Complex Staging:
The Hidden Dimensions of Roy Andersson's Aesthetics

To create a complex image is infinitely more difficult than telling the same thing using editing. But when one is successful the result is much richer. One saves time and, above all, achieves clarity – clarity of thought – which can sometimes be painfully intense for the viewer.
(Roy Andersson 2010: 275)

I. Introduction
In this essay I will unabashedly follow André Bazin and David Bordwell and their discussion of the deep-focus long take as well as staging in depth. I think it is hardly an embarrassment to admit that in order to get a better perspective, it helps to stand on the shoulders of giants. I have three goals. First and foremost, I want to engage with the style of Swedish director Roy Andersson. Andersson – born in 1943 and best known for his films *Sånger från andra våningen / Songs from the Second Floor* (2000), *Du levande / You, the Living* (2007) and *En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron / A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014) – champions a distinctive aesthetics that involves the use of static long takes in deep focus without close-ups, elaborate compositions and various strategies of staging in depth.[1] It is a style built on what this 'Swedish master of deep focus' (Clarke 2008: 34), in a cunning act of branding, dubs 'the complex image' (Andersson 2010). He uses this style with extreme consistency in his commercials and his short films as well as in his feature films from *Songs From the Second Floor* onward.

Second, I aim to add to the scholarship on staging in depth as a potent, but largely overlooked stylistic device – a device that is integral to Andersson's style. In his books *On the History of Film Style* (1997) and *Figures Traced in Light* (2005) Bordwell has drawn attention to staging in depth, which he considers particularly suited to the filmic medium and which he categorically sets apart from staging in the theatre (2005: 60-63). However, Bordwell himself acknowledges that his discussions of Louis Feuillade, Kenji Mizoguchi, Theo Angelopoulos and Hou Hsiao-hsien have not exhausted the varieties of staging in depth.[2] Looking at the films of Roy Andersson can help to expand the research

on staging in depth: Andersson does not simply repeat the ways his precursors have used the device, but introduces innovations and adds new thematic ends to it. Moreover, since even the biggest giant cannot see everything, Bordwell's otherwise brilliant analyses necessarily have a few blind spots. Due to his strong emphasis on what was arranged in front of the camera, Bordwell pays little attention to how the soundtrack and off-screen space allow for a type of staging in depth that implicates both the viewer's *perception* and his / her *imagination*. While in this essay I will not be able to probe Andersson's use of sound in detail, I will at least try to point out this aspect undervalued in Bordwell's account. In the best of all cases these two goals come across as intertwined: I use Andersson as a means to add to the research on the staging-in-depth tradition; and I use my staging-in-depth analysis to shed light on Andersson as an idiosyncratic stylist.

But why study a stylistic device like staging in depth at all? Bazin, with whom Andersson shares an astonishing number of aesthetic preferences, once wrote that 'as good a way as any towards understanding *what* a film is trying to say to us is to know *how* it is saying it' (1967: 30).[3] If Bazin is correct with his assumption that a style can create meaning and relate back to a metaphysics, as he argues in his book on Orson Welles (1978: 81), then it makes sense to closely look at style, and then tie this stylistic analysis to claims about meaning. In a third and final step I will therefore look at how Andersson's style is tied to his content and how it creates meaning. I propose that Andersson's staging in depth may be connected to a pessimistic outlook on the loneliness of our modern life-world in which others confront us merely as apathetic bystanders. At the same time, the cinematic staging in his complex images serves a pedagogic purpose that harbours optimistic hopes. Through his style Andersson challenges his viewers to become attentive observers: unlike his characters we are supposed to watch the world – including his films – with particularly perceptive eyes.

Since not everyone might be familiar with Andersson's astoundingly twisted life as a filmmaker, I want to use the

rest of this introduction to briefly sketch his career and the critical assessment of his films. Since 1970 Andersson has only shot five feature films: the beautiful and popular coming-of-age film *En kärlekshistoria / A Swedish Love Story* from 1970 and the ill-received and commercial failure *Giliap* from 1975. After a 25-year break he won the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000 for *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000). Seven years later and also at Cannes the critically successful *You, the Living* (2007) came out. Finally, in September 2014 his latest film *En duva satt pa en gren och funderade pa tillvaron / A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*, the last part of his *Living* trilogy, premiered at the Venice Film Festival, where it won the Golden Lion for best film. However, Andersson had not given up shooting films in the 25 years between his second and third feature film. Apart from a number of impressive shorts like *Någonting har hänt / Something Happened* (1987) and *Härlig är jorden / World of Glory* (1991), he is responsible for up to 400 commercials. Most of them are 'one-shot commercials', as he calls them (Andersson 2009), for customers like Kodak, Volvo, Clearasil, Citroen, Air France, McDonald's or Sweden's Social Democratic Party.[4]

Andersson belongs to the kind of directors whose inventiveness seems to overpower critics. In order to grasp his originality they seek models and precursors and indulge in the game of comparison. He has been called 'a sort of dystopian Tati' (Bordwell 2007), a 'Nordic Buñuel' (Anon 2000) or an extreme version of Aki Kaurismäki (Saint-Cyr 2014: 18).[5] Federico Fellini is often mentioned as an influence, not least by Andersson himself. Moreover, he has been compared to the painters René Magritte and Balthus, but also the Flemish master Pieter Brueghel the Elder and the American realist Edward Hopper. Andersson himself claims: 'My most important source of inspiration is painting and its history, and photo history as well. I'm very fond of all periods in art history, though there are some periods that I appreciate more. For example, expressionism' (Vishnevetsky 2009). Specific artists he has named as sources of influence are Otto Dix, Honoré Daumier and Ilya Repin.[6] Moreover, his latest film *A Pigeon Sat on an Branch Reflecting on Existence* was apparently inspired by the famous painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) by Jan Brueghel the Elder (Pieter Brueghel's son). Stylistically, he also tries to echo Germany's *New Objectivity* movement of the 1920s with painters such as Karl Hofer, Felix Nussbaum and Georg Scholz as well as the photographer August Sander (Andersson 2014).

Considering his mastery as a director, Andersson's films have sparked astonishingly little academic scholarship. There are articles that compare him to – or read his works against the background of – artists like Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Mildren 2013) or the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (to whom Andersson dedicated *Songs From the Second Floor*) (Lindqvist 2010). Other scholars put an emphasis on the surrealism in his films or look for religious aspects (Lommel 2008, Zwick 2008, Cryderman 2011). But to my knowledge the style of Andersson has not been put under thorough academic scrutiny.[7] How, then, can we describe his visual style, which next to the style of another Anders(s)on – Wes Anderson – may be the most easily recognisable in current world cinema?

II. The visual style of Roy Andersson[8]

Andersson – the double-S Andersson – refuses to use telephoto lenses, but consistently works with wide angles (mostly 16mm), rendering shots with great depth of field. Often, these deep-focus shots have been arranged to form a

vanishing-point triangle, but sometimes Andersson also uses a vanishing-point rhombus composition. Before *You, the Living* Andersson predominantly employed diagonal lines in his compositions. Following art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, Bordwell qualifies this kind of shot as *recessive composition*: figures and architectural space recede diagonally into the background (2005: 166-167).

In order to accentuate the depth of field through a layering of the shots, Andersson additionally draws on frames-within-the-frame or 'aperture framing' (Bordwell 2005: 160-161). As a consequence, we can find numerous door frames and window frames.

Beginning with *You, the Living* there are also tendencies to arrange the centres of attention *horizontally* from the left side to right side of the frame. For the viewer this implies that he or she has to 'pan' from one element to the other, which is to say nothing else than that he / she has to move his / her eyes or turn his / her head. Again following Wölfflin, Bordwell calls this type of composition *planimetric*: 'The camera stands perpendicular to a rear surface, usually a wall. The characters are strung across the frame like clothes on a line. Sometimes they're facing us, so the image looks like people in a police line-up. Sometimes the figures are in profile, usually for the sake of conversation, but just as often they talk while facing front,' Bordwell explains (2007). The planimetric style – as we can find it, for instance, in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and Takeshi Kitano's *Sonatine* (1993) – involves a rectangular geometry with a flat background, which avoids lining up the characters along receding diagonals. Yet even in Andersson's horizontally arranged compositions, he never reverts to *pure* instances of the planimetric style. I would prefer to speak of *planimetric layering* in his case, which gives weight to the fact that Andersson even in his horizontally arrayed images stages in depth.

Furthermore, Andersson's compositions are often very frontal, presenting us with characters directly *looking* into the camera and thus acknowledging the viewer.

Occasionally, there are characters also *talking* to the camera. For instance, in *You, the Living* we find a construction worker stuck in traffic or a young girl in love standing in a bar, both of whom recount dreams from previous nights. In these cases of *frontal staging* we are dealing with a prime instance of what art historian and photography critic Michael Fried (1980) would call 'theatricality'.

Less often, Andersson prefers anti-theatrical staging: filmed from behind and thus facing away from the viewer, the characters are lost in an activity (see also Kirsten 2011). In these cases of *dorsal staging* we are dealing with instances of what Fried (1980) dubs 'absorption'. Here the camera – and, by implication, the viewer – does not seem to be acknowledged by the characters at all. While this may be the norm in mainstream film, it is much less common in Andersson's work.

Interestingly, Andersson also employs a mixed strategy that one could call 'dorsal-cum-frontal staging': characters first filmed from behind seem to realise at one point that there is some*one* – or some*thing*, like the camera – observing them. They consequently turn around to acknowledge this presence. Take, for instance, the first scene in *You, the Living* in which we see a man sleeping on a couch in what

looks like his home office. When a train passes outside his window, he wakes up startled, looks out of the window and then faces the camera. Or consider the harrowing beginning of the short film *World of Glory* – a scene full of references to Holocaust deportations – in which the character closest to the camera turns around and glances over his shoulder right into the camera (much like six years later one of the thugs, played by Arno Frisch, does in a key scene in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*).

Moreover, Andersson's films are characterised by a lack of movement on all fronts. This goes, first of all, for the mise-en-scène: the characters hardly change positions at all, and if so, they do it very slowly. Consequently, bodily movements like bending, turning around, and head movements become all the more salient. Furthermore, the camera is almost always completely static. In fact, Andersson's studio sets – he almost never shoots on location – are so meticulously built that even a slight camera movement could reveal their artifice. In *Songs From the Second Floor* there are only two backward-retreating tracking shots: one is filmed from a moving car; one is a dolly shot. In *You, the Living* this tableaux-style is slightly more often interspersed with very slow forward and backward tracking shots, sometimes combined with minimal pans. Yet these movements are mere concessions. As Andersson claims, he moves the camera only when he cannot express what he wants with a static shot: 'When you have tried to get all values out of [the static scene], then you can maybe start to move'(2008). According to Andersson's aesthetics, a slow camera movement is still preferable to a cut.

As a consequence, another hallmark of Andersson's style is the refusal to use analytic or synthetic montage (according to Roger Clarke, *Songs From the Second Floor* has 45 cuts in more than 90 minutes screening time [2008: 35]). Hardly ever do his one-shot scenes make way for scenes that contain two shots conjoined via editing. As an exception one could cite a scene in *You, the Living* in which a female primary school teacher suffering from a nervous

breakdown is filmed from within and outside her classroom. The lack of character movement and camera activity as well as the high average shot length make Andersson's films a prime example of what has variously been called 'slow cinema' or 'contemporary contemplative cinema'.[9]

Moreover, one will not find close-ups in Andersson's films, at least in his films from the 1980s onward. For Andersson the close-up is insufficient to describe a character's mental state and his / her relationship to the world: 'The wide shot defines the human being more than the close-up because, for example, the room where the person is tells about his tastes, his life' (Vishnevetsky 2009). To convey the way a person positions him- or herself in space is so significant to Andersson that he rules out editing: 'This important component should […] – preferably – not be cut to pieces with the result that the relationship between a person and the room and its contents is rendered unclear or unintelligible' (Andersson 2010: 275). Instead, Andersson relies on meticulously arranged sequence shots, which he dubs 'the complex image' ([1995] 2009) – a term I will explore in the following section.

III. The complex image: Creating, comprehending, coming to terms

What does Andersson have in mind when he talks about 'the complex image', his typical long-take, deep-focus shot staged in depth? According to Andersson, complex images are complex, because (a) they are difficult to achieve artistically, (b) they are more demanding to understand and (c) they a have a stronger and more lasting effect on the viewer. We could therefore speak of a complexity of creating, comprehending and coming to terms.

First, there is the *complexity of creating* the complex image. A scene based on a complex image is 'infinitely more difficult' to shoot than a comparable scene based on editing, as Andersson puts it in the epigraph to this article. This is hardly an overstatement, considering that it sometimes takes him months to shoot a single scene. And it is even less an exaggeration in light of the considerable skills

that his style affords in terms of visual composition and staging the actors, as I hope my analysis will reveal below. An interesting upshot of this difficulty is a sparingness of stylistic devices: for Andersson the complex image is superior also because it implies an aesthetically more valuable economy of means. 'I can find no reason to communicate something in several images if it can be done in one,' he writes (2010: 275). With reference to Bazin, Andersson maintains that he does not need to cut: the components of the image meet within the shot and create meaning even without editing.

Second, there is the *complexity of comprehending* the complex image. Paradoxically, this has to do with the fact that Andersson's long-take deep-focus shots staged in depth offer a bigger freedom to the viewer. Since he or she can choose what to perceive and what to ignore, the spectator is able to think more independently, allowing for greater 'clarity of thought'. However, this also implies that the complex image is more demanding, because the viewer must analyse the image on his or her own, without any of the suggested interpretations offered by classical analytical montage (Andersson 2010: 275). As Andersson writes, 'the artist allows the viewer to decide for himself what is important in the image. Bazin maintained, and I fully share this view, that this stimulates the viewer's emotions and intellect much more effectively' (Andersson 2010: 275). His films therefore encourage repeat viewings – which is, in fact, a stated goal for Andersson. The image should not wear its narrative content and message on its sleeve, as it were, but merit and even ask for various viewings. As he explains, 'you can also overdo things and make it very clear and obvious, so you can immediately see what's happening. Sometimes, I think, it's better that you not *really* capture it, but next time you will see it.' (2000) According to Andersson, 'You can look at a good painting thousands of times. You can listen to Beethoven thousands of times. But there are very few films that you can look at thousands of times.' (2000) The Swedish director believes that the static images in painting and photography can be so densely packed with informational content that they make viewers come back again and again: 'That's also why I prefer to have the camera […] fixed: because there are still many things to pick up from a very simple framing with fixed camera – like in painting.' (2000)

This leads us to the third sense of complexity implicit in Andersson's writings: the *complexity of coming to terms* with the complex image. Since his scenes are 'always […] provoking' and can be 'painfully intense' for the viewer, they are hard to shake off: 'it is exactly this complexity that modern people seem to be afraid of: the experience lingers, one cannot leave it behind' (Andersson 2010: 277). Needless to say, these are favoured psychological effects for Andersson. While all three aspects would merit further discussion, in this essay I will concentrate on the second. Or to be more precise, I will show how a stylistic analysis of Andersson's deep focus, staging-in-depth schemas lend weight to his claims about the increased efforts to comprehend the complex image.

IV. Andersson's complex staging-in-depth
Let us therefore zoom in on his deep-focus, staging-in-depth strategies. As we have seen, Andersson predominantly arranges the centres of attention *in depth* in recessive spaces. Due to the deep-focus cinematography of his shots he does not have to refocus between the centres of attention. For the viewer this implies that he or she has to mentally 'rack focus' between the various layers him- or herself. As Bazin

wrote, such long-take deep-focus aesthetics demand 'both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress. While analytical montage only calls for him to follow his [sic] guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice' (1967: 36).

Now, Andersson often complicates his shots by gradually activating more and more layers of the image from the fore- to the middle- and the background. Since we can never be sure where and when a part of the shot becomes important, we have to take them all in with particular alertness. As a good example we might look at the scene from *Songs from the Second Floor* in which a shopkeeper faces two clerks from an insurance company in the burnt down remnants of his shop. In the beginning the main centre of attention is the foreground with the three men talking to each other (in the background we only see cars slowly passing by in front of the shattered shop-windows). But then, in the far background, we can glimpse passersby on the boardwalk entering the shot, who look to the left, *also* attracting our attention and raising questions about what's taking place in off-screen space. Subsequently, a fourth man – the shopkeeper's son – enters through the broken window, thus activating the middle ground. And finally we see a weird procession of crawling managers, who whip each other on the street like medieval monks. To be sure, not all layers of

the image are active all of the time, but often at least two levels call for our attention. In order not to miss out on important information, we keep on taking into consideration all the image planes simultaneously.

A similar argument can be made for a perceptually challenging taxi scene in *Songs From the Second Floor*, in which we see the inside of a taxi that is moving forward so that more and more of the outside world comes into view. In this case what we see outside is almost as important as what happens inside the car. The further the taxi progresses, the more people outside come into view who seem to be looking at something in off-screen space. Hence we constantly have to switch from *inside* the car, where a soldier is talking to the cab driver, to the *outside* where something strange seems to be happening. All of a sudden, our vigilance gets rewarded when we are able to perceive a group of managers passing by who flagellate themselves (the same flagellants as in the scene discussed above). Andersson complicates this scene by pulling a trick. Somewhat implausibly the two men in the car remain oblivious to what happens outside. Consequently, there is no eye-line that cues us to pay attention to the flagellants – we have to discover them ourselves.

In both cases deep focus and staging in depth demand an alert viewer who scans the various layers of the shot. But what about the following example from *You, the Living*, in which a man is standing on his balcony and follows the
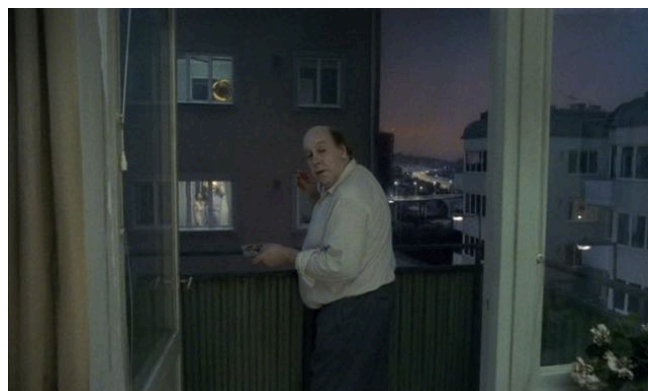
droll events happening in the apartment building across the street? At first glance, this scene is yet another example of a recessive composition: the man in the foreground, the house across the street in the middle ground and the freeway in the far background to the right function like different layers of attention. But Andersson does something unexpected in this case: 13 seconds into the shot the man on the balcony gets involved in a discussion with his wife, who is sitting in what Noël Burch (1981: 17) calls the off-screen space 'behind the camera' – or the fifth segment of the *hors-champs* – and therefore cannot be seen. When the wife starts speaking, her dialogue activates a different and invisible layer of space, off-screen. *Aurally* the space thus reaches also into the other direction, so to speak, as if the camera stood in the centre of a 'tunnel'.

For the viewer, this implies that he or she has to mentally construct – one could also say: to imagine – the space 'behind' the camera. In fact, since Andersson neither offers us a reverse shot revealing the wife, nor shows the wife entering the frame from the space 'behind the camera', she remains in what Burch dubs the 'imaginary' off-screen space throughout the 80 seconds of this single-shot scene.[10] I would argue that this extension of space in two directions – audio-visually in front of the camera and aurally 'behind' the camera – yields an *amplified* staging in depth. It ranges from the wife in the off-screen space behind the camera and thus 'in the back of our heads' (the first *sound* centre of attention) to the man in the foreground (the first *visual* centre of attention) to the two apartment windows in the middle ground and the freeway in the background. This example is important because it allows us to complement Bordwell's otherwise virtuoso discussions of staging in depth: due to his predominant focus on what we can actually *see* in front of the camera, we hardly find analyses of how the soundtrack and off-screen space allow for a staging in depth that involves both the viewer's *perception* and his / her *imagination*.

This can also be argued for a number of Andersson's mirror shots, which likewise amplify staging in depth and

further complicate the viewer's mental activity. Mirror shots are particularly complex once they contain characters that are *not* placed between the camera and the mirror. As in the balcony scene, they extend the depth of field into what Burch categorizes as the fifth segment of off-screen space (behind the camera). Again, this implies that the filmic space not only opens up in front of the viewer, but also extends into the imagined space behind the camera – a space the viewer has to mentally construct. However, there is a crucial difference: in contrast to the balcony scene the viewer simultaneously *perceives* the character inside the mirror and has to *imagine visually* the character in a place that cannot be seen. It is not an easy mental activity to simultaneously focus on the dialogue between the hairdresser and his xenophobic client, to keep an eye on what is going on inside the mirror and to visually imagine off-screen space.

Complex mirror shots have a long history that ranges at least from Yevgenii Bauer's *The King of Paris* (1917) to contemporary art films like Ulla von Brandenburg's *Spiegellied / Mirrorsong* (2012) and Tsai Ming-liang's *Xi You / Journey to the West* (2014). They are a fascinating topic to be explored in more detail elsewhere. Here I use them to repeat my point that Bordwell's discussion of staging in depth can – and should – be complemented by analyses that do not focus exclusively on the pictorial-perceptual level, but also take into account the imaginary elements filled in by the viewer. Incidentally, my suggestions might easily meet with Bordwell's own interests: his cognitive theory of narrative comprehension equally insists on the viewer's activity to fill in missing elements (for instance, when narrative gaps in the *syuzhet* cue the viewer to come up with inferences and hypotheses about what has happened in the *fabula*).

V. The hidden dimension: Co-presence, apathy, and human loneliness
The previous section has supported Andersson's claim that his deep-focus long takes staged in depth complicate the

viewer's mental activity. For my interpretation of Andersson's staging-in-depth aesthetics, it is crucial to acknowledge that his films are haunted by a recurring theme: the *suggestion* and – more often – the *revelation* of a previously *hidden dimension*. Someone or something originally concealed comes to the fore: in most cases invisibility thus turns into visibility; in less frequent cases the invisible is at least suggested to such an evocative degree that the viewer can *imagine* what is hinted at. Andersson ingeniously varies his strategies of how to bring into play this hidden dimension. At least four of them can be distinguished: I call them 'hiding and appearing', 'blocking and revealing', 'veiling and exposing' and 'suggesting and imagining'. As we shall see, in all of these cases the staging-in-depth of his long-take, deep-focus shots plays a crucial role. Whenever staging in depth serves to suggest or reveal a hidden dimension, I will use the term *hidden-depth shots* rather than deep-focus shot.

1. Hiding and Appearing: In what seems to me the most frequent and straightforward strategy, Andersson hides characters behind walls or doors or other props of the filmic world and then makes them unexpectedly appear on the scene. The characters thus initially belong to what Burch calls the 'sixth segment of off-screen space': 'the space existing behind the set or some object in it' (1981: 17). But then the characters enter the scene and thus move from medium proximity to close proximity to other characters. In *You, the Living* we find countless examples of hiding-and-appearing scenes. Just take the second scene of the film: a couple is having an intimate discussion about their relationship in a park. When the man leaves, another man, whose trench coat makes him suspiciously look like an exhibitionist, moves from behind a tree close to the woman sitting on the park bench. In another scene, a man is playing the tuba in his living room, when all of a sudden his wife comes from another room in the apartment and complains about the noise. Or consider the scene in a carpet shop, in
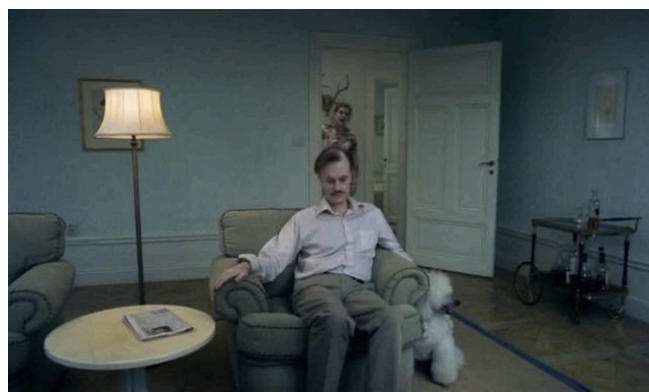
which one of the clerks is sitting right behind a wall and is hidden so meticulously that he has to bend only slightly to enter on-screen space. Behind every wall, behind every door, behind every tree there can be someone hidden and lurking, ready to enter the scene from off-screen space.

2. Blocking and Revealing: The second strategy I want to single out differs only minimally, but in a crucial way. Following Bordwell, I call it 'blocking and revealing' (2005: 58-64). In this case characters are also hidden in off-screen space. Yet they are not hidden by a prop, a wall or enter from different room, but are *blocked* by another character and are *revealed* when this character moves and thus offers us, as viewers, a new and unforeseen perspective. A simple example can be found in a hospital scene in *You, the Living*: a woman and her mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's, sit in the foreground; and in the middle ground we see a nurse, one of Andersson's many observing bystander figures, who watches the two. At one point the nurse turns around and looks in the opposite direction. Her body movement thus exposes an old man – most probably another patient – who was sitting in the background all along.

A more intricate case of blocking-and-revealing occurs some 51 minutes into *Songs From the Second Floor* in a scene on a train station platform. In this sequence shot of almost 7 minutes Andersson uses the spatial depth of his composition to present us with blocked characters in order to create an almost creepy effect. Gradually two dead men from the past, who were apparently hovering behind the protagonist throughout this scene, are revealed: an elderly man with stigmata-like suicide wounds and a young Russian man who had been hanged (according to Andersson's DVD audio commentary they are personifications of guilt [2000]). And finally, in the far background, yet more persons are

revealed when the two dead men move and thus reveal the deep focus background for the viewer. Again, we have to acknowledge the presence of a hidden dimension that we were not aware of before. We therefore have to be on the constant lookout: behind every character there might be hidden yet another one.

But why do I claim that the 'blocking-and-revealing' schema is crucially different from the 'hiding-and-appearing' strategy? While the latter can often be found on the theatre stage as well, the former requires the perspective features of the movie camera. Bordwell gives us a convincing explanation why filmic staging in depth is something other than theatrical staging (2001: 40-43 and 2005: 62-63). Depending on the size of the auditorium, there are between, say, 50 and 1000 sightlines in a theatre: no single perspective is identical. What viewers in the front row to left can see of the space onstage can be barely visible in the back row to the right (and vice versa). Complex staging in depth is therefore not possible in the theatre – or, at least, not with the same amount of precision. Hence the stage has to be used more in its breadth than in its depth. In the cinema this problem with different sightlines does not exist, because all viewers get to see the same pictorial composition (if not the same size of screen). The viewers have to follow the perspective of the camera which, broadly speaking, resembles a visual pyramid that has been knocked over: very narrow close to camera and opening up the farther away from the lens we get. While one might easily imagine film critics decrying blocking-and-revealing as theatrical, it is in fact an entirely filmic strategy: it is precisely the projective optics of the camera that allows for precise blocking-and-revealing. (Incidentally, Andersson admits not to be interested in the stage at all.)[11]

3. Veiling and Exposing: A third strategy bringing into play a hidden dimension toys with the viewer's inattentiveness or negligence of important details. Here the hidden dimension is hidden in plain sight, as it were, but it seems to be 'veiled' by an abundance of other details to be taken into account. Inattentive as we are, we cannot perceive what is crucial; only when it is 'exposed' and thus appears in more clarity, do we understand what we have overlooked. Just like 'The Purloined Letter' in Poe's famous short story, the object of interest is visible for us throughout in Andersson's deep-focus long takes, but for some reason or other we do not see it with our eyes wide shut.

Take the scene with the official meeting of leaders from the world of finance, economics and politics in *Songs From the Second Floor*: in a typical Anderssonian vanishing-point triangle we see a group of roughly 25 persons sitting around a long table, discussing the financial crisis, while passing around a glass ball. I suppose that initially most viewers will not comprehend what this scene is supposed to mean. But a closer look could indeed reveal its apparently hidden dimension, because the key to the scene – its decisive character – is only partially blocked. The scene becomes more easy to understand once Andersson lifts the veil, so to speak, and the crucial element appears more clearly: when nearly all persons get up and rush to the window on the left and only the most important person remains seated, it becomes clear that a woman (coded as 'Gypsy'?) has passed around her crystal ball for the men of finance to come to a decision based on what they can see inside. Again, we are

dealing with a revelation of something unexpected. But this time Andersson also takes us by surprise by revealing our inadequacy in deciphering his complex image. These images contain an ethical imperative: 'It's been there to understand all along, but you haven't got it! So look more closely next time'. Like the men of finance in the picture who look admiringly at the crystal ball and do not understand anything, so many, maybe most viewers seem to be too distracted by the abundance of details in order to comprehend what the scene is about.

4. Suggesting and Imagining: The final strategy to evoke a hidden dimension derives from a *suggestive* use of off-screen space. Andersson uses various means to evoke something off-screen that the viewer will not be able to see, but which he or she has to imaginatively fill in. In other words, the hidden dimension does not become visible, but depends on the viewer's visual (and aural) imagination. One way to suggest off-screen space is a specific *use of dialogue*, as in the balcony scene described above in which the talking wife remains in off-screen space throughout. In another case Andersson works with a *teichoscopy* of off-screen space, i.e. a character describes what remains unseen at this very moment.[12] In the above mentioned meeting with the experts from the world of finance, economics and politics a character called Dr. Wendt suddenly stands up and looks out of the window on the left, claiming that the house opposite was moving. When the irritated chairman wants to know what he was talking about, he repeats his observation and points toward the house across the street. Suddenly, his colleagues get up and look out of the window, confirming that the house opposite is indeed moving. Of course, Andersson does not reveal what they see, but keeps his deep-focus long take statically focused on the inside of the meeting room, thus forcing us, as viewers, to imagine the moving house ourselves.

In another case Andersson suggests what remains in off-screen space through the use of *evocative actions*. For instance, in an interior scene towards the end of *You, the Living* we see a woman lying in the bathtub on the right side of the image, while in the middle ground and framed in a

doorway her husband is getting dressed. At one point, the man seems to hear something outside the window that can be glimpsed in the background, because he moves toward the window and looks toward the sky. Again, Andersson does not reveal what the man sees, but asks the viewer to imaginatively speculate about the object or event that – according to the movements and body positions of the man – seems to be visible somewhere outside the window. Here the cinematic staging extends even further into the depth than the pictorial composition allows. However, in this case we have to become active ourselves in order to extend the composition: we fill in an object or event through our own imagination (slightly later, at the very end of the film, we will find out that the object to add would have been a squadron of warplanes).

As the discussion of the hidden-dimension has shown, in Andersson's films we always have to contend with the presence of someone else (or something else) somewhere hidden in *off-screen* space – concealed by a wall, a door, a tree or blocked by another person or group of bystanders. At the same time, the Anderssonian universe is full of people who wait or lurk in the background *on-screen*: as passive bystanders or even gawkers. Hence the characters either have everything in full sight in front of them or are just around the corner and could intervene. Yet for various reasons they remain passive and apathetic. What do we make of this? Andersson's hidden-depth shots certainly do not serve a single monolithic function. Before I lay out what I consider the most convincing interpretation, I will therefore briefly mention three other purposes the hidden-depth shot may fulfil (my list of functions does not claim to be exhaustive, though).

The Comic Function: First of all, Andersson's hidden-depth shots can have a *comic* effect. His commercials in particular often end with a gag. Here is a straightforward example: in a famous ketchup commercial we see a father in the foreground having dinner at a kitchen table. In the middle ground we find his wife turned away from the man; she follows the television programme that runs in the living room next door, which for the viewer is blocked by the father (presumably so that it doesn't distract our attention). In the background, framed by the doorway and the father, we see their son also facing the TV screen. When the man complains about the new ketchup without sugar, a dry and grumpy dialogue unravels between him and his wife. The son is all the while stoically watching television. However, all of a sudden he intervenes – and gets the last word by reprimanding his ill-tempered father and thus turns the father into even more of a fool than before. While this may not be the most complex of Andersson's commercials, it is typical insofar as it demands us to first scan the fore-, middle and background and then keep an eye on all of the three centres of attention. During the dialogue scene our attention most likely jumps back and forth between the father and the mother. However, at least seasoned Andersson viewers also keep an eye on the background, because with Andersson, as we know by now, one can never be sure whether the depth of field will eventually become active space or not. While sometimes the background is merely a passive backdrop, often a sudden and comic twist reveals it as important.

The Expressive Function: Second, we may also discover an *expressive* function. Taking up yet another Bordwellian idea (2005: 34), I claim that Andersson's style occasionally also expresses (or represents) the feelings of his characters. During the third scene in *Songs From the Second Floor* we

can observe two men in an office corridor. The first man, obviously the superior, is standing. The second man, who has just been fired, is on his knees, begging. All the while various bystanders peek through their minimally open office doors. At the beginning of the scene the long corridor – and hence the depth-of-field – is blocked by the two men in the foreground. Only after the superior has moved to the side, can we see the long hallway. The fact that Andersson uses a long take in deep focus and stages the scene in depth makes the scene all the more excruciating to watch. It is precisely this style that allows you, as viewer, to empathise with both men – and this includes the man who had to fire his colleague and who had been humiliated in the very first scene of the film: he wants to get away as quick as possible from

this scene of embarrassment, but he has to walk all the way to the end of the corridor to his office. The passage of time is crucial here. Had Andersson reverted to editing, he could not have expressed the superior's subjective experience of elongated time and hence may not have communicated it to the viewer in the same manner.

The Symbolic Function: Third, the hidden-depth shots also work on a *symbolic* level (Bordwell 2005: 34). Take scene four in *Songs From the Second Floor*: an immigrant stands in front of the closed door of an anonymous Swedish institution. He knocks at the door and slowly opens it, revealing a group of clerks being photographed inside the room. When the immigrant asks whether a certain Allan Svensson would be in, they first shake their heads; then a bald man impolitely shoos him away. When the immigrant leaves, the door is closed shut behind him. Here we clearly deal with a symbolic level: for immigrants Sweden is a closed society and entering is not allowed. While there might be a 'depth' to be revealed and potentially penetrated, outsiders can only glimpse it briefly before they are excluded once and for all (in fact, in the following scene the immigrant gets brutally beaten up in front of the building, while various bystanders remain passive in the background). The symbolic function of his hiding-and-revealing-of-a-hidden-depth stylistics also plays a central role in Andersson's political-historical agenda. In *You, the Living*, the construction worker's disastrous attempt to do the famous tablecloth trick reveals two Swastikas engraved in the wooden table: it's the Swedish bourgeoisie's unacknowledged involvement with the Nazis that Andersson lays bare here.[13] Hidden traces of this repressed legacy can apparently be found in rather unexpected places.

The Active Viewer Function: The brief discussion of the symbolic function finally leads us to what strikes me as the most important layer of the hidden-depth shot: it allows Andersson to combine an existential critique of our modern life-world, on the one hand, with an attempt to involve the viewer more actively in the film, on the other, in order to counter this modern malaise. Let us recall that in Andersson's world one can never remain unobserved. But this surveillance amounts to nothing positive. People have nervous breakdowns and start crying in front of others: a man in a carpet shop, a woman in a park, a man with flowers who is rejected by the one he seems to adore. No one pays attention to their misery. Or, at least, no one actively intervenes. A rather disillusioned Andersson claims in a DVD commentary that in order to progress in life, people have to be reckless and inattentive: one does not have the time to care about the problems of others (2008).

My interpretation would be the following: always surrounded by co-present others, we are nevertheless existentially left alone; always under direct or indirect surveillance, in fact no one reaches out. Rare are the scenes in which characters take each other in their arms, offer help or console one another. Hence what Andersson wants to show us is that in our modern world we are always alone together. Thematically, this interpretation is reinforced by Andersson's strategy to often situate his lonely characters in what Marc Augé has famously called *non-places*: transitory sites of mobility, anonymity and functionality like office corridors, hospitals, train stations, taxis, subway compartments, airports terminals, and bars (see Lommel 2008: 231).

However, does Andersson need to resort to the strong stylistic restrictions of the long-take, deep-focus, deep-staging shot to make this pessimistic claim about the ultimate loneliness of our modern world? Does he need the complex image for that? I believe he does. Andersson does not allow us to be as inattentive, passive, apathetic as the bystanders in his films. We can never know whether something will eventually be revealed within the time-span of the individual shot. He always asks us to properly scan his images for traces of things to discover. This is not unlike the strategy we find in the teeming paintings of a Bosch or Brueghel (or the detailed contemporary photography of a Gregory Crewdson or Andreas Gursky, for that matter). As we have heard, painting is the art form that Andersson is most inspired by and wants film to live up to. However, in contrast to static images like painting and photography, the films of Roy Andersson work with the element proper of the cinema: time. The temporal dimension of the cinema allows Andersson to reveal elements progressively and let facets of the shot appear unexpectedly. Thus the *freedom* of the viewer – but also his or her *obligation* – to scan the temporal progression of the shot demands a more active perception than usual: an eye for veiled or blocked elements, a focus on multiple centres of attention, an anticipation of sudden revelations, an alertness for minute changes. Had Andersson edited his scenes in a classical analytic way, the viewer would be less actively scanning and observing. The montage would single out what is important, put it directly on display (often in close-up) and suggest the relations between the individual parts. In Andersson's case this is different: the viewer has to have an eye for 'the implicit relations, which the *decoupage* no longer displays on the screen like the pieces of a dismantled engine', as Bazin once put it (1978: 80).

Put against the backdrop of his apathetic characters – couldn't we draw the conclusion that it is almost as if Andersson wanted to teach us a lesson of active perception? While the cinema does not allow us to intervene and thus change the plight of the characters (something the apathetic bystanders could do), at the very least it is our obligation to remain vigilant at all times. Andersson's goal seems be an

education in visual literacy, turning us into attentive observers, open to the hidden dimension of our modern life-world. It is to this end that Andersson urgently needs the complex imagery of his hidden-depth shots.

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[1] The premiere of Andersson's latest film at the Venice Film Festival was announced while I was writing this article. Since I have not been able to see the film yet, it unfortunately cannot play a role in this essay. But judging from the reviews, the production stills and the fact that the film represents the third part of the *Living* trilogy, one may assume that Andersson did not radically alter his style. In his production notes he writes: 'With my last two movies I embarked upon what I call 'abstraction'. I dared to leave realism and naturalism and entered the territory of abstract aesthetics. With *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch*, I will continue and perhaps go even deeper into abstraction, while making the images clearer and brighter' (Andersson 2014).

[2] As Bordwell writes, 'Certainly we could learn from scrutinizing many other filmmakers, from the 1910s masters through Keaton, Dreyer, and Eisenstein and on to Chantal Akerman, Otar Iosseliani, and Béla Tarr. I select my quartet because they both exemplify some typical norms and display some unusual exploitations of them' (2005: 9).

[3] Andersson himself underlines his closeness to Bazin's aesthetics: 'I was not aware of [André Bazin's] film theoretical writings until about fifteen years ago. When I read Bazin I understood that he reasoned in the same way as I did' (2010: 274).

[4] An analysis of Anderssons's second commercial for the Social Democratic Party from 1988 can be found in Jan Holmberg (2005: 190-200). Not all of Andersson's commercials are without cuts: sometimes he works with temporal ellipses for comic ends, contrasting a before and after (for instance in his commercials for the Swedish Post).

[5] Considering that Andersson is so committed to the aesthetics of staging in depth favored by Bordwell, it seems astonishing that Bordwell has written little about Andersson. Marc Saint-Cyr writes that Andersson's most famous works are 'as if Kaurismäki's comedic traits, despairing worldview, and visual tidiness were all pushed to their extremes and given a ghoulish, desaturated makeover' (2014: 18).

[6] Repin's influence can best be seen in the way Andersson arranges his interiors. Compare, for instance, such Repin interiors as *Arrest of the Propagandist* (1880-1892), *They Did Not Expect Him / The Unexpected* (1884-1888) or *They Did Not Expect Her* (1883). Interestingly, Bordwell has referred to Repin as an example of a painterly tradition of staging in depth (2001: 14-15).

[7] Unfortunately, I do not speak Swedish and cannot oversee the publications in Sweden (or other Scandinavian countries), but my Swedish colleague Anders Marklund from the University of Lund was kind enough to compile an Andersson bibliography for me. However, the list does not seem to contain articles that deal with Andersson's film style in any great detail. An exception are a number of student theses devoted to his aesthetics and the notion of the 'complex image' (Faldalen 2008, Lundström 2003, and Davidsson 2008).

[8] Due to spatial constraints as well as my limited sound expertise, I concentrate mostly on the *visual* elements. This is not to deny the importance of the three auditory components dialogue, music and noise.

[9] For example, Harry Tuttle's directory of 'contemporary contemplative cinema' (CCC) auteurs lists Andersson next to such usual suspects as Béla Tarr, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Pedro Costa, Lav Diaz and Aleksandr Sokurov (2012).

[10] For the distinction between imaginary and concrete off-screen space, see Burch (1981: 21-22).

[11] 'I must say that theatre is not my cup of tea, so to speak,' Andersson says (in Vishnevetsky 2009).

[12] On the notion of teichoscopy in film and the use of language to evoke mental imagery, see Hanich (2014).

[13] For a more detailed account of Andersson's political agenda, see Brunow (2010).