

Sarah Coppola
Existentialism
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K. Terezakis

Life is just a bowl full of strawberries and milk

“I shall carry this memory carefully in my hands as if it were a bowl brimful of fresh milk. It will be a sign to me, and a great sufficiency.” – Antonius Block, *the Seventh Seal*

Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* is noted as a masterpiece of existentialist filmmaking. Bergman throughout his entire oeuvre deals with themes relating to similar concepts that the existentialist movement focused on; *The Seventh Seal* in particular explores existentialist themes of religious angst, death and crisis of faith ala Kierkegaard, and throws the presence of the Moment into a Heideggerian movement towards Death. The scene I would like to closely analyze in an existentialist context is when Antonius Block chooses his sign, his sufficiency, while dining in the company of friends; a friendly picnic in the midst of the presence of death.

This humble scene is rendered beautifully tragic when placed in the context of the pervasive anguish cast over the entire film and in the context of the looming cloud of Death hanging over the future. Given the torment of doubt plaguing Block in his crisis towards knowledge, what is the significance of his choosing such a fleeting and precarious sign as a bowlful of milk? While the film as a whole is overripe with existentialist symbolism, I am interested in exploring just how far the metaphor of Block's bowlful of milk can be carried, just as I am curious how far the bowl itself can withstand a Movement (in physical space/into Death).

Religious overtones weigh in heavily in this film. An obvious signal towards a sort of religiosity is in the names of the traveling family: Mary, Joseph, and the baby Michael. Michael in Christian tradition was an archangel who battled the devil. Joseph in the film is a spiritually attune character, given that he is capable of seeing visions and of being aware of a level of phenomenological presence others cannot perceive. Mary, too, is endowed with religious attributes; she is peaceful, caring and philosophically removed from the sorts of doubts expressed by Block and the squire. Her allegorical personification of Mary the mother of Jesus is, I think, a deliberate move by Bergman to show that there is something of a touch of religious comfort or sentiment embodied in these characters. It would be reductive to assert that these characters are static or function only as a religious allegory in the film; it doesn't line up quite so neatly as that, but in the particular scene I wish to analyze, the religiosity of this family is crucial to piecing together the meaning of Block's intended sign.

Mary invites Block to share a meal with her family; an unpretentious and nourishing snack of fresh milk and wild strawberries. She, the mother, hands him a bowl of strawberries and a bowl full of milk—a symbol of a very particular kind of comfort, for she alone in the film is a constant nurturer, emblematic of peace and security. In another effort to shore up the claim of a tone of religiosity in the film, one could call this is a Last Supper of sorts; it is in fact the last meal they will all eat together. It is possibly the last meal Block eats in his lifetime, since when he gets to his castle, his wife offers to prepare a meal that they never are shown partaking in, since their visit is interrupted by a visit from Death.

In response to her simple and humble act, Block is momentarily able to say—“How unreal all seems in your company!” This scene hangs like a delicate spider web spun between the gaping chasm of anguish—Block’s search for knowledge and the looming presence of Death, whose paralyzing figure is inscribed into the margins of all actions of all who are living. By the end of the film, all characters must bow before the strict Lord Death. (Only Mary, Joseph, and their child are able to elude him as the film ends.)

Block’s impromptu tender encounter is likely to have an inestimable significance on his troubled mind. He is relentlessly pursued by Death and obsessed with gaining an impossible knowledge. Yet, in the scene he chooses as his sign, temporality is of the essence (which precedes existence.) His desired knowledge is unattainable, his life is about to end, and his sign of sufficiency is no more than a bowl brimful of milk—an encounter, experienced in the Moment, a comfort that can be embraced in transcendence—but, nothing can be taken away from any of it. No movement is possible; if one were to try and walk with a full bowl of milk, one would surely spill it.

A critique of the inherent *femininity* of milk as the choice of sustenance Block receives is immanent to understanding all of the existential symbolism in this scene. Milk is the “feminized protein” of the mother. This is all about fluidity. *Vital* fluids; the first liquid to sustain us as infants is the milk of the mother; here, we are shown milk given *by* the archetypal mother. The strawberries, too, are sensual reminders of another aspect of femininity; as Luce Irigaray notes in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, the feminine sexed body is constantly caressing and folded in on itself, cleft in two, yet comprising a whole.

Strawberries, as fruit, the enlarged sex organs of flowers, are suggestive of a feminine sensuality.

Block's spirit is attempting the *leap* into faith; he is spun between alienation, absurdity, and anguish, unable to receive the certainty he seeks, reduced to crying out to an absent god in the darkness. Instead of faith or knowledge being his sign or sufficiency, he is only left with this brief intimate encounter. The sign/sufficiency Block is left with—grappling in the dark with his torment—is a Moment, impermanence, an Encounter. As Heidegger, the *Dasein* is continually alienated when thrown into the world of his perception; his only choice of comfort is that of finding meaning in an elusive encounter.

Furthermore, his sign were he to use it as a roadmap towards praxis, is crucially lacking. He literally *cannot go anywhere with it*. We cannot overlook the material space that the bowl takes up, its physical qualities and characteristics, its roundness, a Whole circle, whole milk. Is Block naïve in choosing this as a sign, since he cannot hope for this to be a permanent comfort? He chooses to hold this memory metaphorically between his hands, an occasion so brief and a liquid so precarious, precious. Despite all the impossibility of this being his Sign, it is his one breath of peace in the film. The quote from the Book of Revelation that inspired Bergman to make this film ("*And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour*") describes a moment fixed in time, silent and foreboding.

Later, as death is about to put him in check, Block knocks the pieces over, since he sees Mary and Joseph making their getaway. Death asks, "Did you gain by that brief delay?" Block responds, "Yes." We would overlook the great significance of this act were we only to observe that Block gained by giving his friends a chance to escape. We

are reminded again of Block's sufficiency—the Moment. In the literal staring into the face of Death, he gains from every momentary delay that allows him to embrace life, for another fleeting moment. For, this is his sufficiency.

As I have shown in this brief exploration of the possibilities implied by this encounter that is Block's sign, Bergman as an existentialist portrays the fleeting comforts of the flesh as perhaps the only thing that can be proven. For all of Block's striving toward knowledge of God, no certainty is ever gained, and this encounter is his only great comfort. Bergman is also existentialist in creating this scene in that it is not nihilist, but demonstrates a Nietzschean "yae-saying" to the moment in spite of anguish and absurdity. Yes, Block is in a crisis of faith, but his ultimate affirmation of immanent presence and experience of the Other are what sustain him, granting him respite from anguish in a manner unparalleled elsewhere in the film.