

Filming Guilt about the Past through Anachronistic Aesthetics: *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (Roy Andersson, 2014)

In Roy Andersson's *En duva satt på en gren och funderade på tillvaron* (*A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*) (2014), happiness is often on people's minds but rarely a part of their lives.¹ This is foregrounded in the film through several scenes that play on the same tragicomic scenario: A character talks to someone on the phone and says, "Vad roligt att höra att ni har det bra" ["I'm happy to hear you're doing fine"], but every time, the character has to repeat the line – presumably because the person at the other end of the line has not heard what has just been said.² Like many other moments in *Pigeon*, this scenario uses simple conversations in everyday life to touch on existential issues – in this case, the wish to be (or appear to be) happy. By repeating the line "I'm happy to hear you're doing fine", the film hints at how attempts at being happy on other people's behalf may fall on deaf ears, not so much because people ignore each other. Rather, the impression we get is that people try to care about others but ultimately, tend to care just a little more about themselves.

Happiness and the lack thereof are one of several existentialist themes explored in *Pigeon*, a film that is explicitly framed as dealing with the experience of "being human". After the opening credits, an inter-title reads "sista delen i en trilogi om att vara människa" ["the final part in a trilogy about being human"]. While the intertitle establishes the human condition as a central theme, *Pigeon* is also about Swedish and European societies in particular, and thus has a two-fold emphasis: on a supposedly universal human experience and on a particular Swedish or European experience. In this sense, the film resembles the trilogy to which it belongs (the Living trilogy), whose first two installments are *Sånger från andra våningen* (*Songs from the Second Floor*) (2000) and *Du levande* (*You, the Living*)

¹ I henceforth refer to *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* as *Pigeon*.

² All translations of dialogue from *Pigeon* are taken from the official DVD. All other translations from Swedish or Norwegian to English are my own, and will be mentioned as such.

(2007). Still, *Pigeon* also breaks with the trilogy overall, since it seems to take a critical stance towards Swedish imperialism – a topic that, as Lindqvist notes in 2010, has been largely absent in Andersson’s films (2010, 219-20).³ In its attempt to critique Sweden’s imperial past, *Pigeon* is a noteworthy case within Swedish and Scandinavian cinema, where references to Swedish imperialism are few and far between.⁴ It is also a thought-provoking piece of filmmaking also because of the particular way it represents history – that is, by deliberately using anachronisms which mix together, and connect, the past with the present.

This article analyzes *Pigeon* in light of what memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg (2009) calls “anachronistic aesthetics”. I open my discussion by introducing the film and establishing its key narrative devices, themes, and reception. I then turn to this article’s main question: What are the pay-offs and drawbacks with using anachronisms to represent the past, including mass atrocities in the past?⁵ As I show, several scenes in *Pigeon* stand out as especially anachronistic, in the sense that they deliberately combine elements from the historical past (e.g. historical figures) with elements from the present. The film’s anachronistic scenes depict the past as if co-existing with the present and create critical connections between contemporary Sweden and imperialism, slavery and global capitalism. As such, they not only form a thought-provoking critique of Sweden but also illustrate how anachronistic aesthetics may have, as Rothberg suggests, a creative and subversive potential. On the other hand, viewers unfamiliar with Swedish history may not necessarily pick up on

³ While definitions of the term imperialism abound, I use the term “Swedish imperialism” to describe the period in which the Swedish Empire existed (often described as 1611–1721) and Charles XII reigned (1697–1718). In doing so, I build on the research of historians who have written about this time period (e.g. Per Widén [2015], who refers to “svensk imperialism”, and Kristian Gerner [2007], who uses the term “the Swedish empire”).

⁴ As visual culture and media history scholar Ylva Habel note, the topic is occasionally broached in the Swedish public sphere, but is still frequently downplayed and too quickly dismissed (2008, 28). This, she writes, makes films and TV programs that touch on Sweden’s imperial past all the more important, particularly for people who want to better understand privilege, whiteness, (post)colonialism and Swedish history (Habel 2008, 261). Especially in the last ten years, scholars have increasingly begun to discuss Scandinavia’s relationship to colonialism, postcolonialism and whiteness (see, for instance, Keskinen, Tuori, Irni & Mulinari 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012; Naum & Nordin 2013).

⁵ My definition of “mass atrocities” in this article is fairly broad. Like the editors of *The Religious in Responses to Mass Atrocity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, I use the term mass atrocities to refer to phenomena that include “the Holocaust and other genocides, (...) crimes against humanity such as slavery and apartheid,” and “large-scale, deliberate, and systematic violations of human rights” (Brudholm & Cushman 2009, 6).

the film's critical references to Sweden. As I demonstrate, paratexts associated with the film, including interviews with Andersson and film reviews, guide potential viewers in how to recognize and interpret the historical allusions in *Pigeon*. Yet, not all viewers read these paratexts, and for some, the anachronistic scenes in the film may not represent a critique of Sweden. A second challenge associated with anachronistic aesthetics can be seen near the end of the film, in a sequence that deals with guilt about the past (i.e. the idea that humans may feel guilty for historical events in the past). Generally, the concept of guilt tends to presuppose that someone has done, or failed to do, a given deed at a *specific* time and place. To compare, when *Pigeon* deals with guilt about the past, it does so in a temporally *ambiguous* sequence that blurs not only the past and the present, but also dream and reality. As a result, the film is likely to challenge common understandings of guilt. For better or for worse, this may leave viewers unsure as to the meaning of guilt, and as to whether *Pigeon* is encouraging them to critically reflect on their own relationship to injustices, past and present.

A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence

Pigeon premiered in 2014 at the 71st Venice International Film Festival, where Roy Andersson won the prestigious Golden Lion award for Best Film.⁶ The film continues narrative and stylistic tendencies associated with Andersson's earlier films. For one, the film consistently uses wide angle, deep focus shots and little to no camera movement – a characteristic visual style that is considered one of Andersson's signatures as an auteur. *Pigeon* also follows an episodic narrative structure, consisting of 36 tableaux that are only loosely connected and generally set in the same, non-descript, imaginary Swedish city. Taken together, these various tableaux construct an image of Sweden as a fairly drab and lonely place, one that sharply contrasts the image of Sweden as one of the happiest countries in the

⁶ Besides the Golden Lion in Venice, *Pigeon* also won the following awards in 2015: Best Comedy at the 28th European Film Awards, Best Set Design at the Guldbagge Awards in Sweden, and Best Picture Not Released in 2014 at the International Cinephile Society Awards.

world (see Oxfeldt, Nestingen & Simonsen 2017). Indeed, Andersson's filmmaking career has been characterized by a willingness to criticize Swedish society. Writing on Andersson's career in 2014, film scholar Daniel Brodén (2014) calls Andersson "a strong contender for the title of not only the most original auteur of Swedish cinema but also the famed critic of the state of the welfare state" (99). He adds, "[f]ew, if any, filmmakers have scrutinized the development [of the welfare state in Sweden] with the same depth, consistently, and zeal as Andersson" (2014, 99).

Another characteristic of Andersson's cinema is that it tends to "[displace] realism with abstraction and the dramatic unfolding of a plot with repetitive ruminations—audiovisual leitmotifs—on existential ideas", according to film and literary scholar Ursula Lindqvist (2016b, 548-49). Existential ideas are, as mentioned earlier, evoked in scenes that depict the everyday, and the repetition of individual lines (such as "I'm happy to hear that you're doing fine") allow the film to touch on themes such as alienation, selfishness, desire, work, and the power of routines in modern life. The characters in the film are more accurately described as archetypes than as fully-fledged protagonists, as exemplified by Jonathan (Holger Andersson) and Sam (Nils Westblom), two recurring characters in the film. Two awkward, middle-aged, Swedish salesmen, Jonathan and Sam are slightly pathetic figures, underdogs who repeatedly present themselves to others as bartering in novelty items (including plastic vampire teeth, laugh bags, and rubber masks), but who do not seem able to convince anyone to buy anything. The film's overall mood is often described as tragicomic, and much of the tragicomedy arises out of interactions between Jonathan and Sam, especially their failed attempts at pitching their products to others. Each time they do their sales pitch, Sam talks like a salesman, but does so in a deadpan manner, which creates a comical discrepancy. Meanwhile, Jonathan tries to chip in ("vi vill hjälpa folk har roligt" ["we want to help people have fun"], he says), but his nasal voice is a quivering, faltering knot of doubt.

Jonathan's doubt establishes him as a sensitive character and foreshadows crucial scenes in which he raises ethical questions that other characters, including Sam, seem unwilling or unable to understand. At the hostel-like housing in which Jonathan and Sam live, Jonathan is repeatedly weighed down by philosophical concerns. Jonathan's role is especially important in one of the anachronistic, dream-like sequence in the film. In her review of the film, Jen Yamoto of *The Daily Beast* connects Jonathan and this dream-like sequence to the issue of guilt about the past: "For (...) Jonathan, who's teased constantly for being overly sensitive, [an] encroaching sense of human responsibility arrives in a dream, along with a vague feeling of guilt for sins of the past" (2015). The sequence (which I discuss later in this article) shows several white men in military, colonial uniforms forcing a group of enchained black men, women and children into a massive brass cylinder which, it turns out, is an instrument of torture (Fig. 1). Peter Bradshaw (2015) of *The Guardian* mentions the same sequence in his review, calling it "a truly horrible moment" in the film that it is made "more awful still because the bemusement and laughter that have been our obvious responses to earlier scenes are no longer appropriate".

<INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>

Fig. 1: The cylinder. © Studio 24 Foto: Studio 24

While the sequence (which I will refer to as the cylinder sequence) contrasts the film overall, it is one of multiple scenes in *Pigeon* that are anachronistic, in the sense that it brings together and merges events, phenomena, or historical figures from different time periods. *Pigeon* can thus be understood in light of Rothberg's concept of anachronistic aesthetics and what he considers "the power of anachronism" (137). For Rothberg, deliberately using anachronisms in works of literature can have a subversive function. As he notes, while anachronisms may "constitute different types of 'error' when perceived from a historicist

perspective, they can also serve as powerfully subversive and demystifying means of exposing the ideological assumptions of historicist categorization” (137). Using the writings of André Schwarz-Bart and Caryl Phillips as his examples, Rothberg shows how these two authors, by deliberately using anachronisms, are able to juxtapose the histories of the Holocaust and European colonialism and challenge “restrictive conceptions that keep the histories and aftermaths of the Holocaust and European colonialism separate from each other” (136). While Rothberg’s examples are taken from literature, I consider his larger point about anachronism – that it can be a potentially subversive narrative device – useful also for discussing films, including the anachronistic scenes in *Pigeon*.

For viewers familiar with Andersson’s films, the tendency to mix the past with the present in *Pigeon* may look bring to mind several scenes in Andersson’s earlier projects. For instance, *Härlig är jorden (World of Glory)*, a commissioned short film by Andersson from 1991, opens with a bleak scene that can be said to mix references to the Holocaust and to post-war Sweden.⁷ As Dagmar Brunow writes, *World of Glory*’s opening scene depicts a “mode of killing [that] alludes to the Holocaust” but also features costumes and objects (e.g. multi-story buildings) that would seem to belong to post-war Swedish society (2010, 85). For Brunow, *World of Glory* “condenses different layers of time into one single image” and in doing so, raises questions about our ethical relationship to the past, including the Holocaust (2010, 84-5). Generally speaking, the anachronistic scenes in Andersson’s films help visualize and foreground ethical questions that pertain to responsibility or guilt for events in the historical past. In *Songs from the Second Floor*, for instance, “Andersson seeks to collapse ‘real time’ and history to illustrate that historical events continue to dwell in the

⁷ Several reviewers compare the cylinder sequence with *World of Glory*’s opening scene. For instance, in her review of *Pigeon*, Megan Ratner (2015) of *Film Quarterly* compares the two scenes, but calls the cylinder sequence “Andersson’s boldest references to the intrusion of past atrocities on the present”. See also Pallas 2014, Anderson 2015.

present—particularly those we seek most strenuously to avoid (which fosters, and often compounds, feelings of guilt)” (Lindqvist 2010, 218).⁸

Ways of Interpreting the Anachronistic Aesthetics in *Pigeon*

While *Pigeon* has received critical acclaim within and outside of Sweden, it has also been criticized on various grounds, including its way of representing history.⁹ A negative review of the film published in the Swedish film magazine *FLM* seems to target, among other things, the anachronistic aesthetics in the film. Written by film scholar and film critic Charlotte Wiberg (2015), the review points out that Andersson’s films in general “gör (...) ständiga referenser till nittonhundratalets stora onskor och till kolonialismen” [frequently refer to the great evils of the 20th century and to colonialism]. As Wiberg notes, these references “vävs in i” [are woven into] the filmic universe in such a way that they become “abstrakta tecken” [abstract symbols] and “smälter sedan in i ett enahanda gråfruset, halvdött universum” [melt into a monotone, grey half-dead universe]. Each historical reference, Wiberg seems to imply, lose their specificity. As she suggests, Andersson’s films and their representation of history may ultimately trivialize the suffering of people in the past:

The inability to differentiate, to see the enormous spectrum of nuances between the shortcomings of modern western societies and the evil of the Third Reich, or the slave trade of colonialism, also means that victims of

⁸ As Lindqvist (2016a) notes elsewhere, *Songs from the Second Floor* evokes the theme of guilt also by featuring dialogues that deal with guilt and debt (135-142) and ghostly figures from the past that seem to “haunt” characters in the present (141). Besides *Songs from the Second Floor*, *World of Glory* and the short film *Någonting har hänt (Something Happened)* (1987) have also been interpreted as dealing with guilt about the past, especially Swedish post-war guilt following World War II. See Brunow (2010), Brodén (2014, especially 120-1 and 125), Lindqvist (2010, 218-9; 2016a; 132-142), Yang (2013, 155-98). Andersson’s concern with the Holocaust is not limited to his films. In 2005-6, he co-curated an exhibition, “Sweden & the Holocaust”, at the Living History Forum in Sweden (Brodén 2016, 196-7).

⁹ The film has been criticized for being too similar to Andersson’s earlier films (Pallas 2014; Anderson 2014), and for its representation of (and lack of) non-white characters (Brodén 2016, 210-1). For more on the reception of the film in Sweden, see Brodén 2016, 202-204.

the historical evil become tools in the director's social criticism and that their suffering is trivialized. (Wiberg 2015)

(Oförmågan att göra skillnad, att se den enorma nyansbredd som finns mellan moderna västerländska samhällens brister och tredje rikets ondska, eller kolonialismens slavhandel, gör också att offer för den historiska ondskan blir till redskap i regissörens samhällskritik och att deras lidande trivialiseras.)

Wiberg's review is a welcome addition to the debate on Andersson's films, because it raises critical questions about what is stake in representations of history but also because it challenges Andersson's role as a renowned – and generally lauded – Swedish art film director.

At the same time, her critique of *Pigeon's* representation of history may also be considered typical of a general, but somewhat restrictive, idea of collective memory. More specifically, her argument seems to rest on the idea that the histories of the Holocaust, colonialism and other mass atrocities should not be juxtaposed with one another. This conception of collective memory is, in Rothberg's words, one that sees collective memory as *competitive*. As Rothberg notes:

[M]any people assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for preeminence (2009, 3).

Against a conceptual framework that imagines collective memory as competitive memory, Rothberg convincingly argues that we may instead “consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (3). Thinking of memory as “multidirectional” involves acknowledging “the spiraling interactions that characterize the politics of memory” (11), and allows us to address, for instance, the ways in which memories of the Holocaust and colonialism have influenced (or “cross-referenced”) one another (18). Drawing on Rothberg, I choose to approach *Pigeon* and its anachronistic scenes with multidirectional memory in mind – that is, with an awareness that representations of different historical events, including different mass atrocities, need not be stringently kept apart in order to be meaningful, subversive, or important.

In *Pigeon*, the use of anachronism is most pronounced in the cylinder sequence I mentioned earlier and in two, long scenes in which King Charles XII of Sweden (1682-1718), who reigned in the 17th century, appears in a modern-day bar. Before analyzing these scenes and discussing their subversive potential, it is worth noting that *Pigeon* is, like many of Andersson’s films, generally quite temporally ambiguous. Like *Songs from the Second Floor* and *You, the Living*, *Pigeon* is often unclear in terms of when it is set. The mise-en-scène, for instance, typically connotes various stages in Swedish history. As such, *Pigeon* bring to mind the “stylized aesthetic milieus” in Andersson’s early films, which Brodén describe as “characterized by a *temporal vagueness*, reminiscent of both 1950s *Folkhemmet* and 1980s Sweden” (2014, 118, my emphasis).¹⁰ We can compare the “temporal vagueness” (Brodén 2014, 188) in Andersson’s films with what Andrew K. Nestingen refers to as “temporal mixing”. Nestingen uses the term to describe the films of Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki and how they tend to “include diverse temporal registers and objects belonging to different historical moments” (2013, 92). Temporal mixing partly explains why Kaurismäki’s films –

¹⁰ This aesthetic can be traced back to Andersson’s commercial for the Social Democratic Party in 1985, *Why Should We Care about Each Other?* (Brodén 2014, 118). For more on the background the commercial, see Brodén, 2014, 115-116.

but also those of Andersson, I would add – “seem timeless in some ways” while simultaneously appearing “tie[d] to the present” (Nesting 2013, 92).

By contrast, the scenes and sequences I refer to as “anachronistic” are moments in which characters from the historical past, including actual historical figures, appear in the diegetic present or in ambiguous, dream-like scenes.¹¹ These scenes move figures, and sometimes also events, associated with the historical past into the diegetic present. Numerous reviewers of *Pigeon* highlight such scenes and describe them as standing apart from the film overall, sometimes also calling them “anachronistic” (Lindblad 2014, Yamoto 2015, Connolly 2015).¹² Through these anachronistic scenes, *Pigeon* can be said to evoke the idea that the past is not the past but rather, an integral part of the present.¹³ As such, the film invites the viewer to consider the question: How do we feel when confronted with the fact that injustices in the past continue to shape the present?

If you choose, as Andersson does, to represent history in anachronistic ways, one of the challenges you face is whether or not your viewer is familiar with the histories to which you are referring. While this is a challenge every filmmaker who represents history must deal with, mixing together different historical periods so as to launch a social critique is, one could argue, especially difficult. After all, you rely on the viewer’s ability to recognize which historical periods, events, or figures you are mixing together. That recognition not only shapes how viewers will interpret the film’s social critique, but also whether they recognize the social critique at all. In *Pigeon*’s case, viewers familiar with Swedish history are likely to take *Pigeon* in different directions than those who know little of Sweden’s historical past.

¹¹ Notably, the scenes in question are also anatomic (if anatopism is taken to mean “spatial misplacement”). For lack of space, however, this article investigates the use of anachronism, or chronological inconsistencies, rather than incongruous shifts in geographical space.

¹² To illustrate, in his review of *Pigeon* for the film journal *Film Comment*, Matthew Connolly (2015) writes that “Andersson wisely intersperses scenes less tethered to the absurdist rhythms of everyday monotony, unexpectedly introducing *historical anachronism*, unsettling cruelty, and even musical revelry” (my emphasis).

¹³ Thanks to Linda Rugg for helping me articulate this interpretation of the film.

Interestingly, several reviewers have interpreted *Pigeon* as a film that deals with guilt, especially guilt for events in the historical past (Kiang 2015; Ratner 2015; O'Connor 2015). This can be partly explained by the film's references to guilt, but equally important are the numerous occasions on which Andersson has brought up guilt in interviews with reporters. Over the years, Andersson has positioned himself as a director who is especially concerned with guilt about the Holocaust and other mass atrocities. Often, interviews echo passages from his book from 1995, *Vår tids rädsla för allvar* (*Our Time's Fear of Seriousness*), in which he discusses the Holocaust and cites the Jewish moral philosopher Martin Buber's concept of existential guilt. When promoting *Pigeon* in 2015, Andersson also talks to reporters about Buber's influence on his thinking and mentions his own sense of existential, historic and collective guilt (Lucas 2015, Oscarsson 2013, Steingrimsen 2015). To illustrate, in an interview with the Berlin-based magazine *EXBERLINER*, Andersson mentions the cylinder sequence in particular and relates it to what he describes as his own guilt feelings:

The torture scene with the cylinder? It's memory and it's fantasy. But it's not only fantasy. For me, it's a kind of historic guilt, collective guilt. I was not there to torture the Indians with the conquistadors, but I feel guilt for the white man. I'm ashamed of being a member of mankind. (Lucas 2015)

Interviews such as the one above are among the paratexts that may influence how viewers, film reviewers and scholars interpret *Pigeon*. In addition, reviews, the film's press kits (which are developed by the film's distribution companies), Andersson's official website (royandersson.com) and other forms of promotional help frame and contextualize the film,

perhaps especially its more ambiguous and anachronistic scenes.¹⁴ In this article, I occasionally cite Andersson's own interpretations of *Pigeon*, but do not consider his stated intentions as having the final say on what *Pigeon* might mean. While I remain sympathetic to some of his interpretations, I consciously resist a more auterist approach to Andersson's films, partly because of the considerable influence he already has as an established auteur, and because *Pigeon* also encourages alternative, evocative interpretations than those proposed by Andersson himself.

The Past in the Present: Returning Swedish Imperialism

Among the most remarked upon and remarkable scenes in *Pigeon* are two, long scenes in which King Charles XII of Sweden arrive together with his army in a bar. Set in the diegetic present, the first of these two scenes appears around halfway through the film and opens in a bar on the outskirts of the city. It appears to be an ordinary day: Patrons in the bar, who are dressed in contemporary clothes (e.g. cardigans, hoodies, and jeans), are casually passing the time – drinking beer, playing on slot machines, or making out. Jonathan and Sam walk into the bar and ask for directions to a shop, and soon begin to talk about the products they sell. Yet, just as Jonathan puts on one of their rubber masks (to demonstrate their products), Charles XII and his soldiers arrive. The military men come in on horseback and are notably dressed in blue and yellow uniforms similar to those worn by the Caroleans (i.e. the soldiers of the Swedish kings Charles XI and Charles XII). The name of Charles XII is said (or rather, sung) near the end of the scene, hinting at the identity of the anachronistic

¹⁴ Many reviewers from outside of Scandinavia decode the reference to Charles XII much like the film's press kits do. The press kits, in turn, strongly resemble Andersson's statements in interviews. While it is common practice for reviewers to read press kits, *Pigeon* raises intriguing questions about the particular role that press kits and other paratexts may have for films that use anachronistic aesthetics. For Andersson, press kits, reviews and interviews are important means for circulating his own stated intentions. The paratexts arguably work to create an ideal viewer of sorts – someone who can decode the historical references within the film, and piece these references together into a powerful social critique. For an insightful, recent analysis of paratexts and their importance as “gateways” into a text”, see Gray 2010.

king (upon the king's request, soldiers in the background play a marching song whose refrain includes the line "Karl den tolvte hade hundratusen man" ["Charles XII had 100,000 men"]).¹⁵

<INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>

Fig. 2: Charles XII in the bar. © Studio 24 Foto: Studio 24

To viewers familiar with Charles XII, it may appear fairly symbolic that this particular Swedish king returns in the film. Charles XII is likely to evoke associations to the Swedish Empire and to the period between 1611 and 1718 referred to in Swedish historiography as *Stormaktstiden* (or "the Great Power Era").¹⁶ Not only is Charles XII one of the most mythologized historical figures in Swedish history, as historian Sverker Oredsson notes, but he has also been associated in particular with nationalistic, heroic and Romantic ideas at various stages in Swedish history (1998a, 69).¹⁷ In *Pigeon*, Charles XII returns to the present day in a de-mythologized form. The king and his army bring with them violence, arrogance, misogyny, and a fixation with hierarchy and rank. They are thus positioned as anachronisms not only in terms of their appearance and mode of transportation, but also with regards to their behavior. The army represents a disruptive force in the otherwise laid-back bar, as seen when several officers prepare the bar for the King's arrival and consequently ban

¹⁵ The marching song is set to the melody of the famous American patriotic song "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", which has been adapted to a number of different contexts (Stauffer and Soskis 2013), also forms the melody of "Halta Lottas krog", a Swedish song that appears in *Pigeon* during a musical scene, set in a bar in Sweden in 1943. This latter scene uses music to convey how human desire and playfulness may exist also during war times. In contrast, the scene with Charles XII plays more on the patriotic and nationalistic connotations associated with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic".

¹⁶ Like historian Kristian Gerner, I use the term the "Great Power Era" to refer to the "period from the Livonian War in the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the Great Northern War in 1721" (2009, 687).

¹⁷ As Oredsson notes, during the 1980s and early 1990s, "skinheads and other racists" in Sweden celebrated the death day of Charles XII (November 30), leading to violent clashes between neo-Nazi groups and anti-racism groups in cities like Stockholm and Lund (1998a, 72). Charles XII was also exalted as a hero by German and Swedish Nazis during the 1930s and early 1940s (Oredsson 1998b, 298). For more on Charles XII as a symbol in Swedish history writing and society, see Oredsson 1998a, 1998b.

all the female guests, shouting “inga kvinnor i lokalen!” [“no women allowed!”].¹⁸ They also threaten other patrons with violence, selecting one man seemingly at whim, chasing him outdoors and whipping him.

If the viewer regards the army as Swedish, the misogyny and violence that the army embodies may serve as a powerful critique of the Swedish imperial past and of Charles XII (along with the nationalistic values the king has come to symbolize after his death). According to Andersson himself, the references to Charles XII were an attempt to de-pedestalize the king, to challenge the idea of Charles XII “som machoideal” [as a macho ideal], which “[v]i svensker er oppvokst med” [we Swedes have grown up with] (Bhar 2014). As he states in an interview with the Norwegian newspaper *Dagsavisen*: “Karl XII har for oss i Sverige vært en eneste stor livsløgn, en frisering av historien for å gjøre den mer vellykket enn den egentlig er” [For us in Sweden, Charles XII has been one big lie, an embellishment of history to make it appear more successful than it actually is] (Steinkjer 2014).¹⁹

Viewers unfamiliar with Charles XII or *Stormaktstiden* are more likely to interpret the Charles XII scenes as a critique of imperialism in general, rather than an attack on Swedish imperialism. The film invites this interpretation by interspersing references to Russia in both scenes with Charles XII, and by foregrounding the human costs of war in the second scene in which Charles XII appears. In what is clearly a post-battle scene, we see the king and his army – which is notably diminished – return to the same bar after having lost a battle. A state

¹⁸ That the army does not fit into the bar is also conveyed visually, through the characters’ relationship to the built environment. When the officers and soldiers ride in on horseback, they are shown to be too tall for the doorway and thus bow their head, ever so slightly, whenever they enter or exit the bar.

¹⁹ Andersson adds that there have been speculations about whether Charles XII was gay, a topic he thinks one has been reluctant to discuss in Swedish history (“Samtidig skal han ha vært homoseksuell, noe man i liten grad har villet erkjenne eller snakke om i svensk historie”). The topic should be brought up, he says, especially since Charles XII has “served as a symbol for right-wing extremists” [“har vært et symbol for de høyreekstreme”] (Bahr 2014). *Pigeon* touches on this topic by depicting Charles XII as infatuated with a young male bartender in the bar. In the first Charles XII scene, the king orders an officer to ask the young bartender if he wants to join the king on his political campaign. Later in the same scene, we see the king looking longingly at the bartender, while carefully sliding his hand across the bar to touch the young man’s hand. Besides hinting at the king’s sexual orientation, these moments can also be said to humanize Charles XII by showing his vulnerability and his need for love.

of mourning is conveyed through the use of choral music, and we both see and hear female patrons in the bar sobbing. Charles XII and his army enter the bar, this time defeated, wounded and in tatters. At one point, the bartender says to a sad female patron by the bar: “Änka blev du i Poltava. Ett änkadock fick du” [“You were widowed at Poltava. A widow’s veil was your gift”], after which the woman bursts into tears.²⁰ This mention of “Poltava” is one of several references to Russo-Swedish relations during the 17th century (the dialogue between Charles XII and his officers refers to a “sly Russian”). More specifically, they point to the Battle of Poltava, a decisive battle fought between the armies of Charles XII and Peter the Great of Russia in 1709, at Poltava in present-day Ukraine. In Sweden, the battle is remembered as the moment when Russia replaced Sweden as “the leading European power” (Oredsson 1998a, 53), after years of Sweden and Russia competing for “military and political hegemony in the Baltic Sea region” (Gerner 2009, 687).²¹

That *Pigeon* refers to this particular battle can thus be understood both as a means for criticizing imperialism in European history and for thematizing the decline of the Swedish Empire in particular. Notably, the film does not seem to suggest that the end of Swedish imperialism should be mourned, since it emphasizes the human costs of warfare as it affects civilians (symbolized by the widowed women).²² Through the two tableaux featuring Charles XII, *Pigeon* casts a critical light on imperialism and military invasions and can, for those familiar with Swedish history, also raise critical questions about Sweden’s imperial past.

²⁰ The bartender says the line several times, which prompts more women to cry. Charles XII can be seen looking at one of the women, but he turns away when he sees her cry – perhaps in shame, out of fatigue, or because he does not know what to do. The king is, in short, depicted as someone who does not provide consolation.

²¹ As Gerner (2009) points out, the Battle of Poltava is remembered differently in Sweden, Ukraine and Russia.

²² The bartender’s line is, as Andersson states, adapted from a poem by the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (Ratner 2015). The poem from which the line is taken, “Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?” (“And What Did the Soldier’s Wife Receive?”), was written around 1942 and turned into an anti-war, anti-Nazi song by Brecht and the German composer Kurt Weill (Wyatt 1993, 65-67). The original poem describes the various gifts a soldier’s wife receives from her husband as he is dispatched to different countries during the war. The line *Pigeon* adapts is taken from the final stanza/verse, in which the wife receives from Russia a “widow’s veil” (to use, we presume, in her husband’s funeral).

Mixing Colonialism and Global Capitalism: The Cylinder Sequence

Out of all the scenes in *Pigeon*, it is arguably the cylinder sequence and the scenes that follow it that most evidently evoke guilt about the past as a theme. The cylinder sequence is, I should note, preceded by two clips: first, an inter-title that reads “homo sapiens”, and then a short, morbid tableau that depicts a scientific lab in which a monkey is strapped to an electrocution device and zapped several times, shrieking loudly as a result. While the monkey is in foreground and center of the frame, a woman in a lab-coat is seen standing to the right, looking out the window and talking on the phone. Besides mentioning the weather, she says, unsurprisingly, “Vad roligt att höra att ni har det bra” [“I’m happy to hear that you’re doing fine”]. This lab scene serves multiple functions: It foregrounds happiness as a universalized desire on the part of humanity, reminding us of the sinister consequences of focusing only on personal, human happiness. Moreover, it foreshadows the cylinder sequence and its depiction of torture, albeit torture of human beings, not animals.

The cylinder sequence opens with a black screen and the sound of a dog barking aggressively.²³ We then cut to a wide-angle shot of a savannah, in which we see a massive brass cylinder. Surrounding it are various white, male soldiers, dressed in military uniforms, and two German Shepherds. The soldiers soon usher a group of black slaves into the cylinder (in which the latter are eventually tortured and most likely killed). The dialogue consists mainly of orders being shouted in British English, and the soldiers wear pith helmets and khaki uniforms that evoke associations to the uniforms worn by the British during the Boer War in South Africa in 19th century.²⁴ The scene thus contains various connotations to the British Empire. Moreover, there is the overall representation of race in the scene, namely, the image of white soldiers punishing and torturing black slaves, which brings to mind British

²³ In the film’s promotional material, the cylinder sequence is referred to as “Orgeln”/“The Organ”. See Roy Andersson’s official profile on Vimeo, where several behind-the-scenes clips documenting the making of the cylinder sequence bear this title (<https://vimeo.com/133563197>).

²⁴ Thanks to cultural historian Jane Tynan for help with identifying the uniforms.

colonialism (but perhaps also European colonialism in general). These connotations to the British Empire are arguably nuanced by the presence of the two German Shepherds – a dog breed that has, historically, served as a powerful metaphor for colonial regimes, but also for Nazi Germany (Skabelund 2008).

This brings us to the large, brass cylinder, which is probably the most ambiguous object in the frame. As the scene develops, the cylinder goes from being a vehicle for torture and violence to one that also produces an unsettling element of beauty. Welded onto the side of the cylinder are trumpet horns in varying sizes, but we do not know what these horns are for until the end of the scene, when the soldiers have already forced the slaves inside the cylinder (some of the slaves scream in revolt). A soldier then lights a fire underneath the cylinder, and as the flames begin to grow, we hear the slaves' muffled screaming and notice how the drum slowly starts to creak and spin. At this stage, the trumpet horns begin to emit an eerie hum. The scene, which opened without any use of music, is now dominated by a disturbingly mellifluous blend of brass music on the one hand (which presumably comes from the spinning cylinder) and choral music on the other (which appears to be non-diegetic). As it turns out, the brass cylinder, a massive instrument of torture and violence, doubles as a musical instrument. The scene, which opened without any use of music, is now dominated by a disturbing blend between brass music on the one hand (music supposedly produced by the rotating cylinder) and choral music on the other (non-diegetic music).

The scene not only points to colonialism in the past, but also refers to Sweden's industrial history and events in the recent past through the use of anachronism. Welded onto the side of the cylinder is the word "Boliden", the name of a Swedish mining and smelting corporation (the word becomes visible twice as the cylinder slowly spins). As with the earlier references to Charles XII, the word "Boliden" may mean little to viewers unfamiliar with the Swedish mining company. What the film only hints at subtly, however, several interviews

with Andersson and various reviews of *Pigeon* spell out explicitly. As they state, the word Boliden is included in the scene because Andersson wants to criticize the company for causing and mishandling a toxic waste disaster in northern Chile in the mid-1980s.²⁵

The next tableau in the sequence shifts attention away from the (British) soldiers and the (Swedish) cylinder, towards an anonymous group of old, white people for whom, it turns out, the cylinder is spinning. The scene is another long, deep focus and wide-angle shot with no camera movement, and initially depicts only a white marble building in art deco style with a broad staircase and wide glass doors.²⁶ Reflected in the glass doors are the soldiers, the rotating cylinder and the flames from the previous tableau. Soon, two men in white clothes can be glimpsed through the glass. They pull a pair of curtains to the side, revealing a group of human beings standing behind the glass doors, looking out. The waiters open the glass doors and the group walks out: twelve, old, white men and women wearing black tuxedos or evening gowns and jewelry. They move slowly, with champagne glasses in their hands, and end up standing and watching the cylinder – thus staring directly into the camera. Meanwhile, the two waiters in white fill up their glasses with more champagne. The viewer may notice that one of the waiters looks identical to Jonathan. Neither Jonathan nor the old people say anything in this scene, however. Some of the old people look almost vacant-eyed. Also, both the old people and Jonathan appear only after the slaves have been ushered inside the cylinder. Thus, they may not be aware of the violence that enabled the cylinder to spin and make music for the enjoyment of the privileged guests.²⁷

²⁵ Examples of interviews in which Andersson criticizes Boliden can be seen in the press in Sweden (Sigander 2014), Norway (Dagliden 2014; Steinkjer 2014; Åmodt 2014), and the UK (Leigh 2015). Prior to the film's release, in 2013, the toxic waste disaster in Chile made headlines both in Sweden and internationally, after a group of 707 villagers affected by the poisonous wastes filed a lawsuit against Boliden (Sveriges Radio 2013).

²⁶ The building's architectural style (art deco) may evoke associations to Nazism, since art deco style (which was popular across Europe during the 1920s and 1930s) resembles neoclassicism and functionalism, two architectural styles that connote Fascism and Nazism. (Thanks to art historian Erik Mørstad for help with identifying the building's style and connotations.)

²⁷ For all we know, the old spectators may not know what violence went into the visual and spectacle they are watching. If so, the scene is less an image of knowing complicity, or what Ulla Vuorela (2009) calls "colonial complicity", than a representation of naivety, of *not* knowing. From this perspective, the scene exemplifies an

As the above summary suggests, the spinning cylinder is laden with symbolism and may thus not evoke associations to one particular nation's history but instead, point to British, Swedish and European history, all at once. As for the old, white bystanders, they are not positioned as Swedish through lines of dialogue or costumes. That said, the film overall – and specific details in the cylinder sequence – may encourage some viewers to think of the old bystanders as Swedish. For instance, the sequence shares narrative and thematic similarities with the two scenes featuring Charles XII, which creates a sense of continuity between these various scenes. More specifically, the cylinder sequence, with its obvious use of anachronism, is narratively speaking comparable to the scenes with Charles XII. Thematically, it is also linked to the Charles XII scenes in that it deals with imperialism and the military. Thus, for a viewer who associates Charles XII with the Swedish Empire, the earlier scenes with the Swedish king may shape how one interprets the cylinder sequence and the ambiguous group of white, rich bystanders. Moreover, an interpretation of the bystanders as Swedish is encouraged by Jonathan's presence as a waiter. Since Jonathan is positioned as Swedish through the dialogue, the people he serves may, by proxy, also be seen as Swedish. Finally, that the bystanders look both old and privileged can also evoke associations to Swedish aristocracy and nobility (*adeln*) in particular.²⁸

Multidirectional Guilt? On (Not) Distributing Guilt for Violence in Human History

Nevertheless, cylinder sequence ultimately raises more questions than it answers. The usual categories for distributing responsibility – such as victim, perpetrator, bystander, and beneficiary – are profoundly difficult to apply to the cylinder sequence. While the scenes

instance of dramatic irony in the film, whereby we, the viewers, know more than the characters do (in this case, more than the old bystanders). Moreover, one can interpret the scene as a metaphor for historical hindsight: We, who look back on the past, may sometimes “see” more than the people living at the time (for example, we may see more clearly the ethical problems with slavery – or at least one would hope so).

²⁸ The old men and women can also be read as an image of the aristocracy in general – as former generations of powerful white men and women whose privileges kept them safe while others suffered, and whose hands may have stayed fairly clean because others did the dirty work.

refer to violence in the imperial past and hints at whom the bystanders might be, it ultimately leaves the bystanders' identities open to interpretation. As a result, it remains unclear who is ultimately responsible for the torture of the black slaves. The sequence distributes the guilt neither to one specific nation, nor to one particular historical period. Indeed, one compelling interpretation of the cylinder (which resembles some of Andersson's own thoughts on the matter) is to see it as a metaphor for colonialism in the past and global capitalism in the present. Since the cylinder is a machine of sorts that allows one to use and destroy human lives (the lives of black slaves, to be exact), it can be said to dehumanize humans, to treat them as means rather than ends in themselves. As such, the cylinder can visualize the idea of colonialism as a destructive machine, as well as the notion of capitalism as "creative destruction".²⁹ (The association to capitalism is more evident if one recognizes that the cylinder bears the name of Boliden, a company operating in the contemporary era and on a global scale, despite being based in Sweden).

The question of responsibility or guilt is compounded further by the next scene, which features a dialogue between Jonathan and Sam that casts doubt as to whether the events in the cylinder sequence have taken place, or whether they might be Jonathan's dream (or rather, his nightmare). The scene is in the diegetic present, and shows Jonathan sitting on the edge of his bed, staring blankly ahead (but not into the camera) and looking distraught. The white suit he wore in the previous scene has been replaced by his grey pajama, but the choral and brass music from the cylinder sequence carries over into this tableau as non-diegetic music. This subtly suggests that the previous sequence (and the violence it depicted) may linger on, if only in Jonathan's mind. Soon, Sam, who lives in the room next door, appears and asks Jonathan what is wrong. The ensuing conversation is slow, repetitive and interrupted by

²⁹ The idea of colonialism as a destructive machine can be gleaned in the writings of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who – during the late 1950s – criticizes France for its occupation of Algeria and describes colonialism an "apparatus" and "heavy machine" (2006, 58), as well as an "infernal cycle" (2006, 51). Capitalism as "creative destruction" is a concept articulated by the Austrian American economist Joseph Schumpeter (1947).

pauses, but Jonathan puts across that he “tänkte på nåt hemskt” [“thought of something horrible”], that he “var med” [“was involved”] in “det hemska” [“that horrible thing”]. Yet, when Sam asks him whether he has been dreaming, Jonathan replies: “Det är det jag inte vet. Men det kändes som om det hadde hänt. Det är det som är så skrämmande. Fruktansvärt! Ingen har bett om förlåtelse. Inte jag heller [“I’m not sure. But it felt like it had happened. That’s what scares me. Horrible! And no one has asked for forgiveness. Not even me.”]. Turning to look at Sam, he repeats, louder and firmer this time, “Ingen har bett om förlåtelse” [“No one has asked for forgiveness”].

While Jonathan calls for an apology, the film permanently delays its arrival. In doing so, *Pigeon* leaves the problem of guilt unresolved and can be said to hint at a general unwillingness on the part of humanity to deal with violence in the past, including mass atrocities. From another perspective, the film also conveys how acknowledging (let alone apologizing for) histories of violence is hard work, meets resistance, and is not easily achieved. Jonathan seems to be alone in asking ethical questions, as illustrated in the scene that follows Jonathan and Sam’s dialogue (this is also the penultimate scene in the film). Standing in the almost empty corridor of his hostel-like housing, he asks the following question, three times: “Är det rätt att använda människor bare för sitt eget nöjes skull?” [“Is it right using people for only for your own pleasure?”] While Sam and the guard in the building both come to check on Jonathan, neither seem able to respond to Jonathan’s question. Instead, they seem more focused on “i morgon” [“tomorrow”], on the future rather than the past. As the guard says in response to Jonathan’s question: “Men er det lämpligt att prata om sånna saker så her dags på dögnet? Det är flere som skal upp och jobba i morgon” [“But should we be discussing these things in the middle of the night? There are people here who are getting up early for work tomorrow”].

Although Sam dismisses Jonathan as “lite filosofisk” [“a little philosophical”], the audience is nevertheless encouraged to continue considering Jonathan’s question. How one person’s individual pleasure or happiness may rest on their ability to use other people harks back to many earlier tableaux in the film, everyday moments in which people’s desires border on a selfish abuse of others. As importantly, Jonathan’s question – “Is it right using people for only for your own pleasure?” – can also point back to the cylinder sequence and its depiction of the old, white, privileged bystanders. If we apply Jonathan’s question to the cylinder sequence, we might see the sequence also as a critique of film as a medium and of the interplay between exploitation and entertainment in Andersson’s own filmmaking. After all, the cylinder essentially stages human suffering in order to create something beautiful and enjoyable that people can watch. To compare, Andersson’s films – including *Pigeon* – also stages scenes of violence and does so in what are, ultimately, aesthetically pleasing pieces of cinema. Interpreted thus, the cylinder sequence can serve as a subtle critique of the film as a whole, Andersson’s responsibilities as a filmmaker and, perhaps, the privileged position we, the viewer, occupy as spectators merely witnessing, rather than experiencing, violence.

Conclusion

Pigeon is a film that poses important questions related to history, guilt and responsibility. Jonathan is the character who brings these questions to the fore, as seen when his statements address the problem of exploitation (“Is it right using people for only for your own pleasure?”) and the importance of reconciliation (“No one has asked for forgiveness”). While Jonathan’s comments can be read symbolically, as comments on ethical and even political issues in our contemporary world, it is also worth considering how his statements are shaped and compounded by the ambiguity of the film. As we have seen, it is never established whether the cylinder sequence actually has happened or whether it is merely a

dream/nightmare. Thus, when Jonathan says that no one had asked for forgiveness, the viewer is left to wonder: Forgiveness for what exactly? And on whose behalf? Jonathan's repeated calls for an apology seems to lead to a moral quandary, one that certain viewers might find troubling rather than inspiring. An issue worth discussing further is whether *Pigeon*, despite touching on important issues, may also be criticized for evoking the question of guilt about the past while simultaneously leaving that very question unresolved, if not problematically diffuse.

On the other hand, by bringing up guilt about the past but refusing to provide any solution or closure, *Pigeon* could also be said to make an important ethical, and political, point – namely, that any search for happiness is likely to be disrupted, time and time again, unless we actively consider how the past is connected to the present. As such, the film may be regarded as a timely, if uncomfortable, reminder that we, the living, need to acknowledge the ways in which violence and injustices in the past are an integral part of the present, that is, if we want to a less violent, and more just, future.

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