

# Allegory and Naturalism in Ingmar Bergman's Medieval Films

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When Ingmar Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* came out a few years ago, it was an event of remarkable excitement, the testament of a great director's career, the epic summation of his earlier work.<sup>1</sup> And like many of Bergman's earlier films, it was disturbing in its success. On the one hand, it is grandly, even starkly naturalistic, the cinematic equivalent of Tolstoyan or Strindbergian realism. At the same time, however, it can be seen as a vast, allegorical fairy tale; its basic plot structure suggests this, along with its incorporation of important phantasmagoric elements. Indeed, Bergman emphasizes the phantasmagoric constituent of his story when his characters speak, near the end of the film, of producing Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. *Fanny and Alexander* is also to be seen as a kind of dream play superimposed, as it were, on a realistic drama. That the two do not readily mix is what disturbs and intrigues us about the film, and it suggests an important dichotomy of impulse throughout Bergman's career, a dichotomy he may be said to have inherited from such Scandinavian precursors as Strindberg himself. At different points in his career, Bergman has followed this impulse in its different directions, toward the allegorical phantasy of *Wild Strawberries*, for instance, or toward the naturalism of *Scenes From a Marriage*.

The two medieval films, *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*, though superficially similar in terms of settings and costumes, represent Bergman's dichotomy of impulse in a peculiarly clear and apprehensible form. *The Seventh Seal*, which Jorn Donner has termed Bergman's "least immediate" and "most rhetorical" film (135), is a modern vision (and interpretation) of medieval allegory and must be considered in terms of its allegorical suggestiveness. *The Virgin*

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*Spring*, on the other hand, though it makes important use of ritual action, is actually a naturalistic drama with a medieval setting. Vernon Young calls it “the most selfless of [Bergman’s] films” (188), while Birgitta Steene has argued that “in crucial scenes the camera suggests no symbolic level of response” (95). We are to interpret it according to the naturalistic function of its imagery.

It may be useful at this point to distinguish between “ritual” and “allegorical” as these terms obtain in Bergman’s films. The word “ritual” suggests a prescribed performance of certain acts, usually of a religious nature and typically to be seen as the mystical reenactment of some primal myth in which the meaning of the event resides. The Mass, for instance, is the ritual reenactment of the Last Supper. Not all rituals are as closely associated with their primal significance, however, for a ritual may become detached from its original meaning, and thus subsist as a perfectly inscrutable cultural survival. Indeed, the study of folkways abounds in examples of such deracinated rituals and customs. The important point, however, is that meaning, while it may be visible through ritual, remains distinct from it. The ritual in itself is not symbolic, but realistic. One might point out that according to many interpretations, the body and blood of Christ are literally consumed at every Mass. *The Virgin Spring* is bracketed, as it were, with two ritual actions: the bringing of candles to Mass, a task Tore imposes on his reluctant daughter Karin, and the preparation to kill the three goatherds, which Tore imposes on himself. Interestingly, both these actions go astray. Karin never arrives at the church, and thus does not connect with the meaning of her ritual action. The ritual functions to set the plot in motion. Tore’s ritual preparation for murder, surely a more inscrutable and perhaps a pagan custom, quickly degenerates into a desperate death struggle, whose significance is psychological rather than symbolic.

Allegory, on the other hand, is essentially symbolic. It suggests a series of images or emblems *in which* the meaning is symbolically represented. However realistically an allegory is presented, therefore, it can never be detached from its symbolic meaning, as ritual very often is. Dante’s Virgil may be a very convincing human character, but he is always at once the figure of reason. Steene is probably right that Bergman’s allegory is more “general” than strictly “medieval” (what modern author’s allegory isn’t?), on the grounds that *The Seventh Seal* “has little in common with the *a priori* assumption of an orderly universe, which underlies original [read Dantean? Spenserian?] allegory” (63). But her description of Bergman’s allegory might just as easily serve for Dante’s: “a story in which the spiritual content is set forth in a concrete action and with characters whose movements are realistic but whose basic function is that of abstract symbols” (62-63).

In *The Seventh Seal*, the characters function as abstract symbols of a society

that is clearly intended to seem, in Barbara Tuchman's phrase, "a distant mirror" of our own. Bergman's film is remarkable for the range of its characters, all of whom must confront death in the cataclysmic form of the Black Plague. Bergman himself has drawn a connection between the cataclysm of the Black Plague and the potential cataclysm of atomic war in our own day: "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" (Program note to *The Seventh Seal*). Chief among the film's characters is Antonius Block, a knight, who returns to Sweden with his squire, Jons, and engages the figure of Death in a game of chess with his life as the stake. The chess game, which has precedents in medieval allegory (see Steene 63), suggests symbolically the rational, idealistic nature of Block's search for meaning in his life, a need his squire does not share. But Block and his squire are not the only major characters. Their fates are played out in counterpoint with those of Jof and Mia, a pair of peripatetic actors and the parents of a young child, Skat, an actor, Raval, a doctor at a theological seminary (who once inspired Block to go on the crusade and is now a grave robber), Plog, a cuckolded smith, a group of Flagellants, a young girl burned as a witch, and Block's wife, Karin, a sort of Swedish Penelope. All of these characters represent different levels of society and different possible responses to the impending catastrophe.

Interestingly, many of these characters seem to be drawn from the stock of comic types. Jof and Mia are the young lovers and significantly the only ones to escape death. Jof, who has visions of the Virgin Mary, is a comic lunatic, lover, and poet, literally playing his fate out as an observer of the larger tragic actions. The fate of Jof and Mia provides a rival comic tonality at the film's conclusion, competing ambiguously with the tragic tonality of Block's fate, rather the way major and minor keys compete at the end of Richard Strauss' tone poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Plog is a figure out of medieval comedy, sinister indeed when in league with Raval at the tavern, but ultimately more pathetic than threatening. Skat too is essentially a comic figure, a cowardly boaster of the Falstaff variety. Even Skat's death is comic: he climbs a tree to escape death, only to have Death saw off the limb onto which he has climbed. The hypocritical Raval is a figure out of comedy also, a sort of Malvolio whose threats are easily deflected by Jons. Raval's gruesome death, however, is comic only the way some of the less savory scenes of medieval jest books are comic, in that it is well deserved. He approaches the others in the night, visibly afflicted with the plague and crying out for water, but is left to die miserably and alone. Raval's death departs from the jest book tradition, however, in that it is warranted only by chance, not as a reasonable

retribution for his evil. Bergman's modern insight is that the plague afflicts the innocent and guilty alike and without reason. Skat's death, for instance, is not justified by his petty sins, nor is the death of Block's long suffering and innocent wife.

We see the film's ambiguity about punishment clearly in the scene with Tyan, the "witch" who is burned as a scapegoat. In his excellent study of the Black Death, Philip Ziegler notes that such scapegoats fulfilled a basic medieval need to seek evidence of God's will on earth: "few doubted that the Black Death was God's will but, by a curious quirk of reasoning, medieval man also concluded that His instruments were to be found on earth and that, if only they could be identified, it was legitimate to destroy them" (97). Tyan is being burned because she claims to be able to see the devil, and thus she attracts the attention of Block, who believes that the devil, if anybody, must know God. When Block questions her, however, he finds a terrified young girl who sees nothing: like God, the devil is inscrutable. Tyan seems indeed nothing more than a confused innocent, her death as meaningless as Block fears his own dedicated life has been. This theme is underscored by the presence of the Flagellants, who try to live with death as futilely as Block tries to escape it.

Block and Jons are the main questers in the story, and although they are accorded a more than comic dignity, even they may have comic antecedents in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Block has Quixote's idealism, if not at this point his innocence, while Jons has something of Panza's stolid realism. This point is worth making to place Block and Jons as allegorical types, rather than rounded tragic characters. An inscrutable or meaningless world is not fertile ground for tragedy in any event, and placed in such a world, Block and Jons do not recommend themselves as fully perceived, tragic personalities as much as they suggest different responses to relentless fate. Steene makes the useful point that "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" (66). Jons is in some ways the more sympathetic of the two, a modern-minded skeptic in the Existentialist tradition Bergman admires. In spite of his evident lack of belief, Jons is not enervated, but dedicates himself to helping others in practical ways, as in his rescue of Jof at the tavern. And he remains sarcastic even in the conquering presence of Death, allowing himself to be quieted at the end only "under protest."

Perhaps the most mysterious character is Block's wife, Karin, the "Penelope" to whose house the others repair in their extremity. Presumably, she and Block were once as innocent as Jof and Mia, but in her domestic way (she is the only

character who is not somehow a wanderer) she is now as careworn as Block. Reading aloud from the Book of Revelation, she expects and submits to the inevitable while her husband struggles futilely against it. Where he would speak even to the devil in his desperation to learn the truth about God, she is comfortable with the mystery of the Apocalypse. When Death comes for her in her home, she responds with domestic civility.

But even Karin is not a rounded, psychological character. All the characters in *The Seventh Seal* function together as a whole society facing a universal fate, part of an overriding metaphor of man's struggle to understand and come to terms with the necessity of his death. This is part of their allegorical nature. As in comedy, the meaning in allegory finds its expression not in individual characters, but in the constellation of figures making up the society of the story. This is as true of Dante or Spenser as it is of Bergman. *The Virgin Spring*, however, functions on a very different level.

Its plot, for one thing, is much tighter than the plot of *The Seventh Seal*, which moves through symbolic episodes suggested by moves on the chessboard. Compressed into a twenty four hour period, the plot of *The Virgin Spring* is propelled moment by moment by the psychological impulses of its characters. Bergman's "unsymbolic" camera watches as the yearnings and jealousies of Tore's family group reveal themselves. (William S. Pechter is certainly right that in this film "it is only by a difficult effort that one realizes that the camera is there at all.") The various relationships Bergman suggests—the obsessive love of Tore's wife for her last remaining daughter, Karin, or the equally obsessive jealousy of Karin evinced by the bastard servant girl, Ingeri—are naturalistic and personal. Even the religious feelings of the characters are personal. Tore is characterized by his stern prayers and concern with official form, the duty Karin must perform, for instance, in bringing candles to the Virgin Mary. His wife Mareta's religion expresses itself rather in her tendency to mortify her own flesh and a relative disregard for form. Ingeri, who is unmarried and pregnant, a creature on the periphery of acceptable society, prays to the pagan god, Odin, for revenge. The three murderous goatherds, who constitute the other family group in the film, are depicted with similar psychological particularity. The mute goatherd is a libidinous brute, lacking in his brother's sly, ingratiating ways. The young boy is as innocent in his way as Karin, but clearly brutalized and stupid. Their rape murder of the girl, a horribly naturalistic scene performed in front of a camera as helplessly voyeuristic as Ingeri who looks on from the woods, seems the natural outcome of their psychological impulses. Donner has commented on Bergman's chilling use of realistic sound effects in this scene (199). In terms of stark realism, Karin's murder is in-

deed quite remarkable, comparable in its way to Zampano's murder of the fool in Fellini's *La Strada*.

Tore's ritualistic revenge, which balances Karin's murder in violence, is equally stark and psychologically verisimilar. As pointed out above, the ritual of his bath, mortification with birch switches, and dressing for the slaughter (a parallel with Karin's elaborate dressing for her journey), does not yield easily to symbolic interpretation. While clearly stylized, it is at the same time a psychologically appropriate action for a man whose orderliness and self-control have been insisted upon, and whose driving impulse to the anarchy of violence must be unbottled. Once this has happened, Tore's rage spends itself in excess. He cannot control himself when his wife pleads for the life of the boy, but smashes him against the wall. Unlike *The Seventh Seal*, where death is personified in an allegorical figure whose actions are symbolic and who *represents* the cataclysmic fate of a whole society—as Vernon Young points out, “for all its talk of plague, desolation, and the fumes of burning flesh [the film] does not draw blood” (191)—death in *The Virgin Spring* is presented in grimly personal and naturalistic terms. Where the characters in *The Seventh Seal* contend with death (as much as anything a philosophical idea), in *The Virgin Spring*, the characters, both killers and victims, must simply suffer it.

Naturalism distinguishes *The Virgin Spring* also on the level of metaphor. There is no overriding symbol comparable to Block's game of chess. The symbols in *The Virgin Spring* function psychologically in the context of the story. The most obvious of these is perhaps the frog that Ingeri places in the loaf of bread Karin is to carry to church. While Karin is doted upon, innocent of the ways of the world, and virginal (though not beyond what she perceives as harmless flirting), Ingeri is unloved and embarrassingly pregnant. The world is obviously too much with her. It is psychologically apt that she cannot help hating Karin and feels compelled to some covert action against her, such as hiding the frog in the bread and thus defiling an important constituent of the ritual in which Karin is supposed to participate. The symbol thus takes shape as a reflection of Ingeri's state of mind. On a psychological level, the frog is appropriate as an emblem of sexual jealousy and revenge. Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out that frogs are almost always sexual symbols, primitive creatures associated in the unconscious with the primitive drives of the id (101). The frog suggests Ingeri's unstated wish that something of her own sexual fate will befall Karin, as indeed it does in excess of her conscious desire. When the frog jumps out of the bread at the climactic moment of Karin's confrontation with the goatherds, it is, as Donner suggests, “a release for Karin's mounting fright” (193), and triggers the violence of the rape

and murder. Bergman's psychological symbol resonates even further when the boy at Tore's table, recognizing Tore's prayer as the same one Karin had spoken, vomits the bread he has eaten. Donner has noted that the breakfast scene at Tore's is composed in the manner of "an altar painting" (198). This is true also of the dinner scene, which seems quite intentionally and perhaps ironically patterned after the Last Supper, with the goatherds seated across the table in the position of Judas. Thus Karin's interrupted ritual of life is connected metaphorically with the ritual of death Tore is about to enact.

Another psychological symbol is Tore's uprooting of the birch tree when he learns of his daughter's murder. This scene has had much commentary. Donner speaks of it as suggesting an "interplay of natural forces, far from both Christianity and paganism" (200). Steene considers the scene "almost a parody of rape" (93), while Bengt Idestam-Almquist implies that Tore is exorcizing his own lust for his daughter (see Steene's note 144). Certainly, the tree suggests a young life, like Karin's, being destroyed. And the scene does propose an interplay of natural forces: the violence of Tore's human nature asserting itself against the stark natural world in which the tree is set. The fact that branches from the tree will be used to prepare Tore for his revenge suggests also that he is calling upon the forces of nature in his struggle, forces that his stark and formal Christianity may have set hitherto in abeyance. I think the scene represents also the destruction of the orderly world Tore had built around himself and his family, circumscribed and made safe by the family compound, and violated by the wandering goatherds. The ordered, everyday life of the people in Tore's family group has been insisted upon throughout the film, and stands in marked contrast to the wandering existence of the goatherds (and, one might add, the wandering characters of *The Seventh Seal*). Tore's insight is the precariousness of this earthly stability in nature. Indeed, there is something of the bourgeois in Tore, which is detectable even in his decision to build a stone church on the spot where his daughter was murdered. To the very end, and with good reason, he does not trust in yielding to natural forces, the wilderness that surrounds him, swallows his daughter, and moves him to evil acts himself.

The most ambiguous and complex symbol is that of the water which manifests itself variously throughout the story. Karin's troubles begin when she and Ingeri have to cross a stream by a mill and meet the pagan, ogre-like miller. When Karen has been killed and the goatherds leave the boy to watch her body, it begins to snow, a suggestion of the remorselessness of nature. And, of course, when her body is discovered, a miracle occurs when a spring gurgles from the spot where her head lay. Ingeri bathes herself in it, as if to cleanse herself of sin and take on

herself some of the spring's life-giving force. But for the most part, the images of water have been threatening, and the miracle itself, expressed as water, reminds us of the ambiguity of nature, at once idyllic and threatening, in this film. The sea, toward which Jof and Mia travel in *The Seventh Seal*, is much less ambiguous: it suggests their comic fulfillment and survival. The water in *The Virgin Spring* is inland water, suggesting the more personal terrain of the inner mind, man's nature reflecting his surroundings. And whether it redeems personal tragedy remains questionable.

Bergman's medieval films demonstrate what are really two modes of expression that have competed with each other throughout his career. *The Seventh Seal* functions on an essentially allegorical level, while *The Virgin Spring* is naturalistic. As we have seen, both films employ symbols, but they do so in basically different ways that may reflect two sides of Bergman's nature. The allegorical, of course, seems grander and more philosophical, for it takes aim publicly at a larger theme: mankind's conflict with death. Yet a film like *The Seventh Seal* stands always in danger of seeming overblown or forced. Indeed, Bergman's use of comic elements may argue an awareness of this danger. *The Virgin Spring*, on the other hand, has sometimes been criticized for being too stark, but it succeeds, I think, in a private and mysterious suggestiveness, the unsaid glowing through the starkness of its images. It is subtler, more tragic, and in the best sense a more disturbing film.



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