to the situation in *The Seventh Seal*: If God exists why such bad things happen? Tomas



also confesses to Märta, the schoolteacher, that “it was my father’s dream that I became a clergyman”. It is obvious in the first sermon scene that Tomas, as a pastor, has failed his community as few people have attended the church. This is clearer in the scene where Jonas the fisher and his wife visit him. Jonas apparently feels lost and contemplates suicide. Tomas does not seem to be of much help to Jonas as he has doubts himself, which he does not seem to be able to answer. The pastor advises him “We must trust God” and adds that it is not strange to feel this way now and then. After Jonas and his wife

leave, Tomas is left anxious whether Jonas will show up for if Jonas does not come back it will mean his failure as a clergyman. However Jonas makes it to the church, though late. During their second encounter, Tomas draws attention to God’s seeming “so very remote” and here we have a glimpse of what the pastor is going through. He confesses that he feels “helpless” and that he “understand your anguish but life must go on.” Then we hear Jonas’s first and last sentence in the film: “Why do we have to go on living?” Tomas seems dazzled by this abrupt question and is not able to respond.

It is already settled that *The Seventh Seal* and *Winter Light* are similar in that they both include lead characters that are in doubt about God. In addition to these agnostics as main characters, Bergman adds believers and atheists in his list of characters that are in contradiction with the protagonists in terms of their beliefs. These secondary characters help Bergman to highlight his protagonists’ confusion and angst. In *The Seventh Seal* we have the family of actors, which consists of Joseph, Mia and their baby Mikael, as the believer figures. They are not necessarily religious but Joseph occasionally has visions and he believes in miracles. Their contrast to Antonius comes from the fact that they do not have any second thoughts and their faith is pure. This claim may not be completely true as Joseph steals once. Although they are not perfectly good they are an inspiration for Antonius, which will be discussed in later paragraphs. The silent girl whom Jöns, the squire of Antonius, picks up in a deserted village may be considered another believer since she utters her only words in the film when Death appears to her, which are also Christ’s last words: “It is finished” (Harvey, 2004, p. 376). The atheist figure in *The Seventh Seal* is possibly Jöns. He remarks after the witch who is claimed to be in connection with the devil is burnt “Who will look after that child? The angels, God, Satan, emptiness?” And then he cries out “It is emptiness, my lord!” It can be seen that he rejects God as he thinks about who will look after an innocent child if not God and makes the assumption that since God let the child get killed he cannot exist.

Similar to the characters in *The Seventh Seal*, there are believers and atheists in *Winter Light* as well. Märta is depicted as the obvious atheist of the film. While she is complaining about Tomas' attitude towards God she says "You are impossible sometimes. 'God's silence. God will not speak.' God has never spoken because God does not exist. It is as simple as that." In contrary to Tomas' confusion and seemingly endless questions her way of thinking appears to be straightforward and simplistic. All the same, towards the end of the film, Bergman shows us that Märta is not that simple of a character either. She prays to God, which she has rejected earlier in the film and she complains "If only we could believe." Although the characters who believe in God are not so obvious in *Winter Light*, the wife of Jonas – Karin – can be considered one. She still has hope that her husband can be saved and she is indifferent to the issue concerning China which makes Jonas so anxious.

What is interesting about these films is that though the protagonists are filled with doubt when it comes to God, they both bear resemblances to Christ. For starters, in *The Seventh Seal* Antonius attracts a couple of people



and they all accompany him in his journey home just like the apostles who follow Christ. One direct reference to Christ's life is when Antonius and his company arrive home and sit down to eat while Antonius' wife reads passages from the Book of Revelations. This supper scene resembles that of Christ with his apostles. After the supper, Antonius and his company die. Therefore it is their last supper too just like Christ.

In *Winter Light* Tomas, as a pastor, is envious of Christ although he avoids admitting it. This envy is based on

Bergman's own childhood. Bergman's father was a clergyman, hence young Bergman developed an hatred for Christ himself. In his "A Diary of Ingmar Bergman's 'Winter Light'", Vilgot Sjoman (1974) enquires "How is it to be a little child in a parsonage where the father leaves home every Sunday to devote himself to some other completely strange person named Jesus Christ?" (p. 35) Bergman demonstrates Tomas' envy of Christ in various ways. For instance, when he looks at the deformed image of Christ on the cross Tomas remarks with disgust "What a ridiculous image." These are definitely not the words one might expect to hear from a pastor. But since this is not our average pastor it may be anticipated. Tomas' envy of Christ is further suggested by Märta's bitter confrontation with him. Märta honestly claims that she has never found his faith sincere. She calls it "obscure, neurotic, and somehow cruelly overwrought with emotion, primitive". She also emphasizes his "peculiar indifference to Jesus Christ". She uses the word "indifference" as she does not realize that in reality he hates Christ but no one other than himself knows about it.

While the main characters in both films are dealing with their questions about religious faith, they meet people that have an impact in shaping Antonius and Tomas' beliefs. These secondary characters imply that there is still hope for the main characters. In *The Seventh Seal* the family of actors has a great effect on Antonius' realization. According to Young (1959), this little family "reminds us of the holy family, and their names are the same, save that the child is called, not Jesus, but after the archangel Michael." (p. 44) This family is not perfect though, otherwise it would be too good to be true and would lose its credibility. Perfect or not, they inspire Antonius. Since he has not found evidence of God's existence yet he puts more emphasis on his other quest:

“pursuing with his act of kindness for the family of actors, Jof, Mia, and their son, Mikael” (Stubbs, 1975, p. 67).



Antonius directs himself to being good to humankind. Antonius's tendency can be explained by the fact that “The responsibility toward us that God has failed in becomes our responsibility toward one another, and in assuming it possibly lies our own personal salvation” (Alexander, 1974, p. 27). Thus saving this holy family from Death is his “one significant act” and his personal salvation, which will eventually make his life more meaningful (Young, 1959, p. 43). Although he may never restore his belief in God, he will be able to save others and in return himself.

When we come to Tomas' personal salvation, one can observe that he gets rid of his former idea of God, that “spider God and monster” and creates in his mind a new conception of God. To start with this new God though, he has to reject the former one. He does this while confessing his most personal feelings to Jonas: “There



is no creator. No sustainer of life. No design”. He cuts all his connections with his former idea of God. He obviously owes to Jonas in this respect. After his second encounter with Jonas we are left with a close-up of Tomas' face that is brightened by the beams of light coming from the window. Hubert I. Cohen, in his book titled *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession* claims that “this burst of light is the sign of His approval of Tomas' arrival at a truer sense of reality” (1993, p. 188). At that moment he feels God's silence as the God in him is dead. It is also when Algot the hunchback talks to him about the passion of Christ and how God has let him die on the cross that Tomas

comes to realize that Christ must have felt the same way when God forsook him and remained silent as he feels waiting for the believers to come.

Although *The Seventh Seal* and *Winter Light* share depressing subject matter and oftentimes imply that there is no answer to the protagonists' most difficult questions, surprisingly enough they both end in optimistic ways. This optimism may well suggest that God may not have left us as He sends signs to Tomas and Antonius. This sign may be considered the family of actors in *The Seventh Seal*. Antonius achieves his personal salvation and does what he sets out to do. He is not able to acquire knowledge about God and he knows for sure that he cannot escape Death but he “has a minor triumph over Death” by distracting Death on the chess board and allowing the family to flee (Young, 1959, p. 44). Bergman has other ways of saying that “life overcomes death” too. For instance, the actor who is with Joseph and Mia at the beginning of the film stands on a tree and Death comes to take his soul. Death starts to saw down the tree and after it falls down “immediately, a squirrel jumps onto the fallen tree's moonlit stump” (Cohen, 1993, p. 131).



Another optimistic example from *The Seventh Seal* is the final scene where they start a new life when Joseph has a vision that Antonius and his companions are heading for the land of the dead, led by Death. Although Antonius' last scene may not seem that optimistic the audience is finally sure that "Failing to find God, the Knight has at least found an earthly equivalent – the capacity for love and human kindness" and that is more than enough to find God (Stubbs, 1975, p. 68).

In a similar way to *The Seventh Seal*'s strange optimism we have a happy ending of sorts in *Winter Light*. The sign God sends to Tomas might be Jonas and his eventual suicide. It is already mentioned that Tomas has discovered a new way of perceiving God and he begins to form a new idea of faith in his mind. In the final sermon of the film not a soul makes it to the church, save Märta. Although "there is a practice that in the Swedish church that which says that no service need be held when there are three persons in the church" our fresh pastor starts with the sermon and one can easily see the change in his attitude especially when compared to the first sermon of the film (Sjoman, 1974, p. 36). About this final scene Bergman says: "Nothing is more needed to indicate the new feeling which moves inside the pastor" (Sjoman, 1974, p. 37). This fresh start is further demonstrated in Bergman's own words: "The mirror is clean. There stands a newly scoured vessel that can be filled by mercy. By a new image of God" (Sjoman, 1974, p. 40).

The Seventh Seal and *Winter Light* deal with confusion that is the result of doubt about God's existence. The lead characters in both films have a lot in common. Other than being celebrated people to whom people look up to, they have both experienced emptiness. Nevertheless, the two films end in unexpectedly optimistic ways. Both Antonius and Tomas find their personal salvation with the help of other characters in the films. We assume that Tomas' life is more meaningful now that he has adopted a different perception of God. Although Antonius and his company die, one sees a much more promising vision about the family who causes his salvation. In my humble opinion, *The Seventh Seal* and *Winter Light* are worth seeing as they may challenge the generalization that Bergman's filmography filled with nothing but gloom.

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