
The Virgin Spring" and "The Seventh Seal": A Girardian Reading"

Author(s): William Mishler

Source: *Comparative Drama*, Spring 1996, Vol. 30, No. 1, Scandinavian Drama: Medieval and Modern (Spring 1996), pp. 106-134

Published by: Comparative Drama

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41153793>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Comparative Drama is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Comparative Drama*

The Virgin Spring and *The Seventh Seal*: A Girardian Reading

William Mishler

Of his more than forty films, Ingmar Bergman has set two in the Middle Ages—*The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1956) and *The Virgin Spring* (*Jungfrukällan*, 1959), the latter based on an early ballad and utilizing a screenplay that he co-authored with Ulla Isaksson—which together form an instructive pair. The former, of course, represents his breakthrough as a director of international reputation. Though heralded by the powerful *Sawdust and Tinsel* from 1953, *The Seventh Seal* was his first unquestionable masterpiece. It was a film that to Bergman's own amazement "swept like a forest fire across the world."¹ Today it continues to maintain its preeminent position with both audiences and critics. *The Virgin Spring*, however, is a different matter. Compared to his best work as a director, it has been judged a relative failure, first and foremost by Bergman himself. Initially elated by the film,² he later became sharply critical of it. In an interview from 1970, he stated: "Now I want to make it quite plain that *The Virgin Spring* must be regarded as an aberration. It's touristic, a lousy imitation of Kurosawa."³ And in his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, he neglects even to mention the film⁴ and thus tacitly removes it from among the works by which he evidently wishes to be recognized as a director.

Bergman's condemnation of *The Virgin Spring* is in my view excessive. Taken simply on its own terms, it possesses an undeniable power and presents sequences of great visual interest. On the other hand, it is true, the film is a far less captivating work than *The Seventh Seal*, less surprising to watch and less challenging to think about afterwards. Bergman locates its flaw at the conceptual level, and in my opinion he is correct to do so. After all, there is nothing amiss with the film's actors or technical resources, which are nearly identical to *The Seventh Seal*'s. Speci-

fically, Bergman locates *The Virgin Spring*'s problem in what he intriguingly calls its "totally unanalysed idea of God."⁵ In the present essay I would like to open up this "totally unanalysed idea" first of all because I believe that it will hand us an important key for understanding the disparity in artistic quality between the two films and also, I hope, provide some insight into the connecting logic of Bergman's work as a director and screenwriter. To carry out this inquiry I will draw on the work of the literary critic and anthropologist René Girard, whose theories concerning the function of religion in human society strike me as offering a powerfully articulated parallel to the psychological and anthropological insights implicitly present in many of Bergman's films.

I

It is important in regard to the matter of religion to distinguish the two senses in which the subject is particularly relevant to Bergman—i.e., the personal and the ethical. There is on the one hand the Christianity of his childhood which shadowed him well into adulthood. As the son of a strict Lutheran pastor, Bergman grew up in an atmosphere pervaded by Christian theology and Christian habits of thought from which, as an artist, he struggled mightily to free himself. This endeavor is particularly noticeable in the films of his middle period, extending from *The Seventh Seal* through the so-called trilogy of *Through a Glass Darkly* (*Såsom i en spegel*, 1961), *Winter Light* (*Nattvardsgästerna*, 1963), and *The Silence* (*Tystnaden*, 1963). These last three record the progressive stages in an examination and rejection of the notion of God as a sufficient response to the ills of the world. Bergman has called the trilogy a "reduction," thereby pointing to the tight interlinkage among the films, each taking the minimal optimism of its predecessor, its faint glimmer of theistic possibility, and subjecting it to destructive scrutiny. By the end of the trilogy, the notion of God even as resonant absence or significant silence has been expunged. In *The Silence* the trio of the film's principal characters are carried deeper and deeper into a gritty contemporary urban inferno to which, whatever its hellish connotations, there is no alternative. This is a world without grace in either the theological or the aesthetic sense of the term. The only reminiscence of grace comes in a few elegiac moments of Bach sounding from a tinny radio in an antiquated hotel room and in the ineradicable fact of the communicative power of language. Clearly the fierce pessimism of this film shows Bergman's resolve to be

done with any false optimism derived from his childhood faith as well as, perhaps, his fierce resentment for having to do so. After this point in his career, however many Christian images, references, and allusions his films may contain—e.g., *Fanny and Alexander*, his last film, will stage a murderous confrontation between Bergman's youthful alter ego and a sadistically life-denying Church of Sweden priest in the position of a father figure—the transcendent God of theology is no longer available as a viable point of reference.

Charted on Bergman's biographical trajectory running from the questioning of faith to its foreclosure, *The Seventh Seal* marks a fleeting point of equilibrium:

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. Thus, there are no neurotic complications between the knight and his vassals.

Also, I infused the characters of Jof and Mia with something that was very important to me: the concepts of the holiness of the human being. If you peel off the layers of various theologies, the holy always remains.⁶

From this it seems logical to draw the conclusion that one of the reasons Bergman turned to the fourteenth century was to give himself the opportunity to confront Christianity on its own turf, so to speak, by returning to an era when Christianity provided the dominant philosophical and religious framework for society in order to call it to account. In doing so he was not simply carrying out a purely personal exorcism but confronting a conceptual dilemma which he had in common with many major artists of the modern era. That is, if Christianity has lost its metaphysical validity, what is to substantiate the ethical and moral categories which flow directly from it? Unlike the postulate of a supernatural being, the injunction that people treat each other like "brothers," i.e., equitably—a teaching central to both the New and Old Testament—proved impossible for Bergman to lay aside. But this is probably not an apt formulation of his development. It would be more accurate to say that as Bergman moved away from his childhood notion of a father God in charge of the world—a God who traditionally balanced his accounts of good and

evil—he was left without a vantage point from which to confront the dilemma constituted by the inherent destructiveness of human relationships to which both his temperament and his religious upbringing had sensitized him. This, I think, and not the question of a purely personal faith, is the religious dilemma to which Bergman so frequently refers in his writings and interviews. For example, in his introduction to the volume containing the text of *The Seventh Seal* in English translation, he states:

To me, religious problems are continuously alive. I never cease to concern myself with them; it goes on every hour of every day. Yet this does not take place on the emotional level, but on an intellectual one. Religious emotions, religious sentimentality, is something I got rid of long ago—I hope. The religious problem is an intellectual one to me. . . .⁷

From the inception of his film career Bergman has placed his focus on the disorder of human relationships, never on the rational violence of conquest but always on the violence that people perpetrate on each other for no discernible reason. If the characters in many of his films call out to God or, more often, express despair at God's silence, they do so not only in function of Bergman's private crisis of faith but because they have been touched by violence in a way that would open an abyss for anyone's understanding. They have bumped up against an anomalous destructiveness that leaves them shaken and fearful, suddenly in doubt concerning their basic assumptions about the world. Whether it is Jof the clown in *The Seventh Seal*, who suddenly grasps the fact that a total stranger wishes to do him serious harm for purely arbitrary motives, or the recluse Johan in *The Passion of Anna*, who on a given day begins to find the bodies of tortured animals hanging from the branches of bushes and trees around his house, the world suddenly reveals that it houses an evil apparently larger than it is, for there are no worldly grounds to account for it. Biology is of no help here, because intraspecific violence is a specifically human characteristic; no other animal species preys upon itself under normal circumstances. What then is the factor in human culture that draws humans to a kind of violence which ultimately becomes self-destructive with such powerful magnetism? This is the question posed by *The Seventh Seal* as Bergman, responding to a question concerning its underlying point, indicates with the following anecdote:

Three little children go out for a walk together—two little girls aged

four, with a little boy of two. They take a skipping-rope with them. They put it round the neck of the two-year-old and tie the ends to a couple of trees—just high enough for the boy to have to stand on tip-toe. And walk away. And we don't know what it is that *causes these two to agree* to do such a thing.⁸

This puzzlement is central to all Bergman's work from first to last. What distinguishes his approach from most film-makers is that, for all his fascination with the phenomenon of violence, he refuses to exploit it for its sensational allure or to reduce it in some sociological or behaviorist sense. For him violence remains an ethical matter which he does not hesitate to designate with the theological term *evil*:

What I believed in those days—and believed for a long time—was the existence of a virulent evil, in no way dependent upon environmental or hereditary factors. Call it original sin or whatever you like—anyway an active evil, of which human beings, as opposed to animals, have a monopoly. Our very nature, qua human beings, is that inside us we always carry around destructive tendencies, conscious or unconscious, aimed at both ourselves and at the outside world.⁹

Note the phrase: "in no way dependent upon environmental or hereditary factors." In the world of Bergman's films people, even very young children, are treated as free moral agents. Bergman may be profoundly puzzled as to what led the two children to sacrifice their companion, but he refuses to trivialize their act as a simple instance of conditioned response.

In sum, therefore, we might somewhat schematically say that during the first half of Bergman's film career he pursued the question of human self-destructiveness with the instincts and insights derived from his childhood faith, which to a large degree provided him with a conceptual framework and a set of traditional responses. In the second half, on the other hand, he has allowed the question to pose itself as such—i.e., unanswerably and with a correspondingly greater sense of anguish. In certain films this results in superbly fine-grained analyses of the mechanisms of violence, as for example in his incomparable masterpiece *Persona*, while in others the magnitude of the problem surpasses his available artistic resources. The late film *From the Life of the Marionettes* (*Ur Marionetternas liv*, 1980) is in my opinion one of these latter, but for our purposes it contains the following very useful articulation of the problem. Bergman has one of the characters cry:

There is *something* you must take seriously! Can't you see that? There is something *menacing* going on which we don't speak about because we have no words. What sort of damned idyll is it we are clutching on to tooth and nail, though it is hollow and the decay is oozing through all the holes? Why don't we let all that is black and dangerous come to light? Why do we block up all the exits and pretend it isn't there? Why don't we stop hoping for all kinds of political wonders, although we hear the roar getting louder and know that the catastrophe is approaching? Why don't we shatter a society that is so dead, so inhuman, so crazy, so humiliating, so poisoned? People try to cry out, but we stuff up their mouths with verbiage. The bombs explode, children are torn to pieces, and the terrorists are punished; but for every terrorist that is killed, ten are standing ready—they are invincible because they are in league with a power that we can't reason with. They are victims like their own victims, just as we are.¹⁰

The term 'victim' is central to the thinking of René Girard, to whose work I will now turn. The following is a brief and schematic presentation of those aspects of Girard's theories that are particularly relevant to *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*.

II

Like Bergman's, but in the anthropological register, René Girard's work is focused on the phenomenon of human violence, which he sees as arising from the imitative or *mimetic* quality of human desire. In his first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, he observes that many of the great novelists of the nineteenth century—Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky—portray the characteristic disorder of human life as deriving from the inveterate tendency of human beings to copy each other's desires.¹¹ They choose an object—a lover, for example, or a social position—because other people already want it. This propensity does not represent some perverse quirk of late civilization but is a constituent factor of human reality. If man is the most mimetic of animals, as Aristotle recognized, it is because human beings have no choice but to look to each other for cues as to how to satisfy their biological needs. Unlike Freud, for example, who proposed that infants are born with pre-determined objects of attraction, Girard follows the great literary analysts of human desire in ascribing its disruptive potential precisely to the fact that it has no *a priori*. The corollary is that in the human world the object is never attractive in and of itself but because desirability has been attributed to it through another's choice. Agamemnon desires Briseis

not because the slave woman is irresistible in herself but because she has been singled out by the prestigious hero Achilles.

And as this example demonstrates, the mimetic quality of desire tends to turn it automatically toward conquest or what Girard calls *appropriative desire*. If *A* reaches for an apple, *B* will tend to reach for the same apple; if *A* gets it first, *B* will experience an urge to take it away. Human desire, in other words, is never a simple one-to-one relationship between subject and object but always a triangular relation between these two as linked by a model, whom Girard calls a mediator. If the mediation occurs with a sufficient distance between subject and model so that they cannot enter into conflict with each other, Girard calls it *external mediation*. Conversely, if the two are on relatively the same footing with each other, as in the example of Achilles and Agamemnon, the mediation is termed *internal*, and the mimesis, as I just indicated, becomes *appropriative* and potentially violent. As the social space between subject and mediator lessens, the tension between them augments and can very quickly supplant the original object of desire in terms of importance. Briseis becomes a mere token in the overheated rivalry of Achilles and Agamemnon.

In Girard's next book, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), he extends his insights concerning mimetic desire to the study of ancient religion and the rituals and institutions that derive from it. Girard recognizes that for ancient society—or indeed any society lacking a good legal system and the means to enforce it—the violence instigated by appropriative mimesis poses the gravest of dangers. Once individuals begin to exchange hostilities with each other—words, gestures, blows, thefts, etc.—violence will quickly escalate and propagate itself throughout the group in the form of feuds and vendettas. Violence, in other words, is driven by the same mimetic mechanism as desire. “As the crisis grows more acute,” writes Girard, “the community members are transformed into ‘twins,’ matching images of violence. I would be tempted to say that they are each *doubles* of the other.”¹² And as epic and saga attest, once this force of violent social undifferentiation is unleashed in a group, it will tend to thrive and expand like a forest fire. In Girard's words:

The mechanism of reciprocal violence can be described as a vicious circle. Once a community enters the circle, it is unable to extricate itself. We can define this circle in terms of vengeance and reprisals, and we can offer diverse psychological descriptions of these reactions. As long as the working capital of accumulated hatred and

suspicion exists at the center of the community, it will continue to increase no matter what men do. Each person prepares himself for the probable aggression of his neighbors and interprets his neighbor's preparations as confirmation of the latter's aggressiveness. In more general terms, the mimetic character of violence is so intense that once violence is installed in a community, it cannot burn itself out.¹³

In a bold theoretical move, Girard proposes that primitive society's response to the threat posed by mimetic violence consisted in deflecting all its destructive energies onto a single victim, a surrogate figure to whom the responsibility for the general crisis could be imputed, and who was then either sacrificed or expelled. This is the *pharmakos* or *scapegoat* figure of Greek or Jewish religion but is also, Girard argues, a foundational figure to be found at the origin of all religion. Because the threat inherent in appropriative mimesis is always the same, it presents every group with the same basic choice. Either its members can destroy each other through conflictual mimesis, or they can unite against the perceived originator of the crisis. Taking the latter course they strengthen their ties with each other and obtain the inestimable benefit of peace. Religion, states Girard, writing in the spirit of Durkheim, is humankind's semi-mystified attempt to channel and defuse its own violence.¹⁴ In choosing a surrogate victim, of course, they are not consciously aware of the maneuver they are effecting, at least not initially nor ever thereafter with full clarity. As far as the disputants are concerned, the selected figure is always genuinely guilty of the crimes of which he is accused. He is a foreigner, or a witch, or a subversive—impure, suspiciously *other*, evil, *sacer*, in its negative sense of *unclean* or *damned*. Once the figure has been sacrificed, however, his valence reverses. The peace which accrues to the group as a result of his death or expulsion is of such tangible benefit that in retrospect the figure is endowed with all the healing qualities of the sacred in its positive sense. Girard describes this reversal as follows:

If my thesis is correct, the *pharmakos* . . . has a dual connotation. On the one hand he is a *woebegone* figure, an object of scorn who is also weighed down with guilt; a butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and of course, outbursts of violence. On the other hand, we find him surrounded by a quasi-religious aura of veneration; he has become a sort of cult object. This duality reflects the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect; the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this

baneful violence into a beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance.¹⁵

Once the threat of destructive violence has been expelled in the figure of the scapegoat, rites and proscriptions are drawn up to prevent its return. Everything which might serve to bring back the condition of violent reciprocity—what Girard calls the *sacrificial crisis*—is prohibited, made taboo; rites and rituals, on the other hand, are fashioned which actually *do* recreate the sacrificial crisis but in a carefully controlled manner so as to forestall its return by homeopathic means, so to speak. Sporting events, sacrificial rites, theatrical performance, all variously re-enact the breakdown of social distinctions effected by mimetic violence and then their re-establishment through the renewed power of the sacred which has been achieved through the sacrifice of the scapegoat.

In this brief discussion I cannot do justice to the subtlety and richness of Girard's analysis, but I hope I have presented enough to suggest something of its elegance and conceptual power. In my view it proposes intriguingly plausible connections between disparate phenomena in the human world that would otherwise tend to remain opaque. The function of Greek drama, for example, may be seen in the light of Girard's theory to have been that of offering the city of Athens a kind of laboratory for assessing the ambiguous efficacy of the religious scapegoat mechanism on which its civic peace was founded. My metaphor, of course, suggests a type and degree of awareness that is obviously anachronistic, for the workings of the sacrificial mechanism are never visible from within. Greek audiences participated in drama in an enthusiastic and semi-religious manner, and here the "semi-" is important. When Greek audiences observed the fates of tragic heroes on stage, they were both re-immersed in a version of the primordial sacrificial crisis and its resolution at the same time that they were offered a certain aesthetic distance from which to assess it. Greek drama operated as a delicate balance. It derived from sacrificial ritual both its ecstatic power and its object of scrutiny. Clearly either side of the balance, if pressed too far, would have canceled the other. Girard writes:

Even in fifth century Greece—the Athens of the great tragedians—human sacrifice had not, it seems, completely disappeared. The practice was perpetuated in the form of the *pharmakos*, maintained by the city at its own expense and slaughtered at the appointed festivals as well as at a moment of civic disaster. If examined closely for

traces of human sacrifice, Greek tragedy offers some remarkable revelations.¹⁶

In the ritual performance, the community tries to mimic the gestures that effected its salvation. It is also trying, paradoxically enough, to recapture through ritual the element of complete spontaneity. Here, as elsewhere, tragedy occupies an ambiguous, intermediary position between the ritual performance and the spontaneous model that the ritual attempts to reproduce.¹⁷

On this point Girard's analysis seems to agree completely with much recent thinking about Greek tragedy. Here, for example, is a textbook account of the Theater of Dionysus:

The plague that struck Athens in the first years of the Peloponnesian War, the unnecessary butchery of both friends and enemies, and the total loss of self-control led many Athenians to return to the earlier and more primitive Dionysiac celebrations. The religion, complete with rituals of animal or human sacrifice, lasted well into the second century of the Christian era.

Dionysus is also the god of theater, for the origin of drama lies in the choral odes, dithyrambs, sung in his honor, odes that became drama when Thespis, traditionally the first actor, stepped out from the Chorus and engaged in dialogue with it. The Theater of Dionysus, on the slope of the Acropolis, where the *Bacchae* was first performed after the death of Euripides, contained, like all Greek theaters, a throne constructed in the center of the first tier to be occupied by the High Priest of Dionysus at all theatrical productions. And this Priest was at the performance of the *Bacchae*, watching, along with fifteen thousand spectators, the god he served act out the cruel and terrible ritual of *sparagmós* and *ómophagía* on the body of Pentheus, whose name means grief and mourning.¹⁸

Drama, according to such a view, stands next to the sacrificial scapegoat ritual as its continuation and potentially critical reflection. On the one hand audiences were plunged into the fresh delirium of a sacrificial crisis and its resolution, on the other they were given a partial view of the arbitrary process involved in the selecting of the scapegoat figure. On account of Girard's analysis we are in a position to appreciate how great was the potential risk involved in that exposure, for upon the legitimacy of the sacrificial mechanism rested the entire structure of the sacred, which in turn served to undergird the secular order of law. To see through it, as perhaps we can only begin fully to see through it today, would mean to expose to view both the generative role of vio-

lence in human culture and religion's ambiguous complicity with it, Christian as well as ancient. This is the kind of critical assessment to which Girard's work offers both an invitation and a set of critical tools to accomplish it. So too Bergman's work functions in analogous aesthetic fashion. As a student of theater and theater director, he is fully aware of the view that drama's roots were in sacrificial rites, as his following remarks on the *Bacchae* attest:

In ancient Greece, theater was inextricably tied to religious rituals. The audience arrived long before sunrise. At dawn the masked priests appeared. When the sun rose over the mountains, it illuminated the center of the stage, where a small altar was erected. The blood of a sacrificial animal was collected in a large vessel. One of the priests hid behind the others. He wore a golden mask, like that of a god. When the sun had risen even higher, two priests elevated the vessel at a precise moment, so that the audience could see the godly mask reflected in the blood. An orchestra of drums and pan flutes played, and the priests sang. After a few minutes the officiant lowered the vessel and drank the blood.¹⁹

III

In his third major work, *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*, Girard summarizes his understanding of the sacred power animating primitive religion as "the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis."²⁰ In other words, for Girard, the sacred is nothing but the misrecognized force of a group's violence that has gathered itself to a focus and has been safely discharged through the lightning rod of the scapegoat. The latter is then seen, through a further act of creative misrecognition, as a magical benefactor who through the gift of his death has saved the group from disaster. The only flaw in this mechanism consists in the fact that it prevents human beings from grasping the workings of their own violence. It is this power, this mechanism, and these assumptions that Bergman as a director examines in *The Virgin Spring*, the text of which he and Ulla Isaksson had based on the ballad *Töre of Vänge's Daughters*.²¹

At the beginning of the film, Karin, the daughter of a wealthy farmer couple, Töre and Märeta, is awakened one Good Friday morning and told to ride to church with the traditional offering of candles. Karin is shown to be the couple's pampered darling, soft

and blond, naive and cajoling. At her insistent request her mother dresses her in a fine yellow undergarment “sewn by fifteen virgins” and a shiny silk dress. Meanwhile in the cow shed we are shown Karin’s antithesis, a dark and surly servant girl named Ingeri, the bastard daughter of the farm’s cook, who treats her with resentment and scorn. Ingeri is unmarried and visibly pregnant. The black and white contrast between the two girls extends to religion. Karin is a pure and virginal Christian, while Ingeri, though nominally a Christian, mutteringly invokes Odin.

Ingeri detests Karin. When told by her mother to prepare food for Karin, she packs a live toad between two slices of bread and puts it in the basket. At first we are made to think that she is resentful because Karin has been given the pleasant task of riding to church while she must stay home and do farm work, but later we discover that this is not the real cause of her resentment. Soon the farmer tells Ingeri to ride with his daughter to keep her company in the woods. The two set out. After a short ride they stop to pick flowers and chat, and Karin asks Ingeri if it hurts to be pregnant. The other replies that she may well soon be pregnant soon herself. Karin replies that she intends to be married with honor. Stung by her naive hauteur, Ingeri says that it is equally likely that Karin will be raped. Now it becomes apparent that Ingeri’s hatred of Karin is based in sexual jealousy. At a dance on the preceding evening, Karin had danced with Ingeri’s lover, Simon, a farmer, the man responsible for her pregnancy. Simon appears as they are about to continue their journey. He jokes and talks with Karin but pays no attention to Ingeri. Once he leaves, Ingeri jealously attacks Karin. Karin claims that she danced with him in order to ask him to take care of Ingeri. Nastily, Ingeri twists this to ask whether Karin has agreed to have sex with Simon if he would arrange an abortion for her. Karin strikes her face. Surprised at her own outburst she quickly begs forgiveness. Ingeri tells her not to ask for her forgiveness in a tone of cold loathing. With the lines of demarcation thus clearly drawn, the film is finished with its introduction.

Bergman’s narrative technique in the film is both coarse-grained and subtle. On the one hand he presents his characters through contrasts so starkly drawn that the figures assume the stock features of allegory or archetype. Beneath this surface simplicity, however, his analysis of the psychological mechanisms is complex. The characters’ facial expressions and body language, their quick rejoinders or meaningful silences reveal that they are all entangled in webs of mimetic desire. Love in Töre’s and

Märeta's family is not bestowed generously, it is bestowed tactically. Karin cuddles with her father in ways that clearly reveal her competition with her mother, while Märeta's indulgences to her daughter make it equally apparent that she is a rival with her husband for the girl's affection. With the conferred shrewdness of the family pet, Karin understands her centrality in the emotional tug of war and disingenuously exploits it. In this way she becomes not only the central object of desire for her rivalrous parents—a static configuration—but a self-alienated participant in a triangular struggle fueled by its own disastrously progressive dynamic. Had Bergman as director simply wanted to present a medieval legend of love, violence, and revenge drawn in clear, bold strokes, he could have economized in his presentation of this kind of complication. If his desired effect was the pathos of an innocent lamb unwittingly released into the jaws of evil, he could have achieved it more simply and effectively by means of the archetypally happy family as he did with Jof, Mia, and baby in *The Seventh Seal*. Instead, by the time Karin's shining figure is placed upon her horse, with her long blond hair flowing down over her expensive cape, the viewer has the vaguely uneasy sense that her glow is fueled less by virginal innocence than by the dangerously negative electricity of the family's rivalry. As a consequence Karin is sent into the world as a kind of lodestone for all the available ambient desire.

The triangular mechanism of course also involves Ingeri, who would have been Karin's positional rival even without Simon. By adding Simon to the picture, Ingeri's desire for vengeance is increased. Karin's mere presence is enough to reveal to the other woman that she is no longer a player in the erotic game. When Simon meets the two women, he does not even turn his eyes in Ingeri's direction. Ingeri understands her position. Once Simon has gone, Ingeri has no words of reproach for him; she converts all of her pain into a malevolence directed at Karin. Thus, when a trio of goat herds appears upon the forest road, itinerant brothers who are in fact thieves, two middle-aged men and a boy of fourteen, they appear as the pure concretization of the negative forces already at work. We know at once that they will attack her, "appropriate" her, because she comes charged not only with many material signs of the affection that others bear to her but with an unmistakable air of being entitled to it. This is what qualifies the ensuing rape as more than an instance of simple lust. We see that the men's desire is fueled as much by resentment as by physical attraction. The two older brothers who attack her—

each of course being prodded by the other's desire—and eventually kill her will make their approach with tense and surly expressions on their faces. As much as any physical pleasure, they desire to dispossess her of her aura of self-containment, for in concurring with the world's understanding of her as desirable—i.e., as being in possession of that singular object of desire which is herself—Karin automatically assumes the position of model and rival to all competitors for that same object.²² Let me hasten to add that I am not proposing that it is Karin's "fault" that she is raped and murdered, but rather I am simply articulating the complex causal mechanism implicit in the scene. Within the logic of the film, the men have raised to a third and final level the potential for mimetic violence implicit in it from the start. While Karin is being raped and murdered, Ingeri looks on with guilty glee.

The second half of the film depicts the counterblow to mimetic appropriation: mimetic vengeance. After abandoning the body of the girl, the men unwittingly travel to her father's farm and request food and lodging for the night. This is granted. After dinner, one of the brothers offers to sell Karin's bloodied dress to her mother, Märeta. Suppressing her horrified reaction, she says she'll show it to her husband. She goes outside, sits down, and weeps. Then she stands up and quietly bolts the door, locking the men inside. She then alerts her husband and shows him the bloody dress. He gets out of bed and takes his sword. Stepping outside, he finds the cowering Ingeri. Drawing her to him in an ambiguous embrace—an embrace that retroactively complicates our understanding of the family's psychological dynamic²³—he hears her narration of the manner of Karin's death. She confesses that she wished for it, that it is her fault. He has no anger for her. He instructs her to fire up the sauna. He then goes to the top of a hill and wrestles a young birch to the ground in a scene that carries visual overtones of rape, whereupon he goes to the sauna and cleanses his naked body (with Ingeri looking on) by beating it with birch branches. Apparently this is to be understood as a pagan rite of purification, preparatory to a revenge killing. Putting on clean clothes, he tells Ingeri to fetch his slaughter knife. He enters the dining hall where the men are sleeping and seats himself in his chieftain's chair with its high corner poles adorned with pagan dragons. Driving his knife into the table top, he sits, waiting for morning.

When morning comes he kills the men by stabbing the first and burning the second to death by lying on top of him in the

open fireplace. The act is shot to serve as a visual echo of Karin's rape. At this point the requirements of vengeance have been satisfied but not the demands of the man's rage. Against his wife's mild protest, Töre pursues the innocent and terrified young boy around the room, grabs him, lifts up him above his head, and throws him against the wall. Uncertain whether he has killed the boy, he kneels down beside him. When he sees that he is dead, the man directs a long glance to the dragons on his chair, then back to his own hands. He prays for forgiveness.

At this point in our discussion we should consider the function of the film's clearly demarcated pagan/Christian theme, which has only been mentioned in passing. In pursuing this theme Isaksson and Bergman follow a long line of Scandinavian dramatists (in addition to many novelists and poets) by analyzing their culture as driven by two rival religious ethical systems: the pagan imperative of revenge and the Christian ethic of forgiveness—a split which, on account of Scandinavia's late conversion to Christianity, presumably remains closer to the historical surface than in southern Europe. In addition to the references to Odin that have been already noted, an entire scene is devoted to showing the strong place held by his cult within the ostensibly Christian culture of fourteenth-century Scandinavia. Immediately following the scene in which Simon talks to Karin while Ingeri looks on, the women enter the forest and come to a mill in which lives a strange one-eyed old man who is a devotee of Odin. Making the point, Bergman trains his camera on a raucously cawing raven as the man steps out to greet the women; Odin, of course, has only one eye, and his totem bird is the raven. Karin refuses the man's invitation to enter, but Ingeri accepts. Inside the man pulls Ingeri to his side and offers her a means to get rid of her unborn baby. Looking around, Ingeri realizes that the man offers sacrifices to Odin. Frightened, she rises and flees. The purpose of the scene seems to be to establish paganism, the cult of Odin, as a sinister religion involved with magic and human sacrifice. Now if we add the evidence of this scene to the dragons on Töre's chair and several other more cryptic references, it seems that as the film moves toward its conclusion it invites us implicitly to make the following analysis: Töre and his wife, despite crucifixes on their walls, prayers before meals, and abundant other signs of Christian piety, are in fact pagans at heart. Because their love for Karin was not disinterested Christian *agape*, it became mimetic warfare with their daughter as both weapon and object. Her death removed all ambiguity from their situation and moved them easily

back to the ethic of vengeance required by the heroic code of pagan Scandinavia. In the killing of the innocent fourteen-year-old boy, however, the father has overstepped a boundary, at least in emotional terms, and shocked himself into awareness. Appalled by the disparity between his self-image and the murderous work of his hands, he moves toward Christian repentance.

He and his wife and Ingeri now set out to find Karin's body. On the way, the wife proclaims that she is the guilty one because she was jealous of Karin's love for her father. Also, she says, she had transferred all her love to her daughter, withholding it from her husband. Again, this information is not really intended for Töre but for the audience who can now take it as corroboration for the earlier suspicion that the rape and murder were, at one level, merely the exteriorization of the mimetic dynamic at work in the family. Once they arrive at the site of the murder, Töre collapses by the river while Märeta holds her dead child in her arms. Töre suddenly realizes that the only way he can atone for what he has done is to build a church on the site with his own hands. Then, as the couple lifts their daughter's body from the ground, his penitential resolution is confirmed by a miraculous spring of water which gushes from the ground. Lifting handfuls of the miraculous water, Ingeri and Märeta cleanse themselves. The meaning of the sign is clear: evil paganism has been washed away to be replaced by a clear and repentant Christianity. The evil death of the innocent victim shows itself to be a wellspring of benefits for the living. The love of husband and wife is purified, and the wayward blacksheep daughter, Ingeri, is retrieved from her precarious intermediate position in no-man's land defined by the seismic splits—pagan/Christian, inside the family/outside the family, sexual daughter/non-sexual daughter—and enlisted as an ally in the disinterested project of building a church dedicated to the memory of Karin.

It is this conclusion, we recall, that Bergman eventually found so unsatisfactory. Now when we view it in the light of Girard's theory we can agree that his dissatisfaction is well founded. Clearly the film suffers from a conceptual confusion concerning the beneficial potential of sacrifice—a confusion which is made manifest in its final scene but which has been implicit in everything that has gone before. Far from serving as a validation of the Christian love that the film so obviously wishes to endorse, the miraculous spring merely confirms the beneficial effect that the sacrificial death of the scapegoat has traditionally conferred on culture. Karin's death introduces nothing new into the equation.

It is merely another example of the old sacrificial mechanism which, as explained earlier, consists in loading the ills of the community onto some extraordinary figure—extraordinary in either the positive or negative sense—and then sacrificing it. Here, however, the objection might be raised that it was not Karin's family who sacrificed her. And while this is true, at least in the strictly literal sense, nevertheless the benefit which they seek to draw from her death (foreshadowed by the death of the innocent boy) reveals their complete complicity in the sacrificial mechanism, which, as Girard has argued, constitutes the essence of paganism. Though the church will be nominally Christian, its real prestige will derive from the memory of the slain daughter who, with the appearance of the miraculous spring, has just given the first sign of her sacred powers. The church could as well have been a temple to Diana or any other mythical being whose sacrificial death becomes transmuted by mystified retelling—i.e., by myth—into a fount of benefit for culture.

In sum, to speak of *The Virgin Spring* in strictly conceptual (i.e., anthropological) terms, one might say that it succeeds to the extent that it gives the viewer a sense of the connection between the destructive forces generated by appropriative mimesis and the sacrificial mechanism which they ultimately call into play as a means of self-regulation. Conversely it involves itself in an artistically damaging self-contradiction by first positing paganism, the cult of Odin, as the antithesis of Christianity and then proceeding to give unintended testimony to the fact that both religions are driven by the same sacrificial mechanism. But, oddly enough, what became self-sabotage in *The Virgin Spring* furnished *The Seventh Seal* with its analytic energy. In the latter film Bergman as screenwriter and director focused his attention on the culture generated by Christianity and accused it of providing an ambiance in which the scapegoat dynamic, far from being mitigated, is actively encouraged to run rampant.

IV

A Girardian analysis of *The Virgin Spring* allows us inquire whether Christianity might be seen as simply another delivery system of the sacred's ambiguous benefits. If so, says Girard, it would be reaping social benefits from the very practice it was called into being to oppose—Christ's radical simplification of Jewish law consisting, after all, in the dual injunction to love God and one's fellow human beings. Minimally interpreted, this latter

command expressly prohibits the answering of violence with violence—an injunction which, to the extent that it is heeded, spikes the drive wheel by which the sacred is generated.

Questions concerning Christianity's entanglement in the coils of sacred violence were crucial to both Ibsen and Strindberg, at least in certain phases of their careers. In such plays as *The Pretenders*,²⁴ *Brand*, and *Emperor and Galilean*, Ibsen explored historical Christianity's role in maintaining and capitalizing on the primitive scapegoat mechanism. These imaginative explorations were crucial to his later more famous realistic plays in which the mimetic dynamism which forms "the compact spirit of the majority" remained a persistent object of inquiry. And in Strindberg's plays the problem of deciphering the logic of the Bible's approach to mimetic violence is a recurrent one. It is central, for example, to the historical drama *The Saga of the Folkungs*, a work, incidentally, of considerable potential interest to the discussion of *The Seventh Seal*, given the profound affinities between the two.²⁵ Early in the play, the following exchange takes place between the woman to be known in history as St. Birgitta and King Magnus:

BIRGITTA: Den unge tronföljaren vars krona du bär, blev halshuggen för sin faders brott, så löd domen. Det barnet var ändock oskyldigt, och hans fader Birgers brott bestod endast i att han som anfallen vid Håtuna försvarade sig vid Nyköping. Vill du sätta dig till domare över Herrans rådslag.

MAGNUS: Jag skulle nog ha lust ibland, men modet sviker mig. Mig lyster dock fråga om vi leva i gamla testamentet, där det gällde hämnd, öga för öga, och fädernas missgärningar straffades på barnen, eller om icke Kristus kommit i världen för att lyfta på lagens förbannelse. Kan icke Gud förlåta längre, utan måste ta ut hämnd till sista skärven, under det kan fordrar att vi skola förlåta? Ställer han större fordringar på oss än på sig?

BIRGITTA: Du har på sistone tagit dig för att framställa frågor, som icke må framställas.

MAGNUS: Därför att de icke kunna besvaras!²⁶

BIRGITTA: Nej, därför att de icke få framställas, ännu mindre besvaras.

(BIRGITTA: The young heir to the throne whose crown you wear was beheaded because of his father's crime, the judgment said. All the

same that child was innocent, and his father Birger's crime consisted only of having defended himself at Nyköping when he had been attacked at Håtuna. Would you be judge of the Lord's judgments?

MAGNUS: I'd like to at times, but I don't have the courage. I'd like to ask, though, if we're living in the Old Testament dispensation of an eye for an eye, vengeance for vengeance, and the visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the children. Or did Christ come into the world to take away the curse of the law? Can't God forgive any more? Does He have to avenge Himself to the last grain while He demands that we forgive? Does he require more of us than of Himself?

BIRGITTA: Lately you've begun to ask questions that must not be asked.

MAGNUS: Because they can't be answered!

BIRGITTA: No, because they mustn't be asked, still less answered!)

In my view, Magnus' questions do more than simply provide a psychological portrait of a troubled mind in the theological language appropriate to the age. The questions are substantive. They direct an inquiry to the hidden anthropological mechanisms at work in the culture—both modern culture and that of the Middle Ages. Notice that it is Birgitta, the voice of the Church, who tries to stifle the inquiry. I do not have the space here to do more than quote this passage from Strindberg's play, but I do so nonetheless because it forms such a clear transitional link between our discussion of *The Virgin Spring* and *The Seventh Seal*. The questions asked by King Magnus in *The Saga of the Folkungs* were clearly of the type drawn upon by Bergman as he sat down to write *The Seventh Seal*, and the way in which they were answered makes all the difference between the two films.

Here the question may well arise as to whether it is possible to draw such a clear dividing line as the one I am proposing between sacrificial religion on the one hand and Christianity on the other. Does not Christianity see Jesus as *the* unique sacrificial victim? The question invites a potentially long and complicated discussion, both theological and historical, which would be far beyond the scope of this article. Since the critical optic I am proposing, however, is Girard's, I can perhaps most economically address the question with his own very uncompromising words:

There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may

give for that sacrifice. At no point in the Gospels is the death of Jesus defined as a sacrifice. The passages that are invoked to justify a sacrificial conception of the Passion both can and should be interpreted with no reference to sacrifice in any of the accepted meanings.

Certainly the Passion is presented to us in the Gospels as an act that brings salvation to humanity. But it is in no way presented as a sacrifice.

If you have really followed my argument up to this point, you will already realize that from our particular prospect the sacrificial interpretation of the Passion must be criticized and exposed as a most enormous and paradoxical misunderstanding—and at the same time as something necessary—and as the most revealing indication of mankind's radical incapacity to understand its own violence, even when that violence is conveyed in the most explicit fashion.

Thanks to the sacrificial reading it has been possible for what we call Christendom for fifteen or twenty centuries; that is to say, a culture has existed that is based, like all cultures (at least up to a certain point) on the mythological forms engendered by the founding mechanism. Paradoxically, the sacrificial reading of the Christian text itself provides the basis. Mankind relies upon a misunderstanding of the text that explicitly reveals the founding mechanism to re-establish cultural forms which remain sacrificial and to engender a society that, by virtue of this misunderstanding, takes its place in the sequence of all other cultures, still clinging to the sacrificial vision that the Gospel rejects.²⁷

In Girard's view, what permitted the misunderstanding to arise was a kind of logical fallacy which might be stated as follows: Since Jesus is clearly presented by the Gospels as an innocent victim, one who was used in scapegoating fashion by his accusers, and since his death somehow was a source of benefit to mankind, then the mechanism which brought about his death must also have been a good one. Although rarely articulated in so many words, such thinking gives rise to the view that *it must somehow be a good thing to put innocent people to death as Christ was put to death*. Or a slightly more plausible version, at least in emotional terms: *the death of innocent victims* (because their deaths resemble Christ's) *is somehow valuable*. Clearly Bergman was in the grip of some such logic when he composed *The Virgin Spring*. But in Girard's reading of the Gospels, the point is exactly the opposite: Jesus is the victim whose total and obvious innocence exposes the scapegoat mechanism of conventional culture for what it is, an unwarranted transfer of collective violence which only temporarily serves to abate

violence. In making this exposure, the Gospels become unique instruments of cultural change. No other texts, Girard claims, are as thorough in their revelation of the transfers by which collective violence generates provisional social order. Every society, he states, in which these texts gain a foothold eventually turns its attention to the scapegoating mechanisms by which it maintains itself. The innocent victim—the witch, the Jew, the minority, the *Other*—is given a hearing, however belatedly. If this is the case, then the harsh criticism directed against the medieval Church in *The Seventh Seal* could be seen as deriving from the anti-sacrificial spirit of the Gospels themselves.

“If we are at the point where we compete in the penetrating and subtle discovery of scapegoats, both individual and collective,” asks Girard, “where was the fourteenth century?”²⁸ Bergman’s film is certainly no answer to this question precisely because it benefits from an additional five centuries’ worth of the deconstructive presence of the Gospels, but its anachronistic perspective permits an analysis which casts light on both periods. I do not intend to discuss the entire film but only its central episodes in which the scapegoating dynamic receives a masterfully fugal treatment.

When Antonius Blok, the Knight, and Jöns, his Squire, visit a church on their way to the Embarrassment Inn, the former goes to confession and the latter engages in a discussion with a painter who is painting a mural of the Dance of Death that illustrates a procession of plague victims. Remarking on the depiction of flagellants beating themselves with whips in the hope of moving God to mercy, the painter says, “The remarkable thing is that the poor creatures think the pestilence is the Lord’s punishment. Mobs of people who call themselves Slaves of Sin are swarming over the country, flagellating themselves and others, all for the glory of God.”²⁹ The fact that the Church endorses the practice and pays to have it depicted on its walls is the film’s first piece of evidence that the Church’s *modus operandi* consists in drawing to itself the energy generated by collective fear. Once Blok and Jöns step outside the building they come upon confirmation of the fact in the form of a young woman who has been condemned to be burnt at the stake as a witch. The disparity between her frail and suffering form and the substantial group of armed soldiers and monks who surround her is sufficient in terms of visual rhetoric to establish her innocence. So far, we might say, nothing in the film’s demonstration is particularly surprising. We are being shown a Church as superstitious as its people, equally in thrall to

the illusion of the scapegoat, which for them, of course, is no illusion. They really believe that she has had contact with the devil and that this has caused the plague. Blok approaches the woman:

KNIGHT: Have you seen the Devil?

The monk stops reading and raises his head.

MONK: You must not talk to her.

KNIGHT: Can that be so dangerous?

MONK: I don't know, but she is believed to have caused the pestilence with which we are afflicted.

KNIGHT: I understand.

He nods resignedly and walks away.³¹

With his camera, however, Bergman anachronistically transcends the historical frame. He gives the monk nearly the same features as the figure of Death encountered by the Knight earlier in the day. Death was also the cowed figure whom the Knight took for a priest when he made his confession. It is a visual metaphor which will become literal identity when later in the film the woman is burned. The monk supervising her execution will be Death himself. The message could not be plainer: the Church that seeks remedies in sacrificial scapegoats is inspired by the spirit of death.

Having affirmed this postulate in two simple moves, Bergman then moves to Embarrassment Inn for a more complex analysis of the mimetic/scapegoat phenomenon—a phenomenon which carefully articulates its various contributory elements. The first of these is mimesis itself, so to speak—or mimesis squared: a simple theatrical presentation of cuckoldry. The actors Jof and Mia and Skat prance about on a makeshift stage in the inn courtyard in the roles of Wife (object), Cuckold (mediator), and Lover (rival). The Cuckold has horns on his head, and the Lover makes indecent gestures, etc. In other words, this theatrical performance shows appropriative mimesis pared down to its nuclear minimum, presented in its perennially amusing comic form. No sooner has it been presented on stage than it produces its mimetic effect in actuality. One of the women watching the performance becomes instantly smitten by the actor playing the Lover, and in the twinkling of an eye the two of them disappear behind the stage for a tryst in the bushes. It is as if Bergman is offering us an elementary textbook in the mediated nature of human desire. When he

returns his attention to the theatrical performance he shows us that the mood of the audience is labile, fluctuating between cynical amusement and violence. Lounging soldiers guffaw at the actors and throw portions of food at them by turns. It is as if even a farcical exposure of the workings of mimetic desire threatens to unleash the violence latent within it.

At this juncture Bergman intervenes in what we might technically call his psychological analysis of mimesis to introduce the historical/anthropological component. On the soundtrack, the simple jingle being sung by Jof and Mia is interrupted by the thudding rhythms of the *Dies Irae*, and a procession of flagellants enters. We are shown a long line of "Dominican monks" and penitents, suffering, emaciated, and infirm: moaning, praying, whipping each other's backs with cords. The leader of the procession carries a large crucifix to which is affixed a life-size effigy of Christ. In the light of our discussion to this point, it perhaps is apparent that this scene, indeed these few shots of the image of the suffering Christ and his mimetically suffering followers, constitutes in itself both a deconstruction of sacrificial Christianity and a representation of its awesome power. As the crucifix is carried past the onlookers, they drop one by one to their knees like hay before a sickle (see fig. 1). They are not being shown to be reverent but rather to be irresistibly overwhelmed by the power of the primitive sacred. With an eye informed, no doubt, by Carl Dreyer's treatment of the same phenomenon in *Day of Wrath*, Bergman shows us mouths dropping open and shining eyes turning heavenward in ecstasy.

Having given us both poles of the mimetic phenomenon—appropriative desire and the sacred scapegoat victim—Bergman now turns his attention to the use that Christianity has historically made of the latter. Into the force field generated by the crowd's collective hysteria, he introduces this figure: "A large square monk rises from his knees and reveals his face, which is red-brown from the sun. His eyes glitter; his voice is thick with impotent scorn."³¹ This figure proceeds to harangue the crowd with violent and taunting language, screwing up their fear of death and promising them torment in the afterworld. "God has sentenced us to punishment. We shall all perish in the black death. . . . You have been sentenced, sentenced!"³² Here, of course, one could say that the Church, in the figure of its representative, is as much a victim of the sacred mechanism as an operator of it. The monk is at least minimally exculpated to the extent that there is no question that he firmly believes in what he preaches.



1. *The Seventh Seal*. The flagellants observe a momentary pause in their penitential procession in the courtyard of the Embarrassment Inn. The image of the crucified Christ spreads a sacrificial enthusiasm through the ecstatic crowd. ©1956 Svensk Filmindustri.

With the conclusion of the monk's diatribe, the procession of flagellants moves on, and the second phase of Bergman's analysis begins—the application of the lesson, so to speak. The scene moves inside Embarrassment Inn, past pigs snorting around beer kegs, into a murky atmosphere overcharged in equal parts by unleashed appetite and fear of the plague. The audience samples terrified conversations and is shown a variety of brutish, terrified faces. These people have been made ugly by fear, and that ugliness is about to spill over into their behavior. A visual exception to his surroundings, the innocent actor Jof sits eating his meal and minding his own business. He is approached by a character named Raval, an evil seminarian who earlier in the film had been seen robbing a corpse and attempting to rape a woman. Raval offers to sell Jof the bracelet he has stolen from the corpse. Jof turns him down, and Raval turns his attention back to his food. But now Jof is approached by a blacksmith, in fact the husband of the woman who moments earlier had disappeared into the bushes with the actor Skat. The enraged smith is trying to find Skat to exact revenge. Jof has no idea where he is and wants to appear not to know any actors at all. Attempting to establish a jocular rapport with the threatening blacksmith, Jof banters: "The actor! Now I understand. There are too many of them, so even if he hasn't done anything in particular you ought to kill him merely because he is an actor."³³

Jof's witticism contains unwitting depths. Bergman is keenly aware of the ambiguous and frequently precarious position actors have held in society. As *mimes* they carry a surplus of a potentially destructive energy, or, to change the metaphor, a too easily isolable germ of the disease perpetually latent in the body social. Thus when Raval, overhearing Jof's remark, turns on him and identifies him as an actor, Jof's danger is greater than he could reasonably suspect. When Raval says, "We ought to kill you. It's only logical,"³⁴ the word 'logical' (*logisk*) draws to a sudden focus the full force of the film's exploration of mimesis and scapegoating and allows it to gong like a silent, pulsating bell in the several seconds it takes Jof to realize that the smith and Raval are not making an idle threat. He is surprised suddenly to find himself in the position of the witch, and, as far as the viewer is concerned, equally so in the position of Jesus: he is the focus of the crowd's collective fear and aggression. He is the scapegoat:

The room becomes silent. Jof looks around, but there is no exit,

no way to escape. He puts his hands on the table. Suddenly a knife flashes through the air and sinks into the table top between his fingers.

Jof snatches away his hands and raises his head. He looks half surprised, as if the truth had just become apparent to him.

JOF: Do you want to hurt me? Why?³⁵

Raval and the blacksmith force Jof to get up onto a table and imitate a bear for the crowd's amusement. They hold lighted torches under his arms and around his feet to make him dance faster. The crowd in the inn roars with approving laughter. They pound their cups on their tables with a steady thudding beat. Clearly the implication is that Jof will be killed or at least seriously harmed. As he moves, Jof is shown to hold his hands and tip his head to the side in a way that establishes a clear visual parallel to the earlier figure of Christ on the cross. At the last minute Jof is saved by Jöns, the Squire, but the cumulative point of the scene has been made with all possible clarity. And that point, as I hope to have shown Bergman making with nearly syllogistic rigor, is this: Jof is the new turn of the sacred wheel. What the scapegoat was in primitive religion, what Christ was in the sacrificial understanding of his death, what the witch was to a plague-ridden populace has been generated afresh before our very eyes. And I think the further point is equally clear: the reason this sacred mechanism could function so smoothly is because the Church, the institution whose role it was to disestablish it, persisted instead in giving it new life.

It may seem in making this obviously anachronistic charge against the medieval Church that Bergman is knocking down a straw man and thus indulging in histrionic gestures of defiance addressed to his childhood faith. Perhaps. But no viewer takes *The Seventh Seal* to be giving a balanced picture of medieval Christendom. We understand that its real focus rests on our own age. If historical Christianity is accused of not being sufficiently perspicacious regarding its inherited residue of sacrificial understanding, it is, I think, in order to address the same charge against those modern secular institutions whose role is still the selfsame religious one of uprooting violence and establishing peace.³⁶ Surely it is for this reason that Bergman sets his film within the allusive frame of the *Apocalypse*, for the *Apocalypse*, with its reference point located in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, is a clear warning of the destruction in store for all human groups

who refuse to give up the practice of sacred violence—i.e., of fetishizing violence, of conceiving of violence as the only possible antidote to violence. As Girard writes:

What the apocalyptic violence is first obliged to reveal—the only thing that it can directly reveal—is the purely human nature and the simultaneously destructive and cultural function of violence.

To understand that we are already living through this process of revelation, we have only to think about our relationship, as members of a world community, to the terrifying armaments with which mankind has furnished itself since the end of the Second World War.

Human beings have always found peace in the shadow of their idols—that is to say, of human violence in a sacralized form. This is still true, as humanity looks for peace under the shelter of the ultimate violence. In a world that is continually losing its sacred character, only the permanent threat of immediate and total destruction can prevent men from destroying one another. Once again, violence prevents violence from breaking out.³⁷

In my view, these remarks are perfectly consonant with the spirit of *The Seventh Seal* and may serve as a concluding comment in the demonstration that I have attempted to make in this paper, the point of which has been twofold: (1) to show the singular pertinence of Girard's analysis of the sacred to *The Virgin Spring* and *The Seventh Seal*; (2) with the help of Girard's methodology to show the singular anthropological and psychological acuity of Bergman's analysis as both screenwriter and director in *The Seventh Seal*.

University of Minnesota

NOTES

¹ Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film*, trans. Marianne Ruuth (New York: Arcade, 1994), p. 242. For the scenarios of these films, see Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, trans. Lars Malmstrom and David Kushner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

² "But when I'd finished making *The Virgin Spring* I thought I'd made one of my best films. I was delighted, shaken" (Stig Björkman, Torsten Manns, and Jonas Sima, *Bergman on Bergman*, trans. Paul Britten Austin [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973], p. 41).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴ Ingmar Bergman, *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*, trans. Joan Tate (New

York: Viking, 1988); see also the brief assessment of *The Virgin Spring* in Bergman, *Images*, p. 244, though it is duly noted in the catalogue of his films (p. 410).

⁵ *Bergman on Bergman*, p. 41.

⁶ Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film*, pp. 235–36.

⁷ Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, p. xxi.

⁸ *Bergman on Bergman*, p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *From the Life of the Marionettes*, as quoted in translation in Paisley Livingston, *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), p. 63.

¹¹ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1965).

¹² René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), p. 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁴ “*Religion* in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man’s efforts to defend himself by curative or preventive means against his own violence. It is that enigmatic quality that pervades the judicial system when that system replaces sacrifice” (*ibid.*, p. 23).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁸ Wallace Gray, *Homer to Joyce* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 72.

¹⁹ Bergman, *Images*, pp. 175–76.

²⁰ René Girard, with J.-M. Ourgouliau and G. Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 42.

²¹ *Bergman on Bergman*, p. 123.

²² See the remarks on the so-called narcissistic character in the chapter “Psychoanalytic Mythology,” in *ibid.*, pp. 352–92.

²³ In light of this portion of the film, Ingeri becomes the vehicle for the father’s incestuous desire for his daughter.

²⁴ See William Mishler, “Sacrificial Nationalism in Henrik Ibsen’s *The Pretenders*,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, 1, No. 1 (1994), 127–38.

²⁵ Certain Swedish critics were so literal-minded in their perception of this connection that they treated it as a case of plagiarism. Birgitta Steene notes that the Swedish film reviewer Landquist “wrote of Bergman as a creative artist; to him *The Seventh Seal*

was mostly borrowed and edited Strindberg. He saw special reference to Strindberg's two plays *To Damascus*, a religious station drama, and *The Saga of the Folkungs*, a history play which uses the motifs of the Black Death, the Apocalypse, and self-flagellation" (*Ingmar Bergman: A Guide to References and Resources* [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987], p. 15).

²⁶ August Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1919), XXXI, 43; the translation which follows is from *The Saga of the Folkungs*; Engelbrekt, trans. Walter Johnson (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1959), p. 56.

²⁷ Girard *et al.*, *Things Hidden Since the World Began*, p. 181.

²⁸ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 41.

²⁹ Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, p. 110.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124. Actually, the "monk" is supposed to be a Dominican friar, though he is not wearing typical Dominican garb.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁶ "The procedures that keep men's violence in bounds . . . are all rooted in religion" (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 23).

³⁷ Girard *et al.*, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p. 255.