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# “Beloved Be the Ones Who Sit Down”: Aesthetics and Political Affect in Roy Andersson’s “Living” Trilogy

Ella Tucan

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“BELOVED BE THE ONES WHO SIT DOWN”: AESTHETICS AND POLITICAL AFFECT  
IN ROY ANDERSSON’S “LIVING” TRILOGY

by

ELLA TUCAN

Under the Direction of Angelo Restivo, PhD

ABSTRACT

Roy Andersson’s unique surrealist style and the affect it gives rise to, situated somewhere between deep existential dread and the most absurdist humor, are intimately connected to his staging of action in stacked layers of meaning in deep focus, immobile long takes. A formal reading of his films then gives us a greater understanding of the connection between affect and film style. But the tableau which all but evacuates time in Andersson is not only a stylistic choice: this challenge to traditional structures and temporalities is the formal manifestation of his anachronistic conception of history. I argue that cinematic time is here closely tied to historical time: a view of history as layered, instantaneous and made up of incongruous juxtapositions as commentary on a failure of historicism as central to the development of a national Swedish identity marked by passivity, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of historical conscience.

INDEX WORDS: Affect, Postmodernism, Sweden, Performance, Temporality, History,  
Surrealism, European identity, Long take

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“Open, graves, you, the dead of the picture galleries, corpses behind screens, in palaces, castles, and monasteries, here stands the fabulous keeper of keys holding a bunch of keys to all times, who knows where to press the most artful lock and invites you to step into the midst of the world of today, to mingle with the bearers of burdens, the mechanics whom money ennobles, to make yourself at home in their automobiles, which are beautiful as armor from the age of chivalry, to take your places in the international sleeping cars, and to weld yourself to all the people who today are still proud of their privileges. But civilization will give them short shrift.”  
—attributed to Apollinaire by Henri Hertz

The dead do come back to haunt the living in Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson’s trilogy “about being a human being,” as he calls it. They come back in dreams, nightmares, visions, and, unexplainably, in real life—although the line between waking and dream states is blurred, if and when there even is one. They come back to trouble the present for the unatoned sins of the past or, at least on one occasion, to ask for money they are still owed. Andersson does indeed seem to hold the keys to all times, but the most disturbing element of this entire setup is that the living are hardly distinguishable from the dead. Money has not ennobled them, their automobiles are anything but beautiful, and there are no privileges to be proud of. The actors all look like they’ve come back from the grave, with pale, powdered fleshy faces and nondescript gray and beige clothing, the frozen blankness of their faces reflecting an inner emptiness impossible to overcome. The whole of society is imbued with a dead-end atmosphere and paralyzed by apocalyptic phenomena.

*Songs from the Second Floor* (2000), *You, the Living* (2007) and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2015) sit at the surreal sweet spot where farce and tragedy, hilarity and horror, absurdity and despair collide. All three consist of short episodes that illustrate, mostly, the absurd futility of life, cataloguing a series of loosely connected events in the lives of wrecked, wretched characters who, gaunt and pale, whimper at the oncoming

apocalypse. Through meticulously composed, weirdly lucid dream-landscapes of vast plains, endless corridors and vertiginous perspective lines, the trilogy offers a disquieting mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque, the familiar and the strange—or rather, the familiar made strange. Andersson places his immobile, impassive camera down in the middle of an anonymous, dreary city of sleet-colored skies and lonely, leaden office buildings bathed in cool blue light, peopled by deadly pale, silver-haired salarymen in gray suits, cheerless cogs in a capitalist machine that’s cannibalizing itself. We witness everymen and women shuffling through their day-to-day lives in their apartments, their jobs, the bar, the bus stop, the barber shop, pausing only occasionally to exchange half-hearted, superficial pleasantries with strangers. “I’m happy to hear you’re doing fine” is the refrain that is most often repeated in *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch*, but no one seems to be doing fine. It’s an emblem of the kind of blandly non-committal, vaguely positive talk that Andersson’s characters try their best to employ. “Tomorrow’s another day” is *You, the Living’s* recurrent catchphrase, although as uttered by the characters we almost expect it to be followed by “unfortunately.”

### **1.1 The “Slapstick Ingmar Bergman”**

*Songs from the Second Floor* sets the tone for the trilogy, consisting of 46 loosely connected scenes from the end of the world, all filmed as one-shot static tableaux on intricate sound stages, using non-professional actors chosen primarily for their unusual physiognomy. Everything from religion to big business is taken on in dioramas of mass misery topped by a climactic set-piece in which a young girl is sacrificed to ward off the world’s catastrophe. The film opens on a conversation taking place between two businessmen, one of whom lies unseen in a tanning bed; the irony is underlined by the ghostly pallor of the rest of the characters, who look



like they haven't seen the sun in years. In the following, unconnected scene, a man who has just been laid off after 30 years' service grabs onto his boss's ankle, who drags him down a long corridor as perfectly symmetrically facing doors inch open in sync so his coworkers can impassively take in the scene. The next moment, we see an elderly magician accidentally saw a hapless volunteer in half as the crowd cheers. Finally, we arrive at the closest thing the movie has to a protagonist, the middle-aged, overweight Kalle, who appears, his face and clothes covered in soot, in the subway among travelers unexplainably singing a stirring chorale. We learn he has set fire to his shop for the insurance money, and in a subsequent scene see him trying to convince the insurance reps that the handful of ash in his hand was a veritable Chippendale; through the broken windows in the background we notice a slow procession of professionally dressed people flogging themselves in a steady rhythm. Ancient rituals and superstitions seem to have proliferated, as what looks like a board of directors' meeting at a company comes complete with a crystal ball, dutifully passed around the table as they meaninglessly discuss returns and make predictions for the next quarter. Another scene looks like a surreal reverse of Edward Hopper's famous *Nighthawks*, this time seen from inside the diner, with a winding line of cars stretching infinitely into the horizon.

I submit the brief description above to suggest Andersson is a strong contender for the title of the most original auteur of Swedish cinema. In fact, many Swedes are more familiar with his works than with those of Ingmar Bergman.<sup>1</sup> A broadly popular survivor from the heyday of 1960s art cinema and the most celebrated ad director (of all things!) in his native country, he has devoted his entire career to the interrogation of the human condition and the reification of social

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<sup>1</sup> Who was Andersson's supervisor at his film school, but of whom Andersson has only the following to say: "He was not a very nice person. He was very mean, actually" (qtd. in Covert). Although they disagreed fiercely over their political beliefs and Andersson maintains his early mentor was very conservative and right-wing, he "[doesn't] accuse him of anything — except that he had no humor."

life in the Swedish welfare state. His commentary on the current state of his country is both jokingly irreverent and painfully serious, heart-achingly sincere and acidly ironic. *Songs* is described by Andersson himself, ever modest, as an “important summary of the current state of society and how we should proceed” (qtd. in Brodén 123). Despite garnering international acclaim, however, there has been close to no scholarly work on Andersson outside a couple of articles in European journals which focus for the most part on the director’s varied influences, ranging from modernist Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo to Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder. While such writings describe the director’s style, themes, and major influences, they do not map his work in relation to the larger social context on which they draw so heavily. Andersson occupies a contradictory place in Swedish culture: on the one hand he is an old-school modernist, on the other a broadly popular director of comedies. An integral part of his personality is constituted by his working-class background in the industrial city of Gothenburg, and throughout the past decades he’s become known as a filmmaker who combined a high, artistic ambition with humble pathos and an anti-authoritarian streak, presenting himself as both a radical auteur and a *folkhelm* filmmaker.

Andersson has managed to combine the humorous with the serious to an exceptional extent, and the pitch black humor and grotesquerie of the situations, dependent on visual gags and non-sequiturs, elude classification, unless we make up new categories—sketch tragedy perhaps, or self-hating humanism. The effect is best described as a kind of drily Scandinavian form of surrealism, as down to earth and dour in its wildness as the paintings of Belgium’s Rene Magritte. Spiritual cousins would have to incorporate the films of Luis Buñuel, especially *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), not to mention the deadpan delirium of Buster Keaton’s silent comedy, while Andersson’s high-modernist

influences include everyone from Otto Dix to Edward Hopper, Samuel Beckett to Federico Fellini. Andersson, whose unmistakable style has led the *Village Voice*'s J. Hoberman to describe him as the “slapstick Ingmar Bergman” and Roger Ebert to call him a “tragic Groucho Marx”—I see him more as a Jacques Tati on downers—has made five films in just as many decades. Each of them is equal parts Keystone, Kafka, and Dali, but at the same time wholly, uniquely his own. He “has carved out a niche so distinctive that he has no imitators, no descendants, and no disciples” (D’Angelo). The effect of his complex world-building process is not so much that of a dollhouse as a snow globe, perilously perched on the corner of a table, waiting to fall.

The lack of critical attention given Andersson’s work is astounding, especially given its complexity and the wealth of possibilities for interpretation. My thesis tentatively aims at a correction of this dearth of scholarly consideration by examining the filmmaker’s “Living” trilogy in relation to affect theory and the social, political, and economic condition of Sweden at the turn of the millennium and postmodernism more broadly. I argue that an affective reading of Andersson’s form would be the best way to approach his films. The series of vignettes that make up his works are only connected through their meticulous aesthetic, absurdist sense of humor and the grotesquery of characters caught up in surrealistically exaggerated situations. I think it’s time we tried to gain a thorough understanding of how these elements combine to produce affect in Andersson’s films and to explore the implications of his style. My project then constitutes an intervention not only in the ongoing writing on affect, but a move towards examining the affective and the aesthetic in relation to the political.

## 1.2 Giving Form to the Formless

In the past two decades, work on affect has grown exponentially not only in the humanities, but in recent neuroscientific studies on emotion, literary and critical theory, feminist and race studies, philosophy and studies in representation, a move that resonates with broader strains in what Dutch critics Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker have dubbed “metamodernism” as a “structure of feeling.” The wide array of approaches ranging from the historical and political to the cognitivist through the psychoanalytic and phenomenological have been theorized as a post-structuralist response to perceived omissions in structuralism and a resurging of interest in problematics of embodiment and materiality, including an interest in hapticity and the turn to touch led by Laura Marks and Jennifer Barker.<sup>2</sup> As Eugenie Brinkema points out in *Forms of the Affects*, if there is a common element in recent theorizations of affect by Steven Shaviro, Vivian Sobchack, Lisa Cartwright, Marco Abel, Elena del Rio, Anna Powell and Tarja Laine (among many others), or a nodal point around which these threads of scholarly work could coalesce, it might be said to be an absent center: not so much an argument *for* something as a reaction against 1970s’ Marxist-, psychoanalytic-, and structuralist-inspired theory with its critique of ideology in terms of tropes of hegemony, power, and the “other,” and reading for meaning and sign.<sup>3</sup>

Affect theory in film, or what Ian Garwood calls “sensuous scholarship,” has been dominated by two strands, one following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the other inspired by the thinking of Gilles Deleuze. Both schools oppose classical film theory’s separation between

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<sup>2</sup> Although emotion and sensation have been central to the study of certain “body” genres like melodrama, pornography, and horror, most notably by Linda Williams and Carol Clover, attention to such bodily matters in other genres or across the medium as a whole are almost nonexistent in the grand theories of the 1970s and ’80s.

<sup>3</sup> Affect considered independently of a subject under the notion of excess can be dated back to Barthes’ “third meaning” as a precursor to his work on the photographic punctum in *Camera Lucida*. The concept of excess was then developed by Kristin Thompson, following Stephen Heath’s famous definition of excess as that which cannot be contained in the homogeneity of the narrative, which “permanently exceeds its fictions” (10).

spectator and screen through the turn to a specific, embodied viewer instead of apparatus theory's immobile, disembodied spectator or some vague "us," the audience, and both are sensitive to tactile qualities of the image and soundtrack that have been underexplored in previous writing on film.<sup>4</sup> Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, published in 1992, explicitly positions itself against the "objective" and "scientific" stances taken by psychoanalytic and Marxist film theory which "have obscured the dynamic, synoptic, and loved-body situation of both the spectator and the film" (xvi). While Sobchack draws on existential phenomenology, sensuous scholarship based on other philosophical precepts follow the same general opposition. For example, Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body*, published a year after Sobchack's *Address of the Eye*, is inspired by the writing of Deleuze, but similarly characterizes 1970s and '80s theory as a "phobic construct" in which "images are kept at a distance, isolated like dangerous germs" (15). Shaviro rejects a theory intent on reading for depth, arguing instead for the importance of examining "visceral, affective responses to film, in sharp contrast to most critics' exclusive concern with issues of form, meaning, and ideology" (viii). He radically critiques the psychoanalytic theory popular in film studies, arguing against an emphasis on the phallus, castration anxiety, ideology, and the Law of the signifier, in favor of a turn towards the alternative canon of Deleuze, Bataille, Benjamin, Bergson, and Foucault. His more recent *Post-Cinematic Affect*, published in 2010, continues this project for new and digital media: "Films and music videos, like other media works, are machines for generating affect, and for capitalizing upon, or extracting value from, this affect. As such, they are not ideological superstructures, as an older sort of Marxist criticism would have it" (3).

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<sup>4</sup> Although emotion and sensation have been central to the study of certain "body" genres like melodrama, pornography, and horror, most notably by Linda Williams and Carol Clover, attention to such bodily matters in other genres or across the medium as a whole are almost nonexistent in the grand theories of the 1970s and '80s.

An even more recent, second turn in the turn towards affect, and one which I am more interested in exploring, can be seen as reaction against this splitting of textuality and theory, form and affect, can be seen in works like Brinkema's *Forms of the Affects*, published in 2014, and, to a lesser extent, Garwood's *The Sense of Film Narration*, published the previous year. But while both Brinkema and Garwood reintroduce close textual reading to the study of sensation, the latter is interested primarily in the haptic and affective qualities of film images and film style in relation to narrative structure and its connection to the embodied film-viewing experience. The more radical intervention occurs in Brinkema's book, where she "sets out to chastise contemporary film studies (and the humanities more generally) for not having paid attention to form" (Hanich 2). The author wants to break with the generalizing tendencies she perceives in affect theory.

While I do not want to downplay the invaluable contributions to film studies of these accounts, I agree with Brinkema at least in part when she says that these works, whether drawing on existential phenomenology (as Sobchack does in *The Address of the Eye*, published in 1992) or inspired by the writing of Deleuze (like Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body*, published the following year), tend to emphasize the personal experience of the theorist and the viewer over the films themselves. Hence, we have Sobchack writing of "the embodied experience of labor, alienation, engagement, and transformation I have every time I go to the movies" (xv) and Shaviro perhaps even celebrating the fact that, "I am too deeply implicated in the pleasures of film viewing... to be able to give a full and balanced account" (*The Cinematic Body* 10). As Brinkema writes, "as a result, a great deal of contemporary work on cinema and affect relies on an excessive use of 'I' expressions in relation to experienced emotions or personal narratives..., [which] tells us far more about being affected than about affects" (32).

In divorcing affect not only from the subject but also the body, Brinkema's text functions as a polemic against the theorizing of affect as the immediate, visceral, sensed, embodied, or excessive—in short, as that which escapes and resists systematicity, structure and form. She specifically positions *Forms of the Affects* as a “de-contribution” to theories of spectatorship, “an attempt to dethrone the subject and the spectator—and attendant terms, such as ‘cognition,’ ‘perception,’ ‘experience,’ even ‘sensation’—for affect theory” (36). This is not neo-formalism in the fashion of Bordwell and Thompson, but *radical formalism*. As Julian Hanich explains in his review, for Brinkema “the affects *have* forms as much as they *inhere* in forms.... [To] put it differently, the way a certain film is structured *is* an affect itself” (2). Akin to Deleuze's emphasis on “a violence that is involved only with color and line” in his reading of Francis Bacon in *The Logic of Sensation* (xxix), Brinkema asks, “What lines of thought might be set loose by interrogating the relationship between a cinematic grid and the most visceral of the negative affects, disgust? How might the straits of anxiety be a matter of a broken horizontal line?” (xvi). The turn to affect, Brinkema contends, should not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Significant for my study of Roy Andersson, she goes on to argue, highly formalist or emotionally cold films are not, as they might at first seem, affectless, but precisely the opposite: the more rigorously structured the text, the more affective it is. Brinkema's intervention is crucial in understanding how form and affect are not separate—and definitely not mutually exclusive—but instead intimately connected and dependent on each other. In reading form for affect and vice versa, she demonstrates that affectivity is operative in meticulously composed, flat, glacial texts like Michael Haneke or Peter Greenaway's *specifically because of, in* and even *as* the meticulous, flat, glacial compositions.

However, in maintaining affect theory's resistance to the philosophical roots that informed 1970s film theory, Brinkema refuses to look beyond the scope of the films she analyzes towards any sort of social or cultural conditions that gave birth to them. Furthermore, in her complete decoupling of form from narrative and thematic elements, she seems to be ascribing a kind of universal affect to each cinematic technique. As Hanich notes, if Brinkema is right, then "one would expect a specific affect to reoccur in every instance of the form that Brinkema has ascribed to it. For instance, 'grief' must inhere in every filmic tableau. But this is certainly not the case" (4). I certainly agree, wholeheartedly, with Brinkema's claim that film form and affect are intimately related and we should return to a melding of textuality and theory, but while some parts of her argument are very convincing and I would argue important for affect in film studies, I can't help but also find others reductive. Just as ideological film criticism tends to miss the specific implications of cinema's (or certain cinematic texts') emotional, sensuous, or affective appeal, let alone how that appeal is generated through formal dimensions of style, writing on affect, including Brinkema's, tends to short-circuit some of the pressing social, political, and historical issues of the films under consideration.

Her close analyses of a scene from *Funny Games* (1997), for instance, is careful, detailed, and deliberate enough to create a detailed and definitive picture of how the film portrays grief, but I completely disagree that Haneke's movie can be reduced to this one scene or divorced from a consideration of the consistent thematic treatment of violence in Haneke's postmodern worldview that takes into account its ideological implications or spectator response. In subsequent chapters, Brinkema similarly shows barely veiled disdain at ideological readings of works like *Wild at Heart* (1990) or *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), works which, through their very structure seem to invite such interpretations. The question becomes,



why must these two approaches be mutually exclusive? Why can't we read form for affect without producing a purely formal dissection of its structures that discounts any other factors? From overly general readings of emotion in film to overly specific accounts of personal feelings and sensations, we're arrived at—what I would argue is—a more productive approach to affect in Brinkema's work, but one which still somehow feels incomplete, more restrictive than liberating. I suggest we need to broaden our view of cinematic affect to include not only textual or cognitive processes but also more broadly ideological ones.

### 1.3 Affecting Histories and Political A/Effects

What I propose is a reading of Andersson's trilogy that follows along the same lines as Brinkema's melding of affect and formalism, looking not at how the films affect me but using close textual analysis to see how their affect is structured through the style. At the same time, I also want to expand the argument to take into consideration the films' ideological critique, a critique I argue is dependent upon the films' form and affect, not a separate meaning I plan to somehow tack onto them through my own interpretation. Ultimately, the texts I'm analyzing make affect itself political. If Sianne Ngai, in *Ugly Feelings*, considers aesthetics and politics in relation to affect in order to theorize "aesthetic emotions" or "feelings unique to our encounters with artworks" (6), my project aims at a reordering of her method; instead of using formal analysis as a means to uncovering and explaining the embodied emotions of the spectator within an "equally holistic matrix of social relations" (28), I intend to show how Andersson maps these social and political relations onto the film itself through the form. My argument is that the director's critique of, well, pretty much everything from religion to big business (through the disintegration of the welfare state and other various inadequacies of engagement with a

historically aware European identity) is locatable not only in the movies' narrative content, character, language, nor purely in some other form of meaning-producing mechanism, but specifically in the affective dimensions of their formal structure.

Andersson's unique style and the affect it produces, situated somewhere between deep existential dread and the most absurdist humor, is intimately connected to his stacked layers of meaning in deep focus, immobile long takes. The first chapter of my thesis dissects the film's grotesque aesthetic in relation to performance and staging within long shots. I argue that the director returns to an earlier "gestural" mode of performance that results in a foregrounding of the actors' bodies and physicality. The first half of the chapter then considers the implications of such performances and intricate gag sequences when taken out of the historical context of industrial modernization that couched it in silent film comedy. I argue that Andersson is deeply invested in the perplexing spaces of modernity and the social and economic problems of modernism as related to labor, autonomy, and agency. However, the director is chronicling acts of halted or failed performance of the body, a negative performative in the form of immobility and redundancy, stasis and repetition within a postmodern context. The latter half of the chapter considers this grotesque absurdity, a register overall more complex than tragicomedy, which I see as dependent on the use of rigorously structured but curiously *non*-directive long shots.

The second chapter then looks at this distortion, examining Andersson's surrealism and the way it defamiliarizes ordinary instances of interaction, his meticulous compositions and hyper-stylized framing deconstructing the indexed reality of a given social situation. It is in Andersson's absurd unraveling of the codes that govern sociability that his political critique comes forth, in line with Walter Benjamin's understanding of the surrealist movement. I suggest that one of the most important ways Andersson questions not only cinematic realism but our very

relationship to social reality is through his sense of temporality as promoted by the use of the deep focus long take in which physical movement transmuted into a feeling of intense duration. Andersson's portrayal of temporally stretched, stalled or suspended action is politically charged, depicting not individual problems (of the characters or viewers) but acting as synecdoche to much larger social and national ills. A formal reading of Andersson's use of the immobile long take would give us a greater understanding of the connection between affect and film style that Brinkema maps out, but that constitutes only the first part of my project. What I ultimately hope to show through taking this argument further into the ethical, economic, historical, and social critique engendered by Andersson's works is how form itself becomes political. The static long-take tableau which all but evacuates time in Andersson is not only a stylistic choice in his evoking of specific emotions; this challenge to traditional structures and temporalities is the formal manifestation of his anachronistic conception of history.

The connection which I make in the third chapter of my thesis—which I would argue Andersson already makes in his films—is between cinematic time and duration and historical time: a view of history as layered, instantaneous and made up of incongruous juxtapositions as commentary on a failure of historicism as central to the development of a European identity marked by passivity and a lack of historical conscience. What Andersson offers is, then, a political rather than historical view of the past, one that elucidates the history of the present, or the present as history, and allows us to imagine different futures whose potentialities might be buried in the past. In my conclusion I further consider the political commentary on the current state of Sweden in Andersson's work. I argue that the director's aesthetic choices exemplify a shared historical and political sense that can be traced directly to the social and economic crisis of his country at the turn of the twentieth century and the “precarious present” of the current

global economy. While I believe Andersson's trilogy offers an ideal case study for the project, I hope that if I am persuasive that formal affectivity can operate within a broader social and cultural scope outside the films themselves I can encourage a reading for formal *and* political affect in other works as well.

## 2 FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE

“The Absurd is not in man... nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them.” –Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

“If the reason for people's hustle-bustle is a possibility for avoiding danger, then busyness is not comic; but if, for example, it is on a ship that is sinking, there is something comic in all this running around, because the contradiction is that despite all this movement they are not moving away from the site of their downfall”

–Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*

Antiseptic white bathes the screen in a vision of washed-out emptiness. The near-monochrome of the image is broken only by the faded wood of two chairs neatly placed against the wall, balanced by two open doors a little further down the long hall on the opposite wall—and one wonders if Andersson took the time to consider that the door handles almost perfectly match the color of the chairs. In the far background, in crisp deep focus, a series of doors with white-paneled windows stretching to the high ceiling catch the tiny, white-clad figures between them in the *mise-en-abyme* of the long corridor. The one human presence close enough to the camera to allow a clear view sits sullenly on one of the two chairs in the foreground, back turned three quarters to the camera, arms folded across his chest. Were it not for the loud and weirdly comical busyness of the background figures (one of which is dragged across the floor—by

guards? orderlies?—and disappears through the last set of doors, furthest from the camera) we could be tricked by the immobility of the shot into thinking we’re watching a still image.

Unexpectedly, the middle-aged, over-weight Kalle, the closest thing *Songs from the Second Floor* has to a protagonist, enters from the left side of the screen, closest to the camera. His face and clothes covered in soot as if it were perpetually Ash Wednesday, his clothes a bland dark gray, the character creates a stark contrast to his sterile surroundings. Fidgeting for a handkerchief to wipe away some beads of sweat from his forehead, he leans over to look the seated man in the eyes, lifting the handkerchief to his eyes with both hands, a clear plastic bag (full of bananas?!) and a dark suitcase dangling in front of him from around each wrist. The man in the chair is Kalle’s son Thomas, we learn, institutionalized because “he’s been writing poetry and it made him mad.” Soon Thomas’s brother also enters the frame, followed by a doctor—we presume—who listens to the sadly one-sided conversation between father and son while dutifully checking the patient’s chart. Growing more and more emotional, Kalle fills the observer in: Thomas has “left his cab and his family high and dry, writing poetry till he went nuts!” When Kalle retires to the background to regain composure, the visiting son leans down in front of his brother and recites Cesar Vallejo’s “Stumble Between Two Stars.” The father stands in profile behind them, staring blankly out one of the windows to the right. Every once in a while he turns to his sons and to the camera to demand what’s so special about Vallejo’s tragic but ordinary—or tragically ordinary—figures.

The scene is interrupted by the arrival of a man who stops in front of the supposed doctor, asking, “What kind of nonsense is this?” as he demands to have his smock back. Although he resists by leaning forward and grasping at the smock childishly, the observer is quickly stripped of stethoscope and doctor’s coat, revealing he was wearing the attire of the other patients

underneath. The real doctor—after making sure he’s still got his wallet—walks away from the camera, flanked by two orderlies. As they make it to the first set of doors in the background, Kalle begins gesturing frantically and yelling at his sons to stop what he perceives, in the doctor’s words, as nonsense. The orderlies turn to face us (and Kalle) again, wait a beat, then proceed to grab and drag the shouting man down the corridor as all the other characters continue with their activities—or, more accurately, inactivity.

The joke functions almost as a Keaton gag—or Laurel and Hardy as written by Franz Kafka. The speed—or lack thereof—might initially make the comparison seem strange, but the theatricality of the performances and absurdist humor are more than a little reminiscent of slapstick, what the Keystone cops might have looked like in slow motion. While Andersson’s trilogy must definitely count as some of the most bleak and pessimistic works of recent cinema, they are also punctuated by such laugh-out-loud moments of hilarious mishaps that require our attention. His films embrace a darkly comic deadpan delivery, a mode of performance that is at once exaggerated and wooden, overstated and flat. The effect, heightened by the rigorous formalism of the mise-en-scene and staging the action in static long takes, is a foregrounding of the actors’ bodies and physicality that, in the odd and often uncomfortable juxtapositions and interactions with their environment, provide a fertile ground for the grotesque and black humor. As Schuy R. Weishaar explains in *Masters of the Grotesque*, filmmakers like the Coen brothers—with whom Andersson’s specific, pitch-black humor shares many similarities despite the stylistic differences of their works—are reverting back to an earlier, “gestural” mode of performance that, in its departure from any attempt of psychological realism we find in contemporary acting, would seem more at home in silent film or classic melodrama. This mode of acting is based in excessive externalization and often cartoonish physicality, contrasted in

Andersson to the drawing out of time and the near-catatonic characters who seem to adorn the edges of every scene as observers, without ever getting involved in the action. The tension between movement and stasis, temporal brevity of scenes and elongation of action, results in an affective state of suspended animation, a tragicomic view of the world and its inhabitants as constantly in flux but lacking any real individual agency.

This chapter attempts to pull apart the acting style in *Songs from the Second Floor* and consider the implications of such performances when taken out of the historical context of modernization that couched it in silent film comedy. I argue that Andersson is deeply invested in the perplexing spaces of modernity and the social, cultural, and economic problems of modernism, albeit filtered through a postmodern lens. The political critique his films engender, discussed at length in the closing chapter, starts with Andersson's humor, so in the second part of this section I will seek to trace an affective and formal understanding of the filmmaker's use of comedy in relation to his style, a diagram, for lack of a better term, or logic (following Deleuze) for an affect theory of humor and the grotesque. Although a comprehensive theory of humor in relation to affect and film style is obviously beyond the scope of my project, the theoretical groundwork I seek to lay in this opening section is crucial to an analysis of the specific way Andersson's works use comedy as political commentary.

## **2.1 “There Are People So Wretched, They Don't Even Have a Body”: From ‘Comedy Incarnate’ to ‘Incorporeal Materialism’**

Theories of the body in film comedy, whether influenced by Merleau-Ponty or Deleuze, can provide an adequate context for a discussion of Andersson's style of performance. Here, I will be drawing primarily on Noël Carroll's phenomenological exploration of Buster Keaton in

*Comedy Incarnate* (in relation to other perspectives on the filmmaker provided by Tom Gunning and Gerald Mast) and Elena del Rio's examination of the affective powers of acting in in *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*. In these accounts the body acts as either a physical container of "concrete knowledge" of spatial qualities manifested in its capacities to act out dispositions, projects and purposes (for Carroll) or an embodied expression of unassimilable affect, "incorporeal materialism" (for del Rio). Both views share an understanding of the body of the performer as the concrete, locatable site of affect and explore the relation between human bodies, space, and work. My contention, however, is that while Carroll's discussion of Keaton takes place against the clearly circumscribed background of modernization, it is the halted or failed performance of the body in del Rio that is more relevant to studying Andersson within a postmodern context.

Carroll engages in an effort to situate the iconography of Keaton's sight gags within the work of culture of the steam, steel, and railroad society of his youth, underscoring bodily intelligence as a "human norm" whose essence is the ability to adapt to the changing conditions of the material world (3-6). The author makes the connection between *The General's* imagery of manual work, bodily coping, and the performance of physical tasks and the culture in which the film was produced. He concludes that Keaton's movie valorizes the concrete intelligence and manipulation of tools and raw materials associated with the work that precedes the rise of white-collar, assembly-line and information economy of the twentieth century. The shift he explores is between the need for skilled physical labor required in the interaction with physical objects to the routinized manufacturing, service and clerical work of Taylorized labor, which refuses the worker mastery over the process of production (63-69).



Unlike Carroll, who sees the view of work in Keaton's films as "unmistakably positive, even heroic" and notes the character's natural curiosity towards machines large and small and his love of exploring and tinkering, Tom Gunning, in "Buster Keaton: or The Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," takes a much less optimistic stance, dwelling on the dehumanizing effects of Taylorization that would abet the further alienation of labor (70). He writes that Keaton devised a style of physical performance in which the body "seemed possessed by the machinelike rhythms and manic tempo of modern life," an environment in which "man had to learn not only to work in a new way, but also to move, fall, and make love in a new rhythm in order to keep pace with systems no longer measured to human demands" (14-16). Gunning, drawing on Walter Benjamin and the modernity thesis, extends the mechanical nature of modern man into a view of the world itself as a machine, "an alien an alienating system in which only lightning reactions and an identification with the mechanical might aid the all too vulnerable human body" (Gunning 15). This recalls Henri Bergson's focus on behavior that is rote, habituated, routinized: *mechanical* in the most negative sense. Laughter here becomes social corrective, a way to draw people away from undesirable modes of behavior like complacent, rigid, inflexible, or automatic thinking.<sup>5</sup> But the automatism of Keaton himself is, ultimately, the only appropriate response, much more than a comic gimmick; as Gerald Mast suggests, it's a means of survival in this "chaotic, dangerous world" (129).

The world, in silent comedy, is certainly dangerous, a fast-moving, anxiety-causing system that is too large and too intricate for the comedian to control. But is it actually chaotic?

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<sup>5</sup> If we follow Gerald Mast's theory in *The Comic Mind*, we see that the comedian can have one of two attitudes regarding the relation of man to society: (1) he upholds the values and assumptions of society, urging characters to reform their ways and conform to social expectations; or (2) maintains that an "antisocial" behavior is superior to society's norms. The author argues that the latter function of comedy is characteristic of twentieth century works, Keaton's included. "The hero of modern comedy," he writes, "is the natural rebel who, intentionally or unconsciously, exposes the shams of society.... Even antiheroism [sic.] is a virtue in a world in which heroism either does not exist or has no value" (21). In modern comedy, society itself has become mechanical, and the antisocial comic is the one "elastic" enough to expose its faults.

There is undoubtedly a blend of sense and nonsense at the heart of Keaton's humor, where pragmatic actions are met with impossible effects (either monumentally successful or unforeseeably disastrous), and act and result, intention and consequence, often appear out of joint. But while Buster is unable to control the environment or the situation, he can react to them in a way that generally solves his problems. If the world functions as a machine, then it must follow a prescribed set of rules, however inhospitable to the human bodies within it. As Carrol argues, it is only because the environment is *not* chaotic, because it is in fact "rule-bound" and "law-like," that Buster can adapt to it in the first place (63). In contrast, Andersson chronicles the surreal unraveling of every rational rule or fixed law that characterized modernity. His world is one teetering precariously on the edge of collapse, its citizens vacillating between a sad, half-hearted attempt to convince themselves it's just business as usual and falling back on ancient superstitions to protect themselves. If Buster ultimately becomes an engineer in his mechanical world, Andersson's characters are nothing more than cogs in the complex network of interrelations that make up the director's universe; the whole of humanity is viewed as one big circus full of sad clowns.

Every aspect of Andersson's production bespeaks impeccable, painstaking precision and control, even as it depicts the absolute loss of control. The concrete details of the precipitating crisis at the heart of *Songs from the Second Floor* are never revealed, but almost certain doom hangs in the air of any scene—it's like seeing Elizabeth Kubler Ross' five stages of death boiled down to one: denial. The film is not hopeless as much as it is a comprehensive examination of the process through which all systems for hope collapse. Businesses are failing, flagellants parade the streets, the dead come back to life to haunt those who owed them money, traffic has come to a doomsday halt, and CEOs are trying to save their corporations by offering their

children up to some unknown deity. This is not the danger of mechanization, but its absolute absurdity. The director tracks the collapse of religion as an ordering principle in a world in which capitalist myths have prevailed over religious ones, but both systems lead to the same emptiness and failure. “Finding something to sell with an extra zero on it” is the best hope for survival and the only guiding drive. The dissolution of the borders between the spiritual and the material is made manifest in the selling and junking of crucifixes or the self-flagellating crowd of men and women in business suits. Jesus is still “a nice guy,” but anyone can get nailed in the market economy. In one of the bleakest and funniest lines of the film, an entrepreneur asks, “How could I have thought to make money with such a crucified loser?”

I would argue, however, that Andersson’s dismantling of any “law-like” ordering principle (be it economic or spiritual) makes itself manifest not only—and not principally—at the narrative level, but on an affective-formal one, in the stylized anti-naturalism, mannered movement, exaggeration of poses, and minimal use of language, where the rigorous boundaries of the *mise-en-scène* act as metaphor for the restrictions that affect human mobility. Merleau-Ponty looked at cases where breakdowns (bodily ones) occurred as a way of discerning how the system works in the normal course of events—“malfunctioning people, that is, make what is involved in normal functioning clearly manifest where it might otherwise remain invisible” (Carroll 6). It is precisely the failed performance of activities that draws attention to the performative nature of activity in general. Applying this insight to the performances in Andersson’s films, we can see the foregrounding of the body is oftentimes used to express the very incapacity for expression or transformation. Limp and heavy, the bodies onscreen are particularly (and pathetically) fragile, signifying their physicality in ways that align with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory on how the grotesque can carnivalize the site of the body. Bakhtin goes on to

identify the central purpose of the grotesque with an aesthetic of “degradation” that seeks to materialize the abstract, a materialism based on the human body in transgression of its own boundaries. As Weishaar explains, this physicality can draw attention to the significance of “topsy-turvy” actions and movements that “render the human body comically and ridiculously out of joint with itself” (134).

This denaturalization of gesture and movement can be read—as del Rio does in her analysis of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose works would make a fascinating parallel to Andersson’s—as an example of Walter Benjamin’s analysis of gestural practices as “inscriptions of the crisis entailed by the experience of modernity” (94). Fragmentation, alienation and blockages were certainly a part of the experience of modernity, but I would suggest this becomes much more relevant in Andersson’s postmodern setting (94). If, as Miriam Hansen writes in “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” theorists like Siegfried Kracauer’s saw in slapstick comedy well-choreographed orgies of demolition and clashes between people and things that pointed up a disjuncture within Fordist mass culture, by the time *Songs from the Second Floor* comes along to imitate slapstick’s acting styles, the world no longer has the order and security of technological regimes, mechanization and clock time (70). If modernity was inhospitable to the needs and normal functioning of the human body, postmodernity all but halts this functioning, transforming human experience through the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism. The crisis in Anderson’s cinema is not apparent in the character’s inability to control an increasingly mechanized environment (as in silent slapstick), but the very impossibility of interacting with this environment and the other people who inhabit it. Were it not for the lack of speed, discussed at length in the second and third chapters, the failed activities in Andersson could easily fall into

Sianne Ngai's category of the "zany" postmodern aesthetic. Ngai argues this mode is closely linked to the comedy genre and appears most visible in the art of performance, particularly in movement that highlights the affect, libido and physicality of a hyper-busy character beset by forces beyond his or her control (1-10). Specific to late capitalism and its culture of disorganized, informalized, casualized work, the zany transforms form into activity rather than structure; it always threatens to dissolve the performer into a stream of undifferentiated activity, an incessant flow of action that is relatively shapeless, unstructured, and informal (29-31).

In both Andersson's films and the zany mode, place itself is disconnected from fixed points of origin and destination, privileging a sense of in-betweenness in terms of action and identity. Taking the form of immobility and redundancy, stasis and repetition, this halted but incessant movement is certainly akin to Elsaesser's concept of the "negative performative," as I will explain (196). The performance and movement in *Songs from the Second Floor*, as well as the other films in the trilogy, is precarious and halted, does not demonstrate autonomy or agency, and takes place in a world that no longer follows *any* rules, hospitable to the human body or otherwise. This recalls Deleuze's writing on the temporalization of the body in time-image cinema and the reverberations it shares with a late-twentieth century anxiety about how to quantify human labor within late capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The staging of action in static tableaux—and the challenge this poses to classical identification and linear temporal unfolding—will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2, but in considering performance we cannot ignore the effect the drawing out of scenes has on the body's natural condition of mobility. The awkward prolongation and stasis of the shots allow viewer to dwell in and be impacted by the (slowly) developing affective situation at hand.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Cinema 2*, he writes, "The body is no longer exactly what moves; neither subject of movement nor the instrument of action, it becomes rather the developer of time, it shows its time through its tiredness and waitings" (xi).

Along the same lines, in Deleuze's distinction between "the cinema of action," or narrative cinema, and "the cinema of the body," in which the character is reduced to his or her bodily attitudes, becoming "a summation of gestures rather than a preconceived and abstract compendium of psychological traits," we can perhaps also trace the difference between the modern comedy of silent film and the postmodern absurdity at the heart of Andersson's work (del Rio 21). Following the Deleuzian idea of the body as an assemblage of forces or affects that draw and redraw connections with each other through a process of self-modification or becoming, we can begin to examine, in del Rio's words, the capacity of "images to affect, and to be affected, through their kinetic and gestural voices," where cinema becomes "a series of moving gestures" (2-3). Performance becomes an affective and sensational force that disrupts, redirects—or affects—the narrative, ideological and generic meaning characteristic of modernist works. The result is a postmodern dismantling of representation and narrative which makes affect synonymous with the film image. In what I will later argue is a clear parallel Andersson is drawing to the material social situation in Sweden, we are placed within an affective and narrative context in which both individual purpose and social order are fictions that may dissolve at any moment to reveal the dark humor of the postmodern absurdity of life.

## **2.2 Buster Meets Beckett: Tragicomedy in Long Shot**

If we are to develop a formal reading of Andersson's humor, performance must be considered in relation to his staging of action on multiple planes in long takes, a stylistic technique I will suggest in the next two chapters stands at the core of not only his understanding of comedy, but also of temporality and the present political moment. Historically, the long shot has been a device favored by comedians on both sides of the silence/sound divide in cinema.

Almost a century ago, Charlie Chaplin gave us the oft-quoted aphorism, “Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long shot.” Not to step on Chaplin’s toes, but I’d argue the long shot in Andersson is the perfect vehicle for staging both comedy *and* tragedy, hilarity *and* horror, often coexisting uneasily in stacked layers of meaning in deep focus, immobile tableaux. Watching these fantastical farces unfold onscreen, our laughter is multivalent and conflicted. We begin to recognize ourselves in the meek and the miserable characters onscreen, our shortcomings in their exaggerated mishaps, and our ridiculous bodies in theirs.

While Chaplin’s camera worked close to his human subjects, Keaton often makes even his own character only a dwarfed, distant figure in the background, a human dot on the horizon, moving impossibly in, across and through vast panoramas of huge natural or mechanical forces. In addition to emphasizing his commitment to realism, the long take allowed Keaton to show us the totality of a process unfolding within a prescribed onscreen environment without the manipulation of montage. As Mast explains, long shots allowed Keaton to show us exactly how a particular mechanism works and let us explore the relationship of cause and effect that illuminate all relevant elements in the process (130-32). But keeping all separate elements of the gag visible at all times was more than simply a functional comic device. As Carroll points out, the use of long shots cannot be explained solely by an appeal to verisimilitude or an emphasis on environment, since that would hardly explain the difference between a Keaton long shot and, for example, Tati’s use of the same technique. Although both accomplish a clear depiction of spatial integrity and continuity, the contrast the author stresses has to do with the way the actions (and interactions) are staged for the viewer. In Tati’s *Playtime*, for instance, we are given hyper-busy, incident-packed long shots in which audience attention is not drawn to any exact part of the frame since no specific action is highlighted or underscored over the others.

Keaton, however, relies less on such an open, multifaceted use of several simultaneous points of interest in one shot; intent on controlling viewing responses, he always leads our eyes to the relevant centers of action through the use of highly directive compositional devices such as diagonals, a rigorously structured foreground/background format, and sequential shifts in the focus (80-84). Enhancing causal relationships through the formal opposition of background and foreground and aligning crucial elements of his scenes across a clearly mapped out pattern in depth promote *immediate* visible intelligibility about physical relationships and processes; we understand exactly what's going on "at a glance" (Carroll 96-97). These highly determinate compositions serve as a way of returning on the level of style to the thematic concern with concrete intelligence, eliciting "extreme audience awareness and sensitivity to the key physical elements of physical processes" (100). The organization of visual information prompts the concrete intelligence of the audience, producing a "flash of understanding" that leads to a "very definite" cognitive stance (104).

This seems almost entirely opposed to Andersson's use of the long take and his development of gags in general, where we have no idea what's going on most of the time and the comedy results not from this careful direction of our glance to the expected results of a gag, nor (solely) from the openness of picking out and interpreting the relevant actions presented onscreen as in Tati; we laugh because there *isn't* any order. In the scene at the mental institution described above, we are allowed to observe the process of the gag gradually build, but the comic payoff is unexpected, coming from the most unforeseeable developments, and made even funnier in the end by the actions that foreshadowed it— the insane man hauled away in the background in the beginning, the patient masquerading as doctor. Our "flash of understanding," to use Carroll's terms, is only that everything in Andersson's universe is completely *unintelligible*, and



situations and relationships are constantly reversed. Jacques Aumont's description of "visual search" seems particularly apt here. As he explains, this is a process undergone when viewing all images, both static and cinematic, by which "we do not look at images in one go, but through successive fixations." This demonstrates the "inescapable temporal dimension of perception, the time necessary to apprehend the image (120). Andersson introduces visual gag points—the comically unexplained bananas in a bag, the commotion in the background—but it is our responsibility as viewers to pick these out. This seems much nearer to Tati's use of the long shot. As Carroll explains,

"Tati is the type of comic who sees comedy as a philosophical stance or viewpoint on life. He recreates Bazinian compositional patterns that facilitate perceptual realism as a way of engendering a perspective on the flux of everyday life. He provokes the audience to view his comedy as one could view an actual street scenes; this is intended to be propaedeutic, one supposes, to viewing actual street scenes as comedies" (81).

This description, however, cannot fully do justice to the darker, even tragic undertone in Andersson's work. The world he creates is undoubtedly funny, but the laughter is always a little green around the edges, and there is only the finest of lines separating the absurdity of life from the despair caused by such absurdity. In other words, and to reference the scene which opened this chapter, the problem is not that the mental patients are impersonating the doctors or that the visitors seem more insane than the institutionalized, but that in our current moment there is no longer any difference between them.

*A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*, the film that closes Andersson's "Living" trilogy, begins on an understated title card that foreshadows "Three Encounters with Death." The first of these vignettes shows a married couple preparing for dinner. She washes

dishes in the kitchen, visible through the open doorway in the background of the shot; he stands gazing out the window in the living room before noticing an unopened bottle of wine on their dining table. He busies himself with the corkscrew, but the wine presents more resistance than he'd anticipated. At first he tries pulling the cork out while holding the bottle, but that doesn't provide enough momentum. On the second, similarly slow and strenuous attempt, he holds the bottle between his knees, still standing, and tries to pull with both hands. Failing that, the man finally puts the bottle of wine between his ankles and bends down, facing the camera, gives one swift tug, then clutches at his chest before stumbling backwards to lean against the wall, all while his wife hums a jaunty waltz from the kitchen. Never peeling himself off the wall, he slides to the ground, then falls to his knees, turns in a tortured half-pirouette, and finally lies on his side, dead. He never lets go of the corkscrew. In the third encounter with death, an unlucky passenger aboard what looks like a cruise ship has already passed—"He's dead as a stone," as one observer comments. The scene opens with him lying face up, feet splayed towards the camera, his face not visible as two members of the ship's crew hover over him. In the background, a dozen spectators sit frozen at their table, their face and attentions turned to the tragedy unfolding before them. As the crew members discuss the logistics of housing the body until they reach shore, the woman at the lunch counter interrupts with another, no less practical, question: what to do with the food the dead man had already paid for? The ship's captain ponders the inquiry solemnly, admitting they couldn't charge for it twice, so they'd better try to give it away. She advertises the shrimp sandwich and the draught beer, but the other passengers are hesitant. Eventually a middle-aged man raises his hand slowly, shyly; he'll take the beer. As he savors the free beverage, all the passengers and crew members remain motionless as the shot drags on for almost a full minute with no movement within the frame, a human still life of resignation.

Whereas the films of Keaton and Chaplin often walked the line between comedy and tragedy, in Andersson's films the two registers become intermingled to the point in which they are almost indistinguishable. We are no longer dealing with tragicomedy, but with a much more complex register, an unholy matrimony between the horrifying and the hilarious which brings the director into the orbit of what Weishaar defines as the "logic of paradox" at the heart of an aesthetic of the grotesque. Generally, the grotesque has been conceived of as an aesthetic dimension divided into two contrastive poles, one side gravitating towards the dark, terrifying, and macabre, the other towards the bright, jovial and ridiculous. While the two extremes share similarities in style and structure, most grotesquery has been theorized as gravitating towards one side or another.<sup>7</sup> Weishaar's philosophy of the grotesque, in contrast, seeks to define the aesthetic from within the space of this contradiction, where the ludicrous and the terrible become "inverted twins of one another," identical opposites (2). The grotesque thrives on this uneasy fusion of contradictions, joining together the light and dark, good and evil, sacred and profane, beautiful and ugly, and, significantly, high and low culture. We must remember that Andersson, although a survivor of 1960s international art cinema, is much more interested in the broad and often callous jokes and physical humor of popular cinema than he is in refined wit—but then again, where would Beckett be without Laurel and Hardy? The unresolved clash of opposites in style and tone seems particularly apt for an aesthetic of the grotesque. As Philip Thompson explains, the grotesque is defined specifically through the irresolvable tension of incompatible values, in opposition to tragicomedy. Giving examples from Beckett and Kafka, Thompson observes that tragicomedy points only to the fact that "life is alternately comic and tragic, the

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<sup>7</sup> The contradiction at the heart of the aesthetic is no more pronounced than the splitting of opinions on the theoretical end. Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* are considered the two most important works on the subject, "and they manage to contradict each other utterly on the most basic premises" (Harpham xvii-xviii)

world is now a vale of tears, now a circus.” The grotesque, however, has a harder message: “It is that the vale of tears and the circus are one, that tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy is in some ways tragic and pathetic” (63).

An important aspect of his (tragi)comic method is that it continually explores its own ethical premises. Why do we laugh at the distress of others, and what does it mean to orchestrate such distress, as any comic spectacle does, with the intention of producing laughter? Andersson’s tragedy is one that affects us because we recognize the reality behind it. Although initially jolted out of our customary ways of seeing and interpreting the world and confronted with a radically different, disturbing perspective, we soon realize Andersson’s world is firmly rooted in our own reality. His works, through meticulously composed, weirdly lucid dream-landscapes of vast plains, endless corridors and vertiginous perspective lines, offer a disquieting mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque, the familiar and the strange—or rather, the familiar made strange. In distorting the proportions and form of “official” reality, Andersson’s grotesque surrealism applies a corrosive but corrective funhouse mirror to the dominant aesthetics, removing any sense of stability or certainty not only from the bodies of the figures represented, but also from their relationship to social reality.<sup>8</sup> “THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD,” Wolfgang Keiser states in emphatic all-caps (185). What is uneasy, disorienting, and ultimately horrifying in the grotesque is that it shakes our confidence in our own world, which becomes alienated—and alienating. As Weishaar writes, the grotesque “shocks us with its absurdity, but its resonance effects aftershocks that point both to the depths of absurdity in the world of the

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<sup>8</sup> Yates sees, for instance, the dark and disturbing use of the grotesque in Francis Bacon’s work as “a means of pushing us beneath the surface of reality to a deeper dimension,” one concerned with “the reality of despair” (cited in Weishaar 2), Bakhtin calls the aesthetics of carnival in Rabelais “grotesque realism,” and Thomas Mann calls the grotesque “properly something more than the truth, something real in the extreme, not something arbitrary, false, absurd, and contrary to reality” (cited in Harpham xix).

grotesque and to the existential absurdity of our own world as it is grimly mirrored in grotesque art” (23).

It is that distorted mirror reflection that I will turn to in the next chapter, to consider the ways in which the black humor and rigorous formalism in Andersson’s works present a surrealist enlargement through which reality’s meaning undergoes an expansion, and the social and political significance of this enlargement. I argue this revelation, similarly to his tragicomic tone, is locatable not only in the movie’s narrative content, character, language, nor purely in some other form of meaning-producing mechanism. Anchored in the form of the films themselves, it pervades all of the spaces in between—between our world and that of the film, between rational social norms and their seemingly irrational unraveling, and, significantly, the affective space between filmmaker, text, and viewer.

### 3 A HALLUCINATION THAT IS ALSO A FACT

“Caliban raged when he saw his own face in the glass. The moviegoer just laughs as he strolls through the cinema’s distorting mirrors. But as he laughs, he may also spot a familiar face.”  
—Raymond Durnat, *The Crazy Mirror*

“What he imagines evokes nothing imaginary, it evokes the reality of the world that experience and reason treat in a confused manner.” —René Magritte on Raymond Rousell

“We no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in this situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask” —Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*

*You, the Living* opens on an image that might seem at home in a Hopper painting. At once decorous and discreet and unsettlingly voyeuristic, the camera peers into a small, tidy room where a man sleeps on a pale green couch, his back turned to the camera. For almost a full

minute there is no movement in the scene, allowing us enough time to take in the careful arrangement of objects and meticulous set design. On the off-white wall above the couch hangs an abstract sketch whose colors match the plush cushions below, balanced on the other side by the frame of a window that opens to what must be a painted backdrop, a pastel city scene in the warm glow of sunset. Next to the window we see a calendar, its faded pages the same washed-out color of the window curtains. The dollhouse view of the room and mesmerizing repetition of frames within the frame, combined with the immobility of the camera, allows us just enough time to speculate on the subject onscreen, who starts to resemble a subject in a lushly decorated terrarium, an inscrutable fish entrapped in the hushed silence of his enclosure. He wakes suddenly, in a spasm, talking directly into the camera to explain he's had a nightmare that "bombers were coming."

The scene cuts to a couple on a park bench, both wearing black leather pants, matched with his studded vest, combat boots and dark tattoos. The downcast expression on the woman's face as she asks her partner to get lost stands in stark contrast to the serene, pink flush of light over the trees behind her and buildings in the far background, again a painted set. The scene evolves as if on stage, the characters facing the camera in a Brechtian tableau. "No one understands me," the woman laments. "No one likes me either.... It's all a big goddamn lie!" Convinced that even her dog Bobbo, a small fluffy ball moping on the ground in front of the characters, lies about liking her, she drives both her boyfriend and Bobbo away. The man stands up slowly and begins to walk away, only to remember he's left a veal roast in her oven, a thought that alleviates her near-suicidal depression for a moment. "If only I had a motorcycle," she muses, "to get away from all this shit." As the background music picks up in a lighthearted jazz ballad, the woman begins to sing her musings on the benefits and drawbacks of owning a

motorcycle. Instead, she's a "miserable wench/on an ugly bench./ Is it wrong to pray," she asks, her question answered by a man in an overcoat who appears from behind a tree: "No, it's O.K."

The song builds to a crescendo as it bridges into the next shot, a perfectly centered view into a window closed on a kitchen populated by cooks capped with chef's hats, their bodies hidden by the frosted glass, only their heads visible. An old man with a walker painstakingly makes his way along the sidewalk in front of the window, crossing the screen left to right as he drags a helpless, whining dog behind him. Finally, the scene cuts to the source of the music, a pajama-clad, middle-aged man playing a tuba in his tiny apartment. Exasperated by the noise, his wife appears in the background, lets out a piercing, wordless scream, and slams the door behind her, knocking a small picture frame off the wall, into the fish tank under it. In the apartment below, set up as a perfect mirror reflection of the musician's home, an elderly man climbs on a chair and bangs on his ceiling to protest the tuba-playing, covering himself in peeling paint. The next cut, to complete silence, reveals a man taking in the scene from across the street, the two lit windows of the building facing him close enough for us to see a shiny gold tuba above a tiny figure comically slamming a broom handle on his ceiling.

All of these situations are at once inherently cinematic and inescapably social. The proceedings are familiar everyday occurrences that are instantly relatable—a nightmare that interrupts the serenity of an afternoon, an emotional breakup, the indignities of old age, the disturbance of noisy neighbors. Throughout the short scene described above, our attention is carefully directed to the very act of watching these events unfold through the emphasis on scenes in which the characters themselves watch or are being watched. The point is to allow ourselves to see these familiar settings and actions differently than we normally would. Andersson's hyperstylized framing—both literal and metaphorical—defamiliarize these otherwise ordinary

instances of interaction, deconstructing the indexed reality of a given social situation. The flow of everyday existence is interrupted, pointing to the formal structures of such interactions in real life; these understated moments of chaos betray the fragility of this formality, based on unstable social structures that busily assemble and disassemble themselves within each scene. In his rejection of traditional “realistic” representation through the practice of what del Rio, following Deleuze, calls an “aesthetics of the false,” the image in Andersson can be conceived “first and foremost as affective carrier, generator, and transformer” (179). Because the images described above are stripped bare of a discernable epistemological ground or coherent interpretation, the viewer is left hanging between perception of the image and the impossibility of translating that perception into cognitive action. The result of such moments of indeterminacy is the experience of the image as a virtual site evacuated of every content except a raw affect that is fully present to itself. Since the affective-performative mode maintains a “peculiar relationship” to reality and truth, del Rio suggests a redefinition of cinematic ontology that privileges emotional intensities over “cognitive, representational, or moral certainties,” an ontology in which the affect becomes the active and creative property of every image (180). This chapter considers Andersson’s meticulous composition of images that at once challenge and expand our view of reality. The first section concerns itself with the assertion that Bazin’s theory of the image was in fact invested in *surrealism* rather than realism, the second considers his concept of realism developed in “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” in relation to depth of field in light of Deleuze’s interest in understanding of depth as a temporal as well as spatial dimension in the *Cinema* books.



### 3.1 The Social (Sur)Reality of the Everyday

Writings on film since André Bazin's seminal "Ontology of the Photographic Image" have concerned themselves with theorizing images as tangible traces of reality. The theory goes, we are forced to accept the reality of the object presented, or "*re-presented*," by the camera because the image it creates, like a fingerprint of reality, "shares, by virtue of the process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model" (13-14, emphasis in original). I believe that a brief discussion of recent reappraisals of Bazin's reflections on cinematic realism can lay the groundwork for analyzing Andersson's movies, which abound with challenges to our very conception of the social organization of reality. While I will not dwell on theories of the image which have opened up a neglected trajectory concerned with "rescuing" Bazin from criticism that his thinking is informed solely by a concern with cinema's adherence to verisimilitude and its faithful, indexical reproduction of a pre-existing reality, a short overview can prove extremely productive for an affective analysis of film form in *You, the Living* and Andersson's other works. In the scene described above, the seemingly rigid perfection of the shots creates a perplexing juxtaposition with the sheer silliness of the situations and the studied, deadpan artificiality of the acting, and the result can only be described as surreal, in Bazin's own words, "a hallucination that is also a fact."

A reconsideration of Bazin's writing problematizes the term "realism" as it has been applied to notions of denotation and indexicality in cinema. For Bazin, cinema has the power to capture both perception (which is allied to the "impassive" eye of the camera in its recording of objective reality) and imagination (which describes the emotional response to the reality revealed through photography). As Adam Lowenstein writes in "The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital *Sweet Hereafter*," the photographic experience that

“reveals the world anew” is forged between the camera’s contribution and the viewer’s contribution, uniting mechanical activity with affective subjectivity (56). At the same time, there is something intangible and irrational in this union of perception and imagination, which leads Robert Furze to call Bazin’s essay “a philosophical treatise” that prefigures “the greater existentialist observations, tracts, and novels that were to come” (81). Bazin’s description of photography, these authors argue, mirrors Breton’s union between dream and reality in surrealism through the erasing the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real.

In “The Reality of Hallucination in André Bazin,” Jean François Chevrier pulls apart Bazin’s seemingly paradoxical definition of photography by pointing out it is actually a citation—although it is accompanied by neither quotation marks nor mention of its source. Chevrier argues that Bazin here is adopting an expression put forth by Hippolyte Taine in 1857, “perception is a *true hallucination*,” a reversal of the definition of hallucination as false perception (42).<sup>9</sup> Taine, however, founded his theory on the primacy of sensation and the assimilation of image to sensation, and it is this assimilation that Sartre reproaches in *L’Imaginaire*. Bazin manages to reconcile this gap by placing hallucination at the intersection of perception and imagination. This factual hallucination marks photography as having privileged access to certain modes of surrealist revelation as the image of an object emerges in both its rational concreteness and its irrational essence. Identifying the influence of surrealism on theories of realism brings us to the conclusion that realism, for Bazin, actually “emerges... where the rational and the irrational meet” (Lowenstein 60).

This line of thought seems particularly apt for a consideration of Andersson’s style, where the rigorous composition, staging, and the performance of the actors within static long

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<sup>9</sup> In Sally Shafto’s translation, photography is defined as “true hallucination”—instead of Timothy Barnard’s “a really existing hallucination” or Hugh Gray’s “hallucination that is also a fact” cited above.

takes strive to close the paradoxical gap between dream and reality, imagination and perception. If Chevrier identifies the “reality of hallucination” in Bazin’s writing on Italian neorealist cinema, I would argue that Andersson’s work presents an inversion that allows us to grasp the hallucination of reality. What the director offers are not Fellinesque oddities—although Andersson acknowledges his debt to Fellini—but the grotesque of the ordinary, men and women in whose faces and bodies are etched the discomforts and weight of time. This quality is particularly heightened by Andersson’s casting of non-professional actors, chosen mainly for their unusual physiognomy.

If I can return for a moment to the second epigraph which opens this chapter, Andersson shares with Magritte a surreal sensibility, deadpan melodrama, *trompe l’oeil* effects and visual non-sequiturs, and, I would argue, the same striving to reveal the mystery of the everyday, finding abstract beauty and profundity in the mundane and awkward moments that make us utterly—and imperfectly—human. As critic David Sylvester concluded about Magritte, both artists see their work as “the revelation of a mystery latent in all things, a revelation to be consummated—as with the banal figure which came to seem mysterious when accompanied by its reflection—through presenting everyday things or beings in an alternative way to how they appear every day...” (cited in Danchev). It is only through isolating and exaggerating what viewers usually take for granted that Andersson arrives at what he calls his “trivialist cinema” as a way of sharply lampooning society’s rules, expectations, and institutions. If, as a precursor to surrealism, black humor, defined by Jacques Vaché as “a SENSE... of the theatrical and joyless pointlessness of everything,” can be seen as “reducing everything that then seemed all-important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path,” then Andersson’s cinema of profound disrespect for social convention and acceptable rules of behavior, makes him one of the foremost

contemporary practitioners of *umor* (Breton vii). Emphasizing the minutiae of the prosaic and the momentousness of the everyday, the filmmaker seeks to demonstrate that the most pressing social and existential questions of our age come into focus in the most mundane, banal, and often absurd moments of daily life. His cinema offers a surprising parallel to Walter Benjamin's assertion that "fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (190).

The social and political significance of such moments cannot be overstated. As Adrian Martin explains in *Mise en Scene and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art*, all films work within the prescribed codes and rules of sociability within a given time or culture. The social world itself is already strictly codified and organized, subject to a multitude of rules that govern behavior, action, manner, gesture, posture, movement, and expression. "These situations," he explains, "are social because we know and recognize them in the world beyond the cinema; they form a sort of omnipresent theatre of everyday life. Whether as material for cinema or the stuff of the quotidian world, certain, specific rules are involved, and sometimes explicitly invoked: Habits, ritual, prohibitions great and small, punishments if infringement of the code is too great" (129). A study of social mise-en-scene aims to focus us on the material form of its own workings in real life, and on how these known rituals are recreated and inscribed into the flow of the film.<sup>10</sup> The concept of social mise-en-scene can also help us understand the ways in which films can actively work to deconstruct this social reality, either satirically or

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<sup>10</sup> V.F. Perkins, similarly, sees filmic worlds as inhabited spaces but also, necessarily, as communities of understanding governed by specific rules that rely on collective knowledge and understanding. As she explains in "Where Is the World?": "Each world has its own norms. Each world holds to beliefs and practices that place things on scales that stretch from the inevitable through the ordinary to the impermissible or the impossible" (32).

surrealistically, and the value of this transgression. Social mise-en-scene has, according to Martin, a character that often passes unnoticed in daily life, but this makes it no less performative:

“We know—or rather, we somehow learn, through a complex process of transmission that is particular to every culture and society—how to ‘go about our business ‘ in a public toilet, how to behave at a funeral, how to order and eat in a fancy restaurant, how to occupy space with other commuters on a train or in an elevator. We might well say that many movies begin from the moment when these rules and conventions come unstuck from their smooth routine, either dramatically or comically (or both at once)... Whatever the instance, through some clever twist of filmic presentation, we suddenly become *aware* of the lineaments of a social code or arrangement—an example of art’s celebrated capacity to ‘make strange’ or *defamiliarise* [sic.] something we had previously taken for granted, to reveal what was not so obvious in what we took to be completely natural” (129).

This process of defamiliarization is an integral part of comedy as a genre, but it is telling that Martin uses Louis Buñuel’s *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) as an example, writing about how a simple reversal of the ordinary, social functions of eating and excreting is enough for “the whole social fabric to come crumbling down amidst laughter” (145). By unraveling the known social codes and rituals, surrealism is specifically designed, Neil Coombs writes, “to provoke a response; to challenge and attack the conventions of reality” (8).

Surrealist artists “broke the rules of accepted behavior: the social, religious, and artistic taboos of their time,” thinking they could solve, in Breton’s words, “the principal problems of life” (Coombs 19). This might sound like quite an ambition, but it is not far from Lowenstein’s

description of the surrealistic qualities of cinema, through which “the network of relations connecting the viewer and the world is enlarged—in the encounter between photograph and viewer, some new form of knowledge, affect, sensation, and/or revelation is added to the world” (60). What connects all of these writings is the belief that it is not through reproducing—or even vaguely modifying—indexical reality that we reach a more profound truth; rather, it is the utter transformation or transgression of social reality’s norms in surrealism that reality’s meaning is ultimately revealed and expanded. The movement’s goal, as Benjamin eloquently explains, was always political rather than merely poetic. The theorist discerned a “collective innervation” of technology in the process of the surrealists that effectively politicized art. Benjamin traces a new, physiological and tactile experience with images in his essay, describing the interpenetration of “body and image-space” that bespeaks a reconfiguration of boundaries (subject-object, vision-body, individual-collective, human-mechanical) that have traditionally been divided (Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* 93). Referring back to the early days of surrealism, he sees the work in this circle as *profane illuminations*, not literature but “something else”—“demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature” (179). The actions which Andersson presents might at first seem too insignificant to bear such social and political import, but it is often from the lowly and inconspicuous that social change can spring.

Andersson’s political critique comes forth most strongly through his sense of temporality as promoted by the use of the deep focus long take, which engages in a revelation of how the unconscious expresses itself in everyday life. The filmmaker is interpreting, condensing, and distorting a historical and social moment like a memory or dream, this hallucination of reality expanded and exaggerated through the slowed down temporality and over-stylization of shots. What Andersson’s cinema seems to be doing is to pose a challenge to binary accounts of time as

dynamic and space as static and resist teleological progress narratives as well as circular repetition as he breaks down of the opposition between absorption/contemplation and distraction in aesthetic experience so central to modernist writing on art—and all of this happens not on a narrative or thematic level, but a formal affective one, one that, in Benjamin’s words, “brings the immense force of ‘atmosphere’... to the point of explosion” (182).

### **3.2 Suspended Animation: Time in Focus**

In a scene roughly 15 minutes before the end of *Songs from the Second Floor*, we see a row of well-dressed people making their way across a vast room towards what vaguely resembles an airport check-in counter in the real world. The separate elements of the shot work together like stacked layers of meaning in deep focus, and we are prompted to take special care to observe how all of the characters’ movements and actions interrelate. The wealthy, we gather, have apparently made plans to leave in hope of escaping whatever apocalyptic event has shaken the world, and they’re trying to haul everything they own into the afterlife, vivid visual description of the materialism that reduces, debases, and weighs down human lives. In a single shot lasting just over two- and-a-half minutes, we are given the opportunity to observe a large number of elements working within a single space: dozens of would-be-travelers do Sisyphean battle with stacks of luggage that measure at least double their height, pushing and pulling as they painstakingly make their way across the room, but do so diagonally, following the pattern of the tiles, rather than moving in a straight line the way a normal person would; on the left side of the screen, a seemingly infinite row of preternaturally patient employees dressed in blue uniforms stand nearly motionless; above them, more people wait at a railed balcony; our eyes are drawn to the row of large round light fixtures, only to be brought back to the luggage carts amid the clanking of spilled possessions (generally golf clubs). While the extra making-of material

that catalogues the creation of the airport set through various stages in the process clearly shows the far end of the room is a painting, there are presumably painted figures *moving* in the background. There's even one luggage cart way back there that gets ahead of all the others. With Andersson's devotion to practical effects, it seems unlikely that the movement is computer-generated, which only adds to the unreality of the scene since it somehow *feels* impossible. The whole setup maddeningly begs interpretation but refuses to confer any clear meaning on the proceedings.

The wintry, desaturated colors of the scene are, as in the rest of the film, predominantly muted grays, browns, and blues, creating a flattened effect that feels uncomfortable in juxtaposition with the staging of the shot tableau in a Kafkaesque hallway, narrowing towards infinity. Bodies and their environment seem to coalesce into one single corporeal assemblage. Perspective lines formed by the tiles on the floor, the paneling on the walls, the high ceiling and the counters on the left collide and clash, creating tension and perhaps even claustrophobia, despite the illusion of endless space. The loud, overlapping grunts and groans of the crowd form the sonic definition of human failure and indignity. Only the people pushing the two luggage carts closest to us are recognizable characters, and from what we've seen of them, we can deduce that we're looking at the highest strata of society; their inability to do something as basic as just getting across the room seems symptomatic of whatever started the movie's unexplained mess in the first place. "It's heavy, Pelle," one of them whines, "I can't take it anymore!" He is encouraged to keep going as if it were a moral duty: "You have to, Robert, you have to try!" Even with the world falling apart around them, they can't bear to leave anything behind. On cue, the golf clubs come tumbling down. As they stumble to pick them up, a man from another cart gives the most unemotional, understated pep talk possible: "Hang in there, Pelle. You've got to



hang on!” The employees never lift a finger to help them, or even visibly acknowledge their presence. Like Beckett, Andersson finds a rhythm in cliché as repeated platitudes gain new meaning and echoing refrains add to the dreamlike quality of the scene. Here, a meaningless aphorism delivered as absolute reason is unexplainably repeated from the first scene: “There’s a time for everything.” The time for misery is supposedly over, as the characters look forward to being “free men. Free at last!... And do what we feel like!... Aren’t we worth it, when we’ve worked so hard?” One wonders if that kind of thinking didn’t cause the film’s catastrophe. Throughout this entire conversation, the two men closest to the camera have been clumsily struggling with the clubs. Wherever they’re going had better have golf courses.

The pressing concern for matters of time that Andersson shows not only through his composition and staging in deep focus and elongation of movement, but also on a narrative level through the dialogue in this scene, begs for a consideration of the director’s relationship to cinematic temporality, one that brings us back, once again, to a consideration of cinematic realism influenced by the writings of Bazin. For the French theorist, cinema allowed “for the first time, the image of things [to be] likewise the image of their duration, change mummified” (“Ontology” 15). The argument has already made that Deleuze’s two *Cinema* volumes can be seen as a prolongation, indeed a “philosophical ransom,” of the modernist writing of Bazin (Arnaud 85). Deleuze’s writing on the time-image provides a strikingly subtle commentary on Bazin’s opinions on depth of field, one which takes into account the complexities of Bazin’s thought instead of reducing him to the naïve proponent of realism so much of film theory has made him out to be. Building on a number of Bazin’s texts dating from the late 1940s to the early ’50s, Deleuze expands the Bazinian notion of the depth of field as providing not a “surplus of realism,” but actually an “excess of theatricality” (*Cinema 2*, 142). Among other analyses,

Deleuze identifies that of the long shot death scene in William Wyler's *The Little Foxes* (1941) "where the fixed camera records the totality of the scene in depth, as in the theatre" (*What Is Cinema* vol. 1, 91). Deleuze concludes that the excessive theatricality produced through such staging "will in the end strengthen the feeling of reality" (142). As Diane Arnaud explains, the depth of field creates a realistic effect that arises from the "simultaneous mise-en-scene of two distinct actions: the primary dramatic action as such, and a sort of secondary action which is the shot itself over time" (87). Indebted to Bergson's notion of real movement as concrete duration, this reading of Bazin effectively temporalizes space, as depth of field encompasses depth of time: "In his freeing of depth which now subordinates all other dimensions we should see not only the conquest of a continuum but the temporal nature of this continuum: it is a continuity of duration which means that the unbridled depth is of time and no longer of space" (*Cinema 2* 141-42).

The very nature of depth of field then, understood as "depth of image" is to "show time in itself" (Arnaud 91). Chief among the effects of such a conceptualization of the deep focus shot is the possibility of understanding modifications of dimensions over time. Along the same lines, in his reading of Vittoria De Sica's *Umberto D.*, Bazin sees the film as pushing the temporal unfolding of the action onscreen "to the limit of our sensitivity to duration" (81). The film is important to Bazin not only because of its revision to the terms of narrative fiction, but also for the camera's heightened attention to quotidian micro-events, really events of *uneventfulness* which amplify and expand the aesthetic register of realism *apropos* lived duration. Chevrier writes that the short sequence that Bazin analyzes in "De Sica: Metteur en Scene" is exemplary in its introduction of the art of the "micro-narrative" into the dramatic genre in the way it structures time according to the ordinary everyday unfolding events rather than more

conventional linear narrative patterns, remaining, in Bazin's words "multiple and full of ambiguity" (82). This ambiguity, according to Chevrier, "partakes of both a psychological complexity and the language of the unconscious" (51). As del Rio explains Deleuze's writing in *Cinema 2*, the time-image becomes "severed from realistic ties to time, space, and causality, [so that] one might say that the spatio-temporality of these moments is informed by a kind of virtual, rather than actual, reality" (159).

In Andersson, the static tableau becomes a precarious containment of concentrated energy and tense (and intense) affective force, analogous to the relationship between what Weishaar calls the "seething energy" of the grotesque and its "obstructed or obscured formal structure" (117). But affect here is decidedly not synonymous with action—the scene described above, as most of the director's sequences, are the perfect image of human *inaction*. These are what Sianne Ngai sees as "noncathartic feelings [which] ... give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended 'action') (9). These exploded moments, "intervals" or "gaps," as Harpham calls them, become fertile sites for the grotesque, an aesthetic in which both time and space are often markedly irregular, compressed or elongated to upset the formal balance of a work. For Harpham, these temporally stretched moments trap both characters and viewers in a "purgatorial stage of understanding," in which we're aware of the significance of the moment without having the ability to decipher and react to its codes (15-16). Weishaar explores specifically those absurd, charged moments in the Coen brothers that "seem to swallow up the future as they negate the past and force characters to react blindly to extreme situations that extend beyond their control, as their otherwise mundane lives intersect the catastrophic" (113). These "moments of extremis," in Andersson as well as the Coens, open up liminal spaces of threatening or oppressive stasis to

which the characters respond with aberrant physicality (113). Unable to adapt and reach any type of comprehension, Andersson's characters remain forever stuck in the interval, crucified in time and space, unable to make sense of their relationship to the world.

The dilating of time in Andersson is not only noncathartic, but anti-cathartic; any particular event which takes place accentuates the manner in which these uneventful moments mirror the general situation of obstructed agency and loss of control thematized throughout his movies. If we think of these depictions of stasis and precarious movement as affective states that are shared, that go beyond individuals into the collective, then it is easy to make out the deeper social and political implications of Andersson's works. Deleuze and Guattari write that affects, after all, happen in the nervous systems not only of persons, but of worlds (163-99). Andersson's portrayal of stalled or suspended action is politically charged, depicting not individual problems (of the characters or viewers) but acting as synecdoche to much larger social and national ills. As I hope to show in the next chapter, the static long-take tableau which all but evacuates time in Andersson is not only a stylistic choice in his evoking of specific emotions; this challenge to traditional structures and temporalities is the formal manifestation of his anachronistic conception of history—"we are really living in both our time and the past all the time" (quoted in Ratner 44). The connection I wish to make—which I would argue Andersson already makes in his films—is between cinematic time and duration and historical time: a view of history as layered, instantaneous and made up of incongruous juxtapositions as commentary on a failure of historicism as central to the development of a national Swedish identity marked by passivity, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of historical conscience.

#### 4 THESES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

“Only what does not fit into this world is true. What is requisite of the artistic act no longer converges with the historical situation, which is not to say they ever harmonized. This incongruity is not to be eliminated by adaptation: The truth, rather, is in carrying through their conflict.” –Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

“We are really living in both our time and the past all the time. Everything is affected by what has gone before.” –Roy Andersson, *Film Quarterly* interview

Recently, film studies has been gripped by a fascination with “slow cinema.” A substantial body of theoretical work has expanded, both geographically and historically, the corpus of films admitted into the pantheon, which now includes a diverse range of works from early cinema to contemporary works in both the mainstream and experimental markets. This aesthetic becomes an ethical practice because of its investment in enabling duration as a material form, providing a condition of possibility for recognition, reflection, and empathy (Grønstad 274). At first it would seem that Andersson’s employment of extremely long takes in which mood trumps action, minimal exposition and episodic progression, narrative ambiguity, and a pronounced emphasis on the everyday align his works with those of slow cinema, but I would suggest the films in the “Living” trilogy do more than experiment with cinematic time. This is not “slow cinema” as many, rather narrow and reductionist, accounts define it, but it does fit into Lutz Koepnick’s broader conception of what he calls an “aesthetic of slowness,” explained below. My argument, as follows in this chapter, is that the drawn-out duration of Andersson’s takes serves a more important purpose—it is not only cinematic time that the director is playing with, but historical time, using the form of his films and their affective dimension to carve out a different way of conceptualizing not only history but also the historical and political present.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> While this can certainly be argued of some “slow” directors—such as Abbas Kiarostami, Béla Tarr or Tsai Ming-liang—as well as forbearers of the mode like Antonioni and Tarkovsky and certain other contemporary works of

*Songs from the Second Floor, You, the Living, and A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* grant us the ability to open up other possible orders of temporality or the multiplicity of temporal experience, encouraging meditation on facets of our everyday experience we normally overlook. At the same time, the subject matter Andersson deals with and the affective structuring of his works elude easy classification. The categorization of certain films as “slow” is based in part on a disjunction between shot duration and audiovisual content that gives the impression that “nothing happens” (De Luca and Jorge 5). The criteria here seems, to a great extent, a matter of perception and experience, and can never be merely an objective temporal or rhythmic measurement—one person’s idea of slowness can well be that of another person’s speed.<sup>12</sup> What we can be sure of is that, in Andersson’s films, things *do* happen—indeed something as monumental as the end of the world is (albeit slowly) unfolding before our eyes. The aspects of his films which I’ve discussed in previous chapters, such as the surreal intrusion of physical comedy into his dioramas of mass misery and the stacking of action on multiple planes in deep focus, also encourage the impression of ceaseless activity and constant movement, however halted or precarious.

Slow cinema’s extended temporal structure has been theorized as standing against the accelerated tempo of late capitalism, presenting a kind of existential inertia presumed to be connected with the struggling global economy. These films become “an attempt not only to counter the compression of time and space brought about by technological and other changes but also to bridge the widening gap between the global and the local under the intense speed of globalisation [sic.]” (Lim 89). Slowness, in this context, can provide a medium to “ponder the

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Turkish New Cinema or the Romanian New Wave, Andersson’s films differ in fundamental ways from slow cinema per se, as I will explain below.

<sup>12</sup>For a consideration of slow cinema’s reconfiguration of the politics of spectatorship, boredom, and the “labor” or reception, see Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures*, especially Chapter 2, “Serious Immobilities,” and Schoonover, “Wastrels of Time.”

meaning of temporality and of being present in general, of living under conditions of accelerated temporal passage, mediation, and spatial shrinkage” (Koeppnic loc. 113). While I would argue that Andersson’s films share some of slow cinema’s underlying goals and methods, I do not think they in any way present themselves as an indictment of *speed* per se—in fact, it seems that it is the very slowness of the characters that causes them the most trouble as their painstakingly sluggish actions betray a state of suspended agency.

Much more closely aligned with my reading of Andersson, Koeppnick’s consideration of the aesthetic of slowness comes as a response to and a reframing of recent discourse surrounding slowness that always see the mode as a reaction against the speed of contemporary life, which has been theorized as the normative center of our society. In contrast, Koeppnick is looking at recent artistic works that experiment with extended or decelerated structures of temporality *not* as an attempt to turn their backs on the accelerated pace of modern existence and shrinkage of space, but to ponder and complicate the meaning of temporality and its directional movement. Slowness seen in this way is not merely about a dissolution of historical time nor the restlessness, distractions, and pressures of the present, but a way of mediating between these two poles, between our desire for memory and nostalgia and the need for presentness. The author sees the present moment as a site of multiple, overlapping durations, rhythms, potentialities and intensities of both past and future, memory and anticipation. Time today, he writes, “is sensed as going forward, backward, and sideways all in one; it might often be perceived as chronological and global, evolutionary and ruptured in one and the same breath” (loc. 122). To be contemporary, in this sense, is not just the rejection of modernism or postmodernism—and further complicates a simple juxtaposition of the two—but implies an openness to other possible

orders of temporality, the ability to approach the present as “a realm of unfulfilled pasts and unclaimed futures” (loc. 326).

Similarly, for Andersson the point is not merely to formulate a different relationship to time and space, but a different relationship to history itself. He not only makes the materiality of time one of the main considerations of his works; he is dealing with a specific historical and political context which is, itself, a matter of time. A counterexample to the claim that within postmodernism we have lost our sense of temporality through the weakening of historicity and the emergence of a new kind of depthlessness and superficiality, the present moment for Andersson, in its simultaneity and multiplicity, is not a closed system that evacuates the past. His films are anything but a post-historical site of repurposing and remixing history’s styles, expressions and meanings; they are an invitation to reconsider our contemporary *and* historical sense of time and mobility, our structures of memory, and our notions of place, subjectivity, and community. This invitation is not unlike that extended by Benjamin, whose thought has often been associated with the speed of modern industrial culture, but whose writing can also offer us considerable resources when dealing with slowness as a commentary on history and progress.

In the theorist’s later writing, in particular his final contemplation on the philosophy of history, drafted shortly before his death in 1940, it is possible to pick out a concerted effort to counteract progressivist views of time along a linear, homogenous, forward-moving cause-and-effect chain; here Benjamin is concerned also with deliberate gestures of deceleration as a way of “endorsing memory and the durational as an antidote against modernity’s logic of amnesia” (Koepnick loc. 620). In his famous reading of a painting by Paul Klee, the modern conception of history as progress and rapid change is seen as a storm tossing everything into the future—a future whose principal feature is “the perennial renewal and hence repetition of past and present



catastrophes” (Koeppnick loc. 637). Unable to close his wings, Benjamin’s angel of history is caught up in the breakneck speed of historical time, his eyes directed at the wreckage piling up in front of his feet: “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (“Theses” 257). This aesthetic and political criticism of the twentieth century illuminates the social and historical problems brought up by Andersson’s work, lending them a different kind of actuality in the present. We can trace in the director’s films not only an affinity for theories of the twentieth century, but also a transformation of this modernity and the legacy of its continuing impasses in the new millennium. Reading his films alongside Benjamin’s writing allows us to understand the history of the present, or the present as history, and to imagine different futures whose potentialities might be buried in the past. As Benjamin writes elsewhere, “The trick by which this world of things is mastered—it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method—consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past”— (“Surrealism” 182).

Benjamin’s is then an inherently political, not merely historical, view of the past, which, like Andersson’s films, thrive on the contradictory idea of achieving insight more swiftly through slowing down. In Benjamin’s own words, “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest as well” (“Theses” 262). For Benjamin, actuality requires standing at once within and *against* one’s time, grasping the “temporal core” of the present in term other than those supplied by the current period about itself. His philosophy of history pivots on the question of modernity, on one hand, and his aesthetic theory, on the other, all interwoven with the technologically-determined conditions of mechanical reproduction, but the theses are defined by their tactical, interventionist value; they are a “superb revolutionary document... [which] continually evoke[s] class struggles in terms of consciousness, image, memory and experience” (Eagleton 176). The

historical-materialist perspectives permits Benjamin to formulate an astute assessment of the ongoing crisis than that offered by contemporary leftist cultural politics, one that Miriam Hansen suggests intersects with a “utopianist, in a messianic sense *ahistorical*, if not *antihistorical* perspective that seeks in the dreams of the past the promises of a future beyond the ongoing catastrophe” (*Cinema and Experience* 78, my emphasis). The past has its place in the present without reducing this present to the status of a mere afterimage of the unchanging, forward motion of time. This nexus of memory and futurity in the capacity to both remember and imagine a different kind of existence gives rise to a “temporal disjunction,” the “intrusion of a forgotten past that disrupts the fictitious progress of chronological time”; the ascendance of multiplicity and repeatability over singularity is key in the ensemble of perceptual shifts that define the present (Hansen 82). Echoing Hansen’s analysis, Terry Eagleton similarly writes that for Benjamin historical development is not a linear evolution but a “shocking constellation of disparate epochs..., an amalgamating or archaic with more contemporary forms... the epochal strata are seized and stacked rudely one upon the other, transfiguring the geology of revolution by a violent upheaval” (178).

Although Andersson, as Eagleton argues about Benjamin, “believes in starting not from the good old things but from the bad new ones,” it is actually the bad old things that come to haunt the new (6). The present in Andersson’s films is not an isolated moment but a point of confluence of varied histories and that reach out to, in his own words, “the whole spectrum of human existence” (Andersson, qtd. in Covert). The structure of (un)feeling of the current moment extends back throughout history, as his films combine contemporary stories with a certain medievalism in mordant historical tableaux targeting a world running out of control. Starting with *Songs*, Andersson’s characters are impaled on the present moment and, unable to

act, fall back on ancient rituals and superstitions to protect themselves. What looks like a board of directors' meeting at a company comes complete with a crystal ball, dutifully passed around the table as they meaninglessly discuss returns and make predictions for the next quarter, and the climactic set-piece features a young girl that is sacrificed in order to ward off the world's catastrophe. A struggling furniture salesman is unexplainably accosted (in a vision? a hallucination? a dream?) by a figure from the past, a young man hanged in the Second World War. In *You, the Living*, the past encroaches on the present through the unconscious, in fantastical nightmare sequences which—shades of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*—bring the characters to face trial for crimes like “gross negligence”; in a surreal reversal I will discuss later in the chapter, it is *against* the Nazi party that these crimes are committed, and the beer-swinging judges seem only too happy to send the poor man to the electric chair. But nowhere is the intermingling of disparate (and desperate) historical times more pronounced, and more significant, than in the last film of the trilogy.

#### **4.1 His Majesty the King Needs to Use Your Bathroom**

A half-empty, drab saloon stands on the rough edge of a modern industrial city, presumably Andersson's native Gothenburg. Dilapidated buildings and telephone posts dot the horizon, on display in the large square front windows of the café. The frame offers a vision in beige: worn-out wooden chairs and tables fill the left side of the frame, with a couple of arcade game machines in the back corner, while the bar stretches into the depth of the shot on the right. The patrons of the establishment are impassive to the point of seeming frozen, their facial features locked in expressions of helpless stupefaction; even the young couple glimpsed kissing in the background seem to be just going through the motions. Everything onscreen, including the

forlorn characters, forms a palette of pale yellows, browns and greens—the colors of bland, overcooked food. Ashley Beamont’s “Shimmy Doll” rocks on the soundtrack, acting almost as a mordant, mocking laugh track against the sorrow on screen. The two aging novelty-item salesmen who provide the film’s only recurring characters wander into the bar. Throughout *A Pigeon...* we’ve seen them whine and bicker their way throughout the city as they feebly and unsuccessfully ply their wares—the kind of novelties that might have been popular at some point in the murky mid-twentieth century: a “bag of laughs” that emits guffaws when opened; “extra-long” vampire fangs; a hideous rubber mask in the likeness of a creepy guy called Uncle One-Tooth—that nobody wants to buy. “We’re in the entertainment business,” one of them explains. “We want to help people have fun,” pleads the other as the two grow increasingly desperate, their shoulders visibly slouching ever lower with each appearance.

They’ve stumbled into the bar because they’re lost, “looking for an address that doesn’t seem to exist.” “What do you mean, ‘lost’?” the barman asks, and I half expected them to embark on a soliloquy on the absurd futility of life and the existential finitude that threatens them—what actually happens in the scene is much stranger. In a logistically daunting, anachronistic aside, we watch a detachment of King Charles II’s Army (circa 1709), march past the bar’s front windows. Perhaps they are also lost. Led by the young Swedish king on horseback, the officers in three-cornered hats ceremoniously enter the restaurant (horses et al) and roughly commandeer it, kicking all of the women out and whipping a few of the men for good measure—all while our attention is split between the idiosyncratic happenings and the absurdity of the salesmen, one of whom forgets to take off the grotesque Uncle One-Tooth mask he was demonstrating. The modern-day bar customers are as confused as the viewers by this inexplicable intrusion. Wordlessly, through a lackey, the young king asks for a sparkling water,

drinks it silently, then propositions a young male bartender. “His Majesty thinks a man that young and handsome belongs to the battlefield,” the lackey explains. “You can sleep in the King’s tent.” The scene continues for a good couple of minutes after this, all of the characters completely motionless except the soldiers riding past in the background, triumphantly bellowing a Swedish version of the the Civil War-era judgment anthem “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Fifteen minutes later (in the movie’s screening time, since the diegetic time is impossible to measure), the film presents a surreal inverse of this scene, as we see the desiccated army stumbling and hobbling back the way they came, from the disastrous Battle of Poltava. Limping, exhausted and dejected, their banners in tatters, the Swedish forces are hardly triumphant anymore after being humiliated in a historically bloody defeat in Russia. This time the women in the place are not asked to leave—every one of them has been widowed, and the younger bartenders are nowhere to be seen, replaced by an elderly man. King Charles is strewn across the saddle of his horse, unmoving. We wonder if he is dead until his lackey explains, “His Majesty the King needs to use your bathroom.” An officer bravely offers to inspect the lavatory first, returning sheepishly after a few moments to report that it’s taken—I guess even kings have to wait. As he does, they form a perfectly symmetrical gathering behind him, topped by the horse’s head visible above their bodies. The retreating soldiers seen through the windows in the background now form a procession on foot. “Half the Kingdom is lost,” the monarch whines unbecomingly. “If we only had more horses,” his lackey offers. “And if it hadn’t rained...” Confused, the king asks, “Rained? Did it rain?” His man considers. “No,” he admits, “but it could have. You never know what those sly Russians are up to. If they hadn’t armed themselves

in secret, those sly Russians, we would have beaten them.” The king seems puzzled. “They armed themselves in secret?” he asks. “They must have,” another soldier ventures.

## 4.2 Posthistorical Pastiche?

At first glance, it seems Andersson is rewriting history as freely as the soldier justifying the defeat above, but the temporality of *Pigeon* is much more complex. This is only one—perhaps the most blatant—example of Andersson’s surreal grab-bag approach to history, in which different historical moments collide, converge, and ultimately collapse, and time swoops, circles, and folds in on itself. The temporal mixing of incompatible historical moments aligns closely with the director’s grotesque aesthetic and black humor. As Harpham Explains, the first application of the word “grotesque” in the early modern period coincides with the discovery in 1480 of the “dainty, innocuous” frescoes decorating Nero’s Golden Palace; hence, he sees the word as born out of an aesthetic and ideological conflict between ideas associated with a burgeoning modernity and those reflected in ancient artifacts from a culture in the remote past. The grotesque, he explains, entails the “manifest, visible, or unmediated presence of mythic or primitive elements *in* a nonmythic or modern context” (51). The clash, as well as the humor resulting from it, are often uncomfortable, jolting us out of a familiar understanding of time as linear—not the least significant in this process being his incongruous juxtapositions of styles and influences, ranging from Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s macabre medieval paintings to modern Peruvian poetry and Edward Hopper, the Marx Brothers and Luis Buñuel to Monty Python.

However, this is not pastiche as described by Frederic Jameson—as lacking “parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter... blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (65). Jameson contrasts the postmodern situation with the modernism that

preceded it, seeing in our current condition an apparent victory of commodification over all spheres of life and pinpointing a number of separate but interrelated symptoms he associates with the profound transformation of experience and culture attendant upon the emergence of postmodernity, among them the weakening of historicity, a breakdown in the distinction between high and low culture, and a new depthlessness and superficiality. The theorist is highly critical of our current historical, economic, social, and cultural situation, especially in his idea of the “global present” as a single integrated moment. I would argue that this ahistoricism is, paradoxically, exactly what Andersson is fighting against. The filmmaker is certainly not repurposing or rewriting history as depthless pastiche. Far from blank parody, these temporally confused moments function as an acerbic commentary on social practices both past and present. They are symptomatic of what Andersson perceives as an actual temporal and historical confusion in contemporary Europe, one which he is trying to criticize and remedy.

In addition, Jameson’s and other theories of the postmodern see a supposedly homogenized instantaneity and undifferentiated closure as the distinguishing characteristics of our current moment. Unlike the modernist thought that sought to accelerate time by shrinking space, postmodern information cultures of globalization have flattened both time and space into synchronic depthlessness: “Today, everything appears to be in frantic motion, it is concluded, yet space no longer offers room for any acts of traversal; time is on the fly, yet the present is at a standstill, expanding into the past and future without allowing for the possibility of future progress or regress” (Koeppnick loc. 822). Time that has lost the ability to sense true temporality and the durational by erasing the specificity of local meanings and historical nuances; we all live in one single time. The present, it is argued, “greedily gobbles up the rest of time, yet in doing so dissolves the kind of historical consciousness necessary to approach and interpret the present as

something meaningful” (Koeppnick loc. 131). As Jameson writes in *Postmodernism*, “We are no longer encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the ‘West’)” (390).

In contrast, Andersson’s movies certainly do not follow one singular narrative or order; the present, as depicted in his films, is a realm of simultaneity and multiplicity of experience that reflects the dissolution of any type of integrated narrative or stable point of observation in modern society. In his films, instantaneity doesn’t reign supreme, and the present moment is *not* a closed system, but an ongoing process and affective experience of past and present events (both historical and personal). Like Benjamin, Andersson asks us to hesitate in the face of the present not in order to step out of history but actually to engage with the changing landscapes of the present more fully. The director places the historical present in a space of affective residue that draws attention to past events that are shared among strangers beneath the surface of manifested life. If Andersson repeats and reworks historical scenes within a contemporary context, he does so to counteract a passive experience of the present moment. This self-reflexivity about a contemporary historicity as we are perceiving is, of course, uncomfortable, but this is what constitutes, as Benjamin would have it, a *political* rather historical view of the past.

Two dream sequences (the first at the beginning of *You, the Living*, the second right before the ending of *A Pigeon...*) merit consideration here, as they exemplify Andersson’s views on a failure of European identity dependent on a lack of historical conscience. Although clearly signaled as dreams, these scenes look and sound no different than any other of Andersson’s surreal meldings of past and present, memory and reality. In *You, the Living*, one of the director’s signature long takes, of unmoving, doomsday traffic jams, is interrupted by a character directly



addressing the camera from his car window, recounting the dream he had the previous night. “It was not a pleasant dream, mind you,” he warns. Set at an innocuous-enough seeming family dinner party, the tone quickly becomes menacing as he explains he didn’t know anyone there and was getting the impression that the “dreary” and “depressing” atmosphere was somehow his fault. Accordingly, he decides to lighten the atmosphere by doing something funny. He settles on the tablecloth trick, although he’d never done it before, and “there was a hell of a lot of china.” After the predictable broken-china outcome, anxiety mounts as the police arrive to arrest him and send him to trial for disregarding someone else’s property, “the worst thing you could do.” The class critique in Andersson’s reenactment of the dream is blatant. All of the party guests are decidedly upper class, well-dressed and icily detached, while the poor narrator of the dream appears in denim overalls and a faded, checkered flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up. After sizing up the table and its cluttered but fastidiously composed arrangement of expensive china, pristine silverware and platters, he chooses one end at which to perform the trick and swiftly brings everything toppling down amid a cacophony of breaking dishes. Two wine glasses survive, rolling on their side on the polished wood of the tabletop, inexplicably adorned by two large swastikas. The abrupt cut to the trial reveals a packed courtroom, all cold marble and colder stares. The three judges preside over the offender from a table so high as to remind viewers of the arrogant town clerk’s office setup in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*— in Andersson’s world, the people who take themselves most seriously are nearly always the most ridiculous. Throughout the trial, the unwitting defense lawyer cries inconsolably while the man awaiting sentence sits impassively, even when he is condemned to die for his crimes. “The electric chair, what a terrible invention!” he sobs in his car when we return to the traffic jam. “How could you come up with such a thing?”

The invention used in the second dream sequence is, however, more terrible still. In what must truly be *Pigeon*'s most disturbing scene, reminiscent of the young girl's ceremonial sacrifice in *Songs*, we witness a group of British colonial soldiers piling black-skinned slaves into an enormous metal drum. At an excruciating pace that extends the scene to over seven minutes, the giant copper cauldron is set alight and rotated as if on a spit, the sounds of the dying men filling the air. With horror, we realize this is the "musical" accompaniment of the night, arranged for the entertainment of well-dressed elderly onlookers who dine next to the cauldron and sip champagne amusedly. The terrifying scene is later signaled as a nightmare belonging to Jonathan, one half of the sad salesman troupe who had previously witnessed the arrival of King Charles's Army. The traveling salesman has been teased constantly throughout the film by his partner for being overly sensitive, and this sequence clearly illustrates his encroaching sense of human responsibility, along with a vague feeling of guilt for sins of the past. The dream remains unexplained in the narrative, but on close inspection we can notice the name "Boliden" is etched into the side of the death instrument. The director is referencing the Swedish mining company that dumped 20,000 tons of toxic waste in Chile in the 1980s and was sued in 2013 by victims of arsenic poisoning ("Boliden Lawsuit").

In these scene and many others, what Andersson urges us to do is look towards the past not for solutions for our current situation, but for a better understanding of the long history of abuse in which the present is only one moment, in which the innocent are punished, the rich protected, and the victims remain unrecognized. Accepting responsibility for our historical and personal past is seen as the only way to move forward. The filmmaker's recalling of uncomfortable truths (from the casualties of war, the horrors of slavery, and the concentration camps glimpsed throughout the three movies to more recent social atrocities he alludes to) places

Andersson within a complex network of European discourses on history and responsibility, chief among them Derrida's remarks in *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*. As described by Rodolphe Gasché, for Derrida “*to be* means to inherit. One is a [sic.] heir even before one explicitly assumes or rejects a particular inheritance” (291). But inheritance is never a given; it is a task, in this case an active process of incorporating European discourse (on religion, philosophy, history) “which consists above all in *being* such that [Europeans] assume the memory of Europe” (292). These teleological discourses being now exhausted, “the prime duty of the European is to take responsibility for this heritage, that is, the modern tradition of reflecting on European identity” (292). Andersson's films are all about the refusal to negotiate this effort of responsibility and its effects on the current situation in Europe, portrayed in his films as the end point of inactivity and *ennui*.

The entire populace of Andersson's cities is trying to escape the current living conditions, but it is only through ignoring, denying, or escaping a historical responsibility that they've ended up there in the first place—and the passive observers who adorn the edges of each frame in Andersson's films seem to provide a commentary on passivity in and of themselves. Each shot of his movies forms a macabre visual critique of an arguably terminal malaise of a particularly European sense of identity as the director satirically dissects the deadening insular monotony central to the functioning of the European city and typical of its denizens' identity formation. Andersson himself develops these ideas and outlines his own strongly leftist views in *The Fear of Seriousness in Our Time*, a scorching critical tract published in 1995 in which he details the loss of ideals in contemporary Sweden, the antihumanism of rational modernity and capitalism, as well as the mediocrity and crass commercialism of the cinema. While he is longing for lost plenitude satisfied with the communist ideals of solidarity, he is still a skeptic, suspicious of

grand narratives and deeply pessimistic about man's place in the universe. Like Benjamin's angel, the filmmaker understands we cannot go back and change the past, and neither can we "awaken the dead," but by accepting historical responsibility we might begin to "make whole what has been smashed." In my concluding remarks in the next chapter, I consider the political implications of Andersson's work within the contemporary political and economic situation in Sweden. I contend that Andersson's aesthetic choices and the affect they produce exemplify a shared historical and political sense that can be traced directly to the social and economic crisis of Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century and the precarious present of the current global economy.

## 5 CONCLUSION: NIHILISTIC HUMANISM?

"My films are a struggle against the absence of human solidarity, against the indifference of society towards suffering. They are a word in favor of the poor and the unhappy."  
 –Vittorio De Sica

So what does all of this have to do with Andersson's critique of contemporary Swedish politics? Following Berlant's assertions in *Cruel Optimism*, I argue that our present moment can be perceived, first, affectively, if we are to be reflexive about a contemporary historicity as we are experiencing it. We do not experience either the present nor our belonging to history as knowledge, but first as a sensation, affect, or, following Raymond Williams, a "structure of feeling." It is my contention that Andersson's aesthetic (and affective) experiments with cinematic and historical duration mark the unfolding activity of the contemporary political moment. These aesthetic choices exemplify a shared historical and political sense that can be traced directly to the social and economic crisis of Sweden at the turn of the twenty-first century

and the “precarious present” of the current global economy outlined by Berlant. Working off of the claims laid out in the last chapter, here I will again return to the specifics of Andersson’s aesthetics to explain their connection to the changes the image of Sweden has undergone in recent works of cinema, art, and literature—from an affluent, complacent, and homogenous society supported by the well-functioning (if existentially bland) economic “Swedish model” based on progress, consensus, social equality and centralism into a fragmented and economically unstable society.

Andersson’s characters inhabit a world that doesn’t make sense anymore, that can fall apart or destroy them at any moment, a world of absurdity and despair that works according to the rules of a ludicrous game that they don’t understand and at which they can’t win—and that game is their life. The themes that animate his work—the alienation in (post-)modernity, the attendant loss of common humanity, the corrosive influence of bourgeois capitalism and state bureaucracy—are not in themselves novel, but their presentation merits further consideration. Andersson carefully navigates the oppositions opened up between the global and local, the historical and the current. The unfolding situation—catastrophe? (tragi)comedy?—he tracks is at once specifically Swedish, embedded in a local history and culture and more broad-ranging, a reflection of worldwide economic recession, social and political predicaments and environmental crises. It is at the same time a political stance informed by left-leaning beliefs *and* an existential and philosophical question on our condition that universalizes its thematization, a temporally specific, twenty-first century impasse *and* a contemplation of indignity, inequality, and abuse throughout centuries of human evolution.

Although the filmmaker draws direct parallels between the national passivity of past historical situations (Sweden’s appeasement politics towards Nazi Germany during WWII in

*You, the Living*, the brutality of European colonialism and the defeat at the hands of Peter I of Russia in the Great Northern War depicted in *Pigeon*) and the current mentality of the welfare state in Sweden, Andersson is not erasing the specificity of local meanings and historical nuances. While obviously satirizing neoliberal society, Andersson's images of rundown institutions and public locales also lead to thoughts of a socialist state in decay. The director goes as far as to accuse the Swedish politicians of following the same mentality as the rulers of Weimar Germany, a "'cadet logic' based on pure arbitrariness and short-sightedness... due to their effete and wishful thinking that everything would go back to how it once was" (Brodén 123-24). Berlant similarly examines the contemporary global moment specifically in terms of the instability and precariousness of the present—of bodies, subjectivity, and, significantly, of fantasies as related to citizenship, race, labor, class, health, and sexuality. The fantasies of "the good life" that she (and I would argue also Andersson) sees "fraying" include the dissolving assurances of upward mobility, job security, and political and social equality. It is the optimistic subject itself, the subject which once believed in such assurances, that is dissolving within a context of economic, social, and cultural contingency of current neoliberal capitalism (1-3). For Berlant, the shared historical present is not an object, but a mediated affect and a "thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters... are also always there for debate" (4).

The instability, smallness and frailness of humanity within our current moment is made that much more apparent in Andersson's films when contrasted against an abstract background of sterile rooms and standardized furniture in his string of surrealistic moving tableaux. His images of drab apartments and institutions inhabited by pale, predominantly middle-aged figures,

illustrate a society deeply alienated from any sense of community, its inhabitants signaling the failure of the historical social vision that might have once inspired them. But, unlike the neorealist directors which the Swedish filmmaker acknowledges as a major influence in their blending of Marxist and Christian humanism, Andersson refuses to turn his characters into heroes of the everyday or victims of an unjust system; individual ignorance and pettiness are as much on display as institutional injustice.

### **5.1 This Side of Paradise: The Dissolution of the Swedish Model**

As Marie Demker, Yvonne Leffler, and Olda Sigurdson write in their introduction to *Culture, Health, and Religion at the Millennium: Sweden Unparadised*, “the reader or cinephile who has long associated Sweden with images of an affluent, complacent, and homogenous society—as communicated by the internationally renowned idea of the ‘Swedish model’—must wonder what happened to the state of Sweden.” The edited collection of essays in *Sweden Unparadised* track the evolution of the country in the second half of the century to what they call “a more pluralistic, fragmented, and—perhaps—gloomy society” (1).

Before the changes that would overcome Sweden in the 1970s and '80s, the country was known internationally as a successful welfare state based on progress, consensus, social equality and centralism, the term *fokhelm* (people’s home) used to describe a national political vision of social democracy, known for income-related social insurance benefits, highly skilled workers. Sweden championed the United Nations and strove for peace in conflicts all over the world. Its art, popular fiction, and cultural resources were celebrated internationally. It was increasingly seen as one of the most secular countries in the world with its strange amalgamation of private religion and a Lutheran state church, and prided itself on its tolerant attitude. After the health reforms, banking crashes, economic recession and environmental crises of the past century, the

present day nation is now “characterized by disillusion, societal strife, and the dismantling of the key features of the welfare state, such as its collectivism, institutionalized universal rights, and social security system” (Demker, Leffler and Sigurdson 4). The troubles started in the late seventies, when the Social Democratic party lost power for the first time since it had formed the government in 1932. At first, even as political discourse became more and more individualistic and increasingly in favor of retrenching social public welfare with the rise of neoliberal economic practices in the 1980s, Sweden was considered a model for a sound economy and a strong state. Gradually, with a more highly deregulated economy new forms of private initiatives proliferated, the yuppie phenomenon took hold, and a broad affirmation of private consumption and everyday luxury prevailed. Throughout the decade of the eighties opinion had changed so much that a center-right government coalition came into power in 1991, a change that was swiftly followed by an “acute” currency crisis and the flip-flopping of social democratic and more conservative policies every couple of years (Demker, Leffler and Sigurdson 5-10).

As the former welfare state model dissolved towards the end of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first, popular literature and cinema became significant forums for articulating critical points of view and struggling over their significance. Few have scrutinized and criticized the current social and political situation with the same depth, consistency, and zeal as Andersson. The filmmaker became an icon of the 1960s art cinema and the values of the Swedish *folkhem*, when so many young activists of the leftist movement in Sweden (Andersson included) were taking a stand against international capitalism and promoting socialism with a human face. The director even—modestly, of course—associated his own filmmaking with the *Entartete Kunst* (“degenerate” art as labeled by the Nazi regime) of critical modernist artists like Otto Dix and George Grosz, who, he writes, “with all imaginable visuality



tried to open the eyes of people and warn them about the mounting catastrophe” (qtd. in Brodén 122).

Immodesty aside, “It would not be overstating the case to claim that Andersson has devoted his entire artistic project to the interrogation of the human condition and the reification of social life in the Swedish welfare state” (Brodén 101). The director harshly and publicly criticizes those in power (on both the left and the right) for measuring life only in material terms as the ideals of early working-class movement—solidarity, civic spirit, and social equality—have withered away in the public, leaving a void in the social and cultural body of Sweden. As evidenced by his works, he blames *all* political parties for the recent corruption of the original welfare project, political shortsightedness and the creation of an increasingly inhumane society, drawing attention to the drawbacks of economic progress such as alienation, materialism, reification and conformism, and the utter precariousness of the system itself.

If, as I suggested in the previous chapter, Andersson is reading history, it is undeniably the history of the capitalist mode of production, as attested by his writing in *The Fear of Seriousness in Our Time*, a meditation on the nihilistic consensus mentality permeating all spheres of Swedish society and promoting the purging of serious thought. Andersson’s only collection of explicit political statements, *Fear* more or less echoes the thesis put forth in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the standardization of culture and the reification of all social forms in modern mass society (Brodén 122). The book is considered too idiosyncratic to be taken seriously in Swedish political debates, but it was garnered a cult following for its documenting of capitalism from within the time of the crisis itself. This is, however, what Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness,” a systemic, ongoing crisis—and, Benjamin himself put it, “The fact that ‘everything just goes on’ *is* the crisis” (cited in Eagleton 74).

Disruptions are themselves folded back into the system, global capitalist economy is actually structured by these transformations. One main mode of the present undeniably on display in Andersson's works is Berlant's idea of the impasse, defined as a time for dithering in which someone or some situation cannot move forward or adapt within a state of constant crisis, unreliable agency and dissipated subjectivity (191). What Andersson's films allow is a sidestepping of the impasse through, ironically, an intensification of the crisis, to the point where we might actually imagine the complete collapse of capitalism—even if this is attended by what might also be the end of the world.

## 5.2 Paradise Lost (and Found?)

The last installment of Andersson's trilogy was partly inspired by a Bruegel's 1565 painting *The Hunters in the Snow*, an image where you see birds looking down on our human foibles. But he says it also comes from a moment when he was in his apartment struggling with the script. "Outside through the window," he explains, "I saw at the same level a pigeon sitting on a branch. And I think, oh, maybe that pigeon also is battling with a problem, with his script or his philosophy" (qtd. in Ulaby). The absurdist humor feels as Swedish as Andersson's references to his country's history and politics, but the director insists his films are about nothing less than loneliness, exclusion, intimacy—common human experiences. "People around the world are my homeland," Andersson continues. "My homeland is the globe, not only Sweden. I want to be universal" (Ulaby). Elsewhere, he explains that "even if you are creating the grotesque, as an artist you are in service of humanism... When I show images of slavery, it's a metaphor for how you exploit your neighbor... I want to show the vulnerability of the human being, to wake up the respect for that. I really want to show that absurdity. But not without hope." (qtd. in Covert).

It would seem that there isn't much hope in the director's depictions of human misery, but I would venture to say otherwise. Although Andersson's films drip with irony, they are not devoid of love—love of his pathetic characters, of their small setbacks and infrequent petty triumphs, even of their sins and mistakes. The “Living” trilogy is so acerbic as to leave a sour taste in your mouth, but it is also sincere. The filmmaker's criticism of societal failure, like Vallejo's writing on the vulnerability of the small man, is filled with pathos and forgiveness. In the words of one of the characters in *You, the Living*, a woman kneeling in prayer in an assembly hall while other visitors sneak out the back, “Please dear Lord, forgive them. Forgive those who think only of themselves. Forgive those who are greedy and cheap, those who cheat and deceive, those who get rich by paying lousy wages.” She is preaching to deaf ears, and perhaps so is Andersson, but it would be a shame to withdraw, as the woman's listeners do, from his exploration of serious questions of conscience. Earlier in the same film, we've heard an aging psychiatrist complain of constantly having to “listen to patients who aren't satisfied with their lives, who want to have fun, who want me to help them with that.” He explains, “They demand to be happy while at the same time they are egocentric, selfish, and ungenerous.” People like that are impossible to help in the psychiatrist's opinion, but he is shown as too jaded and too narrow-minded to reflect on what his patients say or what the underlying causes for their condition might be. Instead, he prescribes pills, “the stronger the better.” Andersson listens and reflects, and provides his own theory on the underlying causes for our individual and societal ills, physical and existential. He doesn't prescribe an easy fix, but his is a diagnostic worth listening to.

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