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History of Film 2: Development of an Art

30 April 2013

Auteur Theory

Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957)

The director of a film has always been looked at as the artist that is greatly responsible for a film's style, form, and themes. Film historians have believed this going back from the early days of Soviet Montage, but the director was never really examined and critiqued as an individual artist until the days of the postwar European films. Many directors, producers and screenwriters quarreled over the artistic merit of a movie on who could be properly considered the auteur, or author of the film (Thompson 381).

But two critics who wrote for the *Revue du cinema* claimed that the director was the painter behind the paintbrush and helped to support these claims by backing up such American directors like Orson Welles, William Wyler and John Ford. An important essay written by Alexandre Astruc stated that over the years the cinema had achieved a form of sophistication and maturity and started to attract serious artists who looked at film as a serious form of art in which directors were able to express their thoughts and emotions within the context of the camera lens

in which was entitled camera-stylo (the camera pen.) Finally in 1960 American critic Andrew Sarris developed the word 'Auteur Theory' which was a way to understand film auteurs and their artistic works from such artists as [Ingmar Bergman](#), [Federico Fellini](#), [Luis Bunuel](#), [Akira Kurosawa](#), [Michelangelo Antonioni](#) and [Robert Bresson](#) (Thompson 382-383).

Each artist mentioned above had their own Auteur Theory within the films they've created, and these themes and styles became known as signatures as to whom the artist was and what his/her films stood for. For instance director Federico Fellini brought in such themes as the circus and sexual repression from his childhood. Luis Bunuel brought upon irony and surrealism from his early silent film days with Salvador Dali. Akira Kurosawa created human dramas which were drawn from several famous genres from the West. Michelangelo Antonioni used themes of isolation and the alienation of relationships between a man and a woman. And finally Robert Bresson, a director who seemed to focus on flawed individuals trying to survive a harsh and cruel world using slight touches of his own Catholic upbringing.

The one director I'd like to focus on is Ingmar Bergman and of his use of the Auteur Theory, most famously with his 1957 hit [The Seventh Seal](#) and his use of such themes as 'The Absence of God' and 'The Fear of Death.' In the words of the great film critic Roger Ebert, "Some filmmakers are born. Ingmar Bergman was made. Self-made." Bergman was born in 1918 in Uppsala and was the son of a Lutheran minister being raised with a strict and intense religious upbringing. Since his father worked as a charismatic rector young Bergman used to help the gardener carry corpses from the Royal Hospital Sophiahemmet to the mortuary where his father was chaplain. Growing up, young Bergman became fascinated by the themes of death and the bleak side of humanity which brought upon his fascination with Adolf Hitler and the horrors of the holocaust (Pressler 96).

Bergman originally started out in the theater, and when most people think of Bergman and his work they think of it to be bleak, brooding and depressing, and in many cases that's true; but they were also thought provoking, exciting and extremely entertaining. When he first started out in films a lot of his earlier works like *Sawdust and Tinsel* and *The Magician* you could see his Auteur Theory slowly start to seep into his storylines. Ironically his big break came when he decided to direct [*Smiles of a Summer Night*](#), which was not only one of the few comedies he directed, but the one commercial success that made Bergman known to filmgoers. Because of the success of *Smiles of a Summer Night* that gave the Swedish studios the confidence to finally give Bergman more artistic freedom in his projects to do what he wanted, and Bergman took great advantage of it (Pressler 98).

In 1957 Bergman directed two of his most acclaimed films, *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*. Both stories are about men coming to the ends of their lives and are on a journey to discover the meaning of life and the absence of God. Both films were well received but it was *The Seventh Seal* that became Bergman's Auteur signature on what kind of artist he truly was. *The Seventh Seal* is set during the Middle Ages and tells the classic story of a Knight named Antonius Block and of his friend and squire Jons as they both return home from the Crusades, while a Black Plague is slowly sweeping through their country. As they approach home, Death appears to Block (only Block can see him) and Death tells him that it is his time. Block instead makes Death an offer and challenges him to a game of chess and if Block defeats him he will be allowed to live. Death accepts the challenge and the game slowly continues as Block and Jons try and make their journey back to the Knight's castle along with a group of traveling performers named Jof and his wife Mia.

The classic shot of Death playing chess with a Knight has now become a landmark in pop culture history and every film historian and film buff knows of it. When *The Seventh Seal* was released in 1957 it startled filmgoers with its upsetting imagery of the scorching beaches and bleak glades, its high contrast black and white cinematography, the bleak symbolism and religious ethical concerns on such themes of the ‘fear of death’ and ‘the absence of God.’ Fear of death and the absence of God are two common Auteur Theories that Bergman uses throughout the *Seventh Seal* and he uses again it throughout his career, taking many different forms and shapes.

Within the themes of ‘The fear of Death’ Bergman seems to come to terms with death on a massive scale as he uses the theme of the Black Plague as a metaphor for the concern of 21st century disasters, like global warming, climate-change, and earthquakes (42 Wang). Bergman even acknowledged a correlation between his vision of the Middle Ages and the mid-century fear of atomic devastation of the 1950’s. Not only can the film be looked at as a doomsday metaphor but with its grotesque images of death, it can also be looked as a form of manifestation of modern memento more and within its characters is a reminder of our own mortality as well (43 Wang).

When Block first confronts Death on the beach for the first time in the beginning of the film the dialogue between the two characters isn’t necessarily about the subject of Death, but about playing the game of chess. Block doesn’t seem to be too concerned with his fate at that moment and instead wants Death to answer him some existential questions that he has, which are the form of questions every human wants to know the answer of like: “What is the meaning of life?” Of course Death does not answer any of Block’s questions but simply states, “You ask too many questions.” These direct religious themes of God and death drew from Bergman’s strict

religious childhood as he states in an interview: “When one is born and raised in the home of a minister, one has a chance at an early age to catch a glimpse behind the scenes of life and death. Father conducts a funeral, father officiates at a wedding, father performs a baptism, acts as a mediator, writes a sermon. The Devil became an early acquaintance” (Sonnenshein 141).

Bergman also recalled in another interview on how he accompanied his father on several trips to countryside churches where the medieval wall paintings and carved figures of the Dance of Death greatly fascinated him. Several of these figures appear in *The Seventh Seal* right from the opening shot of the sea eagle hovering in the grey sky while you hear a narration for the Book of Revelations: “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” The film imagines the medieval past through a series of images of death that ultimately scares human beings, namely the figure of Death himself, the skull, Christ on the cross and the infamous ending of the Dance of Death (Wang 43).

The Dance of Death is a symbol that appears three times in the film *The Seventh Seal*. The first time it occurs it is more subtle as it appears in mural of a rural church where Block and Jons visit as Jon’s talks with the painter. It appears a second time when Jof and Mia’s comedy performance is interrupted by a marching parade of flagellants flogging themselves, praying and chanting as one person carries a wooden crucifix (139 Sonnenshein). And the third time it appears is in the final scene of the film as Jof and his family make their escape from Death’s wrath, and Jof can see the Dance of Death in the open countryside with his wife believing her husband is having another one of his so called visions.

The second Auteur Theory that Bergman is known for is the theme of ‘The Absence of God.’ The doubtful idealistic Knight Antonious Block is a man who seeks some form of proof in

the existence of God and the Devil, and throughout his journey he gets no answers, even from Death himself. In one of the best scenes of the film Block enters a church and heads to a confessional unaware that Death is behind the grill playing the part as the priest as Block asks a series of existential questions saying: “We carve an idol out of fear and call it God. Must it be so cruelly inconceivable to know God with one’s senses? Why does he hide in a cloud of half-promises and unseen miracles? How can we believe in the believers when we don’t believe ourselves? What will happen to us who want to believe, but cannot? I want knowledge! Not faith, not assumptions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out His hand, uncover His face and speak to me.”

Block confesses that his death is forthcoming but would like to perform one meaningful deed before he dies, and will try to hold off Death in the game of chess as long as he can. Block later even tries to pry the proof of God and the devil through an encounter with a young girl who the authorities pronounced is possessed by the Devil, a charge that sentences her to be burned at the stake. Before her execution Block tries his best to get what proof he can that the girl is for sure the Devil herself, but hearing her nonsensical words he instead discovers that the girl is merely a frightened and deluded individual, caught within a society of superstitions and hysteria (142 Sonnenshein).

Each character within *The Seventh Seal* is said to represent each part of the human spirit. Block and Jons are polar opposites, in which Block is the part that doubts and questions and tries his best to rationalize things with proof and facts. Jon the squire seems to be more confident and less fearful spiritually and is less pessimistic than Block, accepting things more on pure faith. Jons also will speak out against the war that the two have fought for and unlike Block who cries out to God for help when Death arrives to claim them, Jons calmly accepts his fate unafraid. Jofs

is the comedic character in the story who diverts his family from death near the end of the film. He seems to be the only character that seems to have a paranormal sense of seeing things that no one else can see and Mia seems to be the skeptic not believing her husband's supernatural visions. And last but not least is the tragic servant girl who remains a silent enigma throughout the whole film until the very end when Death finally comes to claim the group and she finally speaks her only words, "It is finished."

The absence of God carries itself throughout the film and the answer if he/she exists or not is never answered or explained and Bergman purposely leaves its answers ambiguous. A story like *The Seventh Seal* wouldn't be understood with the modern audience, because people are now used to themes of psychology and answers to the human mind and not fantastic stories about the boogeyman. These days with evolution, science and psychology it's less with people about the questions of God and the Devil and more about the questions on the human mind (Pressler 99). Bergman seemed to realize this and seemed to update and modify his Auteur Theory throughout his career with such films as *Persona*, *Cries and Whispers* and *Scenes from a Marriage*. When making what many critics consider his swan song *Fanny and Alexander*, Bergman seemed to combine all that he had loved from film and the stage, combined with the old version of the Auteur Theory along with the new, exploring not only the themes of the supernatural but the themes of the philosophical.

The Seventh Seal was released at a time when the great works of Carl Theodor Dreyer was sadly forgotten, in which Bergman used such similar spiritual themes and took them to a completely different artistic level. *The Seventh Seal* closely resembled more themes from the silent era, from films like F.W. Murnau's *Faust* or even Victor Sjöström's *The Phantom Carriage*, which was the film's original inspiration. *The Seventh Seal* had a symbolism that was

immediately apprehensible to people trained in literary culture who were just beginning to discover the 'art' of film, with critics and readers of Cahiers du Cinema among others, discovered Bergman with this film (Wang 51). With the rise of the Auteur Theory the film suddenly became a staple of high school and college literature courses and Bergman wrote in his autobiography *The Magic Lantern*, "Wood painting gradually became *The Seventh Seal*, an uneven film which lies close to my heart, because it was made under difficult circumstances in a surge of vitality and delight."

The Seventh Seal is one of the most important films in the world and Bergman's Auteur themes on the Absence of God and the Fear of Death are still very relevant for many people today; including me. For instance: Did God create man or did man create God? How can one believe in something when there is very little proof to believe? How can you believe in God if you don't believe in the believers who believe in him? Why does God seem to be silent, even during mankind's most atrocious and evil acts? In many ways *The Seventh Seal* is a modernistic story that discusses the doubts of faith of a human being and Bergman embraces these ideas on doubt. And yet his Auteur themes don't necessary make the film a religious or anti-religious film because Bergman gives no explanations or answers to any of its themes and leaves the films message ambiguous. Bergman instead seems to be reassuring the audience that it's OK to doubt and ask questions, which is one of the many drives why artists keep making movies, because they keep asking questions in which they will never know the answers to.

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