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short subject

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ABSTRACT

*Departing from the opening scene of Roy Andersson's 1991 short *Härlig är jorden/World of Glory*, the article gives an overview of the director's political aesthetics outlined in his book *Vår tids rädsla för allvar*. Through the use of static long shots, stylization and the condensation of time and space Andersson attempts to activate reflection upon existential questions such as solidarity and the individual's responsibility. In this scene from *World of Glory* Andersson links these ideas with a critique of Swedish passivity during the Holocaust.*

The opening of Swedish director Roy Andersson's short film *Härlig är jorden/World of Glory* (1991) is almost certainly one of the cruellest scenes in film history. A group of naked men, women and children is being shoved into an open van in order to be slowly gassed under the unmoved gaze of bystanders. Yet, while other directors would try to cause a shock effect through the use of montage of close-ups, Andersson presents the scene as a static tableau in one single long shot. This scene, I would argue, contains Andersson's political aesthetics in a nutshell.

KEYWORDS

Roy Andersson
film style
political aesthetics
Holocaust
André Bazin
Martin Buber

RoyAndersson/Studio24

In the sense of Godard's famous dictum according to which every camera angle is a moral statement, Andersson explains his political aesthetics (and ethics) in his book *Vår tids rädsla för allvar!* 'Our Time's Fear of Seriousness' (1995/2009) outlining his concept of what he terms 'the language of the complex image'. Following André Bazin, Andersson advocates the long shot as a means of objectifying the image. In *World of Glory* no close-ups evoke identification and empathy with the victims, and no montage or camera angles guide; instead, the spectators themselves have to critically analyse the image. During the gassing, one of the witnesses of the scene turns around and looks obliquely behind him where the camera is positioned at eye level as a stand-in for another spectator. His gaze can be said to address the audience as if to ask about his own as well as others' moral responsibility as bystanders to the killing. One is

reminded of Gillian Rose's critique (1996) of *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993), the sentimentality of which also aroused Roy Andersson's scepticism (cf. Andersson 2010: 277). Rose suggests that a film should strive to make the audience identify not only with the victims, but also with the perpetrators. Viewers should ask themselves: 'What would I have done instead?' The *mise-en-scène* employed in *World of Glory*, as well as its lack of sentimentality, activates the audience and invites it to reflect on its own standpoint. Or, as Andersson puts it in *Vår tids rädsla för allvar*:

How should we deal with this knowledge of what humans are capable of? Is it possible to escape this knowledge? Is it possible to prevent it from happening again? How could it ever happen? Are we able to understand why? Why does history repeat itself?

(Andersson 2010: 276)

Another means Andersson uses to raise these questions is the condensation of time and space. The mode of killing alludes to the Holocaust, connoting the 1940s German occupation of eastern Europe when the German Nazis used gas vans to kill people in Poland and the Soviet Union. However, the spectators or bystanders in the scene are dressed in contemporary, rather timeless business suits (if the actors had worn uniforms, this would, according to Andersson, have made it easier for viewers to distance themselves from them), while multi-storey buildings can be seen in the background. This anachronism condenses different layers of time into one single image. The filmic space has turned into a social space, which is pervaded by political and historical discourses. Yet, in contrast to neo-realism, for example, the spaces in Andersson's later films are highly stylized and defy any notion of social realism. I would argue that Andersson's use of space can be regarded as a Brechtian distancing device to oppose illusionism and activate the spectator. Andersson uses this technique to play out his critique of the Swedish passivity, anti-intellectualism and lack of historical consciousness that pervades contemporary Swedish society. Consequently, Andersson became one of the organizers of the exhibition 'Sweden & the Holocaust' (2005–06), which critically examined Sweden's passivity in the face of the Holocaust (Forum för Levande Historia 2010). According to Andersson, the attitude that led to the Holocaust – the ideology of the *Übermensch*, not facing responsibility for one's decisions, fear of seriousness, contempt for people – still lives on in our time, with the retreat of the welfare state and its ideals of solidarity and mutual support. While echoing Elie Wiesel's statement that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference, Andersson's aesthetics are also highly

inspired by Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. Especially his 1923 work *Ich und Du/I and Thou* (Buber 2005) outlines how we can relate to our fellow humans in two ways, either by regarding them as objects (a utilitarian approach that we find in the most varied social systems, whether national socialism or late capitalism) or as fellow subjects, as equals. The scene also epitomizes existentialist philosophy according to which every individual has a responsibility for his or her decisions (cf. Sartre 2007). Thus, the cruelty of the scene does not derive from the shocking effect of a montage of attractions, but from the uncanniness of the audience's feeling when it becomes apparent that the film provides no instructions on what to think. The film does not explain or resolve its topic: 'And it is exactly this complexity that modern people seem to be afraid of: the experience lingers, one cannot leave it behind' (Andersson 2010: 277). Thus, *World of Glory* continues the project of developing his political aesthetics that Andersson launched in 1987 with *Någonting har hänt/Something Happened* (1993). These aesthetics, with their elaborate use of sound, the faded colour scheme and the stylization of the setting can be found both in Andersson's feature films *Sånger från andra våningen/Songs from the Second Floor* (2000) and *Du levande/You, the Living* (2007), and not least – perhaps paradoxically – in his commercials, many of which have already become cult classics.

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Dagmar Brunow has been a lecturer in film studies at Halmstad University (Sweden) since 1999 and has also taught at the universities of Lund, Växjö (both Sweden) and Hamburg (Germany). She is a board member of filmvet.se, the Swedish national association of film studies. Additionally she works as a literary translator and as a host at the radio station FSK 93.0 in Hamburg, and as a contributor to the journal *testcard*, *Beiträge zur Popgeschichte*.

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