

PROPELLING CINEMA AND AESTHETICS FORWARDS THROUGH (UN)REALITY: PEDRO AFONSO'S TAKE ON ROY ANDERSSON'S COMPLEX IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

This short piece analyses Pedro Afonso's video essay on Roy Andersson's *Complex Image*, an aesthetic style based on the tableau shot. It proceeds by scrutinizing the relationship Andersson's aesthetic maintains with painting, slow cinema and political ideology, three aspects connected with realism, one way or the other. By focusing on the operative word "complex", instead of "image", this text claims that the *Complex Image* is not strictly pictorial; that long shots do not necessarily equate with slow cinema; and that there is a strong political engagement alongside an undeniably creative form.

Keywords: The complex image; Painting; Long take; Realism; The living trilogy; Roy Andersson; Slow cinema; Pedro Afonso.

In his video essay *Roy Andersson: The Essence of the Complex Image*, Pedro Afonso assumes the essay as a pedagogical tool cutting across film history, theory and philosophy, while scrutinizing painting and pictoriality. He focuses on the Swedish film director Roy Andersson, currently approaching eighty, with a gleam of discovery that is contagious and highly significant especially, as Afonso rightly claims, most of the audience (at least in Portugal) is unaware of this cinematic gem. In order to make up for that gap, in October 2020 the Portuguese Cinematheque has exhibited all of the director's films, including his latest opus, *About Endlessness* (*Om det oändliga*, 2019).

Overall, Afonso's video essay is simultaneously quite compelling and didactic, as it is permeated by a voice over that guides the viewers through the theoretical argument. The abundance of images, for those who have not watched the films, works wonders to whet one's appetite for their consumption and also function as a worthy illustration of Andersson's formal singularity as a film director. The pace of the essay manages to convey a high degree of information, while keeping the viewers interested. Ultimately, Afonso's film achieves what it sets out to do: to convince us of the cinematic and aesthetic importance of Roy Andersson. However, the short length of the essay (only nine minutes long), together with the aim to provide an overview of the director's style, prevent an in-depth approach to matters implicit in the director's aesthetic. This undermines the film essay genre's possible creativity and political potential (Rascaroli, 2017, p. 5), particularly when Andersson himself "believes that a great film is inherently political, but not didactic" (Lindqvist, 2016, p. 17). Besides, in choosing to highlight Andersson's film form over the intrinsic political content, Afonso deviates from the main point of the *Living Trilogy* and the *Trivialism* that imbues it.

Specifically, Afonso's essay analyses a film aesthetic dear to Andersson, and one that he also uses in over 400 advertisements he directed. The film framing, entitled by Andersson *The Complex Image* (see Larson and Marklund, 2010), is deliberately made to be scrutinized by the viewers' eyes in single-shot scenes, much like what happens in the perception of a painting, as Afonso recognizes, following Andersson himself in the recorded excerpt of an interview. Walter Benjamin, in a quote mentioned in the video essay, also advocates in favour of painting considering that the rhythm of the moving image prevented contemplation from taking place. Yet, Andersson's aesthetic is supported by, at least, one strong paradox which Afonso does not account for. The operative word in his key expression is *complex*, not image.

On the one hand, this aesthetic is not realistic. By Andersson's own account – in a very well chosen clip in Afonso's film – he has grown tired of realism and prefers to represent the real in an abstract manner, hence the minimalist décors, the too much or too little populated spaces, the unnatural acting and make-up, the quasi monochrome cinematography, and so on. As Afonso observes, Andersson's style has relevant cinematic roots in early cinema's choice of frontal and static shots, which were not

realistic at all. Thus, the long shots, which maintain spatial and temporal integrity, are here posited as being “pictorial”.

On the other hand, though, the long shot has always been postulated as the key marker of cinematic realism for one of its most important advocates, the French critic André Bazin, regardless of the speed of the actions taking place in the frame. To Bazin, who favours cinema over painting – unlike Benjamin – in the latter case the picture frame is centripetal, providing “a contemplative area opening solely onto the interior of the painting”, i.e. the artwork (Bazin 1967, p. 166). That being the case, the perception of the offscreen space (inside the film) via reflexes in window panes and mirrors, to which Afonso alludes, cannot be considered pictorial. Therefore, the choice of Bazin here – although his position on the long take has become canonical – might not have been the best choice to validate Andersson’s aesthetic, which is hyper realistic (ergo, unrealistic).

Nonetheless, the dichotomy realism/artificiality is a good debate, one that has permeated film history throughout its existence, but which should not be connected with the debate pertaining to the relationship between cinema and the arts. This thematic intertwining has caused Afonso to confuse the long shot recorded in real time with realism, with which it may be coincident but not as a necessary condition, as many theatrical films remind us, namely Manoel de Oliveira’s *Le soulier de satin* (1985).

In fact, as I argue elsewhere, “the pictorial effect in the trilogy would not be possible without the performative influence of theatre (Chinita, 2019, p. 78), although this is not usually recognised. In fact, the tableau shot of the early cinema was indebted to theatre and not to painting (see Brewster and Jacobs, 1987), and therefrom derived its artificiality, or – to apply it to the debate chosen by Afonso himself – its non-reality. In this respect, Afonso is right in pointing out the importance of space in *The Living Trilogy*. However, the composition of the image, in which the elements are placed “as in a cube”, as Afonso claims, is not a pictorial property, but a theatrical one. This also has implications for the treatment of time in Andersson’s oeuvre.

Whereas in painting it is the beholder who chooses the figures and the order of his or her perusal, in Andersson’s long shots there are inner cues in the *mise-en-scène* that direct the viewers’ attention to where and when the director wants. Depicted figures in paintings are essentially still, while in films they move, and their minimalist motion(s) are of the highest importance to the overall meaning of the scene. Therefore, time is crucial not only in the perception of the cinematic image, but also in its inner development, intradiegetically. In this, the image becomes self-reflexive, and time *does* become visible, as argued by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 2: Time-Image*, as correctly pointed out by Afonso. Yet, this is a circumstance that only befalls the cinematic modern image and not the Renaissance pictorial one, which Andersson also uses to his own benefit as a form of unreality (through the enhancement of perspective).

Afonso's connection between the *Complex Image* and *Slow Cinema* is interesting and valid in light of the importance of temporality in *The Living Trilogy*, but Andersson's goal in using slowness diverges from the intention of the film directors who have carved a niche for themselves with that style. To begin with, slow cinema is a *cinematic style*, as opposed to pictorial and (I add) theatrical style of Andersson's *Complex Image*. Long duration film features, particularly Lav Diaz's, cannot be compared to the 100–minutes of the longest film in the Trilogy; the tragic seriousness of Béla Tarr's is the opposite of Andersson's tragi-comedic impulse; the Swedish director's construction of the largely urban sets, including train stations, is the opposite of the choice of real locations mostly set in rural areas; his dependence on narrative situations, differs from the focus on mainly photographic details unrelated to the characters' actions that interest many slow cinema filmmakers. However, the ridiculous dénouement of each sketch of Andersson's *The Living Trilogy*, which Afonso misinterprets as "gags" – a term usually connoted with straightforward comedy – would be a stronger link to *Slow Cinema* than time, lack of speed, or purported realism.

Although Afonso highlights some themes of the Trilogy (alienation, loss of morality, merciless capitalism, bureaucracy, and a depiction of the Everyman) he fails to develop its connection to the aesthetic dimension of Andersson's films. In fact, *The Complex Image* also owes its complexity to the way the image frames its subjects, i.e., its human gallery and respective universal dramas. Ideologically, "all the banal moments that make up the sum of this grim humanity conjoined with the impersonal space it inhabits are meant to give 'a voice' to the little people who symbolize mankind as a whole" (Ratner, 2015, p. 2 – quoted in Chinita, 2018, p. 73). Afonso's insistence on form undervalues Andersson's discourse of the powerless and disenfranchised and the importance of the *Complex Image* as an instrument of social criticism. If the pace of Andersson's Trilogy is languorous that is mainly due the impotence that paralyses these characters from reacting. "Thus, dead time is responsible for dead space as well and, consequently, for the perception of a metaphorically dead humanity (Chinita, 2018, p. 81)".

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