

Roy Andersson's Cinematic Poetry and the Spectre of César Vallejo

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ABSTRACT: *Sånger från andra våningen* [*Songs from the Second Floor*] was Roy Andersson's first feature film in 25 years when it won the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000. It exemplifies the maturation of a distinctive filmmaking style Andersson developed in two and half decades of making shorts and advertising films and testifies to his decades-long engagement with Peruvian modernist César Vallejo's poetry. Andersson is known for his contentious relationship with Sweden's film establishment, and his critiques of Nordic contemporary filmmakers parallel Vallejo's similarly pointed critiques, in 1930s Paris, of the so-called "revolutionary" agenda of French Surrealists. The formal correspondences between Vallejo's modernist poetry and Andersson's "trivialist" cinema are likewise striking. In this essay, I argue that the spectre of Vallejo has so informed the development of Andersson's distinctive vision and style as a filmmaker that an investigation of the interart correspondences between this unlikely pairing of avantgardists is overdue.

RÉSUMÉ: *Sånger från andra våningen* [*Chansons du deuxième étage*] était le premier film de Roy Andersson à être présenté depuis 25 ans lorsque ce dernier remporta le Prix Spécial du Jury du Festival de Cannes en l'an 2000. Il illustre la maturation d'un style de réalisation distinct qu'Andersson a développé au cours des deux décennies et demie qu'il a passées à faire des courts métrages et des publicités, et témoigne de son engagement de longue date avec la poésie du moderniste péruvien César Vallejo. Andersson est reconnu pour sa relation controversée avec l'industrie cinématographique suédoise, et ses critiques envers les cinéastes nordiques contemporains s'apparentent aux critiques de Vallejo face aux intentions soi-disant « révolutionnaires » des Surréalistes français dans le Paris de 1930. Les correspondances formelles entre la poésie moderniste de Vallejo et le cinéma « trivial » d'Andersson sont également frappantes. Dans cet essai, je soutiens que le spectre de Vallejo a tant influencé le style de réalisation et la vision particulière d'Andersson qu'une étude des correspondances artistiques entre ce duo improbable d'avant-gardistes était plus qu'attendue.

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In one of many discomfiting scenes in Swedish director Roy Andersson's award-winning art film *Sånger från andra våningen* [*Songs from the Second Floor*] (2000), a 60-year-old furniture salesman, Kalle, and his grown son, Stefan, visit Kalle's other son, Tomas, in a mental hospital. As Tomas sits silently on a chair in the long corridor in the foreground and Kalle stares despairingly out a window in the background, wailing that Tomas "wrote poems until he went nuts," Stefan crouches down facing his brother and soothingly recites to him the translated words of another deeply alienated poet, the Peruvian modernist César Vallejo:¹

älskad vare den okände och hans hustru,
och nästan med ärmor, krage, och ögon!
älskad vare den som sover på rygg,
den som bär en trasig sko i regnet
älskad vare den skallige utan hatt
den som klämmer ett finger i dörren
älskad vare den som svettas av skuld eller skam
den som betalar med det han saknar
älskade vare de som sätter sig²

[beloved be the stranger and his wife,
and our neighbor with sleeves, collar, and eyes!
beloved be the one who sleeps on his back,
the one who wears a torn shoe in the rain
beloved be the bald man without hat
the one who catches a finger in the door
beloved is he who sweats from guilt or shame
he who pays with what he lacks
beloved are they who sit down]³

Viewers may recognize these lines as a rewriting of the Beatitudes from the gospel of St. Matthew. In the Biblical account, Jesus instructs his disciples in the core tenets of a radically new faith in the Sermon on the Mount, blessing the poor and declaring that the meek, not the powerful, shall inherit the earth.⁴ In Vallejo's poem, "Traspié entre dos estrellas" [Stumble between two stars, rendered in Swedish as "Snubblande mellan två stjärnor"],⁵ from which Andersson appropriates these lines, the poet replaces Christ's radical and divine declaration that the lowliest in society are the most blessed, with a humanist, and equally radical, declaration that we should love those whom society deems the least noteworthy on the basis of our common humanity. This poem, and the humanist ethos it embodies, so informs Andersson's film that the director dedicates it to Vallejo. The last line in the above citation, "Älskade vare de som sätter sig,"

appears as white text against a black frame, along with “César Vallejo (1892-1938) In Memoriam,” immediately prior to the film’s opening credits.

In this film, Andersson, with the help of Vallejo, creates a cinematic *tableau vivant* of ordinary people in mundane moments, a method Andersson has dubbed “trivialism.” All of the film’s 46 individual scenes feature a fixed camera, a wide-angle lens, carefully crafted studio sets that give the perception of spatial depth, meticulous *mise-en-scène*, and single, uncut shots. In this hospital scene, the shot is nearly four minutes long. It is painstakingly composed, from the neutral colours (pale yellow walls and floor, white painted doors and window frames) to the bright lighting (from windows on the right and round ceiling lamps above that reflect on the floor below), to the receding layers of windows and doors down the long corridor, where orderlies struggle with a belligerent patient deep in the background. Tomas sits quietly, arms folded, in the foreground, his back to the camera and turned slightly in a left profile. His silence seems to engulf the raised voices farther down the corridor. The total effect is that of a highly sanitary, brightly lit prison, and even though Tomas is sitting out in the hall, his alienation is so palpable that he might as well be in solitary confinement. As the scene unfolds, people walk in and out, but the focal point remains Tomas, even though he looks at no one, he says nothing, and his only movement is the slow heaving of his left side against his hand, showing that he is breathing. All Tomas does, for the duration of the scene, is sit, as his brother recites poetry to him. Together, they enact Vallejo’s words, “Beloved are they who sit down.”

Sånger från andra våningen was Andersson’s first feature film in 25 years when it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000. It exemplifies the maturation of a distinctive filmmaking style Andersson developed in two and half decades of making shorts and advertising films and testifies to his decades-long engagement with Vallejo’s poetry, which Andersson first encountered in a bilingual Spanish-Swedish anthology in 1974. (Andersson had actually begun a film, inspired by Vallejo’s poem, that he tentatively titled *Välsignad vare han som sätter sig* [Blessed is he who sits down], but set it aside, uncompleted, in 1983.)⁶ When Andersson was a young director fresh out of film school, his feature debut, *En Kärlekshistoria* [A Swedish Love Story] (1969), won four awards at the Berlin International Film Festival and snared Sweden’s top film prize, establishing Andersson as an up-and-coming star and heir apparent to Ingmar Bergman. But Andersson’s next film, *Giliap* (1975), was a critical and box-office flop, and Andersson—whose disgruntlement with film production conditions in Sweden has become infamous in the industry—dropped out of making feature films to focus on projects over which he could exercise more creative control. These have included advertising films, two books (one of which can best be described as a film poetics), and artistic shorts, which continued to win awards.⁷ In this essay, I argue that the spectre of César Vallejo has so informed the development of Andersson’s distinctive vision

and style as a filmmaker that an investigation of the interart correspondences between this unlikely pairing of avantgardists is overdue.

I will demonstrate that Andersson's critiques of his filmmaking contemporaries, including Denmark's Dogma 95 directors, parallel Vallejo's similarly pointed critiques, in 1930s Paris, of the so-called "revolutionary" agenda of French Surrealists. In addition, the Swedish translations of Vallejo's later poetry, published posthumously in 1939 under the titles *Poemas Humanos* [*Human poems*; in Swedish, *Mänskliga dikter*], and *España, Aparta de mí este cáliz* [*Spain, take this cup from me*; in Swedish, *Spanien, gånge denna kalcken från mig*], engender the pathos and the political critiques that also pervade Andersson's film without becoming sentimental or didactic. The formal correspondences between Vallejo's modernist poetry and Andersson's "trivialist" cinema are likewise striking, in particular how each blurs the lines between written (literary), spoken (colloquial, everyday) and Scriptural (monumental) language, and favours complex images that nonetheless are rooted in universal and quotidian life situations. Andersson and Vallejo, both fans of filmmaker Charlie Chaplin, favour sight gags that highlight the absurd in banal interactions. (Vallejo, who used the visual capacities of the modern lyric to produce such sight gags in his poetry, also authored critical essays on Chaplin and film and was preparing a play on Chaplin when he died.⁸) Finally, belying each artist's relatively marginalized position within his respective medium is a tendency to be self-referential. For example, in one of Vallejo's short prose poems, published in Swedish as "Teori om ryktbarheten" [Theory of Fame] in *Ord och Bild* in 1991, Vallejo's host in a Bucharest bar explains this theory to him:

—En människas liv, sade han på väg utför trappan, uppenbarar sig i sin helhet i en enda av hennes handlingar. En människas namn uppenbarar sig på samma sätt bara i en enda av hennes namnteckningar. Vet man denna enda handling vet man sanningen om hennes liv. Känner man denna enda namnteckning vet man hennes verkliga namn.

[A person's life, he said on his way out the door, is revealed in its entirety in a single one of her actions. A person's name reveals itself the same way in a single one of her signatures. If you know the one action, you know the truth about her life. If you know the one signature, you know her real name.]⁹

The prose poem concludes: "Jag fyllde mellangärdet med luft, slog ned blicken och förblev Vallejo inför Muchay" [I filled my midriff with air, looked down and remained Vallejo before Muchay].¹⁰ Similarly, Andersson—in a Felliniesque move—names his film *Sånger från andra våningen*, not after any of the multi-story urban dwellings within the film itself, but after Andersson's second-floor office at Studio 24.¹¹ This film consists entirely of Andersson's own cinematic

ruminations—his “songs”—on the state of mankind at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Andersson declared in his 1995 film poetics *Vår tids rädsla för allvar* [Our Age's Fear of Gravity] that Vallejo was “in my eyes one of the world's absolutely foremost poets,”¹² and in a 2000 interview he described “Snubblande mellan två stjärnor” as “one of the strongest and most beautiful things I'd read.”¹³ However, it is hardly surprising that while *Sånger från andra våningen* has received many critical accolades, including the Special Jury Prize at Cannes 2000 (shared with Samira Makhmalbaf's *Takhte Siah*), there has been little discussion of the poet to whom Andersson dedicates his film, or of the poem whose lines recur in many scenes, with “älskade vare de som sätter sig” serving as a central leitmotif. Unlike other recent films that have featured the works of celebrated modern poets, the characters within Andersson's film do not identify Vallejo as the author of the words they speak (nor do they identify any of the other philosophical, literary, and Biblical sources imbedded in the film's dialogue).¹⁴ In addition, there are no cues within the film to indicate that characters are going from speaking “real” lines to reciting poetry, philosophy, or Bible verses, blurring the boundaries between literary, religious, and everyday speech—a technique also highly characteristic of Vallejo's poetry. And Vallejo, whose work is revered among scholars of Latin American poetry, receives little attention outside this circle. His enigmatic poetry, which is difficult to translate, his exile from Peru for the last fifteen years of his life, and his poor health and early death all conspired to make him a neglected figure compared to his counterpart from Chile, Pablo Neruda, whom the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1971. The fact that some of Vallejo's poetry has been translated into Swedish speaks more to Sweden's—and in particular, poet and critic Artur Lundkvist's—hunger for poetry from abroad, than to Vallejo's status as a world poet.¹⁵

But perhaps most importantly, twenty-first century audiences are conditioned to apprehend films, particularly those in the “high art” category such as Andersson's, as living *images* first and foremost. Accordingly, it would seem fitting to interpret Andersson's true homage to Vallejo not in the act of including his translated poetry in the film's dialogue, but rather in allowing it to inspire his own form of cinematic poetry. The film's living images, characterized by spatial depth and temporal momentousness, are what critics have extolled and what viewers remember. In fact, the way in which Andersson appropriates Vallejo's poem, sampled out of order and spoken in a subdued tone against a sterile backdrop, empties Vallejo's literary language of its poetic power and places it in the service of Andersson's image. One could argue, then, that the translated lines from Vallejo's poem become alive in this film when they lose their literariness and become cinematic, suggesting that a more tenable translation of Vallejo's notoriously difficult poetry is not from Spanish to Swedish, but rather from one form of poetry to another.¹⁶ Andersson samples Vallejo's poetry not only to

highlight certain challenges facing contemporary cinema as an artistic and social medium, but also to illustrate how humanity's shared, and often violent, histories live on in our contemporary moments. As Leslie Bary has argued, Vallejo's poetry seeks to "restore the social content of words" by demonstrating first that "the status of language (as well as that of 'meaning and truth') is always already in question" (1148). Thus while Vallejo's articulations of the various people who are "beloved" seem nonsensical in contrast to a religious or poetic ideal, their proliferation in the poem both enacts their ordinariness and declares it central to human existence. Andersson takes this process a step further, striving to "restore the social content of words" by rendering them as complex, unforgettable images.

The interart correspondences between Vallejo's poetry and Andersson's cinema skirt the boundaries of language, culture, and linear history. In creating *Songs from the Second Floor*, which examines how human beings in Western society fumble toward meaning in a fragmented and nonsensical world, Andersson seeks guidance from a Peruvian intellectual who lived in exile in Paris, and who was intimately familiar with European society at one of its darkest hours, namely the rise of fascism, Nazism, and ethnic cleansing in the 1920s and 1930s. All of Andersson's films since the 1980s have referenced these historical events. But Vallejo, descended from indigenous Indians on his mother's side, was also intimately familiar with the brutal legacy of a much earlier period of European fascism and ethnic cleansing which had occurred in Latin America.¹⁷ As José Jorge Klor de Alva has argued convincingly in his influential essay "Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages," Europe's colonization of Latin America is distinct from colonial projects elsewhere, such as in India and in Africa, in that it resulted in the widespread deaths of indigenous peoples and the marginalization of their languages and cultural practices throughout the continent by the late sixteenth century. By the late eighteenth century, those indigenous peoples who remained had been absorbed into the oppressive socio-economic structures that local elites (*criollos*) put in place to fuel the development of the continent's industrializing cores. By the nineteenth century, when Latin American nations made their bids for independence, according to Klor de Alva they did so on the basis of an ideology of *mestizaje*, a "powerful nation-building myth that has helped to link dark to light-skinned mestizos and Euro-Americans in frequent opposition to both foreigners and the indigenous 'others' in their midst" (9). Nelson Manrique has similarly described how descendants of Peru's colonizing class reinstated certain socio-political structures that recodified indigenous Indians' outsider position following Peru's independence from Spain in 1821.¹⁸ In addition, the legal, religious, and economic structures Peru had inherited from Spain, and codified in the Spanish language, also remained in place. Finally, the Romantic art and philosophy that inspired Vallejo's generation of poets and intellectuals at Peruvian universities were, for the most part, European imports,

and taught in Spanish. Thus for Vallejo, the critical and poetic language of liberation was inextricably linked with the language of violence and domination.

Stephen Hart has used the term “postcolonial locus” to describe an in-between space from which Vallejo’s poetry, written in a language inherited from colonizers, nonetheless implicates and attacks language as a perpetuator of colonialism’s epistemological paradigms, exposing a wrenching split in the poetic and political psyche. As Hart writes, “One of the premises of colonialism is the separation of one being from another (whether in the form of one people from another, one language from another, the Self from the Other, the soul from the body)” (19). Such a split is rendered visually in several lines of Vallejo’s poem which do not appear in Andersson’s film:

¡Hay gentes tan desgraciadas, que ni siquiera tienen cuerpo . . . parecen salir del aire, sumar suspiros mentalmente, oír claros azotes en sus paladares!¹⁹

[There are people so wretched, they don’t even have a body . . . they seem to come out of the air, to add up sighs mentally, to hear bright smacks on their palates!] (Vallejo 1980 141)

This idea of Vallejo as a tragic figure with a divided subjectivity also features in Swedish poet and critic Artur Lundkvist’s introduction of Vallejo’s work for a Swedish audience in 1974 and again in 1981.²⁰ Contrary to Hart’s claim, however, as Klor de Alva has shown, there is no “post” in the locus from which Vallejo writes. And as Bary has argued, this locus, or space of mediation, shifts constantly throughout the body of Vallejo’s poetry. Vallejo was 31 when he left Peru for Paris, and his horror at the brutality of very real human conditions are as palpable in his earlier poetry, written in Peru, as in the later poetry he wrote in Europe.

Andersson is similarly concerned with dynamics of domination, separation, and alienation in modern society. He locates these dynamics in society’s collective, post-industrial blind faith in “the market,” that nebulous moniker for global capitalist systems. At one point in *Sånger från andra våningen*, for example, a procession of flagellants dressed in business suits and carrying briefcases advance down the street behind the display windows of Kalle’s furniture store. Andersson’s inspiration for this scene was a news report about South Koreans who rushed out onto the street and flagellated themselves in response to the Asian stock market crash of the 1990s. Clearly Andersson believes that Europeans too behave like this, replacing political and conscious action by a superstitious and passive wailing that appeals to “the market”—the new God—for relief. Andersson’s inspiration from Vallejo, then, points to the notion that certain mechanisms of domination function similarly on a global level. The latter part of this paper will focus on Vallejo’s and Andersson’s artistic and intellectual correspondences, particularly where they demonstrate how human beings’ perpetual failures in communication

ironically open up shared spaces of human suffering, a mode of experience that makes empathy possible. Individual suffering results in alienation, but shared suffering can result in a kind of transcendence that involves not an escape from material realities, but rather a convergence of the phenomenological conditions, such as a new intentionality and an emerging social consciousness, needed for transforming those realities.²¹

But first, this paper is a starting point for filling a critical void in Nordic film studies scholarship, which has anointed *Dogma 95* the most significant development in Nordic cinema since Ingmar Bergman and ignored Andersson's work entirely.²² In this regard as well, Andersson's position in recent Nordic film history parallels that of Vallejo in the "world poetry" Modernist canon; the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda—whose poetry is widely considered less enigmatic and more translatable than Vallejo's—has been anointed the most important Latin American voice within this canon, even while Vallejo's work commands a fervently devoted following among specialists. While it would be irresponsible to deny *Dogma 95*'s global (as well as regional and national) impact, it is remarkable how little critical treatment there has been to date of Andersson's work, which provides a cinematic alternative that has developed parallel to—and productively critiques—*Dogma*'s ideological and aesthetic aims. Andersson calls his distinctive form of filmmaking "trivialism" and sees it as a natural successor to neo-realism and the cinema of the absurd while drawing richly from both. Andersson claims that the most pressing social and existential questions of our age come into focus in the most trivial, banal, and often absurd, moments of everyday life (once again echoing Vallejo's artistic vision of the momentousness of the everyday). This view diametrically opposes the *Dogma 95* movement's Vow of Chastity, a manifesto that a group of Danish filmmakers published in 1995, which draws on the naturalist storytelling techniques of dramatists Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg to render filmed moments as crucibles of intense human experience in naked, "realistic" settings.²³ For more than a decade, the revival of Nordic cinema on a global scale has become synonymous with *Dogma 95*, whose most celebrated director has been von Trier.²⁴ The *Dogma 95* manifesto mandates existing locations, natural settings and light, hand-held (and often shaky) cameras, authentic dialogue, and intense close-up shots to expose raw human emotion. The *Dogma* camera invades the intimate spaces of human psychosis, leaving nothing sacred or off limits, and the filmmaker reasserts control over the narrative primarily through editing. *Dogma 95* also instructs directors not to "sign" their films as auteured works and to reject the demands of good taste and bourgeois sensibility.

Andersson's style, on the other hand, clearly embraces the role of the auteur. The hallmarks of his work have become the fixed camera, his painstakingly crafted sets at Studio 24 in Stockholm, the slow and precise pacing of action and dialogue (which routinely requires 35 to 50 takes to achieve), his use of amateur actors in

whiteface, and his loose association of about 50 cinematic vignettes in place of an identifiable narrative. (Other Nordic filmmakers have begun to emulate certain aspects of his style, most notably Norwegian Jens Lien in *Den Brysomme Mannen* [The Bothersome Man] (2006). Even von Trier uses a carefully placed fixed camera with the new Autovision technology he employs in his latest film *Direktøren for det hele* [The Boss of It All] (2006). Andersson's debts to German Expressionism, *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, and German Magical Realism from the early twentieth century are clear, and his critiques of Dogma 95's particular form of realism echo the early expressionists' critiques of the original naturalists.²⁵ (Yet even while he critiqued von Trier and Dogma's use of shaky, hand-held cameras as gimmicky filmmaking, Andersson acknowledged in a 2000 interview that he "hadn't had time to see any of the Dogma films—only a clip from *Riket*," von Trier's made-for-television horror film, *Riget* in Danish, from 1994) (Göransson 72). "I want each individual frame in the film to be like a work of art," Andersson declared in this 2000 interview, and lists Francisco José de Goya, Honoré Daumier, and Otto Dix among his inspirations.²⁶ Because Andersson's films employ absurd scenarios and sight gags to articulate serious themes, his filmmaking has been characterized as a lighter, more humorous version of Bergman's dark existentialism.²⁷ But while Bergman, the pastor's son, anchored his existential angst in Christian conceptions of sin and guilt and painful memories of childhood, Andersson—drawing on Vallejo's poetry, Martin Buber's religious philosophy of the intimate Other, and a myriad of other literary sources—grapples with a social, rather than individual, form of guilt, one that fosters a sense of responsibility toward others.²⁸ In *Sånger från andra våningen*, personal sins and failures take a back seat to more epic themes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as ethnic cleansing and capitalist exploitation. (Andersson's anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, and anti-American sentiments are shared by his Dogma 95 counterparts, even if their methods of critique diverge drastically.)

Andersson had begun these investigations already in 1987 with his unfinished HIV/AIDS film *Någongting har hänt* [Something Has Happened], and in 1991 with his award-winning short film *Härlig är jorden* [World of Glory], and he continues them in his feature-length film *Du Levande* [You, the Living], which was screened in the *Un Certain Régard* section of Cannes 2007 and premiered in Sweden in Fall 2007.²⁹ These core problems of modernity have taken centre stage as cinema has become a dominant form of public art, which, in Andersson's view, makes cinema the logical medium in which to address them the most effectively. In fact, Andersson has stated in multiple interviews that film is "dangerous" when it neglects its humanistic mission.³⁰ While he insists on cinema's vital humanistic role, Andersson's cinema constantly references the communicative power of older art forms, from painting to poetry to still photography. Its many intertextual references, Andersson believes, construct the film's moral core, anchor its scenes in a concrete and historicized human existence, and infuse the viewing experience

with a heightened social consciousness.³¹ In particular, the literary references, especially Vallejo's poem rewriting the Beatitudes, function here as proverbs—phrases expressing commonplace truths.³² In this film, as in life, they are the words we live by.

The complex image

In their influential 1965 essay "Word and Film," published when Andersson was training at the Swedish Film Institute in Stockholm, German film pedagogues Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, and Wilfried Reinke asserted that "the worst that could happen to film would be to be banished to its own domain." They saw in cinema a great potential for unprecedented complexity of expression, yet worried that the institutionalization of filmmaking would "merely canonize the inferior products of the status quo and make film into a specialized branch of the mass media."³³ In the 1960s, this concern, as well as television's assault on the film industry's profits, led to film reform in many of Europe's small markets, including in Sweden, resulting in new public financing for the production of films that had, "at least on paper, something important to say" (Andersson 1995b 79). Andersson's first two feature films, *En kärlekshistoria* [A Swedish Love Story] (1970) and *Giliap* (1975), were financed this way. The first film won international acclaim for its nuanced treatment of young love and the disillusionment of the 1960s generation and has taken a permanent place in film history. But *Giliap*, a dystopic film that captures the grim and purposeless life of a young hotel worker, was rejected by critics and audiences alike, although Swedish critiques have in recent years revisited with appreciation some of the film's experimental techniques (such as the fixed camera and the lethargic pace). Andersson, who has subsequently said in interviews that he felt constrained artistically by production conditions in making *Giliap*, soon began accepting offers to make short commercial films for companies ranging from the candy company Fazer, to the insurance company Trygg-Hansa, to the Swedish Social Democratic Party.³⁴ With the money he made producing advertising films, Andersson established his own production studio, Studio 24, in the upscale Östermalm neighborhood of Stockholm in 1980, a move that has granted him more creative control over his various projects (Weman). While nearly all of his so-called "art" films have received funding from government and private arts councils, he has also invested a considerable amount of his own money in his productions, particularly at the beginning stages of *Sånger från andra våningen*.³⁵ Over the years he has also developed a deeply ambivalent relationship to the Swedish film establishment, where he is admired for his talent but also resented for his perceived arrogance. In the Swedish Film Institute's journal *Chaplin* and in his book *Vår tids rädsla för allvar*, Andersson consistently has condemned the Swedish cultural establishment for failing to challenge young

directors to make complex films. Instead, he writes, it encourages a market-driven professionalism that reflects the provincial anxieties of a small national cinema in the global marketplace, which, Andersson says, results in nihilism rather than the creative vision of its new artists. “Film reform today,” Andersson wrote in 1995, “along with significant portions of the Swedish television industry, is responsible for the achievement of letting the Swedish people pay with public money for their own growing stupidity.”³⁶

Some members of the Swedish film establishment question Andersson’s moral and artistic authority in making such critiques in light of his “dropping out” of feature filmmaking for nearly a quarter century. “How can you sit and moralize about other Swedish filmmakers when at the same time you have made advertising films for so long?” was the 1998 response, at the Göteborg Film Festival, of iconic Swedish film actor Thommy Berggren, who had starred in *Giliap*, as well as in Bo Widerberg’s successful 1971 film *Joe Hill* about the Swedish immigrant who became a mythologized American labour movement agitator.³⁷ Andersson’s response to this criticism has been threefold. First, he insists that while advertising films exist to sell products, his films nonetheless fulfill the same moral imperative as so-called “art” films in demonstrating respect for the living beings who inhabit these humorous filmic sketches. Second, he claims that his artistic sensibilities become fully invested in all of his filmmaking projects, regardless of the film’s intended use. This assertion is borne out by the fact that he set his personal record of 118 retakes to perfect a single shot while making an advertising film for ketchup (Wennö). “One can do it with a certain warmth and feeling for those one is telling a story about. With a responsibility so that no one is exploited or preyed upon or so that one creates false values and examples. I create exaggerations, ironies, and jokes.”³⁸ Finally, it was ironically in making advertising films that Andersson matured as an artist, developing a distinctive method of using a fixed camera and a carefully composed, moving image to tell a story. “With advertising films, Roy found a clear auteur-style,” Gunnar Bergdahl, director of the Göteborg Film Festival, told journalist Mats Weman in 1998. “If anything else is for sale in that industry, it is personal expression. Today he makes films that lack a dramaturgical narrative. He does long takes and works as if he were making a photo exhibit. He joins together the scenes—editing, which you know is supposed to be so sensitive and so important [to filmmaking], he avoids almost entirely” (Weman 26). Ingmar Bergman even weighed in on Andersson’s films, judging them the best in the world. (The fact that many of Andersson’s memorable advertising films have found a devoted audience on YouTube.com is further evidence that his auteur-status is neither limited to nor differentiated from his feature filmmaking in certain publics.)

What has made Andersson’s advertising films both popular and successful is his ability to forge empathy between the viewer and the ordinary and pathetic human beings on the screen in front of them. In his most famous ad film for the

political party Socialdemokraterna in 1985, titled *Varför ska vi bry oss om varandra* [Why should we care about each other], Andersson links together six scenes of mundane human struggle—from factory work to falling down the stairs in the subway—in which no one steps in to help. Foreshadowing a technique he later would use in feature films, Andersson paints all of the actors' faces with white makeup to downplay their differences and connect them visually as part of one human mass. As Dahlén, Forsman and Viklund have pointed out, “the stylized exaggerations made it possible to exemplify concretely—and accentuate—the consequences that would result from the Moderates' and the business sector's propaganda for 'market-based solutions' and individualism.”³⁹ What makes such vignettes effective, in Andersson's view, is timing—vital to the success of dramatic irony—and the authenticity of the actors' body language. This is why Andersson, in contrast to his contemporaries, prefers to “collect” amateur actors he finds in public places rather than hire trained actors. “I simply collect characters in an archive and wait for the right opportunity,” Andersson said in a 2000 interview. “The body language is often at least as important as the lines of dialogue and the pauses, more important than the words ... in order for it to be interesting it must be a character who does not guard or protect herself, something a professional actor can do.”⁴⁰ (Most famously, Andersson found *Sånger från andra våningen's* leading character, Kalle, played by Lars Nordh, while shopping at IKEA.) Kalle's character is an archetype, a postmodern everyman, and despite his leading role he does not appear until 14 minutes into the film. And as Camilla Roos has pointed out, another of Andersson's signature techniques is having his actors occasionally look directly into the camera. “The boundary between film and reality can be erased ... we in the audience are participating in what we observe,” Roos writes.⁴¹ The film's loosely woven “story,” then, does not function to tell us about the characters on screen, but serves as a vehicle for the director to have an intimate conversation with the viewing public about what it is that prevents human beings from living their lives to the fullest in the modern world.

At the heart of Andersson's auteur style is the complex image. Bergdahl's comparison of Andersson's filmmaking to preparing a photo exhibit addresses an anxiety intellectuals long have harboured about film as a social artistic medium, namely that it discourages critical contemplation by directing the spectator's viewing through camera movement and film editing.⁴² Georges Duhamel famously wrote in 1930, “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.”⁴³ Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in 1935: “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.”⁴⁴ And as recently as 1992, film scholar Vivian Sobchack noted a tendency among contemporary film theorists to take as a given film's diabolical nature, which demands the critical

interventions of a trained eye to recognize and resist the ideological paradigms constructed in the filmic narrative. In *Sånger från andra våningen*, Andersson diffuses somewhat this intellectual apprehension toward the alleged tyranny of the film narrative by constructing a series of 46 single, anchored images that strive simultaneously for the narrative complexity of a Brueghel painting and the visual/aesthetic simplicity of postwar interiors.⁴⁵ In so doing, he unnerves the spectator whose eye has been trained, through regular film viewing, to vary her point of view and absorb temporal edits without thinking about it. Such conventions (a moving camera and some use of montage) are typically what propel the film narrative forward.

But in *Sånger från andra våningen*, surprises occur within a single, prolonged shot, rather than through a shifting series of frames. This means that the surprising moments that advance the narrative occur before our eyes, as the camera rolls, instead of via recognizable cinematic effects, lending these moments a documentary authenticity. The uncut shots and slow pace of the action also make the viewer acutely aware that time is passing. The film is 98 minutes long, but it seems much longer, exhausting spectators who are untrained in such unconventional modes of viewing. Then Andersson unnerves us further still by using sight gags, a technique Charlie Chaplin perfected in the days of silent cinema, to shake our assumptions about what it is we are seeing. This is perhaps best illustrated in the hospital scene with which I opened this essay.

In this scene, as Stefan quietly recites Vallejo's words to his brother Tomas, "beloved be the bald man without hat / the one who catches a finger in the door" [Älskad vare den skallige utan hatt / den som klämmer ett finger i dörren], Kalle, the father, turns impatiently and interrupts Stefan: "Caught a fing—what's so remarkable about that? Everyone's done it you know! He wrote poetry until he went nuts!" [Klämmer ett fing—vad är så märkvärdigt med det? Det har väl alla gjort! Han har skrivit dikter så han har blivit snurrig!] Kalle denigrates both the poem's philosophical overtones and the poet's art, underscoring ironically that it was not his son's own poetic soul that has silenced him, but rather a brutal society that has no patience for either art or philosophy. It is also Kalle, not Tomas, who appears to be the most visibly and audibly disturbed, raising the question of which of them is crazy and who is truly sane. As Stefan turns back toward Tomas, a man wearing professional dress clothes and flanked by two orderlies hurries up the corridor behind them and stops in front of a doctor in white coat who, we suddenly realize, had been standing there quietly the entire time, just to Stefan's left, but had until this moment blended into the background of the corridor scene. Now that the man accosting him has drawn our attention to this silent figure, we notice that he wears a stethoscope and leafs through the pages of a manila folder. Just as Stefan recites to Tomas, "beloved is he who sweats from guilt" [Älskad vare den som svettas av skuld eller skam]—the hurried man asks the doctor sternly, "What kind of stupidity is this?" [Vad är det här för dumheter?]

We quickly realize, as he and the orderlies take from the silent doctor his folder, his stethoscope, and his white coat, that he was never a doctor at all, but a mental patient dressed up in the real doctor's trappings. Stefan's poetic line about guilt in the foreground is timed perfectly to coincide with the exposure of the false doctor's identity in the background. Stefan turns to look at the "real" and "false" doctors briefly, then turns back to Tomas and continues reciting, "he who pays with what he lacks" [Den som betalar med det han saknar]—just as the doctor searches for his wallet in his recovered lab coat. The doctor says accusingly to the patient, "There was a wallet here too—where is it?" [Det fanns en plånbok här också—var är den?] then finds it in his own pants pocket and hurries away. The idea that we cannot trust our authority figures to be who they seem to be, much less to exercise competence or responsibility in their craft, recurs throughout the film (most absurdly when a magician severely wounds an audience volunteer while attempting to saw him in half). Finally, as Stefan concludes his recitation, "beloved are they who sit down" [Älskade vare de som sätter sig], Kalle loses his temper completely and yells, "Sit down! What's with that? Beloved are they who sit down?! Why should one love them?! Look at your brother! *He sits where he sits!*" [Sätter sig! Vad är det med det? Älskade vare de som sätter sig?! Varför ska man älska dem?! Vad? Se på brodern! *Han sitter var han sitter!*] The two orderlies drag Kalle screaming from the corridor, again suggesting that it is Kalle, not Tomas, who is the crazy one. Kalle's parting yell from the doorway: "He sits where he sits! Who's going to love him then?" [Han sitter var han sitter! Vem är det som kommer att älska honom sedan?] The answer, evidently, is not Kalle, the film's everyman archetype whose aggressive and uncomprehending behaviour makes him unfit to help even himself, much less his sons. However, Andersson gives us cause for hope in Stefan, the archetypal figure of the next generation, whose poignant scenes with a homeless man digging through garbage engenders a rare moment of human empathy in this dystopic landscape.

Trivialism as the art of existence

Vallejo's influence on Andersson's craft, exemplified in *Sånger från andra våningen*, extends far beyond the eighteen lines of the poem that are directly quoted in the film's dialogue. Andersson has drawn much of his inspiration for the "trivialist" filmmaking style he has cultivated since the 1970s from Vallejo's poetry. In the director's commentary of the film's DVD version, Andersson defines trivialism thus:

One describes the world and our existence in their little trivial elements and in that way I hope that one also can get to the big, enticing, philosophical questions. But how life is—life is of course trivial, we must button buttons, we must zip up

zippers, and we must eat breakfast. It is exceedingly concrete and trivial, the whole of our existence. Even for those who are in positions of power. I like this very much, emphasizing this triviality, because it pushes people down to earth to that place where one actually belongs—namely, we are like animals, we are an animal.

Andersson's definition of trivialism, then, affirms the fundamental equality of all beings in a world ravaged by hierarchical divisions. Trivial moments, such as zipping up a zipper, possess no symbolic power or meaning independent of their relationship to other trivial acts.⁴⁶ But in Vallejo's poems, seemingly trivial moments possess enormous symbolic and religious content, even while they question the benevolence of God and the redemption of humankind. "Traspié entre dos estrellas," the poem featured in *Sånger från andra våningen*, laments a loss of Logos (the divine word, or reason incarnate in Jesus Christ) through the poetic trivialization of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.⁴⁷ For example, one of the "beloved" from Vallejo's Beatitudes parody, "el que lleva reloj y ha visto a Dios" [the one who wears a watch and has seen God], articulates the mortality, even the pending death, of a man whose time has run out and who soon will meet his maker. But this language also paradoxically negates the divinity of God, who can be apprehended by a person wearing a watch. The trivializing language of this poetic description paradoxically strips away the divine mystery of the God incarnate (the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, who was both human and divine) while associating God-like power with worldly time. The man's life is subject primarily not to God's authority, but to that of worldly forces standing in for God. Vallejo's poem likewise renders the Beatitudes ineffective as divine speech by trivializing the nobility and exceptionality of the saved. In this poem, people are beloved simply because they *are*; their identities ("el que no tiene cumpleaños" [the one who has no birthdays]) and their actions ("amandas las personas que se sientan" [beloved the people who sit down]) are otherwise too commonplace to matter. These tautological declarations interrogate not only the parental love of a divine God who tends to his believers' needs, but also humanity's love for the lowliest among them.

Vallejo's poem emphasizes that the Beatitudes, like most religious speech, cannot be emptied of symbolic content because they wield actual power through utterance. The poem's speaker repeatedly cries out in the poem's third stanza, and again in the final line: "¡Ay de tanto! ¡ay de tan poco! ¡ay de ellas!"⁴⁸ The exclamation *¡Ay!* can be an emotive expression of pain, but it can also be an indicative expression of religious exclamation. Furthermore, *¡Ay!* sounds identical to *¡Hay!* [there is/there are] in Spanish.⁴⁹ This line can then be read as an expression of suffering, as a ritual act, or as a ubiquitous phrase from everyday speech, or as all of these at once. What links these seemingly incongruent meanings is the collective consciousness they produce. Pain, ritual, and everyday speech are ubiquitous and fundamental to human existence and connect human

beings to one another. Andersson faithfully reproduces the sound of Vallejo's ¡Ay! in several scenes of *Sånger från andra våningen*. It emerges as an expression of pain when a volunteer for a failed magic trick howls when the magician saws into his midsection, and howls again later at home, when his wife tosses in bed and aggravates the wound. It emerges as a ritualistic expression in the subway scene when we first see Kalle, who is covered in ashes from having burned down his furniture store. As the film's score reaches a crescendo, Kalle and his fellow travelers, apparent strangers to one another, break into a common "Ah" aria, their round mouths accentuated by the camera's fixed angle from the front of the train car.

Vallejo had learned very early about the power of text, which priests and civil servants interpreted for the laymen in the provincial Peruvian mountain town of Santiago de Chuco where he was born. The town had a pyramid-like social structure, with indigenous Indians serving as day labourers, *cholos* (people of mixed Amerindian and Spanish ancestry) comprising the civil servant class and *criollo* landowners as the aristocracy. (It was this landowning class which had rebelled against the Spanish crown and brought about Peruvian independence.) As Jean Franco writes in her critical biography, when Vallejo learned to read and eventually studied Romantic poetry at the university in the provincial capital of Trujillo, his literacy "marked the beginning of consciousness and also a sense of alienation" (Franco 3). Reading European literature and philosophy provided Vallejo with a new critical language for apprehending the neocolonial structures around him, but it also alienated him from the religious and ritualistic society of his birth and from his childhood attachment to the sanctity of language. His first two poetry collections, *Los Heraldos Negros* [*The Black Heralds*] (1919) and *Trilce* (1922), express the poet's excruciating loss of the divinity of sacred language as he discovers poetic language. As poets find more and more figures of speech to articulate the divine, such articulations are rendered trivial, meaningless, and merely repetitive. As Franco explains:

The Romantics had already contributed to the instability of language by extending notions of such as "God" or "love" greatly beyond a Christian significance; and Vallejo now pushes the consequence of this over-extension to the limits of absurdity. There is hardly an act of daily life—traveling, eating, sleeping, hardly a common object—water, bread, rivers, mountains, cities, which has not been used to suggest the supernatural and the infinite ... in the absence of Logos, man is left with words, with a language which can no longer refer to the infinite.

(35)

Nicola Miller further argues, referencing Pierre Bourdieu, that "the idea that poetry is separate from politics is in itself a European one, originating with the early Romantics, who saw poetry as the highest expression of individual

consciousness in opposition to society” and declares that “as a poet, Vallejo cannot be depoliticized” (299-300). By 1920, Vallejo’s blasphemous poetry, his affiliation with Marxist intellectuals in Peru, and his social position teaching literature in Trujillo and in Lima earned him the designation of “intellectual agitator.” He was imprisoned for three months from November 1920 to late February 1921, a time he described in a later poem as “El momento más grave de la vida” [The most serious moment in life]. (Andersson reproduces this poem in Swedish in his 1992 book collection of humanist texts and images, *The Successful Freezing of Mr. Moro*, which I will discuss shortly.)⁵⁰ In 1923, Vallejo, still under threat of imprisonment, left Peru permanently for Paris and lived the remainder of his life there. Like many leftist intellectuals of the 1930s, he championed the cause of the *republicano* fighters against General Franco’s fascist *nacionales* in the Spanish Civil War. He did not live to witness Franco’s triumph, and his collection of poems about the conflict, *España, Aparta de mí este cáliz* [Spain, take this cup from me], was published the year after his death alongside *Poemas humanos*.

As his biographer observes, Vallejo dealt with this violent decade by highlighting the absurdity of such ubiquitous human suffering in his art.

The *Poemas humanos* are shot through with the sadness of the 1930s, when disasters were large and the human individual seemed of little account. Massed at fascist rallies, standing in dole queues, shipped off to concentration camps, people were dispensable parts of a powerful system. Chaplin’s little tramp, struggling to hold on to the shreds of dignity, had become the epitome of the lonely individual’s tragi-comedy in a dehumanized world.

(Franco 192)

An affinity for Chaplin is one of several intellectual correspondences between Vallejo and Andersson, who was born five years after Vallejo’s death. Another is their refusal to be closely associated with artistic or intellectual “movements” of any kind, as well as their rejection of artistic experimentation that they believe indulges in revolutionary posturing while eschewing revolutionary praxis. Andersson has kept a disinterested distance from the declarations and neonaturalistic experimentation ushered in by the Dogma 95 movement and he has advocated instead—in writings, films and guest appearances—for a revival of socially-conscious filmmaking. Vallejo wrote scornfully of Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and similar movements in his essay “Autopsy on Surrealism” in 1929: “Never has social thought been broken up into so many fleeting formulas.” Calling the European intellectuals engaged in such movements “rebels, but not revolutionaries,” Vallejo writes, “How can one speak of spiritual liberation while not having made material and social revolution, and while living in the material and moral atmosphere of bourgeois productive forces and economic relations?” (Vallejo 2002 49)

Andersson translates this anti-bourgeois critique into a current day Swedish socio-political context in an early scene in *Sånger från andra våningen*. Pelle, a mid-level manager who has left work after firing a thirty-year employee in a major corporate downsizing, now sits on the edge of his bed at home, holding a golf club and looking despondent. His lover, Robert, stands at the window looking out at the incessant traffic below (an homage to the opening scene of Fellini's film *8½*). As Robert turns toward Pelle and asks, "Pelle, what's bothering you?" the red interlinked "LO" symbol of Sweden's largest labour organization, *Landsorganisationen i Sverige*, is visible on his white tee-shirt, demonstrating that labour is quite literally in bed with management. When Robert assumes that Pelle's golf club, and not Pelle's guilt from having laid off workers, is the problem and assures him that they'll simply buy a new one, Sweden's labour movement, represented here by Robert, comes across as more intent on placating management's whims than agitating for the very real needs of workers. In a later apocalyptic scene toward the end of the film, Andersson presents the idea that such self-concerned materialism can backfire. In this later scene, Pelle and Robert are among many airport passengers trying to flee the country with all of their possessions before "the end" comes or the economy collapses (or both), but their enormous tower of baggage weighs them down as they struggle toward the check-in counter. Robert accidentally drops Pelle's golf bag, scattering the clubs across the floor. What is particularly striking about this image is the long, barely advancing front line of people struggling individually with towering carts of baggage toward the distant check-in counters. Everyone struggles equally and in utter futility. This image is clear: there is no escaping the legacy we human beings have created in this world. Andersson's scene ends with the travelers having significant floor space left to cover.

"Guilt toward existence"

In 1992, Andersson's Studio 24 contracted with the City of Stockholm to produce *Lyckad nedfrysning av Herr Moro* [The Successful Deep Freezing of Mr. Moro], a free textbook for the city's ninth graders. The book takes its title from an iconic photograph—titled in English "Mr. Moro Frozen in a Block of Ice"—of an experiment in which a man was frozen in a block of ice and freed from it alive. The book consists entirely of iconic black-and-white photographs of historical events paired with excerpts from well-known humanist texts (translated into Swedish), and it was designed to foster in Stockholm's young people a humanistic empathy toward others. The particular problem the city sought to address was the declining enrollments in schools that trained people for health care professions, warning of a pending shortage of health care workers. Local authorities hoped that exposure to humanist texts and images and a discussion

of them in the classroom would inspire more young people to choose care-giving professions. What is distinctive about the book is how it interweaves art, literature, and history, associating the textual excerpts with photographs of human beings in their environments, from the everyday to the horrible. While its purpose is to foster humanistic thinking, its method is to recuperate art and literature from an abstract and aesthetic domain and re-anchor it in human experience. This text is, in book form, a predecessor to Andersson's film *Sånger från andra våningen*.

Vallejo's prison poem "El momento más grave de mi vida", rendered in Swedish as "Den allvarligaste ögonblicket i mitt liv," is the second text featured in the book and appears opposite a dramatic photograph of a nineteen-year-old woman and a three-year-old boy falling from the window of their burning apartment in Boston. The photo captures them mid-air, while both are still alive, and the caption tells us that only the boy survived—by landing on the young woman. The poem alongside it is a dialogue among seven men who take turns recounting the most serious moments of their lives. The last man in the final couplet of the poem says, "The most serious moment of my life has not come yet," a thought illustrated by the accompanying photograph of the falling young woman who is about to die and, in that moment, save the life of a three-year-old boy (Andersson 1997 7). Both photo and poem open up a space prior to the "most serious moment" in which the living subject becomes fully conscious of his or her presence in the world and how s/he is acting in it. Into that space enters a mental image, which is the individual viewer's creative response to the actual image it has just confronted. Significantly, such a space cannot be filled adequately with descriptive language; Vallejo's poem underscores the failure of words to capture such a serious moment. Such a task, Andersson and Vallejo seem to agree, demands a complex image.

"The camera is nothing more than time and history looking," Andersson writes in *Vår tids rädsla för allvar*. In *Sånger från andra våningen*, Andersson seeks to collapse "real time" and history to illustrate that historical events continue to dwell in the present—particularly those we seek most strenuously to avoid (which fosters, and often compounds, feelings of guilt). Toward the end of the film, Kalle is stalked by two dead people: Sven, his friend who committed suicide before Kalle could repay the money he owed him, and an unnamed Russian peasant boy, who says urgently again and again in untranslated Russian, "Я не успел искупить свою вину перед ней."⁵¹ Sven explains to an uncomprehending Kalle that German soldiers had hung the boy's sister before he could apologize to her for something wrong he had done, and then hung him too, making their reconciliation impossible. The Russian boy is an anachronistic reference to an event recorded in the Second World War and re-enacted in Andersson's film, which is set in a non-descript, highly industrialized Western society at the turn of the twenty-first century. Kalle does not know the boy, does not understand what he is saying, and when Sven translates for him, rendering the Russian as "I can't find my sister,"⁵²

Kalle still appears baffled. The boy's lines are not subtitled, causing the non-Russian-speaking viewer to identify with Kalle, and it is meant to be as unclear to us as it is to Kalle what the Russian boy is doing there. Language fails to offer any meaningful explanation.

But then the film cuts to a new scene, in the film's only flashback, to show us the moments leading up to the boy's hanging in Russia. We can see the boy's mouth moving as he tries to communicate with his sister, who is already hanging dead by a rope, but we cannot hear him speaking. His mute speech underscores the futility of his efforts, since the girl is already dead. As the boy's neck gets its own noose, a German soldier in the left of the frame raises a camera and takes a picture. His body is hidden behind the body of another soldier in the foreground, making the camera seem to operate of its own volition. This mimetic gesture of visually recording events that actually happened (although not in Andersson's lifetime) implicates all spectators as witnesses, even—and especially—those of us who grew up following the Second World War. To underscore this connection, Andersson restages in this scene an actual photograph of a Russian boy and girl who were hanged by Hitler's SS in the 1930s. The actors who play the boy and girl bear an uncanny resemblance to the girl and boy in the documentary photograph, published in Gordon Williamson's book *The SS: Hitler's Instrument of Terror* in 1994.⁵³ Andersson's film not only revives this moment on the screen for a later generation, it also reestablishes the presence of the SS officer's camera recording it for posterity, underscoring that these acts were never intended to be hidden from history or memory. Before soldiers can remove the block from under the boy's feet, the scene shifts to a train station cafe where Sven and Kalle discuss the Russian boy's tragic fate. We do not, accordingly, witness the boy dying, but rather apprehend the fact and the tragedy of it. Kalle, our archetypal everyman, is now presented with a twin dilemma; it is not only his personal history of indebtedness to a dead friend that continues to haunt him, it is also the history of the stranger, whose archetype is the Russian boy. Because the Russian boy cannot make up his own debt to his sister, since they are both dead, he seeks help from Kalle.

This stranger's history dogs Kalle even more persistently than that of his dead friend, following him home on the subway. Kalle, clearly uncomfortable that the Russian boy is still there, turns and says, "You'll have to forgive me, but I cannot help you because I cannot understand what you are saying." The boy, undeterred, continues to haunt him. This tragic stranger represents Kalle's, and mankind's, existential guilt for the horrors that humanity has inflicted upon itself. Andersson has described this "skuld mot existensen" [guilt in the face of existence] as an awareness of the interconnectedness of all human suffering, saying that he feels as guilty about Native American genocide as he does for Sweden's friendliness with Nazi Germany during World War II.⁵⁴ Interestingly enough, Andersson does not discuss, nor feature in his films, Sweden's own colonial history, and in

particular its involvement in the human trafficking of enslaved Africans in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Gustavia, the main city of the Caribbean island St. Barthelemy, was named after the Swedish king, and under Swedish rule, it served as a free trade port and hosted the largest slave auctions in the Caribbean. (The island was returned to France in 1878.)⁵⁵ This chapter in Sweden's history has failed to make it into most Swedish history textbooks, not to mention the collective memory of Swedes, and its absence from Andersson's film ironically exemplifies his point.

In the film's final moments, Kalle has just thrown onto a junk heap the latest product he failed to sell "with an extra zero at the end" (i.e. at a substantial profit)—a large, wooden, wall-hanging crucifix. He turns toward the open field beyond the junkyard and sees the Russian boy, Sven, and a young girl who was sacrificed by society's elders walking toward him. Kalle picks up a rusty gasoline can from the junk heap and hurls it at them in frustration, wailing that his life is hard enough without them tormenting him. As it hits the ground, hundreds of other people leap up from the ground and scatter like field-mice, then stop, turn, and join the other three in walking slowly toward Kalle, who now faces a human mass rather than three individuals. The sudden appearance of the many others evokes the mass unmarked graves of wars and genocide (and this postmodern wasteland does resemble the vacant lot that is the site of genocidal murder in Andersson's award-winning short film from 1991, *Härlig är jorden* [*World of Glory*]). Kalle's attempt to chase away the Russian boy, Sven, and the sacrificed girl was what brought them out of the ground en masse, underscoring the futility of such an effort. More importantly, this final scene strongly suggests that when we deny that our existence is strongly connected to others', past and present, we compound not only our guilt, but also human suffering. Andersson's challenge thus echoes Vallejo's: Can we cast aside the neocolonial god of "the market," which sows alienation, separation, and domination, and search for meaning instead in affirming our common humanity? As Kalle faces an advancing field, the screen fades to black, leaving us to ponder this vital question.



Genocide victims are loaded into the back of a truck in Andersson's award-winning short film *Härlig är Jorden* [World of Glory] (1991). Photo courtesy of Studio24.



Religious leaders, schoolteachers, learned men, and the masses watch as a young girl's parents lead her to the edge of a cliff and push her off in a scene titled "The Sacrifice" in *Sånger från andra våningen* [Songs from the Second Floor] (2000) Photo courtesy of Studio 24.

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NOTES

1. The lines from the Spanish original are as follows, cited here in the cut-and-pasted order in which Andersson cites them in Swedish in the film text and not in the order of the original poem (which has 10 stanzas):

*amando el desconocido y su señora,
el prójimo con mangas, cuello y ojos!
el que duerme de espaldas,
el que lleva zapato roto bajo la lluvia,
el calvo sin sombrero,
el que se coge un dedo en una puerta,
el que suda de pena o de vergüenza,
el que paga con lo que le falta,
amandas las personas que se sientan,*
2. I have transcribed this Swedish translation of certain lines of the Spanish poem directly from the film's dialogue. Andersson states in the director's commentary of the film's DVD version that he first read the poem in Swedish in a bilingual Swedish/Spanish anthology of Vallejo's work published by a Stockholm book club in 1975, *Mänskliga dikter*, and thought "it was totally fantastic that someone had written a poem about how fantastic it was to sit down" (translation mine). The well-known Swedish poet and critic Artur Lundkvist wrote the introduction for the anthology that Andersson mentions in the DVD commentary (the anthology actually appeared in 1974). However, "Snubblande mellan två stjärnor" does not appear in that anthology, but rather in a later, expanded bilingual anthology of Vallejo's work titled *César Vallejo: Uppfylld av världen* (1981), also featuring Peter Landelius' translations from Spanish and Lundkvist's introduction. In the film, the lines are not cited in the order they appear in the poem but rather plucked from various stanzas. The film's citations also contain minor variations on the authoritative Swedish translation published in 1981 (for example, "och nästan" [and our neighbour] rather than "vår nästa" [our neighbour], that further renders the poem's religious and poetic speech into Swedish colloquial speech. In Swedish, the definite form of a noun, such as *nästan*, can indicate a possessive relation to the person speaking.
3. This English translation and all subsequent translations from Swedish are my own, although I have consulted Clayton Eshleman's and José Rubia Barcia's Spanish-to-English translation from their award-winning bilingual anthology *César Vallejo: The Complete*

Posthumous Poetry (1978). The dates on which Vallejo originally wrote the poems that were published posthumously, including this poem, have been the subject of considerable debate among scholars. Referencing a date that appears on the unpublished manuscript, Eshleman and Barcia claim the poem was completed on October 11, 1937, in Paris, following his last visit to Spain and the front of the Spanish Civil War. It was first published in a posthumous collection titled *Poemas humanos*, edited by Vallejo's wife, Georgette, in 1939, the year after Vallejo's death.

4. The Sermon on the Mount, known as *Bergpredikan* in Swedish, is found in Chapter 5 of the Gospel of St. Matthew.
5. As Marilyn Miller has pointed out, *traspíe* not only means "stumble" but also refers to a double-time movement in tango, suggesting that the speaker is moving accidentally and awkwardly as well as deliberately and gracefully. Interestingly, this idea has a parallel in the musical score of Andersson's film, an unwieldy waltz marked *largo* that occasionally soars into a lyrical crescendo, composed by ABBA founder Benny Andersson (no relation to Roy). The Swedish title of the poem is "Snubblande mellan två stjärnor," and the Swedish word *snubbla* [stumble, trip] cannot be anything but awkward and spontaneous.
6. Göransson 109 and Grönqvist 18.
7. In addition to his feature film awards, Andersson has won a Prix Italia for his unfinished AIDS film, *Någonting har hänt* (1987), first prize for his short film *Härlig är jorden* (1991) at the Odense International Film Festival, and 14 Lions from the Cannes Film Festival for advertising films.
8. Franco 278-79. The play was tentatively called "Charlot contra Chaplin." For analyses of Vallejo's film criticism see Duffey and Rocío Oviedo.
9. In Spanish: —*La vida de un hombre ... está revelada toda entera en uno solo de sus actos. El nombre de un hombre está también revelado en una sola de sus firmas. Saber ese acto representativo es saber su vida verdadera. Saber esa firma representativa es saber su nombre verdadero.* César Vallejo, *Obras Completas*, 320.
10. In Spanish: *Bajé los ojos, dando viento a mis órganos medianos y me quedé Vallejo ante Muchay.* Ibid.
11. Italian director Federico Fellini's Oscar-winning film *8½* (1963) is a semi-autobiographical account of Fellini's own filmmaking process, interwoven with episodes of his own personal history. Andersson has acknowledged that the traffic jam that reappears as a motif in *Sånger från andra våningen* is a direct reference to the opening scene of Fellini's film.
12. "I mina ögon en av världens absolut främsta poeter." Andersson, *Vår tids rädsla för allvar*, 111. Subsequent references to this work will be cited simply as VT.
13. "Det var något av det starkaste och vackraste jag läst." Grönqvist 18.
14. In contrast, the popular British film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), which featured actor John Hannah reciting W.H. Auden's poem "Funeral Blues," sparked a renewed interest in Auden's poetry among filmgoers.
15. Lundkvist made his breakthrough as a poet in 1929 as one of *Fem unga*—five young ones—who collaborated in an essay collection with this title to publish the work of a

- new generation of modern poets. In his later years, Lundkvist was active in translating and introducing the work of modern foreign poets to Swedish readers. Other Spanish-language poets he translated include Neruda and Federico García Lorca.
16. I use “poetry” loosely here to allow for a “film poetry” that parallels the lyricism of literary poetry in three-dimensional form, particularly through the construction of startling images, the use of a deliberate tempo with variations, and a first-person “I” experiential subject (in cinema’s case, the “I-camera”).
 17. I am drawing from Aimé Césaire’s extended definition of fascism in *Discourse on Colonialism* to include multiple genocides motivated by European fascist ideologies.
 18. As cited in Gallagher, 89.
 19. When I discuss Vallejo’s poetry outside of the context of Andersson’s film, I will cite it in the original Spanish and provide an English translation.
 20. Lundkvist writes in his introduction, “Han bar på sitt dubbla arv som en olycklig klyvnad, ett tragiskt tungsinne som förenade sig med en revolterande våldsamhet” [He bore his double inheritance as an unhappy splintering, a tragic melancholy that united with a revolting violence] (Vallejo 1981).
 21. The vocabulary of phenomenology I employ here is that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who emphasizes the concreteness of human subjectivity and the inseparability of the human body and the world.
 22. Most of the published scholarly work on Andersson has been limited to his debut film, *En kärlekshistoria* [A Swedish Love Story] (1970), although Dahlén, Forsman and Viklund provide a critical analysis of Andersson’s advertising and short films. The only scholarly work on Andersson’s recent films to date is an unpublished 2008 master’s thesis in film from the University of Oslo, by Jon Inge Faldalen. The absence of critical work on Andersson stands in stark contrast to an abundance of excellent critical work on Danish director Lars von Trier and other directors affiliated with the Dogma 95 movement he helped found. See for example Hjort, and Nestingen and Elkington.
 23. The Dogma 95 “Vow of Chastity” is reprinted in Hjort and McKenzie.
 24. Since the 1995 Vow of Chastity, more than 350 Dogma films have been made worldwide. The first official Dogma 95 film was *The Celebration* (1998) directed by Thomas Vinterberg. Danish filmmakers Søren Krag Jacobsen and Kristian Levring also were among the original Dogma 95 collective. Two female Danish filmmakers, Susanne Bier (*Open Hearts* [2002]; *Brothers* [2005]; and *After the Wedding* [2006]) and Lone Scherfig (*Italian for Beginners* [2000]; *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* [2002]) have more recently made critically acclaimed films in this genre, although not all of these films adhere strictly to the Vow of Chastity.
 25. In a Nordic context, see in particular Lagerkvist 1913 and 1918.
 26. “Jag vill att varenda enskild ruta i filmen ska vara som ett konstverk.” Göransson 9.
 27. Some of the films by Sweden’s most famous director, Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007), that express this existential angst most clearly include *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Persona* (1966) and *Cries and Whispers* (1973).
 28. Director’s commentary, DVD version.

29. This film was not ready in time to compete for film prizes at Cannes, so it was instead featured in the *Un Certain Régard* portion of the festival. Andersson, who took four years and 40 million Swedish crowns (\$6 million)—including much of his own money—to complete this latest film, was completing the sound editing on the project right up until leaving for the festival. See Wennö.
30. See Grönqvist 19 and Göransson 72.
31. Andersson continues this intertextuality in *Du Levande* [*You, the Living*], which builds on this quote from Goethe's *Roman Elegies* (1790): "Therefore rejoice, oh thou living one, blessed in thy love-lighted homestead / Ere the dark Lethe's sad wave wetteth thy fugitive foot." <http://www.royandersson.com>.
32. Other famous literary-philosophical phrases integrated into the film's dialogue include "Det är inte lätt att vara människa!" [It isn't easy being human!], which Kalle declares to a bartender, who agrees with him (in a modification of the oft-repeated line "Det är synd om människan!" in August Strindberg's play *Ett Drömspel* [*A Dream Play*] (1901); and multiple variations of the omniscient voice of Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 of the Bible intoning "Allt har sin tid" [Everything has its time].
33. Trans. Miriam Hansen, October, vol. 46, 179-198. As reprinted in Corrigan 244.
34. See Olsson.
35. Director's commentary, DVD version.
36. "Filmreformen står idag, i sällskap med betydande delar av statstelevisionen, för bedriften att låta svenska folket med allmänna medel betala sin egen fördöming" (Andersson 1995b 80).
37. Berggren: "Hur kan du sitta och moralisera över andra svenska filmare samtidigt som du gjort reklamfilm så länge" (Weman 26).
38. "Man får göra det med en viss värme och känsla för de man berättar om. Med ett ansvar så att ingen blir exploaterad eller utsatt eller så att man skapar falska värden och förebilder. Jag skapar överdrifter, ironier, och skämt" (Weman 26).
39. "De stiliserade överdrifterna gjorde det möjligt att konkret exemplifiera—och accentuera—vilka konsekvenser som moderaternas och näringslivets propaganda för 'marknadslösningar' och individualism skulle kunna få" (Dahlén, Forsman and Viklund 42).
40. "Jag samlar helt enkelt på karaktärer i ett arkiv och väntar på rätt tillfälle. Kroppspråket är många gånger minst lika viktigt som replikerna och pauserna viktigare än orden . . . För att det skall bli intressant måste det vara en karaktär som inte garderar sig eller skyddar sig, något som en professionell skådespelare kan göra" (Grönqvist 19).
41. "Gränsen mellan film och verklighet kan suddas ut . . . vi i publiken är delaktiga i det vi betraktar" (Roos 11).
42. Andersson and his longtime cinematic collaborator Kalle Boman also have produced an art exhibit that debuted in Sweden in fall 2007 titled *Fransson skottar snö* [Fransson shovels snow]. It explores Sweden's complicity in the Holocaust of the Second World War.
43. As cited in Corrigan, 128.

44. As cited in Corrigan, 128.
45. The Flemish painter Pieter Brueghel's paintings are specifically mentioned during the director's commentary portion of the DVD, and Andersson stresses the simplicity and clarity he requires of his images. An interesting note: Vallejo's poem "Traspié entre dos estrellas" contains 46 lines (a number that parallels Andersson's 46 vignettes), although only 18 of the poem's lines are quoted directly, three of them more than once.
46. Andersson's use of "trivialism" as an artistic construct has a predecessor in the philosophical tradition, where "trivialism" is the conviction that all truths, even contradictory ones, are true. See Priest.
47. See Franco 35. This poem appears under the subtitle "Sermón de la Barbarie" [Sermon on Barbarism] in his anthology of posthumously published poems.
48. While Eshleman and Barcia prefer to render Vallejo's existential cry "¡Ay!" as "Pity," I believe this diffuses the jarring aural use of the original word too much.
49. Thank you to Marilyn Miller for pointing out that ¡Ay! is far more than an expression of pain.
50. This poem appears in Swedish translation in both the 1974 and 1981 bilingual anthologies.
51. Thank you to Josh Overcast for his assistance with the untranslated Russian dialogue in this film.
52. Actually the Russian could be translated "I couldn't make up for what I did to her." Thank you to Josh Overcast and Tom Dolack for their assistance with the untranslated Russian dialogue in this film.
53. Williamson, 224-25. Original in the Robert Hunt Picture Library. In VT, Andersson discusses similar images of war hangings that he finds compelling: Jacques Callot's "Les Grandes Misères de la Guerre" and Goya's "Los desastros de la guerra." 17-21.
54. Director's commentary, DVD release.
55. See Kent. Harrison's 2007 *Slaveri: 1500-1800* was the subject of some public debate in Sweden upon its release precisely because it does include material on Sweden's role.

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