

About Endlessness, Andersson's Dry Humour



Roy Andersson with His Actors

This time Roy Andersson, the mainstream director of Swedish cinema, has presented his fresh dry humour in a 76 minute film *About Endlessness*. Whether by accident or design, it is most characteristically ding dong of Swedish director to title his sixth fiction feature *About Endlessness*. The moment we have settled into its metonymic cosmic view of human existence in all its infinite, cyclical tragicomedy than the credits are already rolling. Here Andersson strives to view our societal foibles as simple, consistent and doomed to eternal repetition, what seems a vast topic ending up with rather a succinct essay from the 76-year-old veteran.

Yet if the running time of *About Endlessness* has you wondering if he has changed his form, rest assured that his first film since 2014's Venice Golden Lion winner "A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence" finds the filmmaker up to most of his unusual tricks: It presents a series of brief vignettes, mostly disconnected but for a couple of mournfully run-

ning threads, tones of melancholy that look unusually distant but deep gaze on scenes of banal everyday ennui, dark historical consequence a disquieting conflation of the two. As ever, they are framed, art-directed and color-coded with exquisite, almost obsessive and stilted precision and minimalism — all the better to expose the untidiness of human nature in the foreground. The film reeks with dry humour and makes it look one of mysterious wonder! If we've been here before, the immaculate, somehow funky execution of *About Endlessness* ensures this is not a complaint but a cause for logical extension!

A woman and a man together in an embrace are not so much floating in the clouds as stuck on them, as we close in on the arrangement. This is the opening image in *About Endlessness*, obviously borrowed from the acutely kitsch paintings of Marc Chagall – but don't let that put you off. Later we see the couple again floating above a war-devastated city which, I would guess, is meant to be Dresden.

This Roy Andersson film is not so interested in questions of taste, though it remains as stylish as ever.

Interestingly, the next of the film's – seemingly typically Andersson-esque – sketches shifts to a dumpy middle-aged couple nestling on a bench with their back to us. They are looking out over the city in a daze. She is behind the man. After a few streaks of silence, she says: "It's September already." As a joke, it is perhaps a better one seen on 3 September at the Venice Film Festival than it might be later elsewhere.

Yet, in intriguing and poignant ways, *About Endlessness* is deliberately different from the trilogy films in a quaint manner. The sketches that viewers have become used to do not push for absolute absurdity here. Instead they lean on banal, murky normal flow of lives in a bizarre way. They are nothing like as funny as usual, but that liberates them from the smart concerns that Andersson's humour, skit provokes dispathy and condescension simultaneously. It is as if the director has extended the meaning of his title by deleting the dots of his visual jokes; so we are left hanging in these brief shaggy-dog situations in a tenacity.



A Scene from About Endlessness

Now if anyone who has seen any of the films from Andersson's 'Living Trilogy' – *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000), *You, the Living* (2007) and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Contemplating Existence* (2014) would naturally recognize the perceptive elements here. Sluggishly clad, gray-faced people mostly in their later years recite mordant and deadpan conversations against clean, neatly precise backdrops from near-empty atmosphere-less locations and sights that evoke Scandinavian paintings, with infrequent intrusions from military-historical events and characters' bleak nightmares.

The film begins with its chic and lavish and fantastical formal coup: A dazzling establishing shot over an intricate model of Cologne lying in ruins, with an entwined pair of lovers levitating some way above the wreckage, against a downy mass of gray clouds. Where Andersson, ever painterly in his reference points, claims the influence of the new objectivity art movement, with its angular clarity, an atypical opening strophe: brushed with the whimsy of Marc Chagall, or the rampant romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich. Gradually we are drawn to our unidentified flying objects embracing in mid-air before sparkling stars spell out the title credit, humanity looks

ethereally wonderful and needless to say, the rest of *About Endlessness* is more preoccupied with humble life in the rubble and restricted reality below.

Indeed, the next scene reflects the first, and breaks the spell: From a slightly lower vantage point, atop a small hill, an older, less closely touching husband and wife gaze desolately out at the beiged city skyline. “It’s September already,” she glumly notes. Summer is over; it seems romance is dead. Things get more morose and melancholic yet breathing from there. A middle-aged Catholic priest, over multiple vignettes, battles with the realization that he’s lost his faith, seeking counsel for the first time not in God, but a half-invested shrink. Parts like one man’s crippling existential crisis matters when the other is on the clock; at another time, catching the right bus home is of far more urgent interest to the good doctor. This everyday tension between concerns both sublime and the prosaic outright ridiculous, is a constant flow in *About Endlessness*; repeatedly, The director wryly invites us to consider the uncanny, inexplicable blind spots that disrupt nominally seen ordinary life.

Elsewhere, we are taken into the past, with the same pale, jaundiced eye the director casts on the pathetic present: One sketch sees Adolf Hitler entering his cramped, dust-leaking bunker in his final days, meriting only a sluggish, futile “Sieg Heil” from his remaining colleagues; while another looks on impassively as defeated German troops march in meek, neat formation to a POW camp. This portion sounds often ridiculous and fuzzy. We see sands of momentous in history as defused and demythologized: Everyone’s an unremarkable loser of some variety in “*About Endlessness*,” and Nazis merit no special treatment. Being brought down to earth, meanwhile, is the modern-day Christ figure viewed, in one poised, remarkable shot and posture oh-so-slowly dragging a cross up an urban alley, lashed by

tormentors mercilessly. This is regarded with casual bafflement by other onlookers. In one of the few sequential connections between vignettes, the scene is revealed as a nightmare, murky though its quiet non-nightmarishness lingers: It is claimed in Andersson’s imagination, even crucifixion attains an everyday grayness.



A Scene from About Endlessness

Andersson can be ideally classified as a Nordic miserabilist, though to do so is to overlook a lot of his imagined poetry, even after its lilting intro, the film finds pockets of joy and intimacy amid more conflicted musings. One of the mannered interludes here presents a group of teenage girls spontaneously start dancing together at an otherwise sleepy roadside cafe. Not all real life appears unreal or shady in *About Endlessness* even as Andersson stages it with a sort of elegance; it shows the studio-bound artifice as his signature. So much of the film seems to take place in the sober ding dong fusion you ever saw — are invaluable allies to his mission: to ornately reconstruct the everyday life, imagined reality, and to send us back into the world a little wiser to its strangeness that is steeped in wonder-thrust.

As ever in Andersson’s films, the sets are in a bleached-out palette, while the woebegone characters have a pallor that makes them look recently exhumed – which is all the more testimony to the actors’ ability to make us believe in them as fleshed-out archetypes of hu-

manity. As for the film's metaphysical payoff – reflected in an expressly banal image of a man whose car breaks down – it may well be that the more mundane Andersson's imagery gets, the more profound it actually is!!!

The quiet audacity with which Andersson has discarded the elements of his style that people appreciate the most – the absurdity and the payoffs – is not only admirable but more effective in offering an inclusive feel to his cinema. At this moment in history, when Westerners

are feeling more powerless to affect political realities than they have for many years, *About Endlessness* feels more of its time and less more of the same than, say, *A Pigeon...* did when it was here in Venice in 2014. There's a lot of folly and heartbreak and mean-spiritedness here to share among ourselves, and yet we would still smile – looking, no doubt in vain, for lovers in the sky.

Here lies the trick of Roy Andersson, the master director of faith and make-believe world!!

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