

Roy Andersson and Filmsosphy?

"[p]hilosophy and art belong together, as art is very philosophical and arguably philosophy is an art itself" (Roy Andersson 2016)



Figure 1: *Songs from the Second Floor (Sånger från andra våningen, 2001)*, Directed by Roy Andersson

Introduction:

Film has been compared to the mind. How it resembles the way of thinking, seeing, how it resembles our dreams, subconscious and perceptions. It can sometimes be a shock to see such a mirroring effect in front of your eyes. In a sense film offers us an experience of the other. The thing that is not ours, but which we can see and relate to and reflect.

I would like to research how aesthetics in film can make a film think. I want to research this aesthetic reflection, taking Roy Andersson's films as a guideline. Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson has been looked at by critics and art cineasts for his unconventional visual and narrative style. Andersson's style is characterised by his "Aesthetic tableaux", like the use of long static shots, where an absurd reflection on humanity is shown. His films are closely linked to his idea that films, like other art forms, can have an important function in contemporary society, to awaken a social and moral consciousness in his audience. It's how we can single something out, give us a window to look at it, reflect on that separately, away from our everyday lives. It's hard to see the things that surround you every day, to think about them in a metaphysical way. We forget about the meaning of our everyday surroundings.

We have to button buttons, we have to zip up zippers, and we have to eat breakfast. It is exceedingly concrete and trivial, the whole of our existence, even for those who are in

positions of power. I like this very much, emphasising this triviality, because it pushes people down to earth, to that place where one actually belongs. That is, we are like animals, we are an animal. – (Roy Andersson commentary track to Songs from the second floor)



Figure 2: *Du levande (You, the living) (2007), Directed by Roy Andersson*

I also believe, like the film theorist André Bazin, that you should let the audience explore the image and decide what is important and unimportant. You don't have to point this out with scenes or close-ups, but let the audience discover it (...). It goes back to the early days of film you could say, and I believe that there is so much yet to explore in the image of the static camera.– (Roy Andersson from interview with Olle Agebro)

Roy Andersson:

For Andersson, the vulnerability of humanity is one of the subjects he says he is 'dealing with all the time'. Running throughout his oeuvre, the question of what it means to be human – stumbling through an existence wrought with dreams, fears and needs, most of which are as common as they are difficult to share – emerges as an especially central theme in his most recent feature film, *You, the Living (Du Levande, 2007)*. Consisting of 57 relatively slow-paced and loosely connected tableaux, the film makes up a larger narrative about humanity. By focusing on mundane, everyday events the film captures the simultaneous triviality and significance of our existence, dealing as it does with those typically human interactions wherein —nothing really happens, except, perhaps, for life itself.

The humanist philosophy that is central to Andersson's films is not only his aesthetic and thematic expressions, but also his approach to filmmaking itself. Andersson's core

humanistic belief is that art and filmmaking are a means to reflect on human nature. Roy Andersson believes, like the film theorist André Bazin, that you should let the audience explore the image and decide what is important and unimportant. You don't have to point this out with scenes or close-ups, but let the audience discover it. Rarely are his stylistic choices solely film aesthetic. They are often accompanied by certain social critiques that he wants to construct. That reflection on humanity is something I want to research in his films.

But how do the tableaux think? (write a little about what the tableaux is)

The tableaux tell us something about us and determine the glasses that we look through at the same time. The space often tells us more about the characters than the lines they speak. They did not have any script but they did have drawings. The actors would practice in front of the camera, they worked more like painters than as filmmakers.

"Roy discovered an affinity with Bazinian realism and developed Bazin's sequence shot to the point where shot and scene become one. Rather than classic montage, multiple camera angles and action images, he and his cinematographer design sequences of wide-angle, still images that combine long takes, depth-of-field, and multiplane movement. The "complex image" is not merely a technical image but a normative definition of a good image – one that affirms a cinematic image that impresses and lingers. The "complex image" must be "demanding and provoking"; the "viewer must analyse the image on her/his own, without any suggested interpretation" We look at his film-world from an immobile point of view, without close-ups or editing between shots within scenes to direct our seeing and guide interpretation." (Larsson and Marklund 2010, p. 274–278)



Figure 3: You, the living (*Du levande*, 2007), Directed by Roy Andersson

'I hope that through my films I am able to open up our sensibility towards each other and show that we are existentially very vulnerable beings. Plus, we just have so little time in our lives. There is no happy ending to any of us [laughs]. But that's exactly why we should be more responsible with the time we have left.' (Andersson quoted in Jacobson, 2016)

Trivialism:

To account for his focus on existential questions, he and his production team coined the term “trivialism,” which he then used in interviews and commentaries:

“One describes the world and our existence in their little trivial elements, and in that way I hope that one can also get to the big, enticing, philosophical questions. But how life is, life is of course trivial, we must button buttons, we must zip up zippers, and we must eat breakfast. It is exceedingly concrete and trivial, the whole of our existence. Even for those who are in positions of power. I like this very much, emphasising this triviality, because it pushes people down to earth to that place where one actually belongs.” (Andersson quoted in Lindqvist 2016, pp. 23–24)

“Trivialism” opens cinema onto the everyday fact of existence and thematizes a shared ordinary world of mortal beings as a ground for awareness. In the banality of this everyday mode of being and petty details, both human foibles and sublime moments of beauty in the here and now become apparent. His scenes of everyday life range from personal misfortune to social malformation to the inhuman within the human world. They are stretched between two poles: the all too human and the limits of the human. In his most recent film, *About Endlessness* (2019), visually inspired by Chagall and van Gogh, the juxtaposition of tableau is accompanied by a Scheherazadean voice-over to invite reflection on the precariousness and beauty of existence.

His stylization of cinematic images is complex because it is open and dense, and this makes his trilogy distinctive and remarkable. As Lindqvist (2016) argues, his practice is based on the intermediality of film, poetry, painting and music. His films mostly feel like poems, going from one moment to the other, linking together in their stylistic voice, with a strong focus on having something to say, and explaining it through the visual image, rather than with exposition and narrative. For example, how the room is constructed, how the sleep deprived man is napping on the slot machine, how the young girls are impatiently looking at the boys, how one has sex but has his vision fixated in the void. These examples of Andersson’s visual language are poems in themselves, they’re in the rooms, you just have to find them as the spectator in each tableaux.

As Andersson explains: *“There are no shadows to hide in. You are illuminated all the time. It makes you naked, the human beings – naked”* (Andersson quoted in Ulaby, 2015)



Figure 4: *Sånger från andra våningen (Songs from the Second Floor) (2001), Directed by Roy Andersson*

Let's take an example: Halfway through the film *You, the living (Du levande, 2007)* we see a nervous colonel dressed up in his uniform. He gets into a taxi and tells Stefan, the driver, about a speech he has written for the 100th anniversary of a former commander-in-chief. The conversation starts on a trivial level but quickly rises into a deep metaphysical reflection on existence, creating what is maybe one of the most philosophical moments in the film. Stuck in traffic, the colonel reflects on the speech he wrote for the 100th anniversary:

Colonel: 'My approach was a rather philosophical one. About being human year after year. This is how I see it. Life is time, and time is a stretch of road. That makes life a journey, a trip. Don't you think so?'

Driver: 'Yes. I guess you could look at it that way'

Colonel: 'Yet in order to travel you need a map and a compass. Otherwise you wouldn't know where you were. Would you?'

Driver: 'No.'

Colonel: 'And our map and compass are our traditions. Our heritage, our history. Aren't they?'

Driver: 'Yeah, sure.'

Colonel: 'If we don't understand this... Before we know it, we're fumbling around in the dark.'

After a brief pause, the colonel asks: 'Where are we?'

The main characters wander in the films, drift in and out, and move from the foreground to the background or vice versa. They are positioned in relation to secondary characters who are onlookers, bystanders, and passersby. Some of these characters play the role of observers. We watch the main characters and those who watch and listen to them. They are exposed to the gaze and judgement of onlookers aligned with our gaze. In Andersson's view, both the space of being-with, and the spacing of one being to the next, characterises human existence.

Combining the filmsophy with Roy Andersson:

'If you are a filmmaker or writer, you strive to demonstrate or clarify life as it exists for us, that's what it's all about. Either by showing how wonderful it is, or by showing that it is both wonderful and damning, and that it could be much better.' – (Roy Andersson, From Pehr Arte's documentary)

In mainstream cinema it is expected that we would identify with the protagonist and their problems. But how does that work when the story is absurd and nonsensical? I tend to appreciate the abstract and fragmented nature of Roy's films. It gives more room to reflect rather than telling you what to think and feel. It triggers the brain more to actively make new connections that it didn't see before. That's when cinema is able to create its own consciousness, this is what makes the film philosophical.



Figure 5: *Du levande (You, the living) (2007), Directed by Roy Andersson*

Looking at the book *Filmosophy*, written by Daniel Frampton

Film can be seen as a thought experiment. The filmic experience provides a frame to access alternative realities, and at the same time asks us questions that relate to our own reality. What is your frame? The film thinks as the viewer completes the thought in their own head. The filmmaker is the architect of the cinematic thinking world. But when the spectator finishes the thought, then the film thinks, then the film becomes philosophical.

In chapter 5 of the book *Filmosophy*, Daniel Frampton argues that film should be conceived as a performative entity: 'Film does thinking, rather than just provoking thinking. Film-thinking is immanent to the film' (page 95).

Frampton's 'filmind' proposes a philosophical thesis as well as giving a criticism of the current state of film studies. The philosophical thesis states that films can follow lines of intellectual inquiry that traditional forms of thinking, which work predominantly qua language, are unable to follow. Filmosophy thus claims that films can philosophise, and can do so with their own means of expression which extend beyond philosophy as a linguistic activity. The criticism of the status quo in film studies that Frampton puts forward is that cinematic techniques such as form, style, editing, and camera movement separate a given film into different parts, which are subsequently analysed, and distort an accurate understanding of a film and deny one's ability to recall the actual experience of seeing and hearing a film. Instead, film should be understood as an organic whole in which all parts interrelate with each other, and which also causes an organic impression on a film spectator. For Frampton, operational distinctions between film form and film style distort an understanding of how film works (on us as filmgoers). Frampton argues that his conception of film facilitates such an 'organic' film experience, 'because style is tied to meaning with natural, thoughtful, human terms of intention (by the filmind)' (page 149). This is because the 'concept of film-thinking [which is performed by the filmind] bonds form to content by making style part of the action' (page 8).

Frampton's intention to redirect the attention of film-philosophy scholars towards the study of specifically cinematic rather than only narrational philosophical aspects of film seems to be on the right track. In fact, there don't seem to be many studies which specifically focus on the philosophical potential of cinematic means of expression which bypass narratological aspects. I agree with Frampton that what makes cinema philosophically interesting in the first place is its ability to 'think' in non-conceptual ways. Studies that primarily focus on philosophical aspects of the stories that narration films rely on thus ignore the potent philosophical aspects of film.



Figure 6: *Sånger från andra våningen* (*Songs from the Second Floor*) (2001), Directed by Roy Andersson

Film becomes less a reproduction of reality than a new reality, that merely sometimes looks like our reality.

The continual comparison to 'the real' has handicapped film studies, it has disallowed a radical reconceptualisation of film-being.

Film can be anything, we try to compare it to our world and see relations, but everybody can see their own truth.

In this sense, the reality of a film is personal. You can make up your own mind what it means in your personal gaze. Film is in that sense an never ending source for thinking.

But what's the point? To mirror ourselves and society?

The super real reflection:

The French critic Emile Vuillermoz wrote in 1918 that cinema seems to produce a 'super reality' which may be 'more intense than the truth'. Cinema usually shows us a recognisable world, but that doesn't mean it's a copy of the world, but we can rather look at it as a new insight, a new reality, a new world. It's the epistemological difference that's key here. Film is a new world. One of the projects of filmosophy is to question the conceptual link between cinema and reality and to simultaneously push the transfiguring effect cinema can have on our understanding and perception of reality.

Through cinema, man was able to control reality. And that's a huge power that a lot of filmmakers may not take into account. Film can thus be seen as an incredibly unique and

therefore important link between man and world: film becomes the explanation of our position in the world - film acts out an interaction with a world, which thus becomes a mirror for us to recognize our interaction with our own world. This acting out is a kind of intention, a kind of thought. The film-world is an ordered and thought-out world - characters meet and move and love and die and find themselves, all in about two hours flat.

One of Roy Anderssons scenes includes a message to Swedish mining and smelting company Boliden, which sold thousands of tonnes of smelting residue to Chile in the 1980s, only to face a lawsuit claiming hundreds of people, including children, who played on the waste sites, had been poisoned. In the film, people are led into a huge copper cylinder, made by Boliden. "But we didn't use their typography," says Andersson. He sighs. "They just keep saying business is business. Morally it doesn't make sense. The world can't go on like that." (Interview Roy Andersson by Jonna Dagliden)

Like Daniel Framptom says in *filmosophy*, page 3; 'Film reveals reality, exactly by showing a distorted mirror of it. Film transforms the recognizable (in a small or large way), and this immediate transfiguration provokes the idea that our thinking can transform our world. The feeling when you step out of a cinema can result in new realisation, a change, 'a little knowledge'. Why do we feel this way? What does film do to create this feeling? It appears that film, in some of its forms can rejig our encounter with life, and perhaps even heighten our perceptual powers. Cinema allows us to re-see reality, expanding our perceptions, and showing us a new reality. Film challenges our view of reality, forcing a phenomenological realisation about how reality is perceived by our minds.'

All the locations in Roy Anderssons films feel familiar, yet unrecognisable. There is something askew about that pub, something uncanny about that living room. "I've come to realise that I can't shoot real environments. I prefer a hyperreality," Roy says in an interview with Jonna Dagliden. "This is achieved by hand-building each set in the space below us, and using trompe l'oeil. It looks real but it's purified and condensed. I'm fascinated by how life's grandness, smallness and mortality appear much clearer this way" Roy says. This quest for authenticity means that Andersson works primarily with non-professional actors, people he spots out and about, at the petrol station or in a bar, Jonna Dagliden writes. "There might be 10,000 professional actors in Sweden, meaning that the choice is far larger in real life. I'm looking for something people have never seen before." (Interview Roy Andersson by Jonna Dagliden)

Megan Ratner goes on to discuss Andersson's aesthetics: 'Yet for all the constraints, or perhaps because of them, watching the vignettes is freeing. The wide, unhurried shots encourage absorption; like paintings, the films reward multiple viewings. Strangely, the limitations of the form make the life that goes on before and after each vignette more imaginable, not less. Even though these images are no more than cardboard and plywood, there is a pleasure in letting the eye be knowingly fooled, in surrendering to the artifice.' Ratner, M. (2015) p. 36-44.



Figure 7: *En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron* (A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence) (2014), Directed by Roy Andersson

When I ask myself the question: Why do we live? This makes me feel a big discrepancy between how we are actually living and how we would like to live with our basic needs. But when I perceive beauty, an aesthetic experience, it feels like I'm in the place where I need to be, that I'm doing what I should be doing. Most of the things that make sense to me in this life, are felt through beauty. An esthetic experience gives me a vista to what we are actually feeling, as Kant would say.

David Hume said you shouldn't mistake your taste for whether it's good or not. There is criteria for something that is good, for example we like to see health and we dislike decay. But that's something I don't agree with. Decay for me has something Nostalgic, giving me a lot of the time an aesthetic appreciation. In Andersson's films decay is shown in the buildings and people. Old irritable and misfitting people seem to play a leading role in his stories. Do we start to value decay more? Perhaps Andersson's gaze of decay is able to recommend us to a kind of fragile beauty that is intrinsic to the human experience; the process of ageing, the ill body, the ugly body. Andersson creates his own standard for beauty outside the conventional norms of our society, and into his norms of diversity. In the book *Beauty from Designers Sagmeister & Walsch*, DR Collin Elland's research makes clear that we favour diversity over monotony, that we feel more alive in an environment featuring a mixture of buildings and styles.

Conclusion:

When we look at the cave from Plato, it almost looks like the origin of the cinema. The people watching the pictures on the wall in front of them, while pictures are being moved in front of a light. As Plato believed that the mere idea, or description is the real thing, and the material thing is a copy of the original idea, then the picture of the material situation is a copy of a copy. That brings us far away from real life, as Plato would say. Even though I think, this copy of a copy gives us an opportunity to reflect on life. To reflect on the copy and the original idea. The difference from Plato's cave is that the prisoners don't realise that it's not reality what they see. However people in the cinema hopefully do realise it is fiction. There is a tendency to accept the world which is given to us, if not shown otherwise. To see a different world, though a movie, we can question our world, our lives, through this fiction.

It's actually quite crazy what the effect is of film. If we think about the world before there were movies, then life would always be life. You could only dream but were probably aware that you were dreaming. But film shows you a world, a narrative, that is in that space of the movie reality. It was an opening up, a vista to different lives, ideas and feelings.

I want to make movies that are clearer than reality itself. To clarify reality.

– Roy Andersson, From an interview with Erik Augustin Palm.

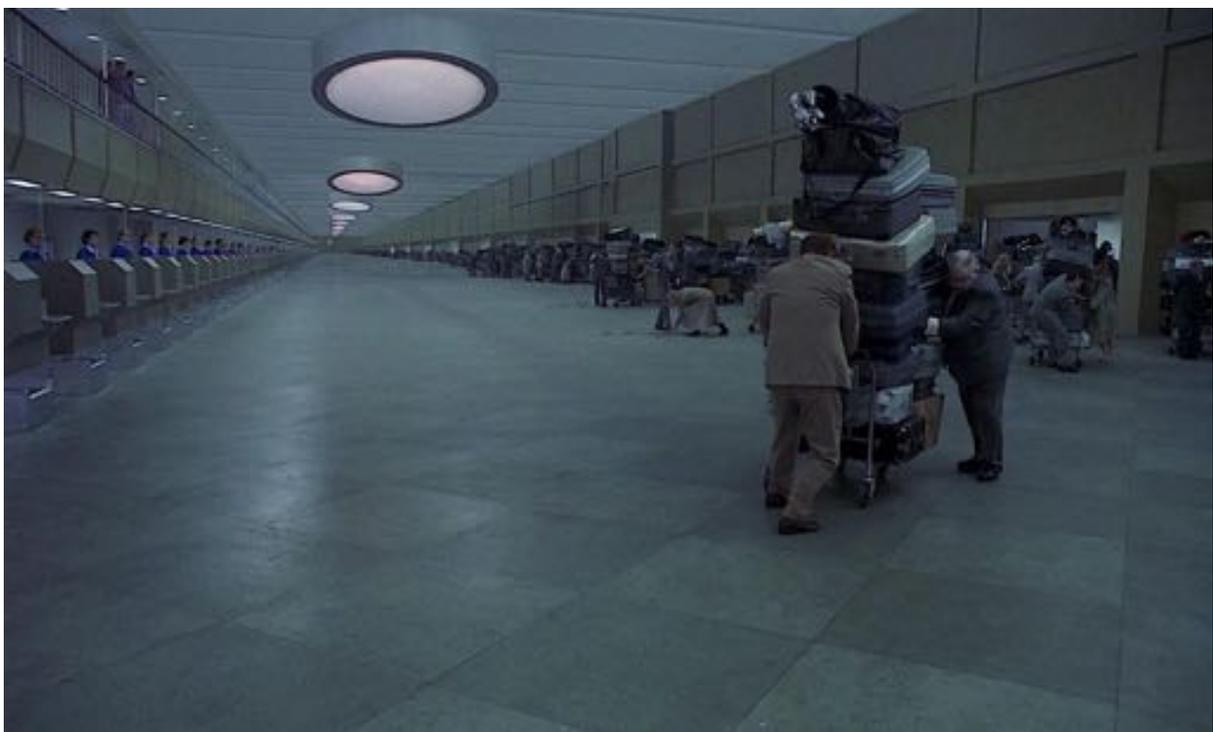


Figure 1: *Sånger från andra våningen* (*Songs from the Second Floor*) (2001), Directed by Roy Andersson

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