

The Debt of Roy Anderson's Dark Humor to Samuel Beckett and the New Objectivity

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Abstract

One of the main characteristics of Roy Anderson's movies is the dark humor and tragicomedy. Various art sources influence his dark humor, such as Samuel Beckett's oeuvres and New Objectivity paintings. Beckett's approach towards tragicomedy can be discerned in Andersson's world and his comic figures. Andersson emphasizes on human being's dark side to create comic characters. Passivity is a significant, horrifying quality of modern subjects in his view, and it will be exploring in this paper. His similar figures, with their repetitive and deadpan manners, question the contemporary world's passive subjects. This study employs Henri Bergson's ideas in "*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*" and Incongruity Theory to investigate humor in Andersson's movies. In addition, the importance of social and political context in Andersson's works connects him to New Objectivity paintings. Two painters of this movement, George Grosz and Otto Dix, are mentioned here. The reason is that their caricature manner and specific attention to the body are similar to Andersson's works. This paper attempts to answer how Anderson establishes the comic tone of his movies and how his concerns and the aforementioned inspirations impact his aesthetic choices. The findings indicate that Andersson benefits from Beckett's works and New Objectivity paintings to accentuate his critical approach to contemporary world issues. He uses comic devices, including similarity, repetition, and deadpan, to express his concerns. Andersson transforms all the influences from other artists into his unique way for his purposes.

Keywords: Roy Anderson, Dark Humor, Tragicomedy, Samuel Beckett, New Objectivity

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Introduction

Roy Andersson is a Swedish director who is considered one of the most critical living European film directors, best known for his “living trilogy” which includes *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000), *You, the Living* (2007) and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), and his latest movie *About Endlessness* (2019). He has gained global recognition for his unique cinematic style over the past decades. A vital ingredient in his films is dark humor and tragicomic tensions. “It is close to the absurdist comedy of Franz Kafka, the surrealist slapstick of Samuel Beckett. Films like these can be regarded as droll comments on modern Swedish life, wry critiques of capitalism or goofy sendups of the welfare state” (Costanzo, 2020, 251). Another noticeable feature of Andersson’s films is tableaux vivants which stems from his interest in painting (Lindqvist, 2016, 552; Hanich, 2014, 38). Here, I mention New Objectivity Movement because of the humor lies in their work, and I focus on George Grosz since dark humor is one of the essential qualities of his paintings.

Despite the abstraction and surrealism of Andersson’s work, there are explicit references to certain historical events. That is where he distances from Beckett and gets closer to the New Objectivity movement. There is no apparent reference to a particular place and time in Beckett's works, while many New Objectivity painters criticized their society and "display a strong social consciousness" (Wu, 2019, 85). Andersson can also observe the flaws of capitalism and neoliberal societies. He strongly criticizes the passivity of modern subjects, their emptiness, and the horrors of the modern world. That is why he tries to engage the spectator’s critical power by employing specific stylistic devices, including dark humor, tragicomedy, breaking the fourth wall, long shots and deep focus.

I have two goals in this paper. Firstly, I aim to investigate how Andersson’s aesthetic choices are tied to his concerns and the comic aspects of his movies. Different scholars have discussed these style choices. However, to my knowledge, no research has been done exclusively on the relation of his aesthetic choices to creating humor and comic effects. Secondly, as I am studying Andersson’s debt to Samuel Beckett and New Objectivity painters, I want to show how he employs these influences according to his worldview and concerns. In this regard, I will explore the importance of passivity, one of his main concerns, in his cinematic world. I also examine how he utilizes similarity and repetition to create comedy.

Incongruity Theory

There are two approaches in order to define comedy: as a genre and also as a mode. Geoff King believes that the best way to understand comedy is as a “mode” rather than a “genre” (King, 2002, 2), and non-comedy genre films can all contain comedic elements. As Andrew Stott illustrates, “this might lead us to suggest that what we call comedy is really humor, a specific tone operating free from generic restraints” (Stott, 2005, 2). Furthermore, we often see the comic techniques are employed to express serious critiques, and they emerge in contexts that do not follow the rules of the comedy genre. King states that comedy is “often disruptive. It messes things up and undermines ‘normal’ behavior and conceptions” (King, 2002, 19).

The leading theories of humor, as Noel Carroll asserts, are superiority theory, incongruity theory, the release theory, the play theory, and the dispositional theory. Here, I mainly

depend on incongruity theory which is the most prominent theory among others. Noel Carroll notes that the incongruity theory means that “what is key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm” (Carroll, 2014, 17). We think of something as ordinary, and something else disrupts the way we think the world is or should be. So, it does not meet our expectations regard to the world. Henri Bergson also identifies incongruity as a source of humor. His ideas revolve around the boundaries between human and machine He states that devices like repetition and similarity that make humans look like machines resulting in laughter. Bergson explains in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900) that “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (Bergson, 2008, 29).

According to John Allen Paulos, “a necessary ingredient of humor is that two (or more) incongruous ways of viewing something (a person, a sentence, a situation) be juxtaposed. In other words, for something to be funny, some unusual, inappropriate, or odd aspects of it must be perceived together and compared” (Paulos, 1980, 9). The juxtaposition is a critical element of comedy that may subvert our expectations, as Carroll states, or disrupts some established rules of society. In addition, Todd McGowan argues that each comic moment is traumatic since it makes people conscious of things that were hidden under the veil of everyday life (McGowan, 2017, 11).

Dark humor and Tragicomedy

Dark or Black humor is a concept that is hard to define. It is a term that Andre Breton first coined in his book *Anthology of Black Humor* (1945). However, he has not provided an exact definition of the term. Here, I will be using the most common definition of the word, which best suits my arguments. Black humor is a type of comedy that make jokes about tragic, disturbing and dreadful topics such as hopelessness or suffering. Jordan Cox refers to Black Humor as “anything combining the morbid and grotesque with humor and farce to give a disturbing effect and convey the absurdity and cruelty of life” (Cox, 2014, 14). The incongruity is inherent in such humor since the shocking situation juxtaposes with the normal expectations of the spectators. In this respect, Mark Hewitson states that in black humor, “[t]he darkness of experience is combined with the lightness of the comic” (Hewitson, 2012, 216).

Two significant concepts in my study are tragicomedy and Kafkaesque due to their connections to black humor. These are two out of four “common threads” Michael Y. Bennett recognizes in absurd literature (Bennett, 2015, 19). One of the representatives of the Theatre of the Absurd is Samuel Beckett. Martin Esslin believes “the Theatre of the Absurd is a darkly comic form that places great demands upon audiences, asking them to juxtapose incongruencies and make sense out of often horrific laughter” (Esslin, 2010 ,29). The definition of tragicomedy is elusive since it has been defined differently. As John Orr has stated, “tragicomedy demonstrates the coexistence of amusement and pity, terror and laughter” (Orr, 1991, 1). In this definition, the two concepts of tragicomic response and black humor are similar in their dual nature. Kafkaesque is an adjective that is ascribed to situations similar to Kafka’s abnormal and surreal situations. These situations result in a specific response called tragicomic in which “one must both laugh and cry, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes alternately, and sometimes one is unsure which response is adequate and/or appropriate.” (Bennett, 2015, 91).

Passivity

Passivity is a significant concept in Andersson's worldview that has a vital role in his aesthetic choices. It has been appeared on two levels in Andersson's world: movie characters and the audience. Andersson represents his characters as passive or indifferent. Most of the time, the characters are just observers of a situation. He is trying to criticize passivity as a horrifying quality of modern people. Therefore, Andersson wants the audience to look critically at the characters and, more importantly, at themselves instead of just having fleeting sympathy. Thus, he attempts to maintain a distance between them and people in his cinematic world by using specific devices, including comic techniques, and breaking the fourth wall.

The first level of passivity is on the area of movie characters. In shaping movie characters' passive relationship with the world, Andersson is influenced by Beckett's approach towards tragicomedy. This genre has undergone many changes, from Plautus, Roman dramatist, that coined the term to Beckett. In Renaissance, protagonists of tragicomedy were tragic, and the world they were put into was a comic world. However, this relation between characters and the world was changed in modern tragicomedy (Foster, 2004, 167). Verna A. Foster explains that modern tragicomedy "reverses this pattern, presenting comic characters in an ultimately hostile or at best indifferent and thus tragic universe" (ibid, 168). This reversed pattern can be recognized in Andersson cinematic world, a key element of his movies.

Passivity is one of the significant characteristics that makes Andersson's characters comic in this tragic world. In many tragic circumstances of Andersson's movies, people stand and stare at the incident or say absurd or indifferent sentences. Therefore, what creates a comic situation is the people's reaction which is incongruous with the situation, and this is where Andersson and Beckett are both connected with Kafka. What makes a situation Kafkaesque is the reactions we see in characters towards the strange cases. Thus, the people's "inaction is what is horrifying and is utterly inhuman" (Bennett, 2015, 137). For instance, "the situation in *Waiting for Godot* is tragic, but the characters' response to it is comic" (Foster, 2004, 169).

In "*Songs from the second floor*" (2000), Lasse, a clerk, is being fired after thirty years of work in a firm. Lasse and the high-level executive, Pelle, are in a corridor lined with doors that all of them are ajar. Other employers are just watching Lasse's misery while weeping and begging Pelle not to fire him. Lasse clinging to Pelle's legs, and when Pelle starts walking away, Lasse is dragged halfway through the hall, which has a comic effect. The spectator feels laughter and distress at the same time (Figure 1). It is an awkward situation. Andersson attempts to juxtapose incongruous elements to reach a tragicomic effect.



Figure 1: Song from the Second Floor (2000).

Deadpan, which is usually understood in terms of performance, accentuates the character's passivity and indifference. Its narrowest definition “refers to an emotionless and expressionless presentation of self” (Holm, 2017,104). Deadpan has usually been considered as a passive mode of humor. Nicholas Holm reconceptualizes deadpan “as an active intervention that refuses to fall straightforwardly into the conventional aesthetic categories by which humor is communicated and understood” (ibid). So, deadpan has dual functions in Andersson’s films. It highlights the characters’ passivity by their deadpan performances, and as a comic mood, it helps with the critics Andersson wants to express.

The second level of passivity is on the area of audiences. As passivity is the human status in Andersson’s view, he generalizes this quality to the audience in various ways. For instance, in “You, the Living” (2007), a man fails in a magic trick and ends up breaking the dinner China of a family of Nazi sympathizers. As a result, he is sentenced to death in court. When he is about to be executed, people sit behind a glass wall and watch this scene while eating popcorns. This scene indicates the audience’s passivity by being bracketed people watching the execution with the audience in the movie theatre.

Breaking the fourth wall is a device for generalization in Andersson’s works. Lasse is fired in the firing scene I discussed earlier, and he is begging Pelle: “no! no! no!”. At this moment, Pelle looks straight into the camera and makes the audience as witnesses. This device activates the spectator and reminds them that “You are an accomplice!”. Also, black humor and tragicomedy in the aforementioned scenes result in an ambivalent response in the audience. Should they be sad or laugh? This is where the question of what is the right action should arise. Comic techniques help develop the critical approach by making a distance between the audience and the subject matter. Therefore, one of Anderson’s concerns is to transform a passive spectator into an active one.

The most significant component of Andersson’s filmmaking that helps activate the audience has its roots in André Bazin theories. As Lindqvist put it, Andersson Borrows “his use of spatial depth and layering-or “staging in-depth”- within the long takes” from Bazin (Lindqvist, 2016, 39). He also uses long shots and deep focus cinematography since these devices require the audience’s participation to find comic elements in the scene. “Andersson challenges his viewers to become attentive observers” (Hanich, 2014, 37). They have to find the comedy hidden in various spots of a shot themselves. Lindqvist states, “forcing the viewer

to make a choice activates her social conscience in a way that viewing directed by editing does not” (Lindqvist, 2016, 39).

This layered visual composition can also create “a tension between volume and surface, and dimensionality” (Chinita, 2018, 1-6), and this tension helps Andersson make comedy effects. In “*You, The Living*” (2009), a scene opens on a man sitting in the foreground. He plays a repetitive rhythm. After a while, his wife appears at the doorstep in the background and screams. The man does not do anything and keep playing with a deadpan style. She goes out of the frame and hardly closes the door, which is heard from off-screen. Then, the picture framed behind the man falls off the wall (figure 2). Then, the downstairs neighbor is shown knocking on the ceiling with a broom in protest of the music sound. In the next scene, a man stands on his balcony and the musician and his neighbor can be seen in the background, in the apartment building across the street (figure 3). This tension between the foreground and background, and off-screen and on-screen, make the comic impact.



Figure 2: You, the Living (2007).



Figure 3: You, the Living (2007).

Similarity and Repetition

Similar Traits

In the previous section, I discussed passivity as a quality in people's behavior incongruous with their distressed situation, and this incongruity prepares the ground for them to become comic figures. In this part, I discuss how Andersson creates his archetypal and comic figures by using similarities in their physical and mental traits. Bergson asserts repetition and similarity create the mechanical quality since the living cannot be repeated, implying some latent mechanism. Bergson explains:

“Laughter will be more pronounced still, if we find on the stage not merely two characters, as in the example from Pascal, but several, nay, as great a number as possible, the image of one another, who come and go, dance and gesticulate together, simultaneously striking the same attitudes and tossing their arms about in the same manner”, and in this situation “this deflection of life towards the mechanical is here the real cause of laughter” (Bergson, 2008, 12).

Andersson's characters have similar traits. They are desperate, impotent and helpless, and have lost everything that had value one day. They live in a world that has become devoid of meaning and search desperately for something to make their lives meaningful. There are several scenes in which Andersson's characters start crying in public while other people act entirely indifferent. For instance, in *“You, the Living”* (2007), a carpet seller starts crying in front of his customers, an elderly couple. He says that he fought with his wife. The woman passes some judges on whose attitude was worse. His husband just asked her to leave the store, and they walk away. The man keeps crying after they left, while a passerby stands behind the store window and looks inside (figure 4). The passerby is just a passive observer of the man's misery through the shop window. This scene reminds us of today's world in which people have got used to just watching everything on the screens or through the shop windows. The deadpan style makes an awkward tragicomic situation and stops us from feeling sympathy with the man.



Figure 4: You, the Living (2007).

Similar Bodies

People in Andersson's film are analogous in physical appearances, gestures, and how they move (figure 5). His portly characters, whose white and pale faces remind us of Beckett's characters have origins from clowns (Cavecchi, 132; Cohn, 1962). According to Ursula Lindqvist in her book *Songs from The Second Floor* (2016), Andersson claims the fact that "his films' protagonist is a human archetype is what motivates his use of whiteface, a visual effect intended to equalize all of the characters" (Lindqvist, 2016, 26). These characteristics relate Andersson to Beckett since the uncertainty of Beckett's characters' identity has also been interpreted as an archetypal characteristic (McDonald, 2006, 2).

The similarity of characters and their unusual white bodies seem to destroy these characters' individuality. People, who lose their individuality and look the same, find machine-like qualities. This unity can also make them look like objects or goods of massive production, and their stillness accentuates this impact. Here, Bergson idea resonates again that when mechanical act substitutes the flexibility, it results in laughter. People should be able to feel and think, so when they are machine-like, we find them laughable. Rapidity is an element that reinforces the sense of comedy since it makes humans look like machines. As Luis Giannetti states, "where speed tends to be the natural rhythm of comedy, slow, dignified movements tend to be associated with tragedy" (Giannetti, 2001 ,128). However, Andersson's characters are static, and when they move, they do it very slowly. This dignity is incongruous with those empty, object-like people. Thus, there is a juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy characteristics.



Figure 5: About Endlessness (2019).

Based on the previous paragraphs, Andersson intentionally wants to emphasize the characters' bodies. As Bergson states, tragic poets tried to avoid drawing attention to the body of their protagonist. Since "no sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself that the instruction of a comic element is to be feared" (Bergson, 2008 ,17). As a result of resemblances between Andersson's characters, sometimes it is not easy to distinguish them from each other. The interesting point is that this similarity also draws the audience's attention to their physical qualities. The similarity of characters and their unusual white bodies highlight the feeling that they are devoid of emotion. The importance of body connects Anderson to New Objectivity Movement.

In New Objectivity Movement, there is significant attention to the body. It is evident in George Grosz's or Otto Dix's portly figures. It comes from the caricatured quality of their paintings. "The involvement of the artists in social criticism, and the resulting intensification of representational form, reveal a tendency towards caricature" (Michalski, 2003, 20). As a result of turning back from expressionism and trying to "distance themselves from the excesses of Expressionism" (ibid, 8), the painters evacuated their personages of feeling. To achieve this goal, they employ specific colors and caricature manner. Andersson uses the characteristics of these paintings to desensitize his characters, including the color pallet, their gestures and dark humor. This desensitization transforms into deadpan performances in cinematic language. So, this deadpan style and monochromatic shades with white and neutral colors and high key lighting strengthen this sense of being devoid of emotion (Figure 6 and 7).



Figure 6: Dr. Mayer-Hermann (1926).



Figure 7: Songs from Second Floor (2000).

Repetition

Repetition is a common device in creating comedy; repeating a dialogue or an act "contributes to the comic" (Cohn, 1962, 61). Sometimes Andersson uses repetition to show or criticize the emptiness of some aspects of human life. For instance, the execution scene in "You, the living" consists of three shots. An elderly woman repeats the same dialogue in each scene. She says, "the set, it was handed down from my great-great-grandmother, and it was more than 200 years old". This repetition highlights the horror and the absurdity of the scene. This scene has comic impacts since it is full of incongruities. Judges are served with beer in

court. It challenges the validity of the law in general. The man's lawyer merely cries and does not defend his client in the court. It seems he knows the conviction is predetermined. The humor of this scene and its juxtaposition with a dreadful situation is able to reveal the brutality and horrifying nature of it so much better.

Comedy can express criticism concerning society since, as a result of its disruptive nature, it can reveal any flaws in the object of its criticism. One of Andersson's primary criticisms is on neoliberalist society and capitalism. Repetition is the most desirable device for him to challenge the capitalist conventions. People are living in a society that the market defines everything. In *"About Endlessness"* (2019), a priest talks to a therapist about losing his faith. Religion is his livelihood, so as long as he is able to make money, this is of minor significance if he believes what he says. In the following scenes, the priest, who has an appointment next week, comes again to the doctor's office. When he arrives, the therapist intends to leave and repeats, "I have to catch my bus", while kicking the priest out with the help of his secretary. According to Julianne Q. M. Yang, "The repetition of individual lines [...] allow the film to touch on themes such as alienation, selfishness, desire, work, and the power of routines in modern life". (Young, 2017, 576).

A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence (2014) features two salesmen who are somehow reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. A comic couple with absurd dialogues and different spirits who seem to need each other. They are trying to sell their novelty items with the same dialogues and actions each time deliver in a deadpan manner, and this repetitive desperate effort makes them tragicomic figures. Jonathan experiences a bewildering feeling that something is wrong. Every time Jonathan is dealing with some questions, a man in charge of the flophouse notifies him that "some people get up early for work tomorrow". People's lives have been shaped by capitalism rules. They are unwilling to hear or think of any ethical or philosophical questions. Their lives are based on bus timetables or the rules of their job.

Comedy Beneath Social Life

Andersson and Grosz have the same approach towards the meaning and purpose of art. For Grosz, art is "to hold up a mirror in front of his age, in the form of paintings in which truths are painfully revealed through polemic overstatement – here lay, for Grosz, the "social purpose" of his work as an artist" (Metzger, 2017, 62). I intend to depict the resemblance of these artists on the way they criticize society by mordant humor and surrealism. However, first, it is essential to express one of Bergson's viewpoints. Bergson explains how a potential comic element lies under the apparent surface of the ceremonial aspect of social life. "They owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified, in our minds, with the seriousness object with which custom associate them" (Bergson, 2008,16). To reveal that comic side, we only need to take their given seriousness away, and "For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it" (ibid).

In some of George Grosz's paintings, his figures wear formal garments in public places, while some parts of their bodies are not covered with clothes (Figure 8). It seems he tries to penetrate social formality and its appearances to reach that latent comic behind them. There is a similar experience in Andersson movies. He challenges the seriousness of courts or religious ceremonies, when Judges are drinking beer in the court, or a priest, who lost his faith, performs a ceremony while drunk and stumbles. In the sacrifice scene of *Songs from the Second Floor*, religious and business elders lined up to watch the girl leading to the cliff.

People wear formal clothes, and everything has been rehearsed in advance to sacrifice an innocent girl (Figure 10). We can also think of *the pillars of society* (1926) painting (Figure 9) that Grosz “offers an exaggerated gallery of typical representatives of power under the Weimar Republic” (Metzger, 2017,62). This scene has dark comedy and is filled with incongruities. Andersson criticizes the barbarism hidden beneath modern life. It reminds us of *Waiting for Godot* and Pozzo’s cruel treatment of Lucky and how the formality of his conversation with Vladimir and Estragon seems comically anomalous (McDonald, 2016, 39).

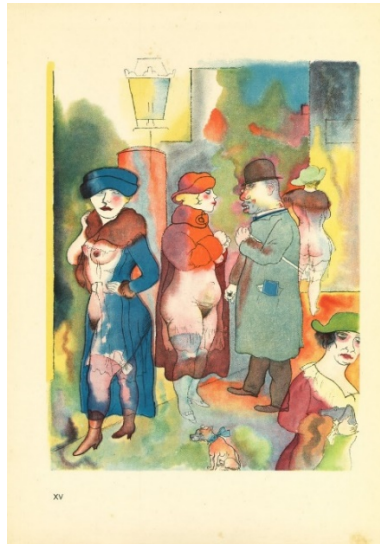


Figure 8: Before Sunrise (1922).



Figure 9: The Pillars of Society (1926).



Figure 10: Songs from Second Floor (2000)

Conclusion

Black humor is one of the main characteristics of Roy Andersson's cinematic world. He makes jokes about the dark side of the world and human beings. Several artists influence him, but Beckett and New Objectivity Movement have greatly influenced his dark humor. Andersson inherited Beckett's approach to tragicomedy. His comic characters live in a tragic world that does not make any sense. Andersson strongly criticizes the passivity of modern subjects, their emptiness and the horrors of the modern world. Passivity is a quality in people's behavior that is incongruous with their distressed situation. This incongruity prepares the ground for them to become comic figures. Andersson also benefits from some characteristics of New Objectivity paintings such as black humor, attention to the body, caricature quality, and the importance of the social and historical context. According to Bergson, similarity and repetition are devices to create comedy. The similarity of characters in their appearances and traits strengthens their machine-like quality, and they become like the massive products produced in the capitalist world. All in all, Andersson's aesthetic choices are tied to his concerns and the comic aspects of his movies. In addition, he employs Samuel Beckett and New Objectivity influences according to his worldview.

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