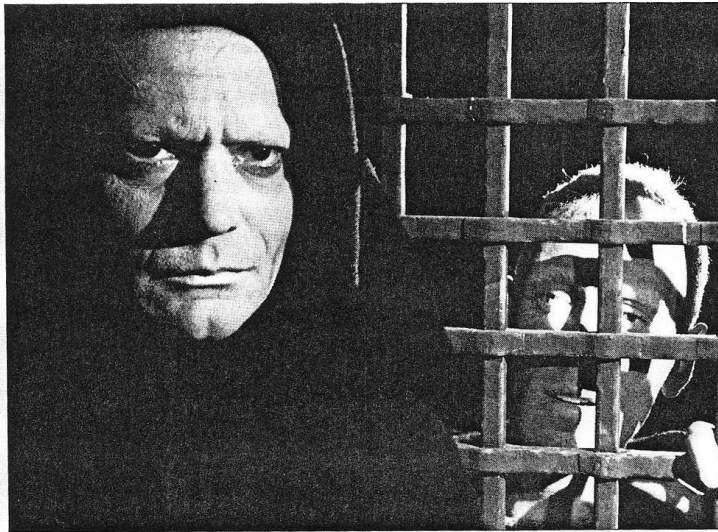


he shock of revelation

st understanding of the value
ema as an artistic expression
when I was 14 or 15 and I saw
io De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*
e Thieves) in Tehran. There were
al film clubs and festivals in
n which gave me the chance to see
gn films. I remember seeing Akira
sawa's *Seven Samurai*, which also
an impression on me.
vent to the US in 1960 to study
na at Berkeley, but I switched
najor to philosophy because I was
pointed with the film department.
s involved with a lot of 'big questions'
ath, existence, the meaning of life,
then I saw Ingmar Bergman's
Seventh Seal (1957) and it made a
e impression on me. Before I saw
Seventh Seal I had thought that
ma would remain a superficial
rtainment because it was incapable
dressing such serious philosophical
stions. Bergman made me take
ema seriously.
My encounter with him – and the
elle vague, Truffaut's *Les quatre cents*
ps (400 Blows, 1959), Godard's *A bout de*
ffle (1960) and others – made me very
n to continue my cinematic pursuits.
anted to make films, but I realised that
dying cinema would not be sufficient
ouldn't give me enough cultural
ckground. I had chosen philosophy
ause, as Plato said, it is the "mother
all sciences" and I realised that for me
would be essential because it would
compass all kinds of things – politics
erature, sociology, art and so on.
I saw *The Seventh Seal* in 1961 in a
tall art-house cinema, with a few
nian friends. As I knew something of
rgman, I was eagerly anticipating the
m, which had a tremendous impact
me – it was decisive in my choosing
nema as a means of artistic expression.
fterwards one of my friends said,
his is it. Why are you doubting your
irection? Maybe one day you could make
film like this."
What really attracted me was the
lm's religious aspect – its emphasis
n these same questions concerning
ife, death, existence, which were my
uestions at the time. I didn't want to
ake films simply to entertain or to
ake money. I was seeking a means
of self expression. I became interested
n cinema because it seemed to be
something that could encompass all
the arts.
I had been a very religious person
when I was young. Then I was stricken
by doubt, which caused me tremendous
suffering. I was psychologically in bad
shape for two years. I was about to lose
my faith in God, and I so had all these
questions – and when I saw these same
essential matters reflected in this film in
such a beautiful and compelling fashion,
it really affected me.
There's the doubt of Max von Sydow's
chevalier, of this Knight of Faith coming
back from the wars, doubting the
existence of God, perplexed by this game



Addressing the essential questions: Bengt Ekerot (Death), Max von Sydow (The Knight)

that he had to play with Death, and
the presence of Death shown in such
vivid, violent, fashion. The simplicity,
the purity of all these elements made
seeing the film a very religious
experience for me.
There were various other elements
that attracted me, also. On the one hand
it deals with the Middle Ages and the
plight of the Knight, but on the other it's
very modern: the character of Jonas with
his sarcastic, ironic, doubtful attitude
towards all these big questions. And then
there's the aspect of innocence and evil
– the juggler and his wife. He has a vision
of an angel, then he sees her, and is
somehow punished because of that.
Then there are the sub-themes such as
the actor's plight, his trying to entertain
audiences and his making a confession
about his profession. The combination of
all these elements, along with Bergman's
innovative use of black-and-white
photography, was a revelation to me.
There may have been some sort of
resonance with my own Shia
background, too: because it's basically
the same obsession – dealing with God,
angels, devils, the meaning of existence
in this world. At that time Iran was not
an Islamic republic, but perhaps there
was something in me – some deeply
embedded cultural element – that
responded to this imagery. Just as
Bergman's take on mediaeval Christianity
was almost modern, I see a certain
modernity in Shia Islam; it's a revolt
against the Sunni interpretation of the
Koran – which tries to surpass or
transcend the traditional interpretation.
This allows for a fresh outlook – that's
why there's a whole body of Islamic
philosophy that comes from Shi'ism
– there were many great thinkers in this
tradition. The way Bergman uses cinema
as a means of expressing the religious
quest impressed me, the search for
spirituality, without being boring. His
achievement is eloquently to express all
these thoughts, feelings and ideas within
the limited format of a two hour film.

In particular, the image of the
Knight playing chess with Death at
dawn will always haunt me, as will the
Knight's truthful confession to the priest
– who then turns out to be Death, saying,
"Now I know what move you're going to
make next."
There's the moment when the juggler
goes to the tavern and is punished – that
actor was so great. And the scene where
they make him dance like a bear was shot
so very dynamically. Perhaps I had an
unconscious identification with the
way Bergman expresses the sense of
totalitarian authority used against this
juggler – against the 'artist' really. I'd
seen so many Hollywood films back
home – but this film was just something
entirely different.
And the texture of the film, using
black and white, with black dominating,
is so effective, while the mixture of
realism and surrealism is done with
such skill that you suddenly see Death as
a figure, a person, and it's not ridiculous
– it's believable. It's like when your eye
is trained in classical painting and
you're suddenly exposed to Van Gogh
– the shock of revelation, that's
what seeing *The Seventh Seal* was like
for me. Something strange and new,
as if to say, "This is the same medium,
but it's so different."
What differentiates a work of art
from non-art is the degree to which it
can de-familiarise an image or situation,
to which it can make something familiar
somehow strange. These are images
you carry with you, not ones that you
just consume right there, and then
forget about.
Bergman was utilising cinema in
a new way – he was not concerned with
traditional cinematic narrative; the story
of *The Seventh Seal* is a departure from the
traditional 'journey' or 'voyage' narrative.
I think that through his thoughtful
manipulation of this narrative, he
achieves a universal appeal.
*'The Seventh Seal' is available to buy on
Tartan Video*

Le bonheur est dans le pré
Etienne Chatiliez; France 1995; Guild; £10.99
(£15.99; Widescreen); Subtitles; Certificate 15
Knockabout Gallic farce which often
seems like a comic counterpart to *The
Return of Martin Guerre* (*Le retour de Martin
Guerre*). Michel Serrault is the harassed
owner of a toilet factory. He is broke, his
workers are on strike and the taxman is
on his back. Desperate to escape his
social-climbing wife and daughter, he
assumes the identity of a man who went
missing 26 years before, and moves in
with this man's family. The humour is
earthy and boisterous – when Serrault
isn't grumbling about the women in his
life, he spends his time gorging himself
on food and wine with his friend Gérard
(Eddy Mitchell). Look out for Eric
Cantona's cameo as a small-town rugby
star. (S&S December 1996)

The Birdcage
Mike Nichols; USA 1996; MGM/UA; £14.99
(Widescreen £15.99); Certificate 15
(S&S May 1996)

Blue in the Face
Wayne Wang; USA 1995; Buena Vista; £12.99;
Certificate 15 □
(S&S May 1996)

Broken Arrow
John Woo; USA 1996; Fox; £14.99
(Widescreen £15.99); Certificate 15
(S&S April 1996)

City Hall
Harold Becker; USA 1996; Columbia TriStar;
£12.99; Certificate 15
(S&S April 1996)

The Curse of Frankenstein
Terence Fisher; UK 1957; Terror Vision; £12.99;
Certificate 15
Peter Cushing belies his reputation
for playing cold, impassive experts with
his fiery performance as Baron Victor
Frankenstein in this baroque Gothic
fantasy. Wild-eyed and arrogant, he
is more Faustian anti-hero than
mild-mannered scientist. In his quest for
knowledge, he is prepared to disfigure
corpses, betray his beloved old tutor, and
even to allow the maid with whom he has
been having an affair to be murdered.
Fisher shows a nice touch in gallows
humour, for instance cutting from the
maid's brutal death to Victor exchanging
small talk with his fiancée. (MFB No. 281)

CutThroat Island
Renny Harlin; USA 1995; Guild; £12.99;
Certificate PG
(S&S April 1996)

Dead Man Walking
Tim Robbins; USA 1995; PolyGram; £13.99;
Certificate 15 □
(S&S April 1996)

Desperado
Robert Rodriguez; USA 1995; Columbia TriStar;
£14.99; Certificate 18
(S&S February 1996)

Esquimo Nell
Martin Campbell; UK 1974; Medusa; £10.99;
Certificate 18
Dispiriting British sex comedy from "the
saucy 70s", barely redeemed by its own
self-reflexive humour. Roy Kinnear is
a Soho entrepreneur who hires a group
of high-minded young film-makers to
shoot an exploitation pic. Limp satirical