

CHAPTER FIVE

Welcome to the Apocalypse

Black Death Films

The Background

Toward the end of the year 1347, some merchants who had been trading in the Black Sea region returned to their home ports in Italy. Unbeknownst to their friends and family, and perhaps even to themselves, they brought back with them a most unwelcome commodity: the dreaded plague or pestilence, a disease that had not been seen in Europe and the Mediterranean for nine centuries. According to the apocryphal account of Gabriele de Mussis, a contemporary chronicler from Piacenza, Italy, these first victims and carriers of the Black Death into Europe had contracted the disease as the result of a primitive form of germ warfare. In 1346, the Mongol armies of the Kipchak khan, Janibeg, attempted to expel the infidel Christian presence from his recently converted Muslim lands. As the Mongols were besieging the Genoese at Caffa (now Feodosiya), an important trading post on the north coast of the Black Sea, the besiegers suddenly found themselves besieged by the plague. Before leaving, the Mongols decided to give their enemies a taste of their own affliction. Loading their dead, plague-ridden comrades onto their catapults, they then lobbed these human missiles "into the city of Caffa in order that the intolerable stench of those bodies might extinguish everyone." Although it is unlikely that the disease was first communicated from East to West in such a highly dramatic fashion, it is entirely possible that the Mongols did transmit the plague to Europeans by the more peaceful means of trade. One of the most coveted export products from the Black Sea region were luxurious animal furs, such as ermine and marten. These furs—even when

skinned—made ideal homes for fleas that carried within their stomachs the bacteria causing bubonic plague. When Italian merchants brought their exclusive wares home, to be draped around their wives' lovely necks or sold at some high-end market, little did they know how costly their imports were to become.

By 1348 the Black Death had a firm grip on Italy, Spain, France, England, and perhaps western Germany and Norway. By 1349 and 1350, it had spread to almost all the rest of Europe, including the Low Countries, Austria, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and the whole of Germany and Scandinavia. Only Poland and Bohemia seem to have been relatively spared by the disease, perhaps because of few trading contacts there. The consequences for Europe's population were catastrophic. Best estimates that can be made from a variety of records to survive from this period indicate that, on average, 50 percent of the inhabitants of any given city, town, or village succumbed, although of course there was considerable variation depending on time and place. Our most accurate records of mortality, for instance, are the registers kept by bishops that record every vacancy that occurred in every parish church in their dioceses. Ten plague registers survive from England, which yield an average mortality of 45 percent among the priesthood in 1349, while a register that survives from Barcelona in Spain points to an even higher, 60 percent death rate between May 1348 and April 1349. It may be argued that priests had better living standards than most peasants, but if they were doing their duty of administering last rites, which their high death rate indicates, then in fact their exposure may have been greater. We also have other records that can tell us how many peasants died from plague, and these rates tend to be no lower than that of their priests. Lords kept annual accounts of how many tenants there were on their manors and what rents and services they owed, and these survive in good number—especially from ecclesiastical institutions—throughout England. Manorial account rolls yield death rates during the plague ranging from 40 to 70 percent. On the Continent, a parish register at Givry in France records a 50 percent mortality in the second half of 1348, while at San Gimignano in Italy, household census returns tell us that population there declined by 59 percent in the city and by 45 percent in the *contado*, or surrounding countryside, as a result of the first outbreak of the Black Death.

This was indeed the "Golden Age of the Germ," for plague came not just once but again and again, revisiting Europe's beleaguered population about once a decade throughout the second half of the fourteenth and throughout the fifteenth centuries. Nor was it only plague that killed. Other diseases that put in an appearance include smallpox, tuberculosis, the "stich" (pleurisy), the "flux" (dysentery), the "sweat" (influenza), and

a horrible venereal disease—perhaps gonorrhoea—that was known as the “French Pox,” in which men’s penises acquired a burning sensation before these rotted off and the victims died. The effect of all this mortality was to keep Europe’s population low until the very end of the Middle Ages. A telling testimony to the late medieval demographic crisis is to plot the life expectancy of the monks at Christ Church Priory in Canterbury and at Westminster Abbey in London, both of which have left detailed obituary records. Despite the fact that the monks at these prestigious and wealthy institutions were extremely well fed and medically cared for, their life expectancy from birth fell precipitously throughout the fifteenth century, by as much as a decade, until it reached a nadir in the low twenties. Other dramatic statistics can be compiled from the tax records for several Tuscan towns in Italy, which reveal that population there declined over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by anywhere from 62 to 75 percent. Meanwhile, in eastern Normandy (which was ravaged by war as well as plague), the century between 1347 and 1442 saw its population falling, according to its tax records, by a whopping 130 percent.

The Black Death can therefore be called the defining event of the late Middle Ages, one that changed, and extinguished, the lives of millions of Europeans. But what exactly was the Black Death? First of all, it should be pointed out that the disease was never called by that name during the Middle Ages. Instead, it was most commonly known as the “plague,” the “pestilence,” or the “great mortality.” The designation of the 1348 outbreak as the “Black Death” only became current among historians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even then it was a mistranslation of *pestis atra* or *atra mors*, Latin for “dreadful disease” or “dreadful death.” These terms date back to the writings of Seneca during the first century A.D. but were reintroduced by Scandinavian chroniclers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

We are indebted to the Victorian era not only for giving a name to this remarkable historical phenomenon, but also for bequeathing to us the first modern medical analysis of how plague kills and why. During the 1850s, a French biologist called Louis Pasteur first discovered that diseases like plague were caused by parasitic organisms known as bacteria, which were so small that they could only be seen under a microscope. One of Pasteur’s proteges who studied at his institute in Paris, Alexandre Yersin, later had a unique opportunity to put this microbiotic theory into practice when he attempted to contain a plague outbreak in the crowded Chinese port of Hong Kong in 1894. Unfortunately, Yersin was not entirely successful, for by the end of the century, the plague had spread to Bombay and other parts of India, where it was to rage intermittently until the middle of the twentieth century, killing a total of nearly 13 million persons. Reports of

the disease that filtered back to Britain from its Third World colonies contributed to the horror that plague continued to hold for the modern Western consciousness. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story, "The Giant Rat of Sumatra," plays upon this fear: Holmes must foil the agents of his archenemy, Professor Moriarity, who attempt to raise the specter of the medieval holocaust in Victorian Britain by importing a plague-infested rat from southeast Asia. Even as recently as 1994, medical newsletters in the U.S. and Europe reported the alarming news that both bubonic and pneumonic plague were once again striking down thousands in the Indian subcontinent.

Yet out of this turn-of-the-century experience with plague came the first systematic study of the disease. The Plague Research Commission, appointed by the British Home Office in 1905, published regular reports in the *Journal of Hygiene* on the epidemic in India from 1906 until 1917, when mortalities began to abate. Based on these observations, we know that the symptoms of plague are caused by the invasion and multiplication inside the human body of the bacterium, *Pasteurella pestis* or *Yersinia pestis* (named after Pasteur and Yersin) and that the symptoms can take three forms, depending on the mode of transmission of the bacteria. The most common type of plague is bubonic, named after *bubon*, originally a Greek word for groin, which is where the swellings associated with this form of the disease usually appear (at least according to the modern diagnosis of the disease). In bubonic plague, the bacteria invade the body through the bite of a flea, which lives off the blood of animals, such as cats, dogs, and rats. A flea that is "blocked" by plague bacilli—in other words, whose stomach is filled with bacteria—is constantly hungry and none too discriminating about its host. It will happily feed on humans once its animal host has grown cold after dying from the plague. Since its stomach is already full, the flea is also forced to regurgitate its blood meal back into its victim, along with perhaps thousands of bacteria. These then multiply in the patient's bloodstream during an incubation period of between two to eight days, at the end of which time they collect in the lymph nodes located in the groin, armpits, or the neck, depending on which is closest to the original point of entry. It is then that the first symptoms appear, starting with a high fever and shortly followed by the signature swellings, or buboes, of the lymph glands, which is actually a sign that the body is trying to expel the infection. Other symptoms include violent headaches; subcutaneous bleeding that produces large livid spots on the skin; and loss of nervous and motor control, which can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including convulsions, dizziness, restlessness, stupor, and delirium. If the patient dies, usually of heart failure or internal hemorrhaging, these symptoms typically last from three to six days. However, a significant proportion of victims of

bubonic plague—anywhere from 10 to 40 percent—do recover naturally from the disease during the second week after the onset of symptoms, by which time the buboes have burst open and released their pus.

The two other forms of the plague are the pneumonic and septicemic varieties, which are even more deadly than the bubonic kind. In pneumonic plague, an especially virulent form of the disease, the bacteria are spread through airborne droplets, much like the common cold, which then invade the lungs and produce a bloody sputum. Victims succumb in 100 percent of the cases within three days of the infection. Septicemic plague is a most rare and mysterious form of the disease. Here, the plague bacilli invade and multiply within the patient's bloodstream so rapidly that he or she may die within hours, without ever evincing any symptoms. We don't know exactly how septicemic plague was spread. It may have been caused by the bite of a human flea, *Pulex irritans*, that was capable of transmitting extraordinarily large numbers of bacteria after feeding on an already infected host. On the other hand, the septicemia may also have been spread much like modern hepatitis—through dirty instruments, such as a scalpel tainted with the blood or pus of a plague victim. Hygiene was none too good in the Middle Ages, and a knife that was used to lance a plague boil may then have been applied to “bleed” a patient, ironically in the hopes that this would prevent or cure the disease.

In several parts of the world, the plague bacteria are what is called “endemic,” that is, they are perpetually present in the bloodstream of the rodent and their attendant flea populations within a given locality. Such plague “reservoirs” seem to have existed since ancient times in the Himalayan foothills between India and Tibet, and since the second half of the thirteenth century in the Central Asian steppes in Mongolia and Kazakstan. Today, endemic plague also persists in isolated regions of the western United States, where signs warn visitors to national parks not to feed squirrels, since they may give them the plague. Even so, at least a dozen outbreaks still occur in the U.S. annually, such as when a man from Santa Fe, New Mexico, who had camped out in a flea- or rodent-infested sleeping bag, nearly died of bubonic plague while on vacation in New York City in November 2002. Since rodents are not normally migratory, the disease can become “pandemic,” or contagious throughout a wide geographical area, only when it makes the leap from animals to humans, who then carry it further afield. Conditions for a pandemic outbreak of plague were created in the century prior to 1348 with the establishment of the Mongol Empire that stretched from China in the east to Russia in the west. As Marco Polo testifies in his *Travels*—based on a journey he had made to Cambulac, or modern-day Beijing, in the second half of the thirteenth century—a relatively safe, fast, and efficient overland route now linked the

endemic areas of Asia with Europe. When Polo's Italian countrymen rushed to establish lucrative trade links with the Mongol Empire in the early fourteenth century, they laid the groundwork for a most deadly import. A similar process seems to have happened with the recent AIDS epidemic, which first made the jump from monkeys to humans in Africa and then traveled around the world through the almost unlimited modern methods of transport.

There are a couple of theories as to where the Black Death may have originated. A number of European chroniclers point to China or India, and native Chinese annals actually record disease epidemics raging through several provinces during the 1330s. Also in these years, the annals record a series of ecological disasters—including floods, famines, droughts, and earthquakes—that alternated with the epidemics. It might seem that these natural occurrences are unrelated to disease, but in reality climactic and terrestrial upheavals may have displaced the Manchurian marmot and other plague-bearing rodents from their mountain homelands down into lower elevation areas closer to human habitation. The Muslim world traveler, Ibn Battuta, bears witness to a disease in southern India that he personally contracted, and from which he fortunately recovered, in 1344. Yet it is not certain that any of these epidemics recorded in the Far East were plague, as not enough information about them survives. Another, more likely possibility is that the Black Death started in the 1330s in Central Asia. This theory is supported by another contemporary Muslim chronicler, Ibn al-Wardi, who was writing from Aleppo in northern Syria. He claims that the plague "began in the land of darkness," which probably refers to Mongolia, since al-Wardi's patrons, the Mamluk rulers of Syria, had been locked in bitter rivalry with the Mongol hordes for nearly a century. Also supporting a Central Asian origin is the archeological evidence of several hundred Nestorian gravestones that were discovered in 1885 in what is now the northern border region of Kyrgyzstan, a republic carved out of the former Soviet Union that straddles northwestern China. In 1338–1339, over 100 deaths were recorded on the gravestones, and on three of them, 10 victims are listed as dying from "plague" or "pestilence." Whatever its origins, the Black Death made its way to the Black Sea ports that provided the first point of contact with Europeans. From there, the plague spread rapidly throughout Europe along an extensive and well-established network of sea and land trade routes.

These days, plague—if it is caught early enough—can be easily cured by a dose of penicillin, which was developed from fungus, or plant mold, by Sir Alexander Fleming in 1928 and first injected into humans in 1940. Obviously, our medieval ancestors did not have the benefit of our modern medical knowledge, but this does not mean that they had no response to

the disease. In general, medieval chroniclers and physicians advanced two explanations for the Black Death. Above all, they said, the plague came from God and was a mighty blow sent down from on high as a chastisement for man's excessive wickedness and sin. In a sense, this gave humans some control over the disease, since by reforming their lives or performing some extraordinary penance, God could be induced to take His divine anger and retribution away. But most fourteenth-century doctors, particularly those attached to universities, also admitted of natural causes of epidemic disease, and this explanation had come into vogue during the previous century when Christian thinkers rediscovered the works of classical philosophers and attempted to harmonize rationalism with faith. Their most important authorities included Hippocrates and Aristotle from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Ptolemy and Galen from the second century A.D., and Avicenna from the early eleventh century. Out of this mostly ancient tradition came the miasmatic theory of contagion: that a plague was spread by "evil vapors," or a miasma, which, when introduced into the air, corrupted it and changed its substance. Such evil vapors could be attributed either to a "universal and distant cause," namely to a conjunction of the planets, Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars, in which the close proximity of their opposing properties produced atmospheric disturbances, or to a "particular and near cause," in which the vapors came from sources closer to hand, such as earthquakes, swamps, or rotting corpses. The medical faculty at the University of Paris issued a most authoritative, and conventional, enunciation of the miasmatic theory in October 1348: It favored the astrological explanation for the vapors and dated the all-important planetary conjunction to precisely 1:00 p.m. on March 20, 1345. Allied to the belief in an aerial spread of the plague was the theory, also derived from the ancients, of person to person contagion, usually by breath or touch. It was not until the pioneering work of Pasteur in the 19th century that the germ theory of disease replaced the miasmatic legacy of the Middle Ages.

The miasmatic and interpersonal methods of contagion conditioned doctors' prescriptions for preventing an outbreak of the pestilence, and sometimes their advice was adopted by civic authorities in special ordinances drawn up to combat the disease. Eminently practical was their recommendation to flee from or quarantine the sick, and this seems to have led to the first recorded practice of using wooden coffins, instead of the usual cloth shrouds, to bury the dead. Also patients were urged to seal the doors and windows of their homes and treat the air with fragrant herbs, vinegar, or the smoke from aromatic woods. One prescription that may have caused more harm than good was the precaution against bathing, which was thought to open the body's pores to the miasma. In reality,

medieval people's poor hygiene contributed substantially to the virulence of bubonic plague, since fewer baths meant more fleas. Even without this misguided advice, it is unlikely that many Christians would have bathed anyway, since bathing was equated with immorality and prostitution. Muslims may have had an advantage here, since their religion emphasized purity, and they inherited the regular use of baths from the Romans. Indeed, their superior cleanliness was a point of pride for Arabic authors when describing the filthy habits of their enemies. The Muslim encyclopedist, al-Qazwini, writing in the latter half of the thirteenth century, complained that European Christians "do not cleanse or bathe themselves more than once or twice a year." This is probably true, since monastic regulations, such as those at the prestigious Benedictine abbey of Cluny in France, provided for only two baths at most for each monk per year. Al-Qazwini also said that Christians do not wash or change their clothes until these "fall to pieces." On the other hand, Muslims were at a disadvantage in that they were forbidden by Islamic law from fleeing a plague area, since the disease was considered a mercy or "martyrdom" from God, rather than a straightforward case of human infection.

During the first epidemic of 1348, both Christian and Muslim doctors had to rely on classical authorities in order to treat plague. Later, however, by the end of the fourteenth century, physicians may have resorted more to practical measures, such as better hygiene and quarantine, that were based instead on their own experience in combating the disease. The most popular cure for any ailment during the Middle Ages was to bleed the patient, called, in medical parlance, a phlebotomy, in order to release the poison and restore the proper balance of the body's humors, which Hippocrates and Galen had taught was essential for good health. Bleeding was in fact to prevail as a general remedy for illness until the nineteenth century. Alternatively, patients could take a theriac—a treacle or syrup—that was thought to have the power to neutralize the plague poison within the body. Such medieval "miracle cures" were composed of various elements aged for a number of years, and they usually included chopped-up snakes and other exotic ingredients, such as Armenian clay, rare herbs, powdered gems, and precious metals. Surgeons also treated the plague boils with special plasters or attempted to hasten their demise by burning or cutting them open.

Although later doctors believed they enjoyed better success in curing their patients (probably due to the advent of natural immunity or lower virulence rather than effective treatment), members of the medical profession who faced the Black Death of 1348 often seemed helpless, and frankly admitted the fact. The pope's personal physician, Gui de Chauliac, testified that the first plague outbreak "rendered doctors powerless and put them to

shame. . . . When they did visit [the sick] they did hardly anything for them." Some modern scholars have seized upon medieval impotency as an excuse to ignore altogether contemporary writings about the disease. This is a mistake. Although medieval authors were certainly respectful of authority and tradition—whether this be biblical or classical—they also relied on their own observations, especially in the context of an unprecedented event such as the Black Death. Giovanni Boccaccio, for instance, describes himself as an eyewitness to the plague's ravages in the city of Florence, which he would "scarcely dare to believe," he says, "were it not for the fact that I am one of many people who saw it with their own eyes." The Moorish physician from Almería in Spain, Ibn Khatima, gives in his plague treatise of 1349 a clinical—and judging by modern standards, most accurate—description of bubonic and pneumonic plague and expresses great confidence in the cure of bloodletting, which he backs up by citing specific case studies. Even Gui de Chauliac, who contracted but survived the disease in 1348, drops his fatalistic attitude when discussing a second plague outbreak in 1360, in response to which he prescribes detailed recipes for theriacs and custom treatments for buboes appearing on different parts of the human body.

Although they universally subscribed to the miasmatic theory, most medical authorities of the time attempted to relate it to some unusual phenomenon that they had observed or experienced, whether this be thunder and lightning, a comet, or an earthquake. Some medieval theories about the plague are unique and owe nothing to older sources. An anonymous physician from Montpellier in France, for instance, believed that the plague could pass from one person to another by sight alone, "when an aerial spirit leaves the eyes of a sick person and strikes the eyes of a healthy man attending him, especially when he is looking at the sick man in his death throes." Other theories, although widely accepted back then, nowadays may strike us as, quite frankly, bizarre. The medical faculty at the University of Paris gave credence to the "accidents of the soul" theory, that one could contract the plague merely "by imagination," or just by thinking about it. Gentile da Foligno, a highly respected Italian physician attached to the University of Perugia, was convinced that powdered emeralds taken internally was a surefire remedy, as the gem was known to crack the eyes of a toad. He also advised drinking liquid gold and wearing a gold ring set with an amethyst inscribed with the figure of a man holding a serpent. Yet at the same time, some medieval medical theories make perfect sense. The principle behind a theriac, that one can neutralize a poison by ingesting it in harmless quantities (hence snakeskin was a popular ingredient), is the same one that was used to develop the smallpox vaccine during the eighteenth century. Medieval doctors also believed

that a victim's breath was highly contagious, which is actually true in the case of pneumonic plague.

Contemporary descriptions of the symptoms experienced during the Black Death—which usually were written down by chroniclers rather than by physicians, who were more concerned with explaining the causes and cures of the disease—are quite full and enable one to make an accurate diagnosis. There was a long historiographical tradition for describing plague symptoms, going back to Thucydides' account of the "plague" (probably typhus fever) in Athens in 430–429 B.C. and Procopius' history of an outbreak of bubonic plague in the Mediterranean during the sixth century A.D. (It was Procopius who bequeathed the word "boubon" to describe this form of the disease.) Fourteenth-century chroniclers of the Black Death seemed to realize that here was a unique historical event, which they must record for posterity so that, in the words of John Clynn of Ireland, "by chance a man, or anyone descended from Adam, should remain behind in the future who can escape this pestilence and continue the work I have begun." (Clynn himself died of the plague in 1349.) Their accounts are descriptive enough that we can be fairly confident they were made from first-hand, or at least contemporary, information.

Taken together, these descriptions, despite occasional eccentricities, are remarkably similar in their diagnoses of plague. Nearly all chroniclers, for example, mention the buboes or swellings that appear in bubonic plague. Although many symptoms are not unique to plague—lymphatic swelling and subcutaneous bleeding are also present in typhus, and violent fever heralds anthrax—plague is the best fit when these symptoms occur in conjunction with each other. Sometimes the diagnosis is unmistakable. Michele da Piazza, a Sicilian chronicler, records the progressive stages that modern doctors have observed in bubonic plague, starting with small swellings or pustules at the site of infection that Piazza describes as "the size of a lentil" (a description also used by Procopius) and progressing to larger buboes the size of a nut or egg. Louis Sanctus, writing from Avignon, mentions that the pope's surgeons performed autopsies that revealed the presence of pneumonic plague in the victims' lungs, and several other chroniclers, including Piazza, likewise distinguish between the bubonic and pneumonic forms. A few authors, Sanctus among them, even bear witness to the rare variety of plague—septicemic—that they noted killed victims very suddenly, causing them to fall down dead in the street or never waken from their slumbers. It is most unlikely that any other disease but plague would take on these three forms, as they are described in the chronicles.

Nevertheless, some modern scholars persist in doubting whether people in 1348 suffered and died from plague. The skeptics usually are scientists—bacteriologists or zoologists—with little to no historical training, but

occasionally they are joined by historians, who really should know better than to be taken in by their theories. Typically, they use the latest scientific knowledge as an excuse to shortcut slogging through the medieval sources in order to cut right to the chase of their biological objections. These center on the claim that bubonic plague must be preceded by a large mortality among rats, where plague bacilli incubate, but which is not thought to be noted by any medieval source. (In actuality, several contemporary chroniclers, including Giovanni Villani, Fritsche Closener and Nicephorus Gregoras, do associate the advent of the Black Death with rats.) This is accompanied by an almost obsessive concern with biological factors, such as the migrating habits of the black rat, the density of the creatures per household necessary to sustain an "epizootic," or epidemic level of the disease, and the density of fleas per rat. The biological experts seem to forget that plenty of other animals who lived in close proximity to humans carry fleas, and that fleas do not need animal carriers to migrate but can hitch a ride in traveling merchandise, such as furs, wool packs, and straw, and live for long periods without a host on grain. If bubonic plague is not virulent enough, then pneumonic plague certainly will do, and the fact that Marseilles in southern France and several dioceses in the south of England experienced their highest mortalities during the winter and spring months indicates that pneumonic plague can travel ahead of or independently from the bubonic variety. Furthermore, the cold, wet summers and warm winters reported for 1348 may have made it possible for the two forms to invade each other's seasonal cycles. It is the height of arrogance to assume that we moderns, at six and a half centuries' remove from the event, are in a better position to diagnose the disease than our medieval ancestors, who actually lived through it. Although biological experts have undoubtedly done a service by making modern medical knowledge about the plague more accessible, it may be just as anachronistic to apply that knowledge to the Middle Ages as it is Marxist theory. The historian Sam Cohn argues on the basis of a combination of medieval and modern evidence that the Black Death differed substantially in terms of transmission, symptoms, virulence, immunity, and demographic patterns from its modern counterpart. But even granting Cohn's argument, which can be challenged on grounds too numerous to mention here, still does not dethrone plague from its place as the most likely candidate to fit the diagnoses of most chroniclers and doctors who witnessed the Black Death. (Significantly, Cohn offers no alternative disease to replace plague.) Modern tests done on bacterial DNA extracted from related strains to *Yersinia pestis* suggest that it can mutate over time and thus drastically alter plague's epidemiological behavior. Recently, forensic techniques have been successful in extracting *Yersinia* DNA from the dental pulp of fourteenth- and sixteenth-century

plague victims. As future laboratory work may show, the plague of our ancestors may not have been the same one we know today.

Nonetheless, one alternative disease to plague has gained alarming currency in the popular consciousness of late: anthrax. Championing this alternative is currently trendy because of the recent bioterrorism using anthrax powder. Norman Cantor, the author of a popular new book on the Black Death, makes ambitious claims that anthrax must be accorded at least equal responsibility to plague for the rampant mortality of 1348. Cantor is a medieval historian, but the main sources of his medical analysis seem to be modern scientific reports. Citing the “smoking gun” of anthrax spores recovered from an archeological excavation of a medieval plague graveyard, as well as fourteenth-century evidence of cattle murrains (epidemics that targeted farm animals), he theorizes that the “rapid dissemination” of the disease was due to the eating of anthrax-tainted meat.

There are some powerful historical objections to the anthrax theory, however, that should once and for all drive a stake through the heart of this monstrosity. First of all, surviving manorial records testify to ample supplies of meat and grain during the Black Death, and several chroniclers record that there were so many animals per capita that they wandered aimlessly through the fields. There was no reason anyone should have had to eat tainted meat during the plague. Second, some cities, attempting to forestall the disease, did take elaborate precautions with regard to the handling of meat. Pistoia in Italy, for example, enacted no less than seven ordinances regulating how the city’s butchers could select, slaughter, and sell their produce. All animals before they were slaughtered had to be checked by a city official to make sure they were healthy. Yet this did not save Pistoia: By 1415, the city had lost 65 percent of its population since the advent of plague in 1348. Finally, there *was* a time shortly before the Black Death when conditions were ripe for a rapid outbreak of anthrax: the Great Famine that struck northern Europe between 1315 and 1322. Widespread murrains, or animal diseases, occurred, and chroniclers in both England and Holland report that poor people were reduced to eating dead and raw “carcasses of cattle like dogs.” Even so, mortality during the famine averaged only around 10 percent, according to a variety of urban and manorial records. Assuming that all these deaths were due to anthrax and not to starvation or some other disease, this is hardly in keeping with the astronomical mortality of 50 percent recorded during the Black Death.

In the end, the quest to know the exact nature of the disease that struck in 1348 may be irrelevant. It is clear from the surviving evidence that, whatever it was, the epidemic killed an awful lot of people. The removal of so many in such a short space of time—which our modern, germ-slaying society still makes possible through the cataclysmic technology of war—was

bound to have a myriad of attendant effects. Because films about the Black Death tend to focus on the social and psychological, as well as religious and artistic, fallout of the plague, the economic consequences are only mentioned briefly here. A severe shortage of peasant labor ensued in the wake of the Black Death. Some lords seem to have accommodated to the new situation, but by and large, the response of the upper classes was a collective denial of economic realities. Throughout Europe—in England, France, Italy, and the Spanish kingdoms of Castile and Aragon—legislation was enacted by royal councils and representative assemblies that tried to turn the clock back on the Black Death. Peasant freedom of movement was to be strictly curtailed, vagabonds put to work, and wages fixed to the low level they had been before the plague. Thus, it should not be assumed that postplague serfs automatically benefitted from the laws of supply and demand in a free-market economy. Instead, the medieval manorial and guild system was a highly regulated one. Evidence of enforcement of these laws, which survives in the ample legal records of England, suggests that there was widespread evasion but also strenuous efforts to make them stick. This seems to have led to rising tensions in society, which flared up in peasant revolts, such as occurred in France in 1358 and in England in 1381. By the end of the Middle Ages, direct exploitation of peasant labor had given way in most parts of Europe to a land of rent-paying free tenants.

In social terms, many chroniclers of the Black Death complained that during and after the plague, the normative customs of society broke down. Priests and doctors refused to visit the sick, laws and dress codes were disregarded, and, what shocked contemporaries the most, even family ties were set aside. The great Florentine author, Giovanni Boccaccio, noted that “this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.” A refrain along similar lines occurs in chronicle after chronicle. Gabriele de Mussis seems to capture the authentic anguish of family members on their deathbeds when he has them cry out: “Mother, where have you gone? Why are you now so cruel to me when only yesterday you were so kind?” or “My children, whom I brought up with toil and sweat, why have you run away?” The fear of dying, alone and forgotten, which comes through very strongly in these accounts, seems a reliable bellwether of the plague’s severe social impact on medieval Europe.

Yet it is hard to know how accurate other lamentations of social failings are, since many of these are a standard feature of the earlier plague accounts by Thucydides and Procopius, and one can find medieval authors

making the same complaints even before the Black Death. An innovative argument was advanced by the American sociologist, James Westfall Thompson, in 1921, which was that the social response of the shell-shocked survivors of World War I could provide an analogue for what happened in 1348. The comparison falters, though, when one realizes that the nihilism of the "Lost Generation" was altogether different from the certainties of the "Age of Faith." A modern secular outlook that could contemplate the notion that "God is dead" never would have occurred to the medieval mind. None of the authors writing in the midst of the Black Death doubted for a moment that their terrible ordeal served a higher purpose, even if they could not fathom what that was.

Psychological reactions to the Black Death were famously recorded by Boccaccio, who just prior to the plague had written what is considered to be the first psychological novel, the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (*Elegy for Lady Fiammetta*). In the introduction to his most famous work, *The Decameron*, he notes three psychic responses to the disease: isolation, denial, and moderation. Boccaccio, who was writing in 1350 when the plague's impact would have been still fresh in his mind, was astute enough to recognize some basic instinctual strategies for coping with fatal infection that hold true for any generation. We see these same responses, for example, in modern Western society's sexual behavior in the immediate aftermath of the AIDS crisis during the mid-1980s.

But a couple of psychological reactions were unique to the Middle Ages. One of these was the Flagellant Movement that swept Austria, Germany, and Flanders in 1348 and 1349. Named after the *flagella*, or whips, they used to scourge their bare bodies, the Flagellants and their spectators hoped that their extreme penance would appease an angry God who was using the plague as a great scourge on a sinful mankind. By the autumn of 1349, the movement had grown to alarming proportions and was condemned by the pope, but even the Flagellants' detractors testify to the emotional power that their performances held. A hostile German chronicler, Henry of Herford, nonetheless claims that when the Flagellants came to town, "One would need a heart of stone to be able to watch this without tears." The emotional fervor they whipped up seems to have mirrored their physical excesses. Herford observes that they would get so carried away that: "the scourged skin swelled up black and blue and blood flowed down to their lower members and even spattered the walls nearby. I have seen, when they whipped themselves, how the iron points [of their whips] became so embedded in the flesh that sometimes one pull, sometimes two, was not enough to extract them."

Another instrument of psychic release for medieval sufferers of the Black Death was a favorite scapegoat: the Jews. Between September

1348 and February 1351, as many as 100 towns and cities in Germany and Switzerland massacred their Jewish populations. The total death toll may have been as high as 16,000. In one city alone, Strasbourg, 2,000 Jews were burnt alive all at once in the town square on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1349. Invariably, Jews were tortured into falsely confessing that they had poisoned drinking wells used by Christians—one of these the now famous source of bottled water, Évian-lès-Bains. Medieval pogroms against the Jews had their own religious and economic logic. Jews were denounced as Christian-hating “Christ killers” and grasping moneylenders; but doctors also lent a hand to this effort, because they gave credence to “artificial” causes of the plague, such as poisoning of the air or water, which conferred a comforting sense of human control over the disease. Most disturbing about the pogroms is the way in which they anticipate the twentieth-century Holocaust. Evidence exists that even in the Middle Ages, there was both the desire and the means to eliminate every Jew alive. Mass exterminations were devised, such as the specially constructed wooden houses that were used to cremate hundreds of victims at Constance and Basel. The German chroniclers, Heinrich Dapifer von Diessenhoven and Herman Gigas, both gave vent to a popular will to annihilate the Jews, and transcripts of the first confessions to well poisoning extracted from Jews at Chillon and Châtel in Switzerland in September and October 1348 were circulated to other Swiss and German towns as trumped-up proof of an international Jewish conspiracy. During their confession and execution, several Jews at Chillon were forced to implicate their entire race by saying “that all Jews from the age of seven on could not acquit themselves of this charge [of poisoning], since they all alike knew and were guilty of the said matter.” Yet the confessions that were dragged out of them by torture are contradictory and, quite simply, unbelievable.

The medieval psychological response to the Black Death was, of course, bound up with religious attitudes. In the case of the Jewish pogroms, medieval Christianity had its ugly side. Indeed, one scholar of medieval anti-Semitism, Gavin Langmuir, argues that even though “blood libels” against the Jews, such as well poisoning, contained irrational accusations of crimes no one had seen any Jew commit, they were, nonetheless, a product of Christians’ quite rational doubts about their religion. Jews, for example, denied fundamental Christian tenets such as the Trinity, which had to be taken on faith. Perhaps Christian doubts were exacerbated by the climate of uncertainty in the wake of the Black Death. On the whole, however, medieval religious belief proved remarkably resilient in the face of the plague and was a key factor in Europeans’ psychological and cultural recovery from the disease.

A popular argument to make is that the Black Death ushered in a more secular outlook that anticipated the Renaissance and a widespread criticism and disillusionment with the Church that foreshadowed the Reformation. In general, so the argument goes, medieval culture was on the wane, or in decline, during the century and a half after the Black Death, and a vibrant, modern society was poised to take its place. These days, the “waning of the Middle Ages” thesis, named after the popular book by the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, carries very little weight. Huizinga, who first published his book in 1919, largely interpreted the later Middle Ages from the vantage point of the deep disillusionment that set into European society in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Like Thompson’s analysis, his work is more valuable as a reflection of the pessimistic outlook of the “Lost Generation,” rather than as an historical reconstruction of the resilient medieval attitudes that weathered the Black Death.

It is true that there was plenty of contemporary complaint about “leapfrogging” priests who abandoned their parishes for more lucrative posts opened up by the plague mortality, but those who complained the loudest were themselves clerical reformers. Some parishes were simply too destitute of churchgoers after the plague to support a full-time rector, while the high death rate among the priesthood during the Black Death is in itself a testimony to their dedication and courage during the crisis. So many priests could not have died if they were not ministering to their flocks. As for their parishioners, there is also ample complaint, again largely coming from clerical authors, that religious fervor had fallen off in the aftermath of the disease. Some bishops bemoaned lack of attendance at church and lack of respect for holy ceremonies and precincts when parishioners did attend. But the evidence of wills, when ordinary people, more so than at any other time of their lives, reveal their religious attitudes, show that medieval faith remained strong and conventionally pious. Testaments survive in good number from the late Middle Ages in the archives of several cities throughout England and Italy. Overwhelmingly, those approaching their end still wanted to be buried in or around the parish church and have priests say masses for their souls and for the souls of their kin. Commemoration and perpetual remembrance of the dead also comforted the living by reassuring them of a degree of immortality even after death.

It is indeed possible that late medieval Europe saw a religious revival, not a decline. Mysticism, defined as a supernatural experience of the Godhead in this life, underwent a renaissance during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Movements such as the *Devotio Moderna* in Germany and the Brethren of the Common Life in Flanders were comple-

mented by powerful individual figures, many of them women, such as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Birgitta of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich. Perhaps mystics helped their society cope with plague by holding out the hope that the Author of this calamity was not so inscrutable and wrathful after all. The English anchoress (meaning someone who lives in isolation in a private cell), Julian of Norwich, lived through no less than eight outbreaks of plague between the 1340s and the second or third decade of the fifteenth century. In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, she develops an unique vision of a maternal, nurturing God that undoubtedly was part of the solace she gave visitors who came to her cell for spiritual advice. A woman who almost willed herself into a near-death illness as part of her mystical journey, Julian seems to have plague in mind when she writes: "people suffer such terrible evils that it does not seem as though any good will ever come of them." Yet no matter how much we suffer, Julian reminds us, there is always the love of God, who holds out the promise of redemption whereby "terrible evils" will be justified. In place of the angry, vengeful God whom most chroniclers depicted as sending down the pestilence as retribution for human wickedness, Julian substitutes a merciful, forgiving deity who is "never angry and never will be angry, for He is God's goodness, life, truth, love, peace." Julian's optimistic faith that "all shall be well" even in a world poised at the brink of oblivion may be the best clue we have as to how Western civilization survived the painful ordeal of the Black Death.

Perhaps the most eloquent expression of late medieval Europe's religious and cultural renewal is to be found in its art. As this relates to the Black Death, an obvious starting point is the varied representation of the corpse or cadaver, an art form sometimes collectively known as the *memento mori*, or remembrance of death, theme. Medieval death imagery can be horribly gruesome, displaying such details of decay as the worms that crawl through the flesh rotting off the bones. (Worms were also believed to herald plague, either falling in a "pestilential rain" from the sky or appearing spontaneously out of diseased corpses.) Many have accused the late Middle Ages of having a morbid obsession or fascination with death. *Memento mori* art, for example, is the centerpiece of Huizinga's "waning" thesis, in which he argues that "the abused imagery of skeletons and worms" drained all art of humanity and "living emotion" as the death figures began to conform to a rigid stereotype. His argument was taken one step further in 1951 by the art historian, Millard Meiss. He contends that even Italian art, which unlike that of northern Europe generally eschewed *memento mori* images, moved away from humanistic values in the aftermath of the Black Death, just when it was supposedly entering the dynamic, early phase of the Renaissance. But if one looks closely at cadaver images

on their own terms, without our modern aversion to death, one can find a hopeful, even uplifting message amidst all the skeletons and worms.

Artistic depictions of death began well before 1348. Around 1280, a group of English manuscript illuminators portrayed the Fourth Rider of the Apocalypse as a shrouded skeleton or cadaver in order to make his entry within the Book of Revelation more dramatic. The image was to go on to have a most vivid and even terrifying representation, which seems a reflection of the apocalyptic scenarios fashionable among chroniclers of the Black Death, for whom the incredible mortality was convincing proof that the end was nigh. In passages reminiscent of the Revelation, Louis Sanctus, Gabriele de Mussis, Heinrich of Herford, and an anonymous Austrian chronicler all attribute the origins of the plague to exotic regions in the East where it supposedly had rained frogs, toads, snakes, lizards, scorpions, worms, as well as large hailstones, blood, and burning fire. Plenty of other apocalyptic signs were reported, such as earthquakes, comets or "bright stars," a black dog "carrying a naked sword in its paw," and a Siamese twin. Some claimed that the Antichrist was abroad at this time, or that his reign was heralded by the Flagellants, the "race without a head" (since they had no leader) predicted by the popular Cedar of Lebanon prophecy. Others saw signs of a new age in the fact that post-plague children had fewer teeth than before.

Yet at the same time that the Fourth Rider of the Apocalypse was holding sway in medieval art, a very different depiction of the corpse was emerging by the end of the thirteenth century. Here, the awesome power of death is mitigated to some degree by allowing the living to engage in a dialogue with the dead. Appropriately titled, the *Three Living and the Three Dead*, the legend describes how three walking corpses, who were kings in former days, warn their living counterparts to prepare for the fate they see before them. A version of the legend in which the dead lie mute in their tombs is famously rendered in the *Triumph of Death* fresco in the Camposanto of Pisa, attributed to Francesco Traini. Dated to around the time of the Black Death (the fresco may in fact predate the plague), Traini's masterpiece succeeds in making the legend, painted on the left side of the mural, proceed as a natural corollary to an apocalyptic figure of Death on the right.

Without a doubt, the image most readily associated with the Black Death is the *Dance of Death*. It may have been inspired by a nervous disorder symptomatic of bubonic plague called chorea, or St. Vitus' Dance, in which the sufferer's uncontrollable physical movements appear to be dancing. Chroniclers in France and Germany also report that people danced to try to ward off or cure themselves of the disease. The Dance was later acted out for didactic purposes, for its message that everyone, from pope

and emperor on down to the hermit and the poor, must “dance” with Death would have hit home in time of plague. A mural on the theme was first painted in the 1420s along one side of the cloister of the cemetery of Les Innocents in Paris (which no longer survives). In subsequent centuries, the Dance of Death continued to be a popular artistic subject. Not long after the Middle Ages, Shakespeare worked it into his play, *Measure for Measure*, while in the nineteenth century, Camille Saint-Saëns expressed it musically in his tone poem, *La Danse Macabre*. Most recently, Ingmar Bergman imagined it cinematically in the finale to his film, *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

The Dance of Death may have Death interacting with social types, but what could have possessed individual patrons to masquerade as dead—in the form of a gruesome cadaver or corpse—on their tombs? One of the earliest such monuments is that of François de la Sarra of Switzerland, who memorialized himself around 1390 as a dead man being devoured by frogs and worms. In 1424–1425, Archbishop Henry Chichele in England commissioned the first “double-decker” tomb that contrasts a resplendent effigy of himself on the upper level of the monument with a horribly emaciated, naked representation below. These *transi* images (from the Latin word *transire*, meaning to “pass away”) were evidently quite fashionable among northern Europe’s upper classes, as hundreds of them survive from the late fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. They seem to be excellent illustrations of the late medieval obsession with death, but what are the tombs actually saying? Worms appear to wriggle into the arms and legs of François de la Sarra, for example, as a symbol of death and decay. But could not the worms also be wriggling *out* of the body, as it is being remade at the Resurrection? This idea is strengthened when one remembers that worms are associated with the Resurrection in the Book of Job: “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:27). Chichele’s tomb presents even more of a conundrum, since he was not to die until 1443, and thus for nearly 20 years he could contemplate a portrait of his own dead self. Yet instead of drawing his eyes downward toward his corpse, the tomb may have directed his gaze upward to his upper effigy—not as an image of himself in life, but in the afterlife, as is indicated by the angels who hold the pillow cradling his head. His cadaver image, which is so realistic that some observers even today wonder aloud whether it is not the real thing, then becomes a transitional figure in which the terror of death gives way to the triumph over death at the Resurrection.

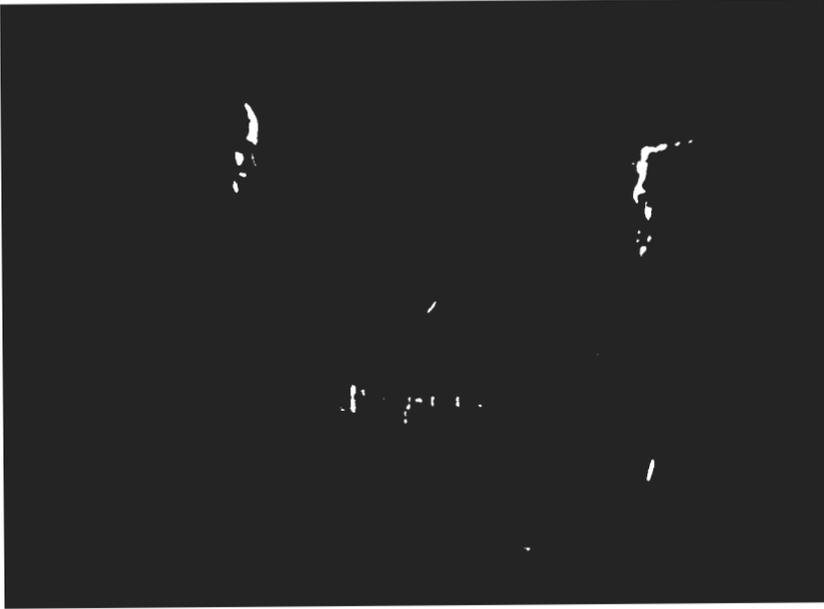
That this is indeed how Chichele would have “read” his tomb is demonstrated by a contemporary English poem entitled, *A Disputacioun Betwix the Body and Wormes*. The opening lines of the poem tell of a pilgrim wandering into a church to escape the plague and falling asleep beside the tomb of a great lady. In a marginal illustration of the manuscript, the tomb

is pictured in Chichele's "double-decker" style, with a cadaver riddled with worms and other assorted creatures lying in its shroud underneath the effigy. The pilgrim-poet proceeds to dream of a surreal dialogue taking place between the lady's corpse and the worms that devour it. Although the worms are deaf to the body's pleas for a halt to the process of decay, by the end of the poem, the body and worms literally kiss and make up because the lady has realized that the deplorable corruption of her body doesn't matter in the end: For at "the day of dome," her body "sal agayn upryse" in all its original "glorified" beauty. Medieval men like Chichele could calmly contemplate their future deaths and face it squarely—even imagine themselves as dead—because they firmly believed that death was not the end, but merely a beginning. When the last trumpet sounds at the end of the world, even bodies ruptured by plague boils will be reborn, whole and sound, once more.

The Movies

The Seventh Seal (1957), directed by Ingmar Bergman, is not only considered the best film about the Black Death, it is also one of the most admired films about the Middle Ages and, quite possibly, the greatest movie of all time. Certainly, it is the film most written about: Well over seventy reviews, articles, essays, and books have made it their subject. To pardon a pun, it is perhaps a film that has been analyzed to death. But *The Seventh Seal* is not appreciated in academic circles only; it has succeeded in penetrating our popular culture as well. One Bergman filmographer, Hubert Cohen, has quipped that Bengt Ekerot's personification of Death in the film is so convincing that "at times we even may half-imagine that a black-cloaked figure wearing a stocking-tight, black cowl around his chalk-white face is going to attend our own expiring, and that he will be speaking Swedish—with English subtitles across his waist." (One wonders how the actor himself, who died in 1971, conceived his own reckoning—or did he pay a special penalty for imitating Death?) This conceit has actually been realized in the self-referential Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle, *Last Action Hero* (1993). The main character, Jack Slater, in addition to confronting Arnold playing himself as his real-life actor persona, also comes face to face with Ekerot's death figure, who, courtesy of a magical movie ticket, glides out of the screen on which *The Seventh Seal* is playing to fully emerge from cinematic black and white to living color. In this case, however, the "real Death" supposedly speaks with a British accent and wields a scythe (a prop that only appears at the end of the film during the Dance of Death).

At the same time, even a film so well regarded as this one, that has insinuated itself into our popular consciousness about death and plague, is



During the plague, the knight, Antonius Block (Max von Sydow), plays a game of chess with Death (Bengt Ekerot) in *The Seventh Seal*. The scene was inspired by a medieval wall painting that Ingmar Bergman had seen on one of his father's preaching missions in Sweden.

by no means a perfect historical reconstruction of the Black Death. Aside from the appropriateness of its cinematic techniques, which is also the subject of some debate, the film only partially succeeds in conveying the period atmosphere and thought world of the fourteenth century. Bergman would probably counter that it was never his intention to make an historical or period film. As he wrote in a program note that accompanied the movie's premiere: "It is a modern poem, presented with medieval material that has been very freely handled." The script in particular—which is sometimes labored, an effect that apparently is even more noticeable in the original Swedish—embodies a mid-twentieth century existentialist angst that is entirely out of place in the Middle Ages. Still, to be fair to Bergman, one must allow him his artistic license, and the script's modernisms may be justified as giving the movie's medieval theme a compelling and urgent contemporary relevance that has not diminished with time. Yet the film succeeds to a large degree because it is set in the Middle Ages, a time that can seem both very remote and very immediate to us living in the modern

world. While the dialogue has afforded critics a rich diet for analysis, the images on the screen are equally famous for bringing to life the medieval wall paintings that inspired Bergman to make his film, and which play their own role in the action. Ultimately, *The Seventh Seal* should be judged as an historical film by how well it balances the medieval and the modern — as perhaps a cinematic lesson in the connections to be made between the cultural attitudes and preoccupations of the two eras.

The plot of the film has been described as being simple and straightforward, like a medieval morality play. A knight, Antonius Block (played by Max von Sydow), and his squire, Jöns (played by Gunnar Björnstrand), return home to Sweden after ten years on crusade. On the desolate seashore the knight encounters Death, but he persuades him to stay his hand as long as they play a game of chess, with the prize being the knight's life. The knight uses his reprieve to try to penetrate the ultimate secret of what lies beyond death and to perform "one meaningful deed" that can redeem his futile life. On his journey home, he and his squire encounter various signs of a country wracked by the Black Death, including rotting corpses, deserted homesteads, the Flagellants, a witch being burned as a scapegoat for the plague, and the gruesome, horrifying spectacle of a man dying from the disease. When the knight and his squire finally come home to his castle, from which all have fled during the plague except for his wife, he faces his final reckoning with Death in an apocalyptic denouement, where all succumb to the disease, including the knight, his wife and squire, and his guests — a blacksmith and his wife and a peasant girl whom the squire had rescued along the way. Only a holy trinity of an acting troupe family — Jof, Mia, and their son, Mikael (Joseph, Mary, and Michael) — survive the Apocalypse, minus their colleague, Skat, who in the meantime has also fallen victim to Death. The film ends with a reenactment of a medieval Dance of Death along the horizon of a "dark, stormy sky," as the survivors walk away into the brightening dawn of a new day.

Before the action begins, a brief title card sets the stage of this historical time period: "It is the middle of the 14th century. Antonius Block and his squire, after long years as crusaders in the Holy Land, have at last returned to their native Sweden, a land ravaged by the Black Plague." More precisely, this would date the action to 1350, the year that the Black Death arrived in Sweden, probably from the neighboring country of Norway, where the disease had taken hold in 1348 and again in 1349 as a result of trade contacts with England. Magnus Ericsson, king of Sweden and Norway, sent out a circular letter in the spring of 1350 in which he warned that:

Every Christian man and woman must sorely fear, for God, because of the sins of men, has sent a great plague upon the whole world, so that the

greater part of the people who live in the lands [England] lying to the west of our land, have died a swift death. And now this flying sickness is all over Norway and Holland and will soon be here, and it takes such a hold that before they are sick, people fall down and die without the sacraments, and wherever it comes, there are not so many people left that they can bury the dead.

Meanwhile, the Vadstena Diary confirms that a “great mortality” struck Sweden in 1350. It is not known exactly how many people in Sweden died from the disease. A later chronicle records, rather implausibly, that five-sixths of the population succumbed, but a record of payment of Peter’s pence after 1350 suggests a plague mortality of around 40 percent. In addition, land prices, as recorded in Östergötland in 1353, were halved “because the great mortality . . . had left many holdings desolate and tenants hardly could be found.”

As far as crusading goes, the most likely arena for the knight’s activities before the opening of the film was Russia, not Jerusalem or the Holy Land. Sweden had been fighting a long-running battle with the Russian republic of Novgorod on its eastern border, as the thirteenth-century career of Alexander Nevsky, discussed in Chapter 3, testifies. Hostilities between the two sides broke out again in the second decade of the fourteenth century, and in 1348 King Magnus organized a crusade against Novgorod that culminated in the battle, and Swedish defeat, at Toads’ Field on July 23.

Historical quibbles aside, *The Seventh Seal* serves up some of the most convincing images that imagine the Middle Ages. From its opening frames, we are fully taken in by the illusion that we are back in the fourteenth century. The main reason for this is that, visually at least, Bergman completely surrenders his film to a late medieval artistic milieu. Nearly all of the most memorable scenes have their parallels in original art and literature. The first appearance of Death in the film, described as “one of the most dramatic entrances in cinema,” is straight out of the fifteenth-century morality play, *Everyman*, which originated in England or Flanders and, like the mystery play cycles, was performed as street theater by the trade guilds of major towns. Everyman, like Block in the film, obtains a brief reprieve from Death so that the play can go on. Bergman recalls his opening sequence as the most daring and accomplished in the whole movie:

It was a delicate and dangerous artistic move, which could have failed. Suddenly, an actor appears in whiteface, dressed all in black, and announces that he is Death. Everyone accepted the dramatic feat that he was Death, instead of saying, “Come on now, don’t try to put something over on us! You

can't fool us! We can see that you are just a talented actor who is painted white and clad in black! You're not Death at all!" But nobody protested. That made me feel triumphant and joyous.

In reality, the illusion is not so hard to understand. It plugs into a deep-seated psychological need in humans, especially developed in the Middle Ages, to converse with Death and thus humanize him in order to take some of the terror out of his coming. We can trace this theme in a variety of medieval garbs aside from *Everyman*, including the Three Living and the Three Dead, the Dance of Death, and *transi* tomb sculpture.

At first, Bergman effectively conveys the terror of Death through the use of extreme close-up and shot/reverse shot techniques. Death opens his cloak to receive both the knight and us, the audience, as he approaches the camera until his blackness fills our entire field of vision. Then, our next angle of vision on Death is from behind, as if he had walked right through us. Scholars of the film, such as Hubert Cohen and Egil Törnqvist, note that by this means, Bergman forces the audience to identify with Block's visceral fear of death. But then the knight's wits recover and the dialogue resumes, with Death betraying some personality, and even a sense of humor:

Block: Wait a moment.

Death: That's what they all say. I grant no reprieves.

Block: You play chess, don't you?

Death: How did you know that?

Block: I have seen it in paintings and heard it sung in ballads.

Death: Yes, in fact I'm quite a good chess player.

Block: But you can't be better than I am.

Death: Why do you want to play chess with me?

Block: I have my reasons.

Death: That is your privilege.

Block: The condition is that I may live as long as I hold out against you. If I win, you will release me. Is it agreed? [The knight holds out his two fists to Death, who smiles at him suddenly. Death points to one of the knight's hands; it contains a black pawn.] You drew black!

Death: Very appropriate. Don't you think so?

The exchange is almost a direct paraphrase of *Everyman*, and once again it taps into an age-old compulsion to personify Death. Bergman, no less than his medieval ancestors, felt an urgent need to make Death more approachable in order to reconcile himself to his own, personal death. As he writes in his autobiographical discussion of the film:

As far back as I can remember, I carried a grim fear of death, which during puberty and my early twenties accelerated into something unbearable. The fact that I, through dying, would no longer exist, that I would walk through the dark portal, that there was something that I could not control, arrange, or foresee, was for me a source of constant horror. That I plucked up my courage and depicted Death as a white clown, a figure who conversed, played chess, and had no secrets, was the first step in my struggle against my monumental fear of death.

One of his formative experiences as an adolescent came when he happened to be trapped inside a mortuary. At first terrified by being alone with a half-dozen corpses, the ten-year-old Bergman gradually became sexually aroused by the naked, still firm body of a dead young girl.

There are plenty of other images in the film that seem lifted straight out of the Middle Ages and thereby lend an impressive historical authenticity. Block's chess game with Death—which forms the unifying conceit of the film, Jof's vision of the Virgin Mary teaching the Christ child how to walk, Death sawing down the tree that shelters Skat, and Jof's final vision of his former companions dancing with Death, all were inspired by medieval wall paintings that Bergman had seen in his youth when he had accompanied his father, a Lutheran pastor and court chaplain to the king of Sweden, on his preaching tours to the country churches around Stockholm. As he writes in his program note to *The Seventh Seal*:

While Father preached away in the pulpit and the congregation prayed, sang or listened, I devoted my interest to the church's mysterious world of low arches, thick walls, the smell of eternity, the colored sunlight quivering above the strangest vegetation of medieval paintings and carved figures on ceiling and walls. There was everything that one's imagination could desire: angels, saints, dragons, prophets, devils, humans. There were very frightening animals: serpents in paradise, Balaam's ass, Jonah's whale, the eagle of the Revelation. All this was surrounded by a heavenly, earthly and subterranean landscape of a strange yet familiar beauty. In a wood sat Death, playing chess with the Crusader. Clutching the branch of a tree was a naked man with staring eyes, while down below stood Death, sawing away to his heart's content. Across gentle hills Death led the final dance towards the dark lands. But in the other arch the holy Virgin was walking in a rose-garden, supporting the Child's faltering steps, and her hands were those of a peasant woman. Her face was grave and birds' wings fluttered round her head. The medieval painters had portrayed all this with great tenderness, skill and joy. It moved me in a spontaneous and enticing way, and that world became as real to me as the everyday world with Father, Mother and brothers and sisters.

The Dance of Death motif is closely associated with the Black Death, since its message that all social classes must dance with Death would seem especially apropos during a time of plague, and since some people seemed to have tried to ward off or mask the disease by dancing. But the visual image does not actually belong to the time-setting of the film. The earliest painting of the Dance is the fresco that once adorned the southern cloister of the cemetery of Les Innocents in Paris, completed by 1424–1425. This is also true of the chess-playing Death, which occurs in conjunction with the Dance. A stained-glass window of Death checkmating a bishop on a chessboard survives as part of a Dance series at St. Andrew's Church in Norwich from the late fifteenth century and also occurs in John Lydgate's English poem, the *Dance of Death*, from the 1430s. Bergman's inspiration is medieval, but not quite so contemporary with the mid-fourteenth century plague as he would have us believe.

Even without the benefit of Bergman's program notes, it is made clear about a third of the way into the film that the moving images take their cue from medieval wall painting. At one point, Jöns enters a church and strikes up a conversation with the painter, Albertus Pictor (1445–1509), who is finishing a fresco on the subject of the Black Death. All of the painted images—the Flagellants, the screaming plague victim trying to rip out his boils, the Dance of Death—will subsequently be reenacted on the screen. Pictor explains, to an almost nauseating degree, each detail of his creation to Jöns and at the same time cues us in to the historical as well as artistic milieu of the film. It is even possible that the painter serves as a mouthpiece for Bergman's private concerns as a filmmaker, especially as to how movies such as *The Seventh Seal* will be received by his audience:

Jöns: Why do you paint such nonsense?

Pictor: I thought it would serve to remind people that they must die.

Jöns: Well, it's not going to make them feel any happier.

Pictor: Why should one always make people happy? It might not be a bad idea to scare them a little once in a while.

Jöns: Then they'll close their eyes and refuse to look at your painting.

Pictor: Oh, they'll look. A skull is almost more interesting than a naked woman.

Jöns: If you do scare them . . .

Pictor: They'll think.

Jöns: And if they think . . .

Pictor: They'll become still more scared.

Jöns: And then they'll run right into the arms of the priests.

Pictor: That's not my business.

Jöns: You're only painting your Dance of Death.

Pictor: I'm only painting things as they are. Everyone else can do as he likes.

Jöns: Just think how some people will curse you.

Pictor: Maybe. But then I'll paint something amusing for them to look at. I have to make a living—at least until the plague takes me.

Jöns quells his fear by drinking some of Pictor's brandy and painting a funny picture of himself, which could be considered an allegory of how Bergman himself uses humor in the film to counterbalance his terrifying images. As the director writes in his memoirs: "In a joyful scene with the painter of churches, Albertus Pictor, I present without any embarrassment my own artistic conviction. Albertus insists that he is in show business. To survive in this business, it's important to avoid making people too mad." A good example of Bergman's tension-releasing humor is Jöns' encounter with a "sleeping man" lying with his dog by the roadside. When the squire prods him for directions and eventually lifts his head, it is to gaze into a corpse face "with empty eye sockets and white teeth" (stage direction from screenplay). Jöns then tells his master that the man was mute, but "quite eloquent . . . the trouble is that what he had to say was most depressing." Bergman also had his private joke when he sent this bit player, a production assistant named Ove Svensson, to the studio's canteen just to watch people's reactions to the gruesome makeup.

Another joke at the expense of his own profession is when Bergman stages the death of the actor, Skat. After play acting at death with a "stage dagger" that has a retractable blade, Skat dies for real when Death saws down his tree, up which he has taken refuge from the creatures of the night. The scene may have been inspired by a wall painting, but the dialogue is reminiscent of the play, *Everyman*:

Death: I'm sawing down your tree because your time is up.

Skat: It won't do. I haven't got time.

Death: So you haven't got time.

Skat: No, I have my performance.

Death: Then it's been canceled because of death.

Skat: My contract.

Death: Your contract is terminated.

Skat: My children, my family.

Death: Shame on you, Skat!

Skat: Yes, I'm ashamed. Isn't there any way to get off? Aren't there any special rules for actors?

Death: No, not in this case.

Skat's ham acting may fool others, but not Death, who inexorably punctures the rarefied atmosphere in which movie stars and their flunkies live.

The fact that Bergman shot his film in black and white (as he did in his thirty other productions until 1963), gives *The Seventh Seal* a grainy texture and seems well suited to a medieval subject, particularly one about the Black Death. Perhaps this is because black and white conveys a sense of "otherness" and the more earthy, elemental tones associated with the Middle Ages. Students of the film have also noted that black and white brings out the stark contrasts between light and dark, and between life and death, that lie at the heart of the movie's identity. The fidelity of the film's period atmosphere is even more remarkable when one considers that it was shot in only 35 days on a shoestring budget—\$150,000 (not very much even in 1956). Aside from the costumes, the sets are highly evocative of a time and place appropriate to the fourteenth century: the church with its painted walls and affective carving of a Christ suffering on the cross; the deserted long houses and the village Embarrassment Inn, where domestic animals rub elbows with people; the knight's drafty, inhospitable "black boulder" of a castle. Much credit is due to the set designer, P.A. Lundgren, who accompanied Bergman to medieval sites, such as Härkeberga Church—scene of the famous murals by Albertus Pictor from the 1480s—in order to realize the director's vision. Even nature seemed to cooperate during the filming. There is the famous story, for example, of how Bergman improvised the film's indelible final image—the Dance of Death—to coincide with a dark storm cloud that suddenly appeared over the horizon on location at Hovs Haller, which necessitated the impressment of some passing tourists, since all the actors had gone home! Bergman also had a stroke of good fortune when filming the plague death agony of Raval in the forest glen, a scene that is almost unbearable to watch in all its naked, brutal realism. (Bergman himself says that the scene "used to fill me with fear and, at the same time, fascination.") Yet a wonderful sense of peace and benediction steals over the scene at the moment of Raval's demise, as a shaft of sunlight suddenly breaks through and bathes the body in its "pale" light. Bergman captured the effect at the end of the take when he "let the camera keep rolling, for some reason."

Above all, *The Seventh Seal* empathizes magnificently with the apocalyptic fantasies and anticipations that hung over Europe during the Black Death. The film is framed by a reading from the Book of Revelation at both the beginning and end of the knight's tale. At the start of the film, a

voiceover, presumably Death's, reads from chapter 8, verse 1, as we look out over a desolate, rugged sea coast: "And when the Lamb had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour." The visuals and the dialogue seem to be in perfect harmony at this point, and together they create, in the words of Peter Cowie, "a mythic country of death". (In reality the location was Hovs Haller, on the southwest coast of Sweden.) Just prior to the reading, a sea eagle is shown hovering in a stormy sky as the soundtrack of a *Dies irae* plays to a *Carmina Burana*-like crescendo. This suggests, without need for any words, Revelation 8:13: "Then I looked, and I heard an eagle calling with a loud cry as it flew in mid-heaven: 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth when the trumpets sound which the three last angels must now blow!'" The stage is now set for Death's dramatic entrance. Critics of the film have usually interpreted the entire rest of the movie as taking place within that half hour of silence, although in real time, the action seems to extend from morning to evening of one day (roughly twelve hours).

The closing sequence, in which Block's wife, Karin, reads from the Book of Revelation at the "last supper" of the knight and his companions in the great hall of his empty, echoing castle, hits another artistic high point that can only be described as "film poetry." A tense, hushed air of anticipation hangs over the scene, as the wife picks up the reading from where Death left off at the beginning of the film and intones from chapter 8, verses 7–11:

The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth; and the third part of the trees was burnt up and all the green grass was burnt up. And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and a third part of the sea became blood. . . . And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a torch, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood. . . .

At this point, Death himself enters the hall, and the guests assemble to dance away with him "toward the dark lands."

In a world where half the population was dying from the plague, it would have been only natural to assume that the Apocalypse was at hand. Agnolo di Tura of Siena, who buried his five children with his own hands in 1348, wrote that "so many have died that everyone believes it is the end of the world." Many chroniclers describe the advent of the Black Death in words borrowed from the Book of Revelation. Gabriele de Mussis, for example, characterizes the origin of the plague as "the angel hurling vials

of poison into the sea," which evokes Revelation 16, where seven angels pour out seven bowls of God's wrath upon the earth. Revelation 8:7–11, as quoted at the end of the film, is powerfully echoed in Louis Sanctus' account of how the plague arrived in India in 1347:

On the first day it rained frogs, serpents, lizards, scorpions, and many venomous beasts of that sort. On the second day thunder was heard, and lightning flashes mixed with hailstones of marvelous size fell upon the land, which killed almost all men, from the greatest to the least. On the third day there fell fire together with stinking smoke from the heavens, which consumed all the rest of men and beasts, and burned up all the cities and castles of those parts.

A rain of apocalyptic signs heralding plague occurs in many medieval accounts of the Black Death of 1348. Similarly, *The Seventh Seal* is replete with "evil omens": Jöns tells his lord of rumors concerning cannibalistic horses and four suns in the sky, and later the villagers at the Embarrassment Inn gossip of monstrosities pouring out of an old woman and another giving birth to a calf's head. The "four suns" is analogous to the "big and very bright star" that Jean de Venette claims to have seen in the western horizon of Paris in August 1348, while a monstrous birth actually was reported by Thomas Burton, abbot of Meux Abbey in Yorkshire, who writes that "shortly before this time [1348], there was a certain human monster in England, divided from the navel upwards and both masculine and feminine, and joined in the lower part." (The "monster" was probably a Siamese twin.) That people could believe in such superstitions may seem farfetched to our modern sensibilities, but Bergman has tapped into a quite authentic medieval outlook here.

Although he "paints" a nearly flawless picture of the late Middle Ages using stunning visual imagery, Bergman seems to mar his film's beauty by having some of his characters—particularly Antonius Block and Jöns—speak what is, in the opinion of many, very awkward, convoluted, and modern-sounding dialogue. Both the knight and his squire serve as mouthpieces throughout the movie for a nihilistic angst and doubt concerning the existence of God, sentiments that owe much to the famous French apostles of existentialism during the 1950s, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. As defined by Charles Ketcham, who interprets several of Bergman's films in light of this philosophy, existentialism is "a radical method of acknowledging life in terms of one's existence rather than one's essence, one's individuality rather than one's commonality, one's choices rather than one's conformity." In other words, existentialism turns away from beliefs that unify man—religion, existence of a soul, morality, and the like—to instead

embrace the heroism of the individual, whose life acquires meaning only in terms of the actions he performs during the brief time allotted to him in the here and now. In a nod to stoicism, existentialism also believes that free will does not really exist for man, but that each person will simply act out what already has been decreed by one's moral and psychological makeup. Therefore, existentialism rejects almost all of what the Middle Ages holds most dear, and consequently, it sounds very odd coming out of the mouths of medieval characters.

Why, then, did Bergman choose an existentialist theme for a film set in premodern times? One good reason for the anachronism is that it adds greatly to the continued relevance of *The Seventh Seal*, despite its historical setting. In the 1950s, the world had fully entered the atomic age. By 1952 and 1953, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union had each tested a hydrogen bomb, which had a destructive capacity up to 1,000 times that of the uranium and plutonium bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. With the rapid buildup and deployment of nuclear arsenals, the atomic arms race was demonstrated to be dramatically different from previous military conflicts. This one had the apocalyptic potential to destroy all life and to engulf the entire world. Bergman makes the comparison between the destructive capacity of the Black Death and atomic weapons quite explicit in his program note to *The Seventh Seal*:

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.

It has been noted by the film's admirers that recent events have by no means diminished the urgency that *The Seventh Seal's* cataclysmic message holds for our times. Although the threat of atomic annihilation may have abated with the end of the Cold War, this has been replaced by plenty of other candidates for the role of inaugurating agent of the Apocalypse: incurable diseases like AIDS, Ebola, SARS, and Mad Cow's Disease; the ecological catastrophe of global warming; and now, the threat of global terrorism.

Some historians, such as Barbara Tuchman in *The Distant Mirror*, have taken a cue from Bergman and tried to push the comparison between the Black Death and nuclear holocaust as a way for modern readers to creatively reimagine what life must have been like for our fourteenth-century forebears. Lately, Norman Cantor has peddled this approach in his book, *In the Wake of the Plague*:

The pestilence deeply affected individual and family behavior and consciousness. It put severe strains on the social, political, and economic systems. It threatened the stability and viability of civilization. It was as if a neutron bomb had been detonated. Nothing like this has happened before or since in the recorded history of mankind, and the men and women of the fourteenth century would never be the same.

Cantor uses the neutron bomb analogy presumably because this weapon destroys people but not buildings, as the plague had done. But a neutron bomb does not worm its way into the social and familial fabric of society, which Cantor claims is so distinctive about the Black Death. A bomb represents a threat from without, whereas plague wreaks its havoc from within. What was so frightening about the Black Death was that even medieval people believed, as we now know, that they could contract the disease from absolutely anyone, even their closest friends and family. Death was all around them: There was no escape. Another important difference between the Black Death and the Atomic Age is that, while both engender an apocalyptic scenario, the modern Apocalypse is tinged with nihilism, in which the senseless destruction acquires a far greater sense of terror because, in an existentialist world, it is perceived to be so meaningless. This is an unbridgeable gap between medieval and modern sensibilities.

The Seventh Seal flaunts its existentialist anachronisms in three, almost equidistant places at the beginning, middle, and end of the movie. First comes the famous confessional scene between Antonius Block and Death:

Block: Through my indifference to my fellow men, I have isolated myself from their company. Now I live in a world of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my dreams and fantasies.

Death: And yet you don't want to die?

Block: Yes, I do.

Death: What are you waiting for?

Block: I want knowledge.

Death: You want guarantees?

Block: Call it whatever you like. Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles? [Death doesn't answer.] How can we have faith in those who believe when we can't have faith in ourselves? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? And what is to become of those who neither want to nor are capable of believing? [The knight stops and waits for a reply, but no one speaks or answers him. There is complete silence.] Why

can't I kill God within me? Why does He live on in this painful and humiliating way even though I curse Him and want to tear Him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is He a baffling reality that I can't shake off? Do you hear me?

Death: Yes, I hear you.

Block: I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out His hand toward me, reveal Himself and speak to me.

Death: But He remains silent.

Block: I call out to Him in the dark, but no one seems to be there.

Death: Perhaps no one is there.

Block: Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.

Death: Most people never reflect about either death or the futility of life.

Block: But one day they will have to stand at that last moment of life and look toward the darkness.

Death: When that day comes . . .

Block: In our fear, we make an image, and that image we call God.

Meanwhile, Jöns conducts his own dialogue with the church painter, Albertus Pictor:

Jöns: Me and my master have been abroad and have just come home. Do you understand, you little pictor?

Pictor: The Crusade.

Jöns: [drunk] Precisely. For ten years we sat in the Holy Land and let snakes bite us, flies sting us, wild animals eat us, heathens butcher us, the wine poison us, the women give us lice, the lice devour us, the fevers rot us, all for the Glory of God. [He and painter make an ironic sign of cross.] Our crusade was such madness that only a real idealist could have thought it up. But what you said about the plague was horrible.

Pictor: It's worse than that.

Jöns: Ah me. No matter which way you turn, you have your rump behind you. That's the truth.

Pictor: The rump behind you, the rump behind you — there's a profound truth. [Jöns paints a small figure that is supposed to represent himself.]

Jöns: This is Squire Jöns. He grins at Death, mocks the Lord,

laughs at himself and leers at the girls. His world is a Jöns-world, believable only to himself, ridiculous to all including himself, meaningless to Heaven and of no interest to Hell.

The scene marks a radical departure from the *Everyman* allegory. In the medieval play, Death makes no bones about the fact that he is God's messenger, and Everyman uses the time allotted to him to set his spiritual accounts in order in anticipation of the afterlife, not in a fruitless quest for proof of God's existence. In *The Seventh Seal*, on the other hand, Death seems to be reduced from an invincible agent of God's reckoning to a kind of shrink from the minimalist school of psychoanalysis—one who listens but refuses to give any answers. He must use deception—pretending to be a father confessor—in order to extract the knight's stratagems and so win the chess game, and when it is over, he admits to the knight that he has no secrets to divulge—"I have nothing to tell." Some critics regard this scene as a confusing twist from our initial perception at the beginning of the film, where Death seems to be an almighty and terrifying figure; others praise it for increasing the drama of the movie and giving Death a more complex, almost human quality.

The second main entry point for modern existentialism into *The Seventh Seal* comes when the knight and squire witness the burning of the witch, Tyán:

Jöns: What does she see? Can you tell me?

Block: [shaking his head] She feels no more pain.

Jöns: You don't answer my question. Who watches over that child? Is it the angels, or God, or the Devil, or only the emptiness? Emptiness, my lord!

Block: This cannot be.

Jöns: Look at her eyes, my lord. Her poor brain has just made a discovery. Emptiness under the moon.

Block: No.

Jöns: We stand powerless, our arms hanging at our sides, because we see what she sees, and our terror and hers are the same.

Finally, when Death arrives at the knight's castle, there comes a resolution not only of Block's chess game with Death, but also of the existentialist debate between him and Jöns, with the knight's wife acting as referee:

Block: From our darkness, we call out to Thee, Lord. Have mercy on us because we are small and frightened and ignorant.

Jöns: [bitterly] In the darkness where You [God] are supposed to be, where all of us probably are. . . . In the darkness You will find no one to listen to Your cries or be touched by Your sufferings. Wash Your tears and mirror Yourself in Your indifference.

Block: God, You who are somewhere, who *must* be somewhere, have mercy upon us.

Jöns: I could have given you [Block] an herb to purge you of your worries about eternity. Now it seems to be too late. But in any case, feel the immense triumph of this last minute when you can still roll your eyes and move your toes.

Karin: Quiet, quiet.

Jöns: I shall be silent, but under protest.

Much of the dialogue in these three scenes, especially as spoken by Jöns, already had been developed by Bergman two years previously in his one-act play, *Wood Painting*, which served as the basis for the film. In great contrast to Sydow's role, the knight of the play speaks almost no dialogue, since the actor who played him in the original production at the Malmö City Theatre was, as described by Bergman, "very handsome, but as soon as he opened his mouth, it was a catastrophe." Instead, Jöns must carry the weight of the play's existentialism, much of which is transferred verbatim to the film, such as when he muses contentedly outside the Embarrassment Inn: "My little stomach is my world, my head is my eternity, and my hands, two wonderful suns. My legs are time's damned pendulums, and my dirty feet are two splendid starting points for my philosophy." In the case of the film, however, the squire's unalloyed existentialism is now counterbalanced by the knight's more ambivalent approach to this modern, antimedieval creed.

The knight and the squire are often described by film scholars as representing two poles of, respectively, intellect and action, but their actual portrayal doesn't always fall neatly into these categories. The knight, for example, confesses to Death that he will use his reprieve to perform "one meaningful deed," and after he discovers that it has been Death in the confessional all along, he recites what could be considered the existentialist credo: "This is my hand. I can move it, feel the blood pulsing through it. The sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with Death." Later, the knight does carry through with his "one meaningful deed," when he distracts Death long enough during their chess game to allow Jof, Mia, and baby Mikael to escape from Death's clutches. (This premise again militates against Death's supposedly invincible power.) Block also is the only one who helps the executed witch, Tyan, by giving

her a potion to ease her pain. While Jöns, too, performs his share of meaningful deeds—rescuing both the mute peasant girl and Jof from the seminarian, Raval—he stops short of doing anything for Tyan or Raval as he watches them both die horrible deaths.

A more useful comparison may be to say that the knight symbolizes agnosticism, as someone grappling with doubts about his faith, and the squire atheism, as one who refuses to believe altogether. (At one point, Jöns declares that the Holy Trinity is no more than a “ghost story” to be “accepted without too much emotion.”) In terms of Boccaccio’s plague psychology, one could say that Jöns responds with denial when confronted with the realities of the disease, while Block opts for moderation, since he acknowledges Death’s presence and tries to do something about it. The knight and squire could also be said to represent two different stages in mankind’s relationship with God. Jöns is the fully modern man whose disillusionment with life’s latest horrors has made him skeptical of any place for religion in human history, but Block is a transitional figure, with one foot in the Middle Ages and the other in the modern world.

A critic of the film, Birgitta Steene, has called the knight’s quest for God “blasphemous” because “a desire for ultimate knowledge is treason against God,” which can only end in the knight’s fall, as he is willing to worship even the Devil, along with Tyan, if this will prove God’s existence. While this may be true of an Old Testament interpretation of man’s search for God, it is not entirely accurate when applied to the New. To doubt one’s faith is not out of place even in the Gospels. Jesus himself said on the cross, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” [Matthew 27:46], and Thomas, the doubting disciple, declared of the risen Christ, “Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it” [John 20:25]. The great medieval Church fathers, St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas, did attempt to address doubts about God’s existence, such as are expressed by the knight, by applying rational thought to faith. But, as Charles Ketcham points out, Anselm’s ontological proof—or proof by definition—and Aquinas’ Aristotelian proof by causation would only have been scorned by the knight as man’s clever, circular arguments to justify his psychological need to believe in the supernatural.

The Middle Ages had yet another response to Antonius Block’s tormented struggle to penetrate the silence of God: mysticism. In the “negative” tradition of mysticism going back to the anonymous figure of Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth century A.D., the “dark night of the soul”—wherein God appears to be a silent, mysterious, unknowable being—is fully acknowledged as the first stage of the mystical quest for a direct experience of the divine. A popular fourteenth-century mystical manual called

The Cloud of Unknowing, among the first works to be written in vernacular English prose, gives this advice about how to penetrate the “cloud of unknowing” surrounding God:

But now you will ask me, “How am I to think of God himself, and what is He?” and I cannot answer you except to say, “I do not know!” For with this question you have brought me into the same darkness, the same cloud of unknowing where I want you to be! For though we, through the grace of God, can know fully about all other matters, and think about them—yes, even the very works of God himself—yet of God himself can no man think. . . . Therefore, though it may be good sometimes to think particularly about God’s kindness and worth, and though it may be enlightening too, and a part of contemplation, yet in the work now before us it must be put down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you are to step over it resolutely and eagerly, with a devout and kindling love, and try to penetrate that darkness above you. Strike that thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love, and on no account whatever think of giving up.

Of course, God’s existence is already taken for granted by the mystic, who trusts that the cloud of unknowing will be parted once his loving faith has been sufficiently demonstrated (even though revelation is completely up to God’s will). The knight does not have the faith to even begin the mystical journey, and while the medieval belief in God could be said to be self-justifying, the same could be said of Block’s agnosticism. Because he is unwilling to trust implicitly that God is ever present, he can never experience the mystical union with the divine that would give him the proof he so desperately craves.

Aside from its larger concerns with existentialism, *The Seventh Seal* is also a very personal film for Bergman. It was a way for him to work out his own inner conflict about his faith. As he writes in his autobiographical memoirs about the movie:

The Seventh Seal is one of the few films really close to my heart. . . . Since at the time I was still very much in a quandary over religious faith, I placed my two opposing beliefs side by side, allowing each to state its case in its own way. In this manner, a virtual cease-fire could exist between my childhood piety and my newfound harsh rationalism. . . . I still held on to some of the withered remains of my childish piety. I had until then held a totally naive idea of what one would call a preternatural salvation. My present conviction manifested itself during this time. I believe a human being carries his or her own holiness, which lies within the realm of the earth; there are no other-worldly explanations. So in the film lives a remnant of my honest, childish

piety lying peacefully alongside a harsh and rational perception of reality.

The Seventh Seal is definitely 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.

Bergman then explains how later, apparently after he had completed *The Seventh Seal*, he lost his belief in the afterlife, and paradoxically, his fear of death:

My fear of death was to a great degree linked to my religious concepts. Later on, I underwent minor surgery. By mistake, I was given too much anesthesia. I felt as if I had disappeared out of reality. Where did the hours go? They flashed by in a microsecond.

Suddenly I realized *that is how it is*. That one could be transformed from *being to not-being*—it was hard to grasp. But for a person with a constant anxiety about death, now liberating. Yet at the same time it seems a bit sad. You say to yourself that it would have been fun to encounter new experiences once your soul had had a little rest and grown accustomed to being separated from your body. But I don't think that is what happens to you. First you *are*, then you are *not*. This I find deeply satisfying.

Bergman's operation experience therefore became his religious epiphany: definitive proof, not of God's existence, but of his absence. In an interview he gave in 1968, Bergman was brutally dismissive of even his former agnosticism, his very quest for faith that he had expressed in *The Seventh Seal*:

I've always felt sympathy for the Jönses and the Jofs and the Skats and the Mias. But it's with something more like desperation I've experienced the Blocks inside myself. I can really never get shot of them, the fanatics. Whether they appear as religious fanatics or vegetarian fanatics makes no odds. They're catastrophic people. These types whose whole cast of mind as it were looks beyond mere human beings toward some unknown goal. The terrible thing is the great power they often wield over their fellow human beings. Apart from the fact that I believe they suffer like the very devil, I've no sympathy for them.

The Seventh Seal therefore became the perfect sounding board for Bergman's rebellion against his paternally imposed piety. Indeed, one is tempted to see Raval, the evil seminarian who set the knight on the path of his fruitless crusade, as a subliminal portrayal of Erik Bergman, a dour pastor who was, according to his son's account, an even harsher father.

There is one other personal experience of Bergman's that impinges upon the film. This was his flirtation with Nazism at the age of sixteen, when he was sent to Haina, Germany, as a summer exchange student. In his autobiography, Bergman records that the enthusiasm of his German peers for the Hitler Youth and the Nazi Party was so infectious that he began giving the Heil greeting at every opportunity and that he once attended a Nazi rally in Weimar. He was not alone, for his brother, Dag, was a founder of the Swedish Nazi Party, and his father duly voted for them. After the war, when he was confronted by the evidence of the Holocaust, Bergman was "overcome by despair, and my self-contempt, already a severe burden, accelerated beyond the borders of endurance." Although *The Seventh Seal* does not directly address the Jewish pogroms that took place during the Black Death, Bergman does seem to exorcise some of his guilt-laden demons from his anti-Semitic past through a pull-no-punches portrayal of the execution of the witch, Tyan. Like the Jews, she has been made a scapegoat for the plague, and, also like them, she is put to death by cremation. Significantly, Jöns wishes to rescue her but then realizes that this is futile and, as he stands by helplessly watching her funeral pyre, cries out: "That poor little child. I can't stand it. I can't stand it!" Bergman claims in his autobiography that he only came to grips with the Holocaust when he realized that he was "guilty by association only." In a revealing passage, Bergman recalls how the religion teacher at the German school he attended in Haina read from the Nazi newspaper, *Der Stürmer* and "repeated in a factual tone of voice, *von den Juden vergiftet* [poisoned by the Jews]." Clearly, the Nazis were reviving the blood libels leveled against the Jews during the Middle Ages. It is even possible that Bergman's teacher was quoting from the May 1, 1934 issue of *Der Stürmer*, which ran an infamous front-page article that featured an illustration of Jewish rabbis collecting blood from Christian children, who were being slaughtered with long knives.

Balancing the tormented skepticism and bitter cynicism of Block and Jöns are the simple faith and love between Jof and Mia. As with the existentialist theme, there are three scenes in *The Seventh Seal* where their uplifting message is on display. One takes place early in the film, when the actor troupe of Jof, Mia, and Skat wake up in their touring wagon. Jof gets up first, roused by a mosquito which he smacks against his forehead, smearing it with blood. This seems yet another cryptic reference to the Book of Revelation, where the angel of the East carries "the seal of the living God" and cries out: "Do no damage to sea or land or trees until we have set the seal of our God upon the foreheads of his servants" [Revelation 7:3]. Already Bergman signals that Jof and Mia represent something more than the triumph of the human spirit; they also point to the triumph of the

heavenly host over death at the Resurrection. Such an interpretation is strengthened by other symbolic aspects of this scene: Jof's vision of the Virgin Mary teaching the Christ child how to walk, inspired, as we know, by a medieval wall painting Bergman had seen as a child; Jof's boast to Mia that their child, Mikael, will do the "one impossible trick" of acrobats, "to make one of the balls stand absolutely still in the air"; and a skull-like mask, which Skat has used to rehearse the part of Death, hanging impotently from the wagon as Mia declares her love for her husband while he remains "silent as a grave" (stage direction from screenplay).

Bergman's second affirmation of faith comes at roughly the midpoint of the film, just after Jof's excruciatingly cruel humiliation at the aptly named Embarrassment Inn, where he has been forced by Raval at knife point to dance like a bear. The scene starts out with Antonius Block and Mia talking together on a sunny hillside. Eventually, they are joined by Jof, Jöns, and his girl. A bowl of fresh milk and some wild strawberries are passed around by Mia to the company. Birgitta Steene has called this "the most crucial sequence in the film" because it takes on an Eucharistic symbolism. For the knight, it is a turning point in his quest for faith. It is at this moment that he has the closest thing to a religious epiphany:

I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping, Jof with his lyre. I'll try to remember what we have talked about. I'll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. And it will be an adequate sign—it will be enough for me.

Immediately thereafter Block wanders down to the beach to resume his chess game with Death, with Jof and Mia's caravan in the background. It is here that the knight learns of Death's designs on the "holy family" and forms his resolve to perform his "one meaningful deed" by saving them.

At the end of the film, of course, we have Jof's vision of his former companions dancing with Death. With a shock of recognition, he describes the dancers to his wife:

I see them, Mia! I see them! Over there against the dark, stormy sky. They are all there. The smith and Lisa and the knight and Raval and Jöns and Skat. And Death, the severe master, invites them to dance. He tells them to hold each other's hands and then they must tread the dance in a long row. And first goes the master with his scythe and hourglass,

but Skat dangles at the end with his lyre. They dance away from the dawn and it's a solemn dance toward the dark lands, while the rain washes their faces and cleans the salt of the tears from their cheeks.

The last line again points to the Resurrection at the Last Judgment, for it recalls the words of St. John in the last chapter of his Revelation, when he sees a vision of the new Jerusalem, accompanied by: "a loud voice proclaiming from the throne: 'Now at last God has his dwelling among men! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away!'" [Revelation 21:3–4] Perhaps, too, there is something significant about the fact that the knight's wife, Karin, and Jöns' girl are both omitted from the Dance.

It's pretty clear that these scenes represent Bergman's "childish piety," the pure, innocent faith as it is supposed to have existed in the Middle Ages. Equally obvious is that this piety leans heavily toward the "feminine" side of God's nature—His nurturing, redemptive, forgiving aspects—that found ample expression in the writings of late medieval female mystics. The cult of the Virgin Mary—embodied in Jof's first vision—is one example of this "feminization of devotion" that can be traced back to the Mariology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century. Even more evocative is the hillside "communion" of strawberries and milk. In late medieval Scandinavian lore, strawberries are symbols of the Virgin and also are associated with Sweden's most beloved Catholic saint, St. Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373). One story has it that a dying child and namesake of the saint pleaded for strawberries in the dead of winter and was granted them through a vision of the holy woman's spirit. St. Birgitta is said to have predicted the Black Death in a famous prophecy from her *Revelations*, written in 1347:

Then said our Lord: "Therefore it is just that I go with my plough upon all the earth and world, both heathen and Christian. I shall neither spare the old nor the young, neither the poor nor the rich. But each shall be judged according to justice and each shall die in his sin; and their houses shall be left without inhabitants; and yet I shall not make an end of the world."

Although Birgitta insists that there will be judgment for man's sins, she is not nearly so apocalyptic as male chroniclers who try to fathom God's plan

behind the plague. Milk, naturally, is also symbolic of the Virgin Mother, and it likewise evokes the “Jesus as Mother” concept that is beautifully expressed by another fourteenth-century female mystic, Julian of Norwich. In Chapter 60 of the long text of her own *Revelations*, Julian writes: “The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and He does so most generously and most tenderly with the holy sacrament, which is the precious food of life itself.”

Regardless of whether Bergman consciously references all these meanings in his film, we know at the very least that the above scenes reflect some powerful feminine influences on his own life. Aside from his mother, Karin Bergman, there was his maternal grandmother, Anna Åkerblom, at whose country house in Dalarna, Sweden, he picked wild strawberries every summer. Indeed, the milk and strawberries of the second scene have been called “private symbols in Bergman’s world, the Eucharist in a communion between human beings.” Bergman himself has said: “Whenever I am in doubt or uncertain, I take refuge in the vision of a simple and pure love. I find this love in those spontaneous women who . . . are the incarnation of purity.” Although the character of Mia is an obvious embodiment of this purity, the knight’s wife and Jöns’ girl also play this role. The name of the knight’s wife, Karin, not only recalls Bergman’s mother but also St. Birgitta’s daughter, Catherine, who followed her mother in becoming a mystic and saint. Both the wife and the girl are selfless in their willingness to sacrifice themselves for others. The wife has dutifully waited for her husband to return in spite of the fact that all her household has fled from the plague; the girl is the only one to attempt to bring water to the dying, gasping Raval, despite the fact that he had earlier tried to rape her. Both also resign themselves to Death: The wife welcomes him “courteously” into her house, and the girl utters the last words of Jesus on the cross: “It is finished” [John 19:30]. Finally, both are spared the Dance of Death as seen by Jof in his vision. What has happened to them? Have they gone directly to heaven? Do they perhaps symbolize the triumph over death at the Resurrection, when the body—a crucial component of late medieval female mysticism—will be fully restored and joined with the soul at the end of time? Marc Gervais, one of Bergman’s filmographers, notes that we, the audience, “scarcely notice” the women’s absence from the Dance of Death, yet their fate still seems significant, as if “the two women are conscious of something the others ignore.” I suspect that this something has to do with the power of love and redemption that Bergman believes women can offer in the face of overwhelming suffering—precisely what female mystics offered in the aftermath of the Black Death. Here again, as with the inspiration provided by the medieval wall paintings of his childhood, Bergman’s personal vision coincides with an authentic historical touch.



The famously emotive Flagellant sequence from *The Seventh Seal*. The image of the crucified Christ in the upper right is the same one that we see in an earlier scene of Antonius Block's confession to Death.

This brings us back to our original question: Does Bergman sufficiently balance his medieval and modern approaches to faith? I believe that, when all is said and done, he does not. *The Seventh Seal* is altogether too dark, too pessimistic a film to adequately convey how late medieval society was able to overcome the Black Death, and thus make the transition to the modern world. Bergman himself confessed in his film memoirs that "what attracted me [to *The Seventh Seal*] was the whole idea of people traveling through the downfall of civilization and culture." Shortly after its release, some reviewers picked up on the film's overwhelming darkness. John Russell Taylor, for instance, judged it a failure because "it never finally convinces us, as it obviously intends to, that all its horrors, the rapes, tortures, flagellations, burnings, are valid expressions of a pessimistic world picture only lightly touched with hope." One comes away from *The Seventh Seal* more powerfully impressed by images that show a "waning" civilization, as opposed to the lighter scenes that point to late medieval culture's recovery and renewal. Albertus Pictor's prophecy that people are more fascinated by a

skull seems to be self-fulfilled by Bergman, as he imbues more dynamism and direction into the darker scenes.

A good example of the director's privileging of pessimism is the famous Flagellant sequence. This was by no means the first time that the Flagellants had been portrayed on film. A Swedish silent classic from 1921, *Häxan* (also known by its English title as *Witchcraft Through the Ages*), "unflinchingly presents," according to the film scholar, Kevin Harty, "the squalor, cruelty, and superstitions of the Middle Ages" in the form of a documentary-like account of medieval persecutions of witches, which are then compared with modern treatments of the insane. Among the film's macabre demonstrations of medieval "barbarism" is a procession of nude Flagellants. *Häxan*, which was produced by Svensk Filmindustri, the same company that produced nearly all of Bergman's most famous films, including *The Seventh Seal*, was undoubtedly known to Bergman and perhaps inspired his own Flagellant and witch-burning scenes. It also seems that Bergman borrowed from a Flagellant scene in August Strindberg's play, *The Saga of the Folkungs*.

The portrayal of the Flagellants in *The Seventh Seal* is remarkable for capturing the hysterical emotionalism that they literally whipped up and which was attested to by plenty of medieval chroniclers. Yet when the monk who leads the procession stands up to deliver a sermon, a jarring, fanatical note is sounded that is not entirely fair to the real, historical Flagellants. Bergman has stated that he modeled the sermon on that of the fiery preacher, Father Paneloux, in Albert Camus' existentialist novel, *The Plague*. Set during a modern outbreak of plague in Oran, Algeria, during the 1940s, the novel contrasts Paneloux's flagellating faith with the heroic medical efforts of Dr. Bernard Rieux, practically the only character who does anything constructive to alleviate people's suffering during the epidemic. In the same way, the monk's sermon is played in the film as a futile rant against man's stupidity, arousing only self-loathing and contempt. As the Flagellants process into the village, everyone weeps, bows, and prays in response to the spectacle of extreme humiliation, except for the knight, squire, and his girl, all of whom look on with detached, slightly condescending faces, as if in sympathy with the sentiments of the audience. After the procession leaves, Jöns remarks: "This damned ranting about doom. Is that food for the minds of modern people? Do they really expect us to take them seriously?" The Flagellants, therefore, acquire in the film a voyeuristic tinge as a strange, surreal sect that is alien to our better selves, even during the Middle Ages.

By and large, medieval chroniclers of the Flagellants—who were almost always members of the Church—do betray a scornful hostility to what they regarded as a dangerous and newfangled religious movement.

But at least it cannot be said that anyone was indifferent to them. Most people of the time were divided about how to react to the Flagellants: The common people seem to have staunchly supported them, while the authorities, both civil and ecclesiastic, were extremely wary. It was apparently not unknown for the medieval Flagellants, in their sermons and songs, to preach a doom-laden message. Two chroniclers from Strasbourg, Mathias of Neuenburg and Fritsche Closener, record that a centerpiece of Flagellant ceremonies was the reading of a "heavenly letter," in which such fire and brimstone sentiments as "Christ is displeased at the wickedness of the world!" were dispensed in the course of the sermon. But at the same time, it is undeniable that crowds of medieval onlookers welcomed the Flagellants with open arms and rejoiced in their coming; they did so because they believed that the Flagellants' extraordinary penance would help ward off the plague, not because their preachers would tell them what they already knew, that is, that everyone was in imminent danger of death. So venerated were the Flagellants in some places that the blood that rained down their bodies during their excessive whipping performances was reverently collected and preserved as miracle-working relics. Housewives in Flanders reportedly wiped up their blood with rags, which they then used to dab "their eyes and those of others." A Flagellant preacher in Tournai compared the redemptive power of the Flagellants' blood to that of Christ on the cross, a position backed by the townsfolk but one that most churchmen denounced as perilously close to heresy. Flagellants would not have enjoyed the popularity that they had among the common people if their message was entirely nugatory.

When *The Seventh Seal* follows up the Flagellant scene with the burning of the witch, Tyan, and then by the plague death of Raval, the overall impression conveyed of medieval cruelty, depravity, and demoralization is complete. It is hard to see how the "joyous" scenes featuring Jof and Mia can compete with such searing images. This is not to say that these uplifting sequences, as explained above, cannot be interpreted as holding a profound meaning within a medieval context. Yet their symbolism, such as it is, is sometimes elusive and overly subtle. Nor is it unambiguous. Many of Bergman's symbols are perfectly capable of bearing more than one interpretation. To take one example, the squirrel that appears on the tree stump after Skat's death seems to be a straightforward allegory of the continuity of life and of Christian Resurrection. But it is also quite possible that the image has an entirely pagan meaning, as a personification of Ratatosk the Squirrel, who in Viking mythology runs up and down the world tree, Yggdrasil, trading insults between the eagle resting in the topmost branches and Nidhogg, the corpse-devouring dragon dwelling in the lowest root called Niflheim, land of the dead. A double, and contradictory,

meaning may also be assigned to Jof and Mia. When asked in a 1968 interview if the names of Jof and Mia were mere chance, Bergman replied: "No, not at all. Naturally, they're Joseph and Maria, it's as simple as that." But these characters, who do not appear in Bergman's original play, *Wood Painting*, may not be so simple after all. Rather than being allegories for the holy family, Jof and Mia may just as well be a latter-day Adam and Eve or Noah and his wife: People simply fortunate enough to have been spared the Apocalypse and left behind to repopulate the earth.

All in all, Bergman seems unwilling to endorse the lighter passages of his film with the same confidence and reliability on faith that existed in the Middle Ages. Instead, modern skepticism and existentialism are allowed to seep through, even here. Jof's glowing epiphany of the Virgin Mary, for instance, is undermined by his confession to Mia that he has made up visions in the past, such as of the Devil painting their wagon wheels red. Similarly, we do not know whether to trust his last vision, of the Dance of Death, since he names only one female dancer—the smith's wife, Lisa—while the image on the screen clearly delineates two women dancing. Although Jof is a kind of saintly Everyman figure—he has to play the "soul of man" opposite Skat's Death at the saints' feast in Elsinore—he is also often derided in the film as a buffoonish fool or clown, who must play the cuckold in the troupe's performance before the Embarrassment Inn. Despite the fact that Antonius Block has his "adequate sign" in his communion of strawberries and milk on the sunny hillside, his comforting reassurance utterly evaporates at the end of the film, when he cries out to a God who is "somewhere, who must be somewhere." Bergman's ensuing closeup of the girl's radiant, tear-stained face overshadowed by Death's approach may very well, as Marc Gervais surmises, capture in her "enraptured gaze . . . the vision of further mysteries, further mystical experiences" to be glimpsed in a far-off time and place. Yet the dissolve and graphic match from her face to Mia's, as the latter peeks out at a world that has weathered the passing storm, seems to symbolize instead an existentialist belief that the only eternity is the rhythmic ebb and flow of life's continuous cycle. Bergman indicates as much when he writes in his memoirs: "I infused the characters of Jof and Mia with something that was very important to me: the concept of the holiness of the human being. If you peel off the layers of various theologies, the holy always remains." But Bergman's light is not clear enough, nor forceful enough, to keep out the dark. In the struggle between his two "pieties," the medieval-based one is never given the chance of a fair fight. This seems especially true when one compares *The Seventh Seal* to Bergman's other medieval film, *The Virgin Spring* (1959), a lesser-known production but one that ends on a far more affirmative note on medieval faith. After viewing *The Seventh Seal*, one can be forgiven for

wondering how in the world postplague Europe managed to have a Renaissance.

Nevertheless, *The Seventh Seal* would go on to become a much imitated classic. Its Flagellant sequence, for instance, probably inspired a similar scene in the Polish film, *Krzyzacy (Knights of the Teutonic Order)*, released in 1960, while a more comedic take on the scene—one where monks beat their heads with wooden boards—occurs in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, from 1975. The latter film also has a famous “Bring out your dead!” sketch, set during a plague in a medieval village, which actually has some basis in historical fact. According to Giovanni Boccaccio, Florence during the Black Death was plagued by the depredations of the *Becchini*, a grave-digging fraternity that blackmailed survivors by threatening to take them away while still alive if they did not pay them more money to dispose of their dead. Also in 1975, the American comedian, Woody Allen, who has nominated *The Seventh Seal* as his favorite film, paid homage to Bergman’s Dance of Death with his own version at the end of his comedy, *Love and Death*. Then in 1983, the Monty Python troupe mined *The Seventh Seal* once again for comedic gold in their fourth film, *The Meaning of Life*, which also parodies the Dance of Death sequence. In a scene highly reminiscent of Death’s arrival at the knight’s castle, Mr. Death, in Monty Python’s version, comes knocking on the door as an uninvited guest at a posh dinner party in progress at a quaint country cottage. Rather than inspire a hushed awe in his victims, Mr. Death must instead listen to the interminable table talk of some American visitors, who engage in a metaphysical debate about the meaning of death. Meanwhile, the wind howls and the hearth blazes, atmospheric that are lifted straight out of Bergman’s film. After Mr. Death points to the demise of all from the salmon mousse (botulism), the soiree embarks on a Dance with Death from the convenience of their cars. Other films, such as *The Masque of the Red Death* or *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, both of which exist in several versions, refer to the plague but without being too specific as to the historical time period or setting. *Die Pest in Florenz* (1919) depicts the plague in Florence during the time of Savonarola (1452–1498), while a Norwegian film, *Trollsøyn* (1994), is set during the Black Death in Norway.

There are two other, more notable films that take the Black Death as their main subject and, what is more, use *The Seventh Seal*’s plot device of contrasting medieval and modern approaches to catastrophe. One is *The Navigator: An Odyssey Across Time* (1988), which is usually relegated to the science fiction section of video stores, even though it could equally qualify as an historical film. A New Zealand production, *The Navigator* was directed by the reclusive Vincent Ward, who also created the film’s story line and cowrote the screenplay. Until he was eclipsed by Peter Jackson,

director of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), Ward was perhaps his country's best known and most highly regarded filmmaker. His film also stars a bunch of New Zealand actors who are virtually unknown in the United States.

Taking its cue from other movies in the time-travel genre, such as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *The Navigator* imagines what it would be like for modern, everyday people to encounter their distant medieval ancestors. Only this time, the twist is that instead of having modern man travel back to the past, *The Navigator* brings medieval people forward to the present. More recently, in 2000, this concept was turned into a comedy called *Just Visiting* (a remake of the French film, *Les Visiteurs*, from 1993), in which a French nobleman, Count Thibault, and his trusty servant, André, are transported to modern-day Chicago.

Time travel has been accomplished in the movies in a number of ways. *Just Visiting* relies on special effects and suspension of disbelief. (Thibault's wizard concocts a magical time-travel potion.) *The Navigator*, on the other hand, makes this possible through the dream vision, a plot device also used in the *Connecticut Yankee* films, which in turn borrowed it from Mark Twain, who in his novel has Hank Morgan knocked over the head in order to wake up in King Arthur's court. In this case, the time "navigator" is a young boy called Griffin (played by Hamish McFarlane), who lives in a hillside mining village in Cumbria in northwest England. An introductory title card informs us that the Black Death is about to invade England from Europe and that one-third of Europe's population has already succumbed to the disease. The real mortality rate was more like one-half, and, in spite of the subtitle, "Cumbria, March 1348," it would be far more likely to be 1349 before the plague reached this far north in England. But these historical quibbles do not detract from the rest of this excellent film.

The Navigator opens with a closeup of Griffin's face in a trance-like state, an image that is intercut with snippets from his dream: a long tunnel, a cathedral, a Celtic-style cross being fixed to the spire, and a falling glove. Griffin's second trance is triggered by the long-awaited homecoming of his beloved brother, Connor (played by Bruce Lyons), who comes back to the village after an absence of 26 days. Nonetheless, the villagers have been anxious about his return, and Connor confirms the stories they have been hearing about a deadly pestilence abroad in the land. A village conference is held, at which it is decided that the best miners will follow Griffin's dream, as well as local rumor, which tell them to journey down the deepest mine shaft to "the far side of the earth," where they expect to find a great church to make an offering of a cross spike forged from their local copper, so that the village will be spared the pestilence. The conference is interrupted by the sudden arrival of strangers on the lake. At first believ-

ing them to be pillagers from “the stone-cutting village across the cliffs,” the miners discover that they are in fact “refugees from the East” who are fleeing the plague, albeit too late. To keep the infected people from wading ashore, they attack the ships with long poles and flaming arrows. The scene seems lifted straight out of the plague chronicle of Louis Sanctus, who describes how three Genoese galleys brought plague back from the Crimea at the end of 1347 and “were expelled from that port with flaming arrows and diverse engines of war, because anyone who dared touch them or have any business dealings with them immediately died.”

Ward does a superb job in this first part of the film in recreating the authentic atmospherics of the Middle Ages. Shot in grainy black and white, these scenes show grimy, unwashed peasants dressed in rags, living in wooden hovels, and being lowered by hand-turned cranks down rough-hewn mine pits. The muted lighting reveals a desolate, claustrophobic, almost alien landscape, but one that is comfortingly familiar to the medieval villagers, for whom Connor’s absence of little less than a month seems like an eternity. Even the actors’ faces are transformed into Middle Aged versions, which in Arno’s case is accomplished through a false set of teeth applied to Chris Haywood’s mouth in order to make them look rotten. Obviously, Ward owes a debt to Bergman (even though his favorite Bergman film is *Persona*, not *The Seventh Seal*), but the illusion that we are actually in the Middle Ages seems to surpass even *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*, and it remains unmatched, except perhaps by Chris Newby’s *The Anchoress* (discussed in the Afterword). Here, equal empathy is accorded to the medieval, as well as to the modern, mindset. The villagers fervently believe in their “superstitions,” such as that the Black Death will “skip right over” their community if only they put “witches’ spikes” atop their roofs or if they catch a glimpse of holy relics, such as “St. Augustine’s fingerbone and feathers from the Angel Gabriel.” Their simple, yet powerful and enduring, faith contrasts with their primitive scientific knowledge: Connor tells them that the plague is spread by the full moon, which “bears contagion before it like a sack; at sunrise she lets it fall . . . on us.” Ward is never condescending toward these odd people, who seem so far removed from us moderns. Instead, we are so fully immersed in their thought world that gradually we come to accept it, implicitly.

The film even attempts to recreate the medieval English language and its rhythms, although it sounds remarkably close to Jordie slang, the well-nigh incomprehensible dialect of Newcastle (compare to *Stormy Monday*, a film set in the modern-day version of the city). Hard to follow at first, *The Navigator*’s dialogue requires close attention and gradual acclamation. For the benefit of frustrated viewers, here is a “translation,” as near as I can make out, of the crucial opening exchange during the village conference:

Martin: All right, all right, all right. There's a powerful evil on the move. Connor's seen it. A pestilence which ups further than the full moon, he said. Do we panic, or do we plan? Tell them Arno.

Arno: A week back, I found a monk across the lake. He spoke of a great church being built in the West. He says it's highest in Christendom. There's builders coming from everywhere, timber for its construction. You make offering, you stop Death.

Searle: No! Church is too far! Beyond further reaches of earth I hear. Across mountains, across seas. Across horrors there aren't even names for.

Arno: We've got to go, Searle. There's pilgrims on every road.

Martin: With Connor to lead the party, we'll do it. He knows the outside world better than anyone. What do you say, Connor?

Connor: I've seen pilgrims, Martin. I've seen so many bodies there weren't enough living to bury the dead. I've seen mobs chasing monks from their abbeys for refusing last rites to dying. It's these same monks that head west as pilgrims, Martin. There are people no more than animals. You can trust no one. Children . . . begged me for food. I didn't dare go near them. And black boils under their armpits ready to burst and they denied plague was upon them! All the churches are empty. It's still not satisfied, the evil keeps striding forward with each full moon. We've got a month, maybe two, but that's with a scrap of God's grace.

Martin: We can do it! Reach the church and raise a spike of Cumbrian copper, with you and Searle to lead our party.

Grandma: I deserve this chance. Show the faith!

Grandpa: [holding aloft the spike] Here's to taking it to a journey!

Connor: Then Searle must do it. I'm sick of all the death.

Again, the plague references here are quite authentic and are taken almost directly from the medieval chronicles. Aside from Connor's description of bubonic plague symptoms, his allusion to mass graves of victims mirrors a refrain of the English chronicles, that "the living were hardly able to bury the dead." It should be noted that even though Connor describes the Church as under attack, this only happens because medieval people place so high a value on its sacraments: The churches are empty, we are given to understand, because of mortality, not abandonment of faith.

The transitional stage of the film occurs as the search party—consisting of Connor, Griffin, Martin, Arno, Searle, and his half-witted brother,

Ulf—tunnel to “God’s city” on the other side of the world. Unbeknownst to them, they have actually ended up in Auckland, New Zealand, in the late twentieth century (perhaps Ward’s private joke, since along with Australia this is the land “down under”). It is made clear, both at the beginning and at the end of the episode, that it takes place entirely within Griffin’s dream vision. As the party frantically tunnels down “six times the length” of Arno’s rope, going faster than the plague-bearing moon with the aid of a windlass-powered “engine,” a winged skeleton blows a trumpet and shrieks across the sky. As in *The Seventh Seal*, these are a people at the brink of the Apocalypse, facing their Last Judgment. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the film changes over from black and white to color: its cue for the “time warp” from a medieval to modern setting. (A precredit notice warns viewers not to adjust their sets at this point.) Similarly, Griffin here seems to undergo his own transformation—from local visionary who can predict “last year’s corn” or a “vein of copper in pit” to a Nostradamus-style prophet who can see into the future.

Once in the twentieth century, our medieval time travelers encounter all the technological paraphernalia of modern civilization: sewers, electricity, cars, submarines, construction equipment, subway trains, and televisions. Ward once more displays a sure touch as we see this familiar technology through medieval eyes. At some point in our childhoods, nearly every one of us in the audience has played with toy versions of these modern machines. Yet now they appear frightening, alien, monstrous—a kind of mirror image of what Ward has done to us in the first part of the film, when he acclimatized us to the medieval world. The sense of wonder and terror generated by the encounter is nowhere better portrayed than in the first scene, where Ulf is caught like a “deer in the headlights” and left stranded in a sea of cross-flowing traffic as he tries to cross the road. (Apparently the scene was inspired by Ward’s own experience backpacking across the German autobahn.) A car callously runs over and breaks Ulf’s treasured statue of the Virgin Mary, which he clutches to his chest like a security blanket. In this fast-paced world, there is no regard for the innocent, childlike faith of our ancestors. At a later point in the film, the jaws of an earth-moving machine masticate menacingly above Connor like some prehistoric monster. Meanwhile, the rest of the party comes face to face with a submarine as they cross the bay in a little dinghy. (The scene has acquired new meaning in the wake of the tragic collision off the coast of Hawaii between the USS *Greenville* and a Japanese fishing ship, *Ehime Maru*, in February 2001.) As they impotently flail their oars against the ironclad sides of the “dragon,” the modern-day horse they have brought along for the ride stands by unfazed, a symbolic link between these two realms. It seems that Ward is making some comment here on the

doomsday threat of nuclear annihilation, in the face of which even modern man is powerless. Another reference to a modern “plague” comes when Griffin and Searle come face to face with a bank of televisions in a shop window. At the last second of this scene, attentive viewers will catch a glimpse of a hooded skull flashing across all the TV screens. For those in the know, or who stay tuned to the very end of the credits, this is from the “Grim Reaper” commercial put out by Australia’s National Advisory Committee on AIDS, which the government set up under the auspices of the Department of Community Services and Health.

The one encounter between medieval and modern people occurs when the search party stumbles upon some workers at a foundry which is staying open late on its last night of operation. Thinking them “Hari-bloody-Krishnas” or bush people, the foundry workers struggle to understand the strange language of their medieval visitors (an endeavor that we, the audience, can empathize with). For their part, Searle and Griffin attempt to convince the kindly “smithy” and his companions, Tom and Jay, to cast one more job. A surreal dialogue ensues:

Searle: We’ve brought copper.

Smithy: Fresh off the boat, are you boy?

Searle: Copper! Cast it! Now!

Griffin: Connor said you’d cast a spike. You’ve got to help us or the village is lost. Please! Cast it!

Smithy: Shh, shh! [To Tom and Jay] Can you understand these buggers?

Tom: Copper?

Searle: Aye, aye! Copper. You must cast it for us. [Arno and Martin try to hand-turn an electric millstone, which Jay turns on for them.]

Griffin: Smithy! You’ve got to help us. Please Smithy! Cast the spike!

Smithy: If it’s casting you’re after, sorry son. We’re being closed down. [He gazes at the Celtic cross he has taken from Arno] Oh, the church. Hang on. It’s over here. Church wanted us to cast a pinnacle, put the scaffold up. We had this bed lying around here for months, waiting for them to scratch around in getting some money. No money.

Martin: The Church . . . is poor?!

Tom: Yeah well, like any other business, eh? When they don’t want what you’re selling.

Martin: Selling? [Tom and Jay laugh.]

A hushed, mystical aura then steals over the scene when Smithy lowers the medieval Celtic cross into the modern bed, fitting it perfectly. Tom and Jay are no longer laughing. In the end, the foundrymen do cast a new spike, and the film reaches an emotional climax as a small river of molten medieval metal flows down into the modern casting bed, accompanied by rousing vocal and organ music on the soundtrack. As the fully cast cross glows with a white-hot fire, Martin leads the medieval party in a Latin prayer, while the modern foundrymen stand by abashed, uncertain what to do except bow their heads out of respect. Surely, Ward intends this scene to carry the main message of his movie. Despite their simple way of life, medieval people, the director dares to suggest, had something that we in the modern age sorely lack—a confident assurance of faith that gave our ancestors a psychological edge when faced with overwhelming crises such as the Black Death. In the course of our headlong embrace of technology, we in the modern world have lost touch with a way of life that is elemental and unimaginatively powerful. Unlike *The Seventh Seal*, *The Navigator* accords its more privileged and sympathetic portrayal to the blind faith of the Middle Ages, rather than to the cynicism and skepticism of our jaded modern era.

This note is struck a second time when medieval miners and modern blacksmiths join forces to put the spike up on the abandoned church tower before dawn breaks. Suddenly, the mechanical windlass on Jay's truck breaks down, and they are forced back upon good old-fashioned horsepower to pulley the spike up along the scaffold. Symbolically, as well as literally, technology has failed modern man in his hour of need (i.e., there is still no cure for AIDS), and Ward seems to saying here that we moderns desperately need something to fill our spiritual void. By contrast, medieval man had the advantage of spiritual "inoculation" against our modern nihilistic despair. But when Griffin finally guides the pinnacle down into the base of the spire, this is the cue for a second, even greater emotional high-point in the film, as bells ring out and denizens of both the present and past—shown in intercuts of modern Auckland and medieval Cumbria, all in color—celebrate their mutual triumph.

The nightmare of falling from a great height is perhaps the oldest in the book. Griffin's fall, however, takes on new meaning as the villagers celebrate their escape from the "Death." The boy's jig on the hilltop becomes a Dance of Death when he begins to suffer from dizziness and feels a plague boil on his armpit. He runs down to the lake to confront Connor, who experienced the same symptoms during the night but whose boil appeared on his neck and has since burst and released its pus, signifying his recovery. Despite the fact that Connor kept his distance from the others—symbolized in Griffin's dream by his going off on his own—he unwittingly

communicated the disease to his younger brother when he lifted him up under his armpits at his homecoming. Connor's glove, which in the dream seems to mark him as the victim who is to fall from the spire, until he gives it to Griffin to help him ascend the ladder to the top, now has become the agent of spreading bubonic plague. Ward stretches our credulity a bit in this scene. It's hard to imagine fleas living on a leather glove; also, the timing of the illness is off, for it normally takes about a week—not a day and a half, as is depicted in the film—for bubonic plague to incubate. Nonetheless, the scene taps into a great fear of dying alone that was genuinely felt by plague sufferers and can be traced in the chronicles. Connor is impelled to stay in the mine pit with the others, even after he first learns that plague is upon him, because, as he explains plaintively to Griffin: "I was afraid. There was nothing else I could do, you understand, there was nowhere for me to go." This is an authentic cry of anguish that could have been written by any number of medieval authors who witnessed first hand the cruel social dislocations created by the Black Death.

The final scene, where Connor pushes Griffin off into the lake in his plague coffin, carries great pathos. A myriad of themes pursued throughout the film come together at this moment. Griffin's powers of prophecy have come true: Without realizing it, he foresaw his own death when he dreamed the Celtic cross in the water—the same one which now adorns his coffin. He also is here portrayed as a sacrificial, Christ-like figure, who gave his life to spare others. The continuity of life is symbolized by the baby to which Linnet, Connor's wife, has given birth within the five or six days it would have taken Griffin to die. As his coffin floats away, Searle wishes him a tender "Godspeed," since Griffin's real journey into the after-life is just about to take place. *The Navigator* may be classified as a science fiction film, but in actuality, it is a moving testament to the enduring power of a 2,000-year-old faith.

Finally, there is the enigmatic *Book of Days*, which was written and directed by the New York performance artist, Meredith Monk. *Book of Days* not only came out in the same year as *The Navigator*, 1988, it also uses the same time-travel conceit, only in reverse. In this instance, it is the modern world that intrudes upon the Middle Ages, as construction workers detonate a brick wall, behind which lurks a monochromatic medieval world, whereupon the film suddenly switches to black and white. The two films even share the same feature character: the child prophet. Here it is a young Jewish girl called Eva (played by Toby Newman) who can see into the future and has visions of the modern world. However, as is typical of most of Monk's work, *Book of Days* does not have a plot or a story line per se. Instead, it can be considered a collage, montage, or, to use Monk's own choice of words, "a tapestry" that interweaves both medieval and modern

images. One of the ways in which the director does this is to have modern reporters, heard off camera, interview various medieval “talking heads”: a peasant shepherdess, a Jewish storyteller, a madwoman, an apostate monk, a Jewish grandfather, a doctor, and a knight. As you can probably guess, this is not a typical film. Instead, it belongs to that eclectic category known as experimental, or avant garde, cinema. Indeed, *Book of Days* was never intended for commercial release. It was shown at the New York, Montreal, and Berlin film festivals in 1988 and 1989, and at the same time, a version formatted for television was aired on PBS. Its \$1.4 million budget was financed partly by a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts. Nowadays, it is only available on VHS copies distributed by Monk herself.

Much of the film is strange and on the surface seems to have nothing to do with the Black Death. Halfway through the movie, we get a series of “entertainments,” including the sawing of a woman in half and the story of Frankenstein that is continued when the Jewish storyteller switches on an old-style, 1930s radio. All this could be Monk’s tribute to street theater; yet the latter scene could also be a cryptic reference to the Golem, the Frankenstein-like monster created by Rabbi Loew of Prague that in olden times was believed to protect the Jewish quarter from anti-Semitic pogroms, such as occurred during the Black Death. But at the core of the film are some powerful scenes which, like those in *The Seventh Seal* and *The Navigator*, invite the audience to compare medieval plagues with their modern equivalents. One obvious parallel is between the Black Death and AIDS. During the interview with the Flemish physician, “Philippus Groetius,” the doctor is asked at one point by his modern questioner: “What is a virus? How do you treat stress?”—to which his puzzled reply is, “Stress what?” Monk then intercuts the interview with images of a cell dividing as magnified under an electron microscope. The message seems to be that even with our biomedical technology, we can be just as stumped as the medieval physician by new diseases such as AIDS (which unlike plague is caused by a virus, not a bacterium). Later, when Eva has become the protege of the madwoman (played by Meredith Monk herself), who teaches Eva to trust her visions, she tells her mentor of: “a place I’ve never seen before. They walk on gray ground. I hear an intent noise. Many people are falling. They can’t breathe. There’s no air. Everyone is sick. It is hot. I’m afraid. I’m afraid.” The camera then pans left, with no editing transition, directly from the medieval setting of the madwoman’s cave to the modern streets of New York. Eva seems to be channeling modern fears of nuclear holocaust, a twentieth-century parallel to medieval plague that we have already seen referenced in both *The Seventh Seal* and *The Navigator*.

If *Book of Days* has a plot at all, it concerns the pogroms against the Jews during the Black Death. This is one of the few films to address the

subject of Christian persecution of Jews during the Middle Ages, and it certainly gives a more probing portrayal than the Hollywood treatment in *Ivanhoe* (1952). Shortly after blasting through to the Middle Ages, we are introduced to the Jewish community in town. An overhead shot of the town clearly delineates the “Jewish Quarter,” located outside the town walls, where Jews are segregated from Christians. Monk also imposes a stark contrast in their clothing—white for Christians and black for Jews—to drive home the point that these are separate communities. (As Eisenstein did in *Alexander Nevsky*, Monk seems to be reversing the symbolic connotations associated with these colors.) The Jews wear the “sign of infamy,” or the Jewish badge, which is here depicted as a yellow circle, which had been mandated by Pope Innocent III from 1215. A slow pan down a proclamation pasted to a wall sets forth the medieval proscriptions against Jews. In addition to the ghettos and the badges, Jews are also segregated by trade: The only profession open to them is moneylending. These scenes will naturally make most audiences think of the Nuremberg Laws and the yellow star of David imposed upon Jewish citizens in Nazi Germany. Although Jews and Christians mingle amicably enough in the market, we sense a coming storm. When Eva draws water from the village well, this both anticipates and refutes the accusation of well poisoning made against the Jews during the Black Death.

We are then taken inside a Jewish household, where we are shown simple furnishings and food. After a communal meal at a long table attended by the extended family (a “last supper”?), there commences a talking-head interview with the patriarch, a kindly Jewish grandfather named Jacob Benabrum (played by Pablo Vela). His sense of “otherness” from the Christian community is quickly established when the interviewer asks him if this is his “hometown”? Jacob subtly corrects him by saying, “My home is in this town, yes.” He informs us that he is a merchant and that he is defenseless, since he owns no weapons. A touch of humor is introduced when Jacob at first denies, then reluctantly admits, after heckling from his family, that he once got drunk “by accident” (probably during the Festival of Purim, a Jewish holiday celebrating misrule). In the background, we see the family both at work—counting out money on a scale—and at play—the men at dice and the women at cat’s cradle. Suddenly the interview takes on an ominous tone:

Interviewer: What’s the worst thing you can imagine happening?

Benabrum: Well, I’ve thought of this many times. The worst thing that could happen is to die alone and away from my family and in a strange town. I don’t like talking about this if you don’t mind.

Interviewer: I hear rumors of trouble in neighboring towns. Do you think the trouble will spread to this town?

Benabrum: Trouble always spreads, my friend. We know this. Always.

Interviewer: What is a radiator?

Benabrum: A radiator? I think you must be referring to the young man who makes our candles.

Interviewer: Are you happy?

Benabrum: At this moment, I'm very happy, yes.

Grandfather Jacob is then called away by his granddaughter, Eva. Monk next cuts to them sitting together in a Jewish cemetery. Eva tells her grandfather about a recurring dream, in which she sees: a "silver bird in the sky that leaves a trail of smoke"; a "woman standing on the ground" who is "not wearing many clothes" (at this point she pulls up the hair at the base of her head); and a "big carriage with no horses; people come running out of it." She also draws a plane and a car in the sand and mimes for her grandfather someone taking pictures with a camera. Like another Nostradamus figure, Eva seems to foresee the future horror of the Holocaust: the Luftwaffe bombers, the victims shipped in cattle railroad cars to the concentration camps, the "processing" of their clothes and hair before being sent to the gas chambers, even the recording of it by Nazi propagandists or Allied liberators. The cemetery is an appropriate setting for this vision, for it spells mass death. Her grandfather, however, prefers to interpret her dream biblically: The woman is the whore of Babylon, and the horseless carriage is Noah's ark. But even though he takes the comforting view that Eva's signs are "very ancient" and part of the long-established tradition of the Old Testament, he seems to have intimations of coming catastrophe, which he prefers to ignore. His greatest fear is to die alone, away from his family, a tragedy that did happen to many victims during both the Black Death and the Holocaust. If we stretch our imaginations a bit, the radiator—a device that conducts heat—may refer to the gas chambers or the crematoria. Benabrum knows from bitter experience that trouble will inevitably come (perhaps his wife died in a previous pogrom), no matter how happy one may be in the present. The people inside the carriage/ark are "trying to escape their destiny, but they will not succeed." Grandfather Jacob then teaches Eva a song that will become a thematic link later in the film. After some intervening scenes, we see Eva scratching the images of her futuristic vision onto the wall of her home.

The last third of *Book of Days* dramatizes the consequences for the Jewish community of the Black Death. As both Christians and Jews fall dead of the plague, the apostate monk tries to hold back an angry Christian

mob bent on scapegoating the Jews. He exhorts them to, "Go home," but to no avail. Suddenly the interviewer's microphone is shoved into his face:

Interviewer: Brother, brother. What's going on here?

Monk: They don't know what they're doing. They want to go to the Jewish Quarter but they don't know what they want.

They're just full of hatred. They're completely mad. They say the Jews are guilty for all this. But everyone's dying: Jews, Christians, men, women. I'm sorry I can't talk to you anymore.

The monk then turns back to the crowd in another futile attempt to persuade them to disperse. We then see the Jews being held prisoner in a large cage, as the rampaging Christian mob tramples to death a Jewish victim. Meanwhile, the Black Death spreads, which is indicated by the red areas on the overhead plan of the town that keep getting bigger and bigger, until they cover nearly the entire surface. These images are intercut with a strange figure in black who gesticulates wildly while checking his watch: Most students of the film interpret him as Father Time, or Death. Finally, we enter once more into the home of the Jewish family that was interviewed earlier. Whereas once there had been the busy hum of life, now there is a desolate silence, broken only by the buzzing of flies around the plague-ridden corpses. The camera slowly pans over all the members of the household (just as it had panned over them at their communal meal), and at last comes to rest upon Grandfather Jacob and Eva, who lie in bed together in a tender last embrace.

Toward the end of the film, Monk closes the circle by returning to the opening scene of the construction workers. This recapitulation device was also employed in *The Seventh Seal* and *The Navigator*, where it is represented by, respectively, a reading from the Book of Revelation and Griffin's dream vision of a Celtic cross in the water. In *Book of Days*, the construction crew acts like a team of amateur archeologists (a metaphor Monk has used in other films), as they enter through the beckoning doorway of the Jewish home and explore the dark, empty room with their flashlight. They eventually light upon Eva's markings: In addition to the plane and the car, there is now etched on the wall a gun, a briefcase, and a pair of eyeglasses. On the soundtrack we hear once again the song Eva sang with her grandfather. This signals that we should interpret these images like Eva did of her dream: the gun, perhaps, as a symbol of the future technology of mass extermination; and the eyeglasses and suitcase to represent the piles of possessions that were confiscated from the Jews upon their arrival at the death camps. Medieval pogroms during the Black Death, Monk implies, foreshadowed the greater tragedy of the Holocaust, for in both atrocities

the perpetrators evinced a desire to eliminate all the Jews by whatever means at their disposal.

But Monk is making another, even more powerful point here. It may be all well and good to have the gift of prophecy, as Eva has, but it is equally important to look back into the past and try to learn from it. Only in this way, Monk suggests, can we prevent the tragic events of history from repeating themselves. As Monk said in an interview about *Book of Days*: “Basic human nature remains the same, no matter what the overall environment in society is like.” The study of history is not an academic exercise for Monk, but an extremely urgent means of addressing our social ills. We are clearly invited to draw parallels not only between the pogroms against the Jews during the Black Death and the Holocaust, but also between the former event and the scapegoating of homosexuals during the AIDS crisis, an issue that was very much to the fore in the late 1980s. Today’s audiences may also bring to mind the “ethnic cleansing” that has occurred since the release of the film in the former Yugoslavia during its civil war in the 1990s. Monk’s film is not simply entertainment; it is a call and incitement to activism. Her message seems to be that, unlike the interviewees in the film, we cannot simply stand by and dispassionately watch as an atrocity takes place. *Book of Days* thus acquires a relevance that extends well beyond the date of its release.

It is remarkable how all three directors who tackle the Black Death—Bergman, Ward, and Monk—use a common fund of themes, film techniques, and even characters. Nonetheless, each filmmaker comes to dramatically different conclusions about the meaning that this apocalyptic event holds for history. The Black Death may not be a particularly prolific subject for film. Yet in spite of this, it has proved to be one of the most rich and rewarding topics of the cinematic arts.