

ROY ANDERSSON: THE ESSENCE OF THE COMPLEX IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

The work of Roy Andersson, a Swedish auteur that turned its back to realism and embraced abstractionism, embodies one of the few truly defying and groundbreaking attitudes in modern cinema: the denial of speed. The current essay focus on the methods through which he obtains this effect and the contribution of his body of work to the aesthetics of cinema.

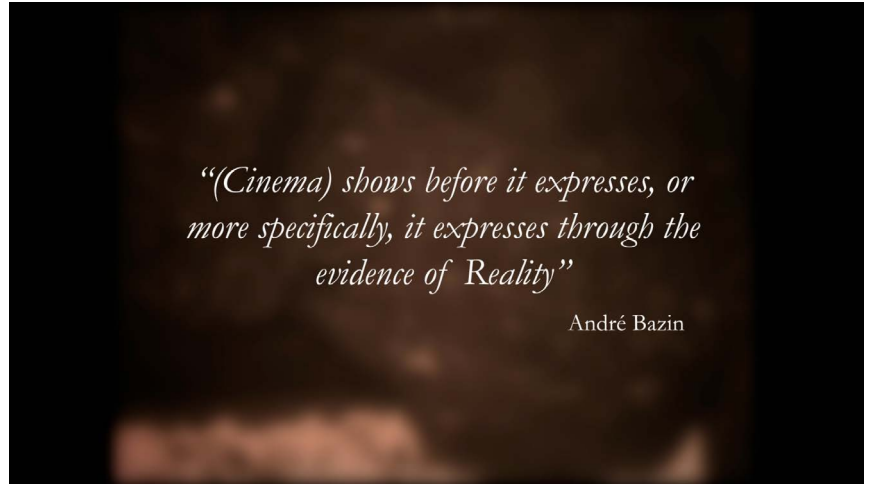
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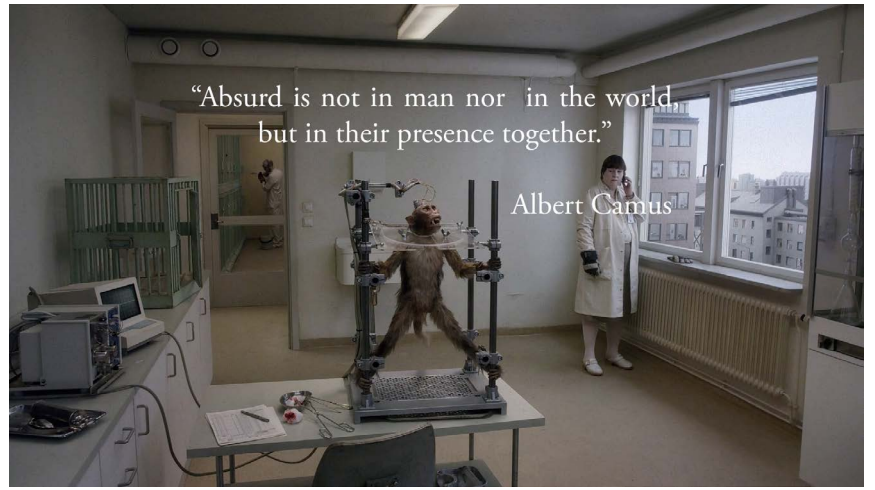
“The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.”

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“Absurd is not in man nor in the world,
but in their presence together.”

Albert Camus



Alienation

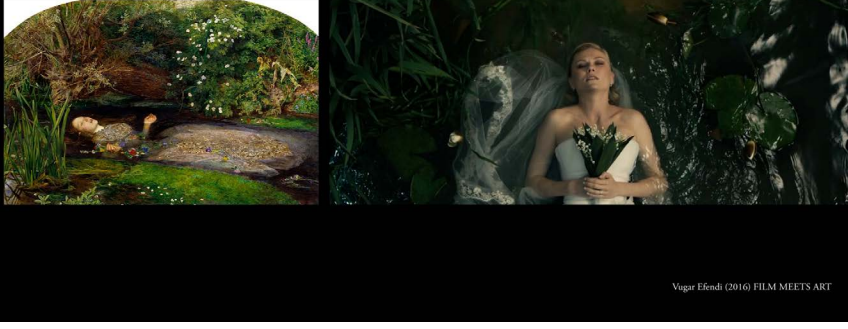


Loss of
Humanity

Burden of Capitalism







THE EMANCIPATION OF CINEMA AND THE RETURN TO ITS ORIGINS

As is common in Scandinavian countries, filmmaking is a practice of great artistic devotion and carries a great tradition of pushing aesthetic boundaries with each film. In this constellation of auteurs, one is fairly unknown to the not-so-attentive public, however his influence on cinema's development fluxus is paramount. And his legacy is undoubtedly carried on by his *Trilogy of the Living*.

Understanding Roy Andersson and the influence of his work means returning to birth of cinema. As an incipient art form, cinema started as an extension of theatre and deriving from the compositional limitations that were cast upon painting. These issues were attended to in the form of the *tableaux shot*, a technique that Andersson subverts to his own purpose and creations. And it carries with him an ironic weight, as the swede is purposely referring to earlier times, simpler times, in order to further advance our conception of an artform that has evolved massively in both language and content throughout the last hundred years.

So why the *tableaux shot*? Well, to the audience in simpler times, shocked by the innovation brought upon by the moving image, it was a method of preserving real time and continuity, a way of not scaring them (in both the figurative and literal meaning), unused to such a novel way of portraying stories. So, albeit the potential that film enclosed to create new worlds and fantasies, during the first two or three decades of the art it was mainly a vehicle for showcasing other artistic productions and events. We might say that it was montage (never underestimating the influence of Porter and Eisenstein) that brought the necessary tools for cinema's emancipation.

But why was this so? Why was cinema regarded as an imperfect art practice, one that should be at the service of other more "elevated" art forms? Well, the starting point is to understand Aesthetics' Studies and the paradigm at the time of cinema's flourishing. Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", written in 1935, gives us a clear idea of the underlying issue as well as the paradigm shift that cinema was proposing.

Painting invites the spectator to contemplate; before her, the spectator can abandon itself to its associations. Before the movie screen, he cannot. As soon as his eye captured a scene, it has already changed. It cannot be stopped. (Benjamin, 1936, p. 231)

So, the issue of speed, much discussed by Paul Virillo, is a recurring theme throughout the twentieth century and a subject of intense philosophical debate. As opposed to this vision, the French film critic André Bazin developed a series of essays and ideas that sought out to praise film for film itself, the reality it provided when properly used. For Bazin, the reality of the image is "the essence of film", proposing that reality would be accurately expressed (from an artistic standpoint) through the long

shot (Menard, 2003). Why this mechanism? Because it would capture the essence of the event by providing unmanipulated space and time information to the audience, providing realism to the captured events (Lima, 2018). We can already see that this pertains to the practices in which cinema first flourished.

In more practical terms, Bazin's vision and ideas would end up providing the basis for the slow-cinema movement. This movement characterizes itself by maintaining temporal and spatial integrity, while inviting the audience to sensorially experience and contemplate the movie, pushing narrative and drama to the background (Brunow, 2010). We can roughly identify five characteristics that are transversal to this cinema current, namely: long-shots; maintaining temporal cohesion matching real time with the duration of the films' actions; tableau shots, albeit with changes in the composition of the shots and the importance of background and foreground hierarchies; hyperrealism; and a less dramatic interpretation of events, both from the montage standpoint but most importantly from the *mise-en-scène* and acting standpoints (Grønstad, 2016).

THE TRILOGY OF THE LIVING AND ROY ANDERSSON'S LEGACY

So where does Roy Andersson fit within this complex tapestry of cinematic currents? Well, the answer lies, in his own words, in trivialism, his own movement (Ratner, 2017). A vision set to voice the common citizen and his banal worries and tasks through abstract settings and situations where real is represented as an essence, barebone and stripped of superfluous distractions. Viewing one of the three films that comprise this trilogy, it becomes obvious that it is tragicomedy that motivates Andersson. Like Camus once wrote "Absurd is not in Man... Neither in the World, but in their presence together". Post-modern alienation, loss of humanity, capitalist and bureaucratic influence are all recurring themes, pertinent as ever (Tucan, 2016).

Influencing the Swedish artist, we can find Bruegel, *Der Neue Sachlichkeit*, Edward Hooper, Fellini, Buñuel and specially Tati. All these influences merge in a work process that is intimately connected to painting, drawing his shots from his own sketches and shooting all of them in meticulously planned sets (Ratner, 2017). All this amounts to the creation of a condensed reality, the essence that Bazin referred to, derived from memory and recollection processes. In essence, stripping all that is excessive, he is able to create the image-time, as Deleuze would put it, with time itself becoming visible, dictating the pace of the action itself (Flanagan, 2012).

Why the tableau shot? What better way to invite the audience into pondering and introspection than through (almost) still images? Like paintings in a museum, his shots pertain to provoke the audience, letting them linger on for as long as they want, searching for meaning in every corner of the frame (Chinita, 2018). There is nothing beyond the frame, but the frame pertains to everything that isn't framed. The frame suggests,

affects and influences the spectator's perception of the movie and the reality in which he stands, in a way that Aumont proposed (Pethő, 2015).

Perhaps Roy Andersson has defined it best by calling his shots "the Complex Image". It works within the concepts of the slow cinema movement, with the addition of features such as shadowless lighting, a deadpan acting, meta-commentary and the constant feeling of voyeurism, in little sketches that paint themselves until the final gag.

IMPORTANCE FOR AESTHETICS' DEVELOPMENT IN CINEMA AND MODERN ART

Maybe it wasn't Mr. Andersson's *logos* to radically propose such a novel way of filmmaking, but his influence cannot be understated for cinema's emancipation as art. We cannot forget that theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno postulated the death of art with Cinema, but still here we are, with authors that still push the boundaries of the craft.

This trilogy is relevant for cinema as it is for aesthetics. Andersson's movies are akin to painting, contemplation, they search for the aura that Benjamin theorized, through formality. It is the culmination of a cinematic evolution process that takes the craft back to its pictorial origins. Roy Andersson is able to create, with his trivialism and complex Images, a novel way of looking at cinema, proposing reflection, introspection and the public's engagement so that the creations can fulfill themselves. They are masterfully crafted and gifted with pictorial beauty, but it is within the audience that the Images complete themselves, through reminiscence, memory, criticism and, most importantly, humor.

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