



Registered Charity: 1156478. Patron: Jim Broadbent

Friday October 23rd, 7.30pm

A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence (12a)

dir. Roy Andersson

starring: Nils Westblom, Holger Andersson, Charlotta Larsson

sponsors: Jonathan and Shuna Killin

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Roy Andersson is a single-panel absurdist who subverts the traditional set-up and knock down gag structure, landing his punchlines like rimshots played on a busted cymbal. He has been compared to Tati and Fellini, though it seems to me that he has as much in common with Gary Larson or Charles Addams. Billed by an opening title card as "the final part of a trilogy about being a human being", Andersson's *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* joins *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000) and *You, the Living* (2007) to complete the writer-director's magnum opus. Given the time that Andersson takes between projects, and the fact that he is now over 70, it may also represent his last testament, and suffice to say he hasn't broken character.

The title's 'pigeon' is an actual or implied presence at the opening and closing of the film. In the first shot, it's seen as a taxidermied specimen in a museum display case; in the closing, it is represented by an off-screen coo that captures the attention of some taxidermied-looking Swedes waiting at a bus stop on a Wednesday morning. Andersson prefers to shoot from a perspective as fixed as that of the bird in the ornithology display - I counted one camera move in *Pigeon*, this a very slight pan to the right - while the way he stages scenes gives them the aspect of a vitrine or diorama, as opposed to the surveillance-camera perspective developed by Ruben Östlund (director of *Force Majeure*, showing in March), another native of Gothenburg. Andersson's subjects don't move much more than his frame does; they often stand almost stock-still, alienated from their environments and interfacing with them almost not at all, as though they'd been green-screened into place.

A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence takes place in Gothenburg in what appears, for the most part, to be a contemporary setting, though the presence of cell phones is one of the few elements that anchor the movie in the now. Everyone with a phone seems to be having the same conversation - "I'm happy to hear you're doing fine" - and the populace is for the most part ethnically uniform, the whitest white people in cinema, wearing the corpse-paint pallor familiar from Andersson's work.

Without fanfare, the film periodically leaps from the present to distant points on the timeline. The clientele at a bar discuss an ancient regular who's been visiting for more than 60 years, and then a title card and a change of paint job announce the shift of the scene to 1943 - the year of Andersson's birth - where we encounter someone who may or may not be that regular in younger days, silent witness to a boisterous singalong staged as a musical number. The same melody is heard later in the film: in another bar, this one in the suburbs; business as usual is interrupted by a visit from Charles X11 (1682 - 1718), and through the picture window his seemingly endless divisions can



Synopsis: Gothenburg, Sweden, the present, 1943 and 1709. Three quotidian death scenes open a series of vignettes. One of these scenes takes place in a living room, one in a hospital bed, one on a ferryboat. In a dance studio, a flamenco instructor mauls one of her pupils. The man previously seen as the captain of the ferryboat introduces himself in his new job as a barber. Two novelty salesmen meet in a bar and quarrel. The same bar is shown as it was in 1943, scene of a lively singalong. The novelty salesmen go on their rounds, pitching their goods and trying unsuccessfully to collect on overdue debts. As they stop to ask for directions in a suburban bar, Charles X11 (1682 - 1718) and his army march past on their way to war with the Russians. The novelty salesmen, living at a men's shelter, are confronted by their own higher-ups, looking for overdue payments. At the suburban bar, a wounded Charles X11 reappears, his vanquished army limping home. The novelty salesmen acrimoniously part company, then reconcile back at the men's shelter. In a laboratory, a monkey is treated with electric shocks. A group of European colonials drive African slaves into an instrument that converts their tortured screams into eerie music, for the entertainment of an elderly crowd dressed as though for the opera. This appears to be the dream of one of the novelty salesmen, who awakens and relays his troubled conscience to his partner. On a Wednesday morning, a small group on their way to work wait at a bus stop, where a pigeon coos.

Credits (selected)

Sam: Nils Westblom

Jonathan: Holder Anderson

Couple at museum: Per Bergqvist, Solveig Andersson

Man with wine: Sture Olsson

Old Son: Ingur Olsson

Dance teacher: Lotti Tömros

Dancer: Oscar Salomonson

Charles X11: Viktor Gyllenberg

Lonely Officer: Jonas Gerholm

Waitress: Charlotta Larsson

Directed/written by: Roy Andersson **DoP:** István Borbás

Gergely Pálos

Editor: Alexandra Strauss

Sweden/Germany/France/Norway 2014. 100 mins

be seen marching to the front. Later, the bedraggled remains of the force are seen heading in the other direction, retreating from the decisive and crushing defeat of the Battle of Poltava in 1709, accompanied by the wailing of widows.

Such tenuous connections - a phrase or a tune that occurs in wildly different situations like a fugue - are the threads that knit together Andersson's quiltwork of blackout scenes, along with a loose community of recurring characters: a military man who keeps missing dates and a lecture on orderly withdrawal; a zaftig flamenco instructor and a male pupil for whom she burns with unrequited lust, and - the nearest thing the film has to protagonists - a duo of middle-aged novelty salesmen who schlep their wares around town. Their goods include plastic vampire fangs and a rubber mask more given to eliciting screams than laughter. Continually stiffed on payments by shop owners, the salesmen sleep in a drab men's shelter where they themselves are hounded for outstanding debts. In one scene they pay a visit to a debtor who shoos them away, begging poverty. This is followed by a scene at a children's recital, where a sullen, husky girl stumbles through a poem in which a pigeon reflects on "the fact that it had no money".

Andersson's version of "being a human being", then, has a great deal to do with empty pockets, unpayable debts, with retreats and defeats - and this is in the best of cases. A section introduced with the title "homo sapiens" begins in a test laboratory, where a woman in a lab coat prattles on her phone - "I'm happy to hear you're doing fine" - while, in the foreground, a chimp writhes under the administration of electric shocks. Following on from this is a scene in which pith-helmeted colonials drive Africans into a monumental torture device; it turns their agonised cries into a haunted music, to be enjoyed by an elderly crowd dressed as though for the opera. Here we may understand the novelty salesmen to be Andersson's alter egos, peddling a comedy that is very close to horror.

Another View: David Ehrlich (Little White Lies)

The third and final instalment of Roy Andersson's "trilogy about being a human being", is very much of a piece with from 2000's Songs from the Second Floor and its followup, 2007's You the Living. Each of the three films comprises a series of darkly comic vignettes captured by an unmoving camera with a focus so deep it borders on the infinite. Andersson's spartan but immaculate sound stages are populated by non-professional actors, who are caked in pale makeup that makes them appear zombified and suspended between states of being.

But if Andersson's latest has an air of the familiar, the maturation of the film's ideas, the indelibility of its images, and the fluency with it speaks to its maker's previous work cements Pigeon as a vital instalment to the trilogy. In fact, that relative sameness becomes Andersson's ultimate theme, the film's unspeakably perfect last shot a direct rebuttal to the idea that things should — or even could — be any other way.

While Pigeon is the most inviting of Andersson's films, it eventually reveals itself as a trap. Named after a bird perched above the action in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 'Hunters in the Snow', the film begins with a morbid triptych of scenes that Andersson helpfully introduces as "three meetings with death".

These introductory skits function as a primer for Andersson's style, acclimatising viewers to a film world unlike any other.

Part recap and part seduction, the prologue's true purpose is a bit more nefarious than it seems: Andersson is planting the seeds of complicity, imploring his audience to smile, chuckle, and then laugh at the mortal misfortunes of others. It's an impulse that he'll stoke for the next 100 minutes before unleashing an antepenultimate scene of unfathomable horror that confronts the crowd with their own secondhand inhumanity.

In the film's incredible centrepiece, which can be identified as one of narrative cinema's most impressive long-takes by the time it's half over, two characters have an encounter with Sweden's King Charles XII, an early 18th century sovereign remembered for his bloodthirsty aggression towards other countries. In this one shot, Andersson refracts the intrinsic power of the time-image through the lens of time itself so that the inertia of history is felt in minutes and centuries alike.

The set-up achieves a transcendent state of suspended animation, as though every person in the shot has been taxidermied alive. Andersson's jaw-dropping reach into the past is made possible by the technology of the present, taking advantage of his digital camera and its capacity to shoot for stretches of uninterrupted time far longer than film permits.

Whereas Songs from the Second Floor and You, The Living both ended on notes of despair; A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence resolves with a cathartic sigh of acceptance, and maybe even hope. Its last act is one of simple generosity, and in a single moment Andersson's trilogy of self-contained suffering blossoms into a unified still-life.

Our next screening: Friday November 13th, 7.30pm

White Bird in a Blizzard (USA 2014. Cert 15)

Kat Connors is 17 years old when her perfect homemaker mother, Eve, a beautiful, enigmatic, and haunted woman, disappears - just as Kat is discovering and relishing her newfound sexuality. Having lived for so long in a stifled, emotionally repressed household, she barely registers her mother's absence and certainly doesn't blame her doormat of a father, Brock, for the loss. In fact, it's almost a relief. But as time passes, Kat begins to come to grips with how deeply Eve's disappearance has affected her. Returning home on a break from college, she finds herself confronted with the truth about her mother's departure, and her own denial about the events surrounding it... (C) Magnolia