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Theological Themes in the Films of Ingmar Bergman

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The purpose of this study is to examine the theological themes in some select films by the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman. This study uses three of Bergman's films, *The Seventh Seal, Wild Strawberries*, and *The Virgin Spring*, as subjects of literary and character analysis in order to examine their religious ideas, and when necessary, provide counter-point. The first theological situation examined is the individual's search for God presented in Bergman's characters. Secondly, the problem of evil is considered as it relates to some of the circumstances presented in Bergman's films. Finally, the success of the characters in finding their own spiritual reconciliation is determined. The study concludes that Bergman's films are highly effective in encouraging viewers to consider or reconsider their spiritual situation.

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Introduction

The use of story and image has always helped to illustrate and illuminate theological points. Some obvious examples are the parables told by Jesus in the Gospels, simple stories that bring the Kingdom of God into contact with everyday life. The Christian tradition has a rich history of using artwork to better visualize the sacred narrative of creation and redemption, exemplified, for instance, in Michaelangelo's famous painting of the Sistine Chapel. Such artwork allowed the illiterate to better understand and appreciate their faith. Through these two methods, theological teachings were concisely delivered to people whose context may not have allowed them to understand a different approach. The fact, for instance, that many of Jesus' parables involve agricultural metaphors is perfectly appropriate and helpful for an agricultural society, and church artwork and paintings are immediately comprehensible to an audience who may not know how to read. Nowhere has the combination of these two mediums been better demonstrated in our time than in the motion picture, which has brought a wide variety of themes and messages to people all over the world. The film medium can sometimes be very complex and difficult, but, like the mediums mentioned previously, it is also powerful, immediate, and accessible to people of all ages, which makes it ideal for introducing and considering the occasionally abstract field of theology. One filmmaker whose work has consistently used theological themes is the Swedish writer and director, Ingmar Bergman.

Ingmar Bergman and His Films

Theological themes and imagery present themselves throughout all of Bergman's productive film career. The son of a prominent Lutheran pastor, Bergman made movies

that very often deal frankly yet abstractly with Christian themes including love, hope, doubt, evil, death, life, reconciliation and rebirth. Interestingly, although Bergman himself has occasionally resisted elaborate theological interpretations of his work, he has not disputed their possibility. He tells a trio of interviewers in *Bergman on Bergman*, "I come from a world of conservative Christian thought. I've absorbed Christianity with my mother's milk. So it must be obvious that certain... archetypes, aren't they called – stick in one's mind, and that certain lines, certain courses of events, certain ways of behaving, become adequate symbols for what goes on in the Christian system of ideas" (191). Therefore, the focus of this study will be on his films' Christian theology, although some themes certainly overlap with those in other major theistic religious traditions. Since, as will be seen shortly, Bergman's own conclusions often tend to come down on the side of atheism and existentialism (albeit, not easily), it will also be worthwhile to consider these theological and philosophical ideas from different sides and to offer possible ideas and solutions to these problems. A final reason presented for using Bergman in a study like this is that it is a tradition in academic courses to use a Bergman film, especially *The Seventh Seal*, to introduce students to literary and philosophical conventions. Philosophy professor Mary M. Litch asks concerning the title of her book, "How could there be a book entitled *Philosophy through Film* that didn't include at least one film by Ingmar Bergman?"(169). In *How to Read a Film*, James Monaco says of *The Seventh Seal*, "Its symbolism was immediately apprehensible to people trained in literary culture who were just beginning to study the 'art' of film, and it quickly became a staple of high school and college literary courses" (311).

Although many more of Bergman's films could be examined and analyzed using

the same criteria, the study will focus on a period in the late 1950s in which Bergman made two films that are well-known, *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*, as well as another film that deals with topics of interest, *The Virgin Spring*. In fact, it was around this period that Bergman himself was facing some personal issues that these films mirror. He writes in *Images: My Life in Film*, "*The Seventh Seal* is one of my last films to manifest my conceptions of faith, conceptions that I had inherited from my father and carried along with me from childhood"(238). Also, both the story lines and the cinematic approach to these films are more straightforward and less avant-garde than later Bergman productions, making them easier to analyze. Monaco observes, "Bergman's best work lay ahead in the sixties, after the religious symbolism had been exorcised and he was able to concentrate on more personal, less symbolic situations" (312). However, this symbolism is exactly what this study is after, and precisely what makes Bergman's spiritual struggles seem fresh and immediate. By properly identifying and analyzing the religious ideas and insights in these films, people may come to a better understanding of the effects and consequences of theology in their own lives. Therefore, the focus will be on the larger scope of the film, rather than delving too deeply into the composition of individual shots or the makeup of certain sequences. These things will still be used to serve as examples, but a truly complete and comprehensive commentary and analysis of every facet of these deeply rich films is clearly beyond the scope of this study.

The Search For God

The first major theological situation that enriches itself from examining this selected Bergman oeuvre relates to the individual's search for God. This search is considered an existential one because each participant in this search has the full

knowledge of his or her own death, making the search seem more urgent, and at the same time more hopeless. The theme of death seems to be a preoccupation of Bergman. On the very first page of his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, he writes of an early memory, "I suffered from several indefinable illnesses and could never really decide whether I wanted to live at all"(1). The medieval themes of *The Seventh Seal* give a vivid portrait of the search for true, authentic divinity in a world that would seem to be teeming with false and frightening mysticism and spiritualism. In addition, both *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries* involve a specific quest for wholeness and meaning, which, in this case, existentially ties in with the search for God. The knight in *The Seventh Seal* is disillusioned, returning home after his stint in the Holy Land during the Crusades. The professor in *Wild Strawberries* goes to accept an award, a vindication of his life's work. The extent to which these travelers succeed on their journey, and the extent to which they yield to roadblocks on the way, is indicative of the presence and absence of God in their lives.

The main reason that finding God is such a preoccupation for so many of these characters is also why Bergman himself, and, in fact, practically everyone, searches for some kind of divinity; God provides an external meaning to life. If a loving creator God exists, who truly cares for the human creation, then individual acts have some kind of lasting significance beyond their immediate consequences; that is, they matter in light of eternity. However, in his films, Bergman is influenced by a kind of modern angst which lines up with the existential idea that people can and must derive their own meaning from their decisions and actions. The tension comes from the fact that people frequently do not seem to be able to accomplish their lives' goals to full satisfaction; compromises are

inevitably made on the way. Such a problem would be easier to deal with if a transcendent, omnipresent God enters the picture; as philosophy professor Mary M. Litch explains in *Philosophy Through Film*, "So, even though my personal accomplishments may be scant, my role in furthering God's plan for the world gives meaning to those accomplishments and to my life as a whole" (187). How some characters are more successful at this than others will be considered later. At this point, it is important to keep in mind that the question of God and the question of finding meaning is largely inseparable; it is hard to consider one without reacting to the other. For now, the consideration must be the question of whether the characters can actually find God, and, more importantly, why they continue to keep looking.

In the highly symbolic story of *The Seventh Seal*, a knight, Antonius Block, returning from the crusades, confronts death. Instead of merely submitting to his fate, the knight challenges this anthropomorphic death figure to a chess game. The knight's attempts to perform a meaningful deed before the game ends form the film's central tension. Despite the medieval setting, it is often pointed out that the attitudes of the characters seem starkly modern. Bergman's reply, "In my film the Crusader returns from the Crusades as the soldier returns from the war today. In the Middle Ages, men lived in terror of the plague. Today, they live in fear of the atomic bomb. *The Seventh Seal* is an allegory with a theme that is quite simple: man, his eternal search for God, with death as his only certainty"(qtd. Steene, *Focus on The Seventh Seal,* 93). Although these Cold War fears are gone, contemporary people still have a lot of similar angst, over global terrorism, for example, or environmental changes. This is how the thematic link of the search for God continues from age to age. Whatever the context, death remains constant,

life continually fleeting. This is particularly true in *The Seventh Seal*, of which Bergman said, "It freed me from my own fear of death"(Bjorkman, Mannis and Sima 117). Throughout his journey, the knight is accompanied by his squire, Jöns, who is much more bitter and cynical in his outlook on life than Block. Throughout the film, and in contrast to the morose and confused knight, Jöns embraces the material life, consoling himself with immediate sensory pleasures. Birgitta Steene describes it, "The knight and his squire complement each other, and depict the skeptic personality facing a world where God is silent: one in futile introspection, the other in gallant action" (Steene *Focus on the Seventh Seal* 96-97).

In the above statement lies the problem: for many people, morality and the moral code come from God. The question, then, is what can be said of the necessity of God or religion when an unbeliever already displays a well-thought out moral code, and consistently acts upon it? The first issue is the question of where exactly morality originates. If a divine moral code truly does exist, then it seems quite possible that all know to follow it, whether they believe in its source or not. That explanation may not convince too many skeptics, they may argue in response that the atheist is simply following the properly acceptable decorum of society. If this is correct, then it still does not solve the problem of morality, since its source is neither personal nor transcendent, only social. While Jöns does indeed seem to be making his own decisions and following his own desires, (taking someone else's wife for himself, etc.), it may be argued that his state of mind is influenced by being disillusioned in the crusades. This is similar to Block's situation, but he has turned to this personal, spiritual quest so at least he can be sure that he has made some lasting moral significance. This clearly shows how these two

character types and personalities are apt representations and generalizations of how a great many people face the question of God. The problem is that neither option is helpful in finding real answers because they both are entirely self-centered, letting their own fears and insecurities overwhelm their search instead of considering the broader, metaphysical picture. Thus, the challenge for viewers is to decide whether these two ways of living can truly be overcome, and if real knowledge of God can be reached. Further hints are found in Bergman's next work, *Wild Strawberries*.

Though it does not deal with a religious theme specifically, the journey of Isak Borg in *Wild Strawberries* echoes many of the themes of searching found in *The Seventh Seal*. In *Ingmar Bergman*, Birgitta Steene acknowledges that the film does not directly concern religion, but finds parallels with it, saying the film is "...conceived as a symbolic pilgrimage, as a form of penance...Isak Borg goes through the stages of a Christian confession: acknowledgment of guilt, penance, and absolution" (Steene, Ingmar Bergman 72). More specifically, although the actual questions of God's existence have been brushed aside, according to Hamish Ford the theological issue here is "in the form of a longing for personal self-acceptance and reconciliation with others and one's past"(Ingmar Bergman). *Wild Strawberries* has this basic question in common with *The Seventh Seal*, but with a slightly more optimistic denouement.

The setting in *Wild Strawberries* is explicitly modern. Although Borg is seemingly a successful doctor, he deals with the same problem of facing his own mortality. This is compounded not only by his advanced age, but also by an invitation to receive a special honorary award. The journey to get the award brings back many memories from Borg's past involving painful and awkward family situations. Of course,

given these situations, as well as Borg's age, death is once again a major factor in his journey. At the start of the film, Borg has a startling dream which explicitly refers to his mortality. Steene writes, "...Isak sees a clock without hands, a symbol of timeless reality, of death...The film as a whole can be seen as Isak's attempt to come to terms with the anxiety that produced the first nightmare" (Steene Ingmar Bergman 75). This dream is an important part of the film, because it represents Borg's fears of how his death relates to his legacy; therefore, it represents a transcendent and metaphysical view of Borg's thoughts and emotions. Hence, this dream, and others are, for Borg, the catalyst for angst and self-reflection in the same way that the Christian God is for Block, thus replacing the role of an actual, omnipotent God in a thoroughly modern film.

In discussing this search for God, it is here necessary to introduce Soren Kierkegaard, the pivotal nineteenth century philosopher and theologian who influenced many later religious and existential thinkers. Briefly summarized, Kierkegaard separated human beings into three different modes of existence, aesthetic, ethical, and religious. All three are essential to fully understanding these characters. The aesthetic person is mainly concerned with chasing earthly pleasures and is not concerned with any greater meaning or obligation. Kierkegaard introduces this mode of existence in the book *Either/Or*, by presenting the story of a seducer who devotes all of his mental faculties to seducing a particular girl. An ethical person, by contrast, is in tune with a strict moral code and always considers the moral obligations before acting. According to Kierkegaard, what is the primary difference between the two? Philosophy Professor Elmer H. Duncan writes in his survey of Kierkegaard's thought that in *Either/Or*, "The Seducer is not condemned for having chosen evil rather than good; the fact is that he has not chosen at all" (37). The

overall point is that the aesthetic is constantly lost in such decisions and never properly acts or develops. This point leads nicely into the most important mode or sphere of existence, the religious.

Very briefly put, Kierkegaard thought that in order to properly have Christian faith, to "make a leap of faith," as he put it, one must stop deliberating and make a definite decision. Explains Duncan, "Whether we are deciding to become Christians, or to get married, or anything else, we must finally put reflection aside, and make our decision" (89). Therefore, the essence of a religious person is the ability to act on such a decision. It is the particularities of faith that cause the trouble and reluctance to decide. In what is probably Kierkegaard's best-known work, *Fear and Trembling*, the story of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac is dealt with. Kierkegaard writes under the pseudonym of Johannes De Silentio, who has trouble understanding the faith of Abraham in this situation. He writes, "The last movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, I cannot make (be that a duty or whatever it may be), in spite of the fact that I would do it more than gladly" (62). Isak Borg most resembles an ethical, almost religiously ambiguous person living in a world in which Christianity no longer maintains such a strong influence over daily life; at one point in *Wild Strawberries* he deftly avoids answering a question about his belief in God. Religious thoughts and language are echoed much more closely by Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal*, who asks, "Why can't I kill God within me?" and at the end fervently prays to God who "must be out there." Such people have clear knowledge of the ethical and can see the benefits inherent in religious belief, but simply cannot take this extra leap of faith. Likewise, Squire Jöns has turned to the aesthetic life for the reasons mentioned earlier. At one point in the film, Jöns comments on his own

character, that he "grins at death, chuckles at the Lord, laughs at himself, and smiles at the girls," adding that, "His world exists only for himself... meaningless in heaven, indifferent in hell;" his seeming callousness is the result of the uselessness of making definite decisions after having abandoned his spiritual compass. The importance of this in finding personal meaning will be considered later.

The Problem of Evil

Of course, one obstacle that frequently interferes with religious belief and this sort of "leap of faith", both in Bergman's films and in real life, is the problem of evil. Humans have pondered for many centuries the question of why a good and powerful God would allow evil things to happen, and the questioning will likely go on for many years more. Perhaps the first major consideration of this problem in Jewish and eventually Christian tradition occurs in the book of Job. According to the story, the accuser (Satan) tells God that Job, an impeccably faithful servant, is only good because he leads a prosperous life. In return, God allows Satan to take away Job's family, property and, eventually his health. Job spends almost all of the remainder of the story with his doubtful friends, trying to convince them that he is innocent, and that his life is just miserable. Finally, at the end of the story God appears to Job and tells him that he cannot understand or judge God's motives and God's ways, because he is not God. For example, "Have you understood the expanse of the earth? Tell Me, if you know this" (Job 38:18). Although the Bible is here not afraid to address the problem of God's power in relation to evil, the question is still left unanswered by explaining that God's motives are simply beyond mere human beings.

Although the story of Job seems to be most relevant for problems relating to what

are referred to as natural evils (hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, illnesses, etc.), there is also the matter of personal evil, involving the malicious behavior committed by a person. As far as personal evil goes, Christianity has always maintained that humankind has a free choice in how to act, and that God, respecting free will, does not interfere. This free-will argument is, in fact, a classic and oft-used argument for the existence of God. If God always intervened in people's lives, then it could not be said that they were truly free. Furthermore, according to Christian theology, it is quite natural for people to do things that are not in accordance with the moral law, regardless of whether they know God or not. Even a figure as revered as the apostle Paul admits that he often does things he is not proud of, "For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish" (Romans 7:19). One of the main points in Christian belief is that people can overcome this personal evil through their relationship with Jesus Christ. Once again, the point that actions and events have eternal consequences is important when discussing personal evil in a theological context.

In Bergman's films, as in life, the problem of evil is a catalyst for many of the angst-filled searchings and questionings. Although it is primarily personal evil and only occasionally natural evil that Bergman's protagonists deal with, it ironically all seems to be out of their control, caused by the decisions of other people. William Mishler, in his essay *The Virgin Spring and The Seventh Seal: A Girardian Reading*, says of Bergman's characters, "They have bumped up against an anomalous destructiveness that leaves them shaken and fearful, suddenly in doubt concerning their basic assumptions about the world." In *The Seventh Seal*, for instance, the fear of the plague affects even people who are not physically afflicted with it, causing them to lash out at others and feel guilt

towards themselves over their precarious circumstances. The question now must be asked as to whether Bergman ever presented any solution to, or ways of dealing with, the problem of evil; or if he could even make sense of it. Once again, the feeling of impending doom that pervades the characters' lives has reappeared in contemporary times with contemporary threats. The response to this frightening world is written into the various characters' personalities. Block, the knight, wants empirical verification of God, no doubt to assuage the horror and guilt he has experienced in the Crusades. Jöns has given up this quest and has resigned himself to the aesthetic pastimes Kierkegaard describes. However, another character in *The Seventh Seal*, Jof, provides a counterbalance to the existential angst and yearning in the other characters. Jof is part of a family of traveling actors, along with his wife Mia and son Mikael. Jof has a simple faith ingrained in him and his personality opens up interesting questions for anyone considering the problem of evil.

Contrary to most of the other people in the film, Jof does not worry about death. In *Philosophy Through Film*, Mary M. Litch says of Jof, "...if asked, he would probably respond to the knight's concerns about the problem of evil in the same way that Mia responds in her conversation with the knight... -- he simply does not understand what the problem is" (179). But is it truly desirable to think this way? If God has given humans a mind that can comprehend such evil, then is it wise to take such a carefree attitude towards it? Litch does point out one interesting biblical parallel about Jof, "In some ways Jof is the embodiment of Jesus' advice: 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it'" (179). Rather than saying that evil is a trivial matter, this is an admonition not to worry too much about earthly matters, but to instead think of them

from the viewpoint of eternity. This can also be readily seen in Jof, who despite being a clown, is no fool. Aside from Block, he is the only one who can see death, and when Block distracts death in order to allow Jof, Mia, and their baby Mikael to get away, the frightened Jof sees the opening and takes it! This is foreshadowed in the beginning of the film. When first introduced, Jof is shown having spiritual visions, talking to the horse, singing to the birds and otherwise behaving in a way that reflects a heavenly, not earthly, outlook. It is best to say that Jof actually has a pragmatic attitude toward life, despite his deep faith. The irony is that it is because Jof sees death that he is able to escape it. His faith was not a blinder in this case.

The issue of whether having religious faith can open one's eyes to unseen realities is, in a way, central to the theological approach to the problem of evil. Theologians have been considering this problem for a very long time, and the hope is that by considering theological explanations for evil, one can realize that Christianity provides background to explain things that may otherwise seem totally absurd. Christian theology holds that the evil and wickedness experienced in life are results of the aforementioned free will, and that their effects are the result of human rejection of God. Although it is not popular to bring up the human side of the equation when discussing the ramifications of evil, it is a theologically necessary part of the equation. The primary difficulty is in assessing the characteristics of God and saying that God is loving, even when terrible things happen. However, it is important to expand the definition of love when applying it in a divine sense. As C.S. Lewis puts it in *The Problem of Pain*, "If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all the records, that though He has often rebuked us and condemned us, He has never regarded us with

contempt" (33).

If it is not terribly difficult to understand the impact of such a God, or to view the consequences of evil as a punishment, or to accept that some people go through ordeals and come out with stronger resolve than before, then the much greater problem of innocent people being what seems to be the arbitrary or absurd victims of evil presents itself. Yet even in that case, it is often in the darkest of hours that people turn to God. Writing in *The Problem of Pain* about the observation that people often have no use for God during the good times in their lives, Lewis, while consciously trying to avoid seeming cold or insensitive, makes just such a reference to this behavior. His interesting and eloquent observations are worth quoting at length:

> It is hardly complimentary to God that we should choose Him as an alternative to Hell: yet even this He accepts. The creature's illusion of self-sufficiency must, for the creature's sake, be shattered; and by trouble or fear of trouble on earth, by crude fear of the eternal flames, God shatters it 'unmindful of His glory's diminution'. Those who would like the God of Scripture to be more purely ethical do not know what they ask. If God were a Kantian, who would not have us till we came to him from the purest and best motives, who could be saved? And this illusion of self-sufficiency may be at its strongest in some very honest, kindly, and temperate people, and on such people therefore, misfortune must fall (96).

This lengthy quote thus illustrates what can happen as an effect of human evil. With this in mind, it must now be determined whether human actions can combat evil and the threat of destruction. In this case, the context will be of a very religious family in one of Bergman's lesser-known films, *The Virgin Spring*.

First of all, it must be noted that *The Virgin Spring* is not exactly a movie that Bergman was especially proud of making. In *Bergman on Bergman*, he calls it a "touristic, lousy imitation of Kurosawa" (120). However, that does not make the film unworthy. Mishler, noting the above slight along with Bergman's other disparaging snubs

of the film, calls such criticism "excessive." He acknowledges many weaknesses with the film, but says, "Taken simply on its own terms, it possesses an undeniable power and presents sequences of great visual interest" (The Virgin Spring and The Seventh Seal: A Girardian Reading). Indeed, this is particularly true in relation to theological themes of evil and suffering. Despite the medieval setting, today's news stories could have inspired the basic plot: an innocent, young girl is on her way to light a candle at church. While on her journey there, some degenerate bumpkins accost the young girl. They pretend to be innocent, at first, but eventually rape and murder her. Later that same day, these criminals come upon a house and ask to stay the night, not knowing that the inhabitants are the family of the very girl they attacked! The family discovers the identity of these drifters and the father exacts violent, murderous revenge on them. This story is told in starkly religious terms, a deeply religious family attacked by outside evils, in a clear contrast between pagan and Christian forces. At the end of the film, the family goes and visits the spot where their daughter lies slain. Töre, the father, cries to God asking how such a thing could have happened. Admitting his own ignorance, he vows to build a church on that very spot in order to atone for his sins. Just then, a spring breaks through the ground on the very spot where the young girl lay dead.

Job's plight in the Bible connects strongly with the ordeal of the family in the film. Like Job, it is hard to imagine a more devoutly religious family, making it seem all the more surprising and incongruous when they are struck with such misfortune. Such crises bring familial tensions to the forefront: the girl's sister admits her jealousy and her bitter indifference while witnessing the crime; Job's wife tells him to "Curse God and die." However, in *The Virgin Spring,* Töre is not as passive as Job; he sees an opportunity

and acts on his vengeful tendencies. This violent reaction contrasts with Töre's vow at the end, showing the powerful effects actions have on life and hinting at the most proactive way in which any person can help solve the problem of evil. In both *The Virgin Spring* and *The Seventh Seal*, it is a meaningful, moral act, which combats the overwhelming threat of evil and the precariousness of life at the hands of a world where evil flourishes. In both films, this selfless action allows other life to continue growing. In *The Seventh Seal*, the ersatz holy family of Jof and Mia escape to raise Mikael, the presumed hope for the future. In *The Virgin Spring*, however, it is Töre's vow that allows the water to flow. Water is very symbolic in the New Testament as representing new life. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel, "...whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). A new beginning is possible for this family, even after such terrors propagated themselves on both sides. Some may find this response preposterous. Steene quotes one such skeptic, Marianne Hook, to this effect, "Had a new fury welled up in him, or an uncontrollable sorrow, one would have been convinced. But it is psychologically preposterous that he should fall down and thank God at such a moment" (Hook qtd. In Steene Ingmar Bergman 94). Nevertheless, this attitude, which is considered paradoxical in the world, is a paragon of Christian teaching and example, ever since Jesus Christ Himself willingly laid down His life. As Paul, following Christ's own teachings, writes in Romans, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21). However, it must also be said that, for Bergman, such action is divorced to a large degree from its religious context. Bergman's doubts about the film seem to reveal his lack of confidence in the religious angle of the film's effectiveness

as a parable which gives some clues for dealing with evil. From Bergman's own point of view, living a good life against the forces of darkness is the only possible way of coping with a world that can be so crushingly wicked, and God is no longer a guide in such activities.

Finding Spiritual Peace

This gives a hint as to how people who may not be believers in any devout sense, or any sense at all, can find happiness. Even though Bergman's films have a reputation for being relentlessly dark and depressing, many of his characters do eventually obtain their salvation in one way or another. In Bergman's world, though, the most tangible path of personal reassurance is in the existential notion of performing meaningful deeds in order to bring meaning to one's life. However, the emptiness that people feel without such personal, spiritual knowledge and relationships is actually an argument in favor of God, not against. The French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, explains in his unfinished defense of Christianity, *Pensees*:

> What does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself. God alone is man's true good, and since man abandoned him it is a strange fact that nothing in nature has been found to take his place...(75).

So Christianity is clear on what can properly fill this void, which is depicted in the specific characters and situations of Block, Jöns, and Jof in *The Seventh Seal,* and Borg in *Wild Strawberries*. What is truly helpful here is to contrast the two movies with regard to the ways in which both they realize final spiritual peace for their protagonists.

In *The Seventh Seal*, Block is living out his life in real time. It is not until death

actually appears that he is able to do his good deed. In *Wild Strawberries*, on the other hand, Borg is able to influence his past by solving problems in his present. In this way, the events of today can ultimately affect the outlook on the events of tomorrow. In *The Seventh Seal*, the focus is on overcoming death by preserving the future: Block saves Jof and his family, and even the usually indifferent squire, Jöns, shows moments of kindness, such as saving Jof from some malevolent drunks in a bar. *Wild Strawberries*, with its loose, flashback structure, brings things full circle, past to present, showing how one's personal history may indeed be overcome, no matter how debilitating or shameful. Despite his familial troubles, both past and present, Borg's troubles dissipate and he finds solace in his final dream, in which his family is all together, fishing at their home, with none of the previous signs of familial strife or threats of death. Gerald Mast and Bruce F. Kawin observe in their textbook, *A Short History of the Movies*, an interesting point of film technique that links the two films together. They write that in the dream sequences, "Bergman shoots these scenes with a clarity and a whiteness that echo the scenes between Mary and Joseph [Jof and Mia] in *The Seventh Seal*" (444). Bergman contrasts the lighting of this dream with, for instance, the claustrophobic darkness in Borg's elderly mother's home.

One clue to how Bergman accomplishes this final spiritual peace, according to Birgitta Steene, is the way he handles time in the film, "In *Wild Strawberries* all time is now no matter whether we see scenes from Isak's youth, his mature years, or old age" (*Ingmar Bergman* 76). She quotes Eugene Archer, another film writer, to the effect that individual moments in life are infused with meaning in proportion to who experiences them (76). Although such thinking compares with a kind of post-modern notion of

perception shaping reality, it is more helpful here to think of spiritual reconciliation in Christianity. For example, Paul reassures the Corinthians with promises of such reconciliation: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come" (2 Cor 5:17). Additionally, Borg's life seems to even itself out, for instance his son and daughter-in-law seem to be working on their floundering marriage. Borg seems a new man at the end of *Wild Strawberries*, and, although not explicitly stated, it is hard not to see a spiritual dimension to his peace. Derek Malcolm, film critic for *The Guardian*, observes that *Wild Strawberries* has an "almost Christian insistence on the possibility of reconciliation and redemption" (Ingmar Bergman: Wild Strawberries). This seems to be a far more optimistic path than the one given to Block in *The Seventh Seal.*

On the other hand, though, Borg resigns himself to many of his problems, preferring to live in a dream world where all works out in the end. According to Kierkegaard, such resignation or renunciation is a step on the road to religious belief, but is not quite there. Perhaps the biggest clue comes from Bergman himself. Revealing the inspiration for the character in *Images: My Life in Film*, he writes, "Isak Borg equals me. *IB* equals *Ice* and *Borg* (the Swedish word for *fortress*). Simple and facile...I was then thirty-seven, cut off from all human relations...I was a loner, a failure, I mean a complete failure. Though successful. And clever. And orderly. And disciplined" (20). This lack of personal center, despite outward evidence of success, cuts right to the heart of Borg's (and Bergman's) spiritual and existential situation.

However, does any of this matter in the face of death? The emphasis on Bergman's life philosophy throughout this study has been on the power of human action

to benefit the lives of others, and how this simple idea is existentially worked into Bergman's filmmaking. One thing that these characters, with or without faith, have in common, is a practical attitude toward life. Even Jof, despite his chosen profession, is no fool and not only sees death but also knows to take his opportunity to flee. Mystics and theologians, who are taken to have their heads in the clouds, actually end up having to focus on the here-and-now. They simply are equipped with different tools to deal with it. Perhaps the main difference between living a good life existentially and living one theologically is the knowledge that life is ongoing. Christianity demands some kind of personal self-awareness that one's actions matter in light of eternity. Is the existential option of continuing to live on in the face of despair, evil, and utter annihilation completely futile without any supernatural, transcendent promise? It is up to each individual viewer how to answer such questions when forming his or her own personal moral and spiritual code.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even a brief survey of certain themes in Bergman's films reveals a rich spring of ideas and human insights, giving the observant filmgoer cause for thought. The fact that from his youth, religion was a deeply ingrained part of Bergman's mental make-up has assured that his art is filtered through the extensive Christian traditions of art and literature, endowing his films with more spiritual feeling and perceptiveness than other equally acclaimed directors could manage. Particularly in this period during the 1950s, his writing and directing style contain such strong, searching qualities that viewers cannot remain unmoved but must examine their own preconceived ideas. In *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*, Bergman lays out life's journey in ways both literal and

metaphorical, exposing how people either find or miss God. *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring* form a thorough study of what is perhaps the greatest challenge to Christian theism, evil. Finally, it is clear how Bergman sorts out the characters in his films by allowing them to find some kind of appropriate end. By vividly showing these issues on the movie screen, Bergman has transferred abstract theological debate into something more tangible and real.

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