



**An Analysis of A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence  
(Roy Andersson, 2014)  
through Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue**

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**Elif Demođlu**

Radio, Television, and Cinema Department  
Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey  
elfdemoglu@googlemail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1448-6991

**Korhan Topcu**

Radio, Television, and Cinema Department  
Düzce University, Düzce, Turkey  
korhantopcu@duzce.edu.tr  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0681-2512

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## Abstract

Some films go beyond mere entertainment; they challenge our perspectives on life, society, and humanity. The cinema of Swedish director Roy Andersson, with its non-plot-driven, recurring thematic and formal choices and unique mise-en-scène style, requires effort from the audience to be fully understood. Andersson's cinema, with its complex narrative and existential inquiry, provides a structure suitable for philosophical analysis. Martin Buber, an existentialist philosopher, is a fitting figure for a philosophical analysis of Andersson's films. This is due to the thematic similarities between Buber's ideas and Andersson's films, as well as the philosopher's influence on the intellectual background of the films. This paper will analyze the prominent questionings in Andersson's post-2000 films through Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, which highlights the I-It and I-Thou relationships, as well as the feeling of guilt. After a general examination of Andersson's cinema and its intersection with Buber's philosophy, the director's film *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014) will be analyzed. This paper reveals that Martin Buber's philosophy aligns with the themes explored in Andersson's films, and his thoughts provide a helpful framework to analyze the director's depiction of guilt. The superficial, meaningless relationships between the characters in Andersson's film reflect Buber's I-It relationship. Andersson has created a unique, absurd narrative and storytelling style that invites the audience to observe and question these unformed relationships. This style encourages the audience to engage in philosophical inquiry, developing distinctive mise-en-scène elements that highlight the director's detached, critical stance. This approach unveils the absurdity of the alienation prevalent in the I-It relationship, with the aim of encouraging the audience to question themselves.

**Keywords:** film and philosophy, martin buber, philosophy of dialogue, I-It, I-Thou, sense of guilt, mise-en-scène, Roy Andersson, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*

## Introduction

### Film and Philosophy

Understanding a work of art as belonging to a specific art form requires placing it in a mental category. For this reason, the existence of works of art is a subject of philosophy (Şan, 2024, p.15). Reflecting on and perceiving films opens a door for philosophical thought. Cinematic works themselves lead one to think and lead to mental questioning. According to Bazin (2011), a film's ability to withstand philosophical criticism is important because it elevates the film beyond mere entertainment and allows it to present the realities of life to the audience (p. 10). In the relationship between cinema and philosophy, there is a distinction between the philosophy of cinema and the philosophical examination of film, even if the boundaries can sometimes be blurred. On the one hand, there are the meanings attributed to images by the formal qualities of cinema, and on the other hand, there are the meanings created by films and the connections established between them and philosophical concepts (Kabadayı, 2013, p.51). The relationship between film and philosophy, as defined by Rossouw (2021) with the two-way street metaphor, is approached not only from the perspective of philosophy contemplating film but

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also from the perspective of the film engaging with philosophy (pp. 19-21).

A film can be analyzed by using various philosophical concepts. When analyzing a film philosophically, it is important to reveal the specific concept embedded within the film. According to Kabadayı (2013), topics covered in film criticism that draw on philosophy are diverse and include subjects such as 'truth, fiction, humanity, knowledge, wisdom, existence, freedom, morality, virtue, truthfulness, justice, ethics, nihilism, time, simulation, chance, destiny, happiness, pleasure, pain, aesthetics, beauty, ugliness, good, and evil'(p.51).

As was stated in Bazin's quote above, films that go beyond being mere entertainment products invite the audience to think actively, rather than clearly conveying meaning through their intellectual depth, complex structures, and explicit narratives that deviate from classical narration. Roy Andersson is a director who stands out for his unique *mise-en-scène*, episodic, non-plot-driven narrative style that lies outside the realm of classical storytelling. His thought-provoking films provide fertile ground for philosophical analysis.

Johann Rossouw (2021) makes three classifications regarding the philosophical nature of cinema: the "weak" thesis, which argues that films are merely illustrative tools that exemplify philosophical concepts; the 'moderate' thesis, which claims that films serve as thought experiments contributing to philosophical debates; and the 'bold' thesis, which asserts that films produce philosophy through their own unique methods. In this paper, the aim is to move beyond the weak thesis that views cinema as a simple visual reflection of philosophical texts and adopt a balanced stance between the moderate and bold approaches. While the ambitious claim that films can do philosophy is partially accepted, a cautious limitation is maintained, emphasizing that each case should be evaluated within its specific context.

This paper aims to utilize the concepts of a particular philosopher to explore the deeper meaning embedded in Roy Andersson's cinema. Based on Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, which focuses on the I-Thou and I-It relationships and the feeling of guilt, a philosophical analysis will be conducted on one of Andersson's films that shares similarities with his post-2000s films.

Within this paper, the relationship between Roy Andersson's cinema and Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue will not be examined through a rigid claim that films directly 'do' or 'produce' Buber's concepts. Instead, a more measured and analytical perspective will be adopted, highlighting how Andersson's *mise-en-scène* reveals these philosophical relationships, opens them up for reconsideration, and invites the audience to a dialogical encounter. In this context, alongside philosophical analysis, *mise-en-scène* analysis will be conducted to examine how elements such as decor, lighting, camera angles, and camera positioning reveal philosophical concerns, such as existential guilt, in Andersson's cinema. According to Kabadayı (2013), *mise-en-scène* analysis goes beyond describing 'what is there' in a scene; it investigates 'how' the audiovisual elements construct the conceptual world (pp. 16-19).

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In this paper, there are two reasons for choosing Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. Firstly, the concepts emphasized in Buber's philosophy of dialogue play an important role in understanding the director's questioning of the concept of the individual in his films. In Andersson's films, the alienation and lack of communication between modern individuals correspond to Buber's I-It relationship, which is connected to the I-Thou relationship. The feeling of guilt seen at the core of the I-It relationship is the basis on which the director focuses in his films. The second reason is that the director states in an interview in the documentary *Being a Human Person* (dir. Fred Scott, 2020) that he was influenced by Martin Buber's philosophy and that he perceives the individual within the intellectual framework of his films. In the documentary, the director refers to Martin Buber's work *Guilt and Guilt Feeling* (first published in 1958, 1999) as follows:

Martin Buber expresses it beautifully when he talks about atrocities committed against the order of people or the order of life. When you destroy that, a feeling of guilt arises. Something that makes people dirty and bothered. Buber says that humans feel this but can also repair it. Not necessarily at the place where the crimes were committed, but we can repair it by worshipping life in other situations. I think it's a very optimistic expression. It's possible to repair this guilt. By doing good. Simple is that (Scott, 2020).

In his article *Guilt and Guilt Feeling* (1999), Buber examines people's feelings of guilt and the moral responsibilities that arise from this situation. Buber nurtures hope that feelings of guilt can be overcome by returning to the I-Thou relationship through solidarity, empathy, and mutual respect. Absence of solidarity is often questioned in Andersson's films. This trigger for a sense of guilt that is prevalent in the director's cinema can also be seen in the I-It relationship.

In this paper, Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, his concepts of I-It and I-Thou relationships, and his views on guilt feeling, will be explained to analyze Roy Andersson's cinema through Buber's lens, and it will be argued that Buber's philosophy and Andersson's cinema overlap significantly. Then, Andersson's cinema will be discussed in general terms, his relationship with Buber established, and a philosophical and *mise-en-scène* analysis of *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014) will be presented through Buber's concepts. As mentioned before, the director's films after 2000 share similar characteristics. The reason for choosing *A Pigeon Sat on A Branch Reflecting on Existence* from among these films is that it contains scenes that are more conducive to discussing feelings of guilt than others.

### **Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue, I-Thou and I-It Relationship, and the Feeling of Guilt**

Since Martin Buber is thought to belong within existentialist philosophy, it is necessary to first examine the philosopher's status within this philosophical discourse. In existentialist philosophy, the question of existence is linked to the human condition. Existentialism questions the meaning of human existence and seeks to help people avoid feeling alienated from themselves (Akarsu, 1975, p. 179).

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Existentialism holds that individuals can succeed only by finding themselves through free will, personal responsibility, and choice. Philosophers who have embraced existentialism, despite significant differences among them, argue that philosophical thought should focus on the human experience of existence (Kleinman, 2019, p. 25).

Orhan Hançerlioğlu (1980) draws a distinction between philosophers such as Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, Nicolas Berdreaeff, Lev Cestov, and Martin Buber, who developed their existentialist ideas at a theistic level, and philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean Paul Sartre, who developed their ideas at an atheistic level (p.144). Toprak (2022) expresses Hançerlioğlu's distinction by referring to it as theological and secular. Buber can be categorized among the theistic/theological existentialists who view their philosophy as a surrender of human imperfection to God, and his relationship with God has been influential in his questioning of Western philosophy and his stance against rational thought. Buber's philosophy offers a unique perspective on existential individualism and the Cartesian subject, while taking a holistic approach to human relationships, society, and cultural heritage (Toprak, 2022, pp.15-16).

When examining the concepts that stand out in Buber's philosophy of dialogue, the I-It and I-Thou relationship, the principles of good and evil, and guilt and guilt feelings come to the fore. Since this paper does not aim to explain Martin Buber's philosophy in detail, it is limited to the I-It and I-Thou relationships and the sense of guilt, which can be argued to be directly related to Roy Andersson's cinema.

Buber essentially criticizes modern society and the modern individual. According to Buber (2019), in an era of crises, society cannot progress solely on abstract ideologies. He argues that this society, which he describes as sick, needs to be fundamentally transformed in line with modern social understanding, emphasizing that appropriate treatment is required for the illness. The roles imposed by institutions and the system's tendency to turn people into robots, mechanizing them, and standardizing their lives alienate them from their own existence. Buber encourages people to take action to realize their own existence. The modern individual, as Buber defines it, is incapable of communication and unable to recognize others. He believes it is necessary for the individual to establish meaningful relationships to overcome this problem.

Buber (2019), when approaching humanity based on dialogue, divides this relationship into I-It and I-Thou. These concepts provide an important framework for understanding the connections humans establish with existence and the fundamental role they play in the individual's existence. The I-It relationship is the superficial relationship humans have with existence, while the I-Thou relationship is the deep relationship they establish with one another through dialogue.

The difference between Buber's I-Thou and I-It relationships points to one of the main problems of existentialism: seeing humans as subjects rather than objects. According to Buber, an individual can only become an I by encountering You and

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accepting You. Given the conditions of the modern world, relationships between people are at risk of becoming I-It relationships (Çınar, 2006, p. 14).

Due to the passive nature of the I-It relationship, dialogue does not exist in this form of dynamic between people. This relationship is close to mutual interaction due to its monological structure. According to Ulukütük (2011), in the I-It relationship, the other person is reduced to an object evaluated based on their physical characteristics; the individual experiences objects in the world rather than establishing real relationships with other people (p. 99). This situation is an obstacle to the human capacity for relationships. It causes not only the loss of humanity but also the loss of the self-worth of presence (Toprak, 2022, p. 32).

In his article *Guilt and Guilt Feeling* (1999) Buber presents his ethical philosophy and thoughts on human relationships. He discusses how people's feelings of guilt are related to moral responsibility. According to him, feelings of guilt stem from people perceiving a sense of deficiency or disconnect in their relationships and actions. Buber states that feelings of guilt stem from the I-It relationship. In this type of relationship, other people are perceived as manipulable objects. Buber emphasizes the importance of focusing on the I-Thou relationship rather than on establishing genuine, meaningful relationships.

Buber (1999) argues that personal guilt, understood as existential guilt people assume within specific personal situations and in relation to their own identity, cannot be explained by categories such as repression and awareness in analytical science. The bearer of such guilt constantly reminds themselves of their guilt. However, the person often tries to escape this remembrance; what they are escaping is not the event they remember but the depth of their existential guilt (Buber, 1999, p. 116).

Buber (1999) states that the magnitude of a person lies in their ability to face their misery, accept their guilt, and achieve self-enlightenment. The individual will be able to understand the nature of his guilt once he breaks his resistance to self-enlightenment. Buber defines the door that opens to self-enlightenment as the law of self-identification. A unity is established between the person who accepts guilt and the person who bears guilt, between the person who is in the light and the person who is in the dark. However, what follows the difficult process of self-enlightenment is the effort to maintain the identity one has established with oneself, and this is an endless test. This process does not mean that the individual constantly punishes himself with guilt; on the contrary, it is the human being's effort to remain calm and dignified through enlightenment (Buber, 1999, pp. 135-137).

According to Buber (1999), when a person is guilty towards himself, it is sufficient to move forward patiently after self-enlightenment to respond to the high call of conscience. People are not only guilty towards themselves, but also towards other beings, the rest of the world, and those around them. Therefore, to respond to the call of conscience with justice, they must also follow the path of reconciliation. Reconciliation means approaching the person who is guilty in the light of

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self-enlightenment, accepting one's existential guilt, and striving to make amends for the consequences of one's actions. This action has the quality of reconciliation when it occurs not only in accordance with a preconceived decision, but also as a natural reflection of a transformed existence. Ultimately, this process is achieved only when a renewed person develops a new understanding of service to the world through their renewed powers and transforms their relationship with the world (Buber, 1999, p. 137).

While confronting guilt is related to self-enlightenment, overcoming feelings of guilt is connected to the I-Thou relationship. This relationship is characterized by a person recognizing another as an equal and a fellow subject. Both sides try to establish mutual empathy and form a deep connection. Elements like mutual understanding, love, respect, and empathy shape the I-Thou relationship.

Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue goes far beyond what has been described above and offers a much broader framework. To understand and analyze Roy Andersson's cinema from a philosophical perspective, which is the subject of this paper, the conceptual framework of the I-Thou, I-It relationship and its connections with guilt are discussed here in general terms. Before analyzing *A Pigeon Sat on A Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), Roy Andersson's unique cinematic style and the fundamental issues he highlights in his films will be examined, and his relationship with Martin Buber's philosophy will be discussed.

### **An Overview of Roy Andersson's Cinema**

Roy Andersson is one of the most important directors of contemporary Swedish cinema, known for his unique cinematic language and international success. The director, who shot his last film, *About Endlessness*, in 2019, began his feature film career in 1970 with *A Swedish Love Story*. Following his first film, which dealt with the corrupt welfare society and its economic and class struggles in a realistic cinematic language, he made his second film, *Giliap*, in 1975. In his second feature film, the director has used less dialogue and more long takes, focusing on the lack of communication and existential questions. After his second film, he took a long break from his feature film career and turned to directing commercials and short films (Dağaç, 2019, pp. 381-382). Twenty-five years after *Giliap*, Andersson made his third feature film, also the first film of his *Living Trilogy*, *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000), followed by the other films in the trilogy, *You, the Living* (2007), and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014). Andersson also made his last film, *About Endlessness* (2019), in a similar style to the trilogy.

Dağaç (2019) states that Andersson developed a new cinematic language in *World of Glory* (1991), one of his many short films, which he continued to use in his films after 2000. He also notes that this film served as a foundation for the *Living Trilogy* through its *mise-en-scene* and themes (p. 382). In *World of Glory*, Andersson avoided using close-up shots to prevent the audience from identifying with the victims. Instead, he employed stable shots and wide angles to encourage the audience to interpret the images critically and analytically (Brunow, 2010, p.84).

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When trying to understand the cinematic language Andersson began to implement in this short film and continued to use in his films after 2000, a few key concepts need to be addressed. Andersson's use of complex image and trivialism, as well as his unique mis-en-scène elements and thematic preferences, are crucial to his filmmaking language in these films.

According to Hanich (2014), Andersson carefully prepared the sets in his studio to create a metaphorical version of reality in his films, reshooting scenes multiple times until he achieved the desired effect, and preferring to use wide shots in almost all scenes. Andersson defines this approach as a complex image characterized by minimalism. According to him, the artistic design of these scenes is quite challenging, and the audience must make an effort to analyze them (p.40). The aim is to force the audience to confront complex images that are difficult to grasp, to give ordinary moments a deeper meaning, to stir the audience's conscience through the characters' direct gaze at the camera, and to create scenes that will remain in the memory even after the film ends (Lindqvist, 2016, p. 547). While classical narration cannot go beyond appealing to the audience's senses, complex images are an effective way to engage the audience. Andersson (1995, 2010) explains this situation as follows:

I want to start a conversation: About morality and seriousness. By seriousness, I do not mean the absence of humor or joy, but rather taking matters seriously, doing one's work diligently, getting to the heart of the matter, drawing conclusions, and providing clarity. These things do not necessarily lead to a sour expression or a lack of humor (Andersson, 1995, p.23; 2010, p.555).

Complex image is visible in the mise-en-scène elements of Andersson's films. Through long takes, wide shots, and depth of field, all objects and characters within the frame remain consistently clear. Camera movement is very limited, shots are generally stable, and the characters' movements are almost at a standstill. The film's tempo is slow. The characters are usually archetypal figures. The dialogues are minimal, artificial, and full of banalities. The plot does not rely on causality; instead, the narrative is shaped through thematic, visual, musical, and verbal repetitions, creating an episodic structure (Chinita, 2018, p. 70).

Stable shots and wide-angle, plan-sequences, theatrical and bizarre acting, absurd-poetic-surrealistic narration, and alienation effects, such as actors sometimes looking directly at the camera and addressing the audience, are distinctive features of the director's unique style (Dağaç, 2019, p. 382).

In Andersson's cinema, the concept of trivialism, which can be described as paying attention to trivial details, is also important. The simple, ordinary, trivial details of everyday life become fundamental parts of existence in Andersson's cinema (Dağaç, 2019, p. 384). According to Lindqvist (2012), Andersson aims to bring the audience back to the world by highlighting trivial details. The director prefers amateur actors

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to well-known actors to make this world even more effective (p. 214). Andersson's characters' faces are painted white like limestone, as if they are somewhere between life and death. According to Kaya (2014), Andersson states that the use of white-faced actors was intended to universalize the characters and the story. In this context, the scenes represent the common experience of all humanity, not just that of a particular individual or society (p. 47).

Roy Andersson offers a new perspective on cinema through trivialism and complex image, allowing the audience to reflect, introspect, and actively participate. His films are only complete with the audience's participation. This completion is achieved through history, memory, questioning, and absurd humor (Afonso, 2021, p. 97).

The people in limbo or the sense of alienation and rootlessness that permeates Andersson's films can be seen not only in public spaces but also in private places. The concept of *folkhemmet* (the people's home), a term used in Sweden to describe the welfare society, is one of the main points of Andersson's social criticism. According to Tucan (2016), in Andersson's trilogy, the home is also the center of communication breakdown, monotony, and alienation (p.182).

When considering Roy Andersson's cinema from a thematic perspective, his films after 2000 highlight concepts such as existential dilemmas, criticism of welfare societies, references to the darkest moments in history, the destructive consequences of individualism, alienation, the lack of communication, the collective subconscious, and the loss of meaning. According to Lindqvist (2012), Andersson questions individual and social alienation by showing the consequences of the idealization of individualism through provocative, exaggerated examples (p. 211). According to Dağaç (2019), Andersson's decision to name his trilogy *The Living Trilogy* reflects his ironic approach to modern humanity. The white faces, minimal movement, and the characters' lack of communication in the films point to the increasingly mechanized and meaningless existence of 21st-century humans (p. 384). At the same time, he often emphasizes the guilt of European society and the duplicity of the welfare state in his films.

Having discussed the common themes and characteristics in Andersson's films after the year 2000, the director's last film of his *Living Trilogy*, *A Pigeon Sat on A Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014) will be analyzed in relation to Martin Buber's concepts of I-Thou and I-It relationships and guilt feeling. Before the analysis, the influence of Buber's philosophy on Andersson's cinema will be discussed.

### **Martin Buber's Effect on Andersson's Cinema**

To reveal the impact of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue on Andersson's cinema, it is important to examine the intellectual background of the director's short film *World of Glory* (1991). This film, shot for the short-film series *90 minuter 90-tal* (90 Minutes 90s) at the Gothenburg Film Festival, is a clear example of the narrative and storytelling style seen in the director's feature films after 2000. The opening scene of *World of Glory* shows a group of people packing another group of people into the back of a truck and killing them with poison gas. According to

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Dağaç (2019), this scene, which directly references Europe's Nazi past, is repeated in similar ways throughout Andersson's trilogy. Similarly, the themes of loss of meaning, unhappiness, the ordinariness of everyday life, the collective unconscious, and alienation between people, which are clearly observed in *World of Glory*, also form the basis of the films Andersson made after 2000 (p.382).

It can be argued that the main theme underlying Andersson's cinema is a confrontation with guilt, and its origin is related to historical memory. Guilt lies in apathy, and Andersson's questioning of humanity and society is based on the idea that people have been passive witnesses to human cruelty throughout history.

Andersson, in *World of Glory* and his other films, refers to the extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and political dissidents in gas chambers at concentration camps during World War II, stating that such events are the most concrete representations of evil. Questions such as how to deal with the knowledge that people can commit such acts, whether this knowledge can be forgotten, or whether such events can be prevented from happening again are important to the director. Additionally, the director questions why history repeats itself and how such events are possible (Andersson, 2010, p. 276).

Andersson was born in 1943, during the most intense phase of mass extermination. While growing up, he was aware that millions of people were being killed in the most brutal ways in a neighboring country. He notes that the country responsible for this was a society with a high education rate and cultural traditions like those of his own country. These events had a deep impact on Andersson. He expresses shame on behalf of humanity for these crimes, stating that, although he was not a direct witness to them, he feels guilty (Andersson, 2010, p. 276).

Andersson states that Martin Buber's work *Guilt and Guilt Feeling* had a significant impact on his decision to explore this theme for the first time in his film *World of Glory*. He notes that Buber uses extremely impressive and clear language when describing feelings of guilt (Andersson, 2010, p. 276).

The idea of existential guilt suggests an unavoidable situation. However, Andersson stresses that Buber not only explains the feeling of guilt but also offers a way to achieve redemption and reconciliation. While noting that Buber focused on personal guilt, Andersson argues that his ideas are only valid for the masses (Andersson, 2010, p. 277).

Andersson reflects on how these events, now part of historical memory, should be portrayed in cinema. He states that he chooses not to use moments of suffering as an effective tool. He criticizes this approach and cites Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) as an example. As discussed earlier, regarding the term "complex image," a key element of his post-2000s films, Andersson suggests that audiences should analyze the image themselves and experience this process without commentary or guidance (Andersson, 2010, p. 277).

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An example of this approach can be seen in the opening scene of the film *World of Glory*. Andersson highlights the importance of the positioning between the person connecting the hose to the bus and the main character looking at the camera. In this context, the camera is not just a tool for observing time and history; it also symbolizes memory and knowledge. Therefore, the main character's gaze at the camera is described as a gaze toward history, memory, time, and the audience. One of the witnesses in the gas poisoning scene turns back to the camera, which is positioned at eye level, and looks at the audience as if questioning his own moral responsibility and that of others in the face of the massacre. The audience is prompted to ask themselves, 'What would I have done?' Andersson encourages the audience to reflect on and question their own attitudes through the detached *mise-en-scène* in *World of Glory*, which lacks the emotionalism typically used in such scenes (Andersson, 2010, p. 278).

Andersson uses this cinematic style to express his criticism of apathy, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of historical awareness in contemporary Swedish society. Andersson was one of the organizers of the exhibition *Sweden & The Holocaust* (2005–2006), which criticized Sweden's passive attitude toward the Holocaust. According to Andersson, the attitudes that led to the Holocaust—the ideology of superiority, the lack of responsibility for one's decisions, fear of seriousness, and contempt for humanity—continue to exist today. The erosion of the welfare society and the ideals of solidarity and support are contemporary reflections of these attitudes. Andersson notes that his aesthetic echoes writer Elie Wiesel's statement that 'the opposite of love is not hate, but apathy,' and as mentioned above, his approach is also influenced by Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. Buber's works *Guilt and Guilt Feeling* (1958, 1999) and *I-Thou* (1923, 2019) have contributed to Andersson's aesthetic view and his particular language of film (Andersson, 2010, pp. 292-293).

It's important to mention that the historical references to apathy and guilt in the director's films aren't just about the Nazi era. His films also address other shameful periods in human history, like the slave trade and the massacre of Native Americans. Andersson, following Buber, points to existential guilt and says that all human suffering is connected. The director states that the guilt he feels over the Native American genocide is equal to the guilt he feels over Sweden's friendly relations with Nazi Germany during World War II (Lindqvist, 2012, p. 312-313).

### **A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence:**

The final film of the *Living Trilogy*, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), explores themes of lack of empathy, communication, and meaning. With this film, Roy Andersson became the first Swedish director and second Nordic filmmaker to win the Golden Lion award at the Venice International Film Festival. This award was previously won by Danish director Carl Dreyer for his film *The Word* (*Ordet*, 1955). According to Lindqvist (2016), Andersson's award in Venice represents a victory for a director who has been pushed outside the traditional film financing system, struggled to find support for years, and yet fought resolutely for his unique cinematic language (p. 548).

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It is difficult, if not impossible, to describe the plot of this film, as it is with the other films in the trilogy. Similar to the other films in the trilogy, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* is not plot-driven. Instead, it has an episodic narrative structure consisting mostly of independent parts. Unlike other films, the characters Jonathan and Sam appear repeatedly in some episodes of this film. These two characters sell funny items to entertain people. However, no one is interested in these items that are not actually funny, so the characters fail to achieve their goal. According to Lindqvist (2016), Sam and Jonathan's relationship and dialogue are inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (p. 552). Andersson was inspired by Pieter Bruegel's painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) when creating the film's visual world. While developing the idea for the film, Andersson noticed a pigeon perched in a tree outside his window and drew inspiration from the pigeon's thoughts on existence (Petho, 2015, p. 50).

### **I-It Relationship: Non-Dialogic Relations**

In the film, Andersson powerfully illustrates Martin Buber's view that modern individuals and societies need to be radically transformed (Toprak, 2022, pp. 16-19) through his exaggerated, artificial audiovisual world. The film depicts the individual, who has been reduced to a robotic, homogenized form by the roles imposed by the system's institutions, in an absurd manner. All the characters' faces are painted white, as if they are wearing masks. Their faces are emotionless, their movements are very limited and heavy, and their dialogues are artificial and theatrical. Similarly, Buber defines the individual in modern society as unable to communicate and does not know those around them. The film demonstrates this characteristic as it is difficult to speak of a real relationship in superficial dialogues and expressionless faces. People view each other as part of the system and its rules. People have become mechanical beings deprived of their emotions. In this passive I-It relationship, there can be no real dialogue. White-colored and emotionless faces and absurd dialogs can be seen as a metaphor for these non-dialogic relationships.

The film contains many scenes that exemplify this situation. After paying for his meal in the cafeteria line, a man dies in front of everyone, and the reaction of those around him is directed not at the man himself, but at the question of who will take the meal that has been paid for. Or in another scene, which will be analyzed below, children waiting by the bedside of a dying woman in the hospital room are not concerned with her death, but with the money-filled bag she is clutching tightly in her hands.

According to Buber, a person's experience with objects in the world hinders meaningful dialogue. In such a case, the individual's self-worth is also lost (Toprak, 2022, p.32).

In the film, the broken conversations between individuals are seen in both public and private spaces. People who are unable to establish dialogue at home as well as in monotonous spaces are supported by a pale color palette. The director commonly employs framing techniques such as wide shots, static angles, and depth of field, often creating a frame-within-frame effect in the composition. In a wide shot, the people seen in the other room or behind the window are positioned as separated,

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divided, and distanced from each other. This visual separation also reinforces the sense of disconnection among the individuals.

Özgüven states that the director discusses values that have become so corrupted in society that they cannot be fixed (Barış, 2022, p.107). In an interview, the director criticizes alienation in human relationships and says he longs for a society where people understand one another, feel responsible for one another, and support one another (Barış, 2022, p. 106). In his films, the society he hopes for does not seem to exist because the relationships he depicts lack meaningful dialogue, clearly indicating that people do not see each other as subjects. As an example, the scene chosen from the film will be analyzed in terms of I-It relationships with the elements of mise-en-scene.

### *Death Encounter Scene No.2:*



**Image-1**

The scene, which is the second of the scenes titled 'Three Encounters with Death' in the opening of the film, approaches the moment of death as a situation that reveals the tension of material relationships rather than interpersonal spiritual ones. As seen in Image-1, the camera is positioned diagonally from the side of the room, fixed in place, framing the room in a wide shot that also includes the open door. This general shot remains unchanged throughout the scene. The dominant tones are pale shades, such as gray and yellow. The scene uses high-key lighting, with no shadows. In the center of the frame, there is a wheeled hospital bed. The diagonal placement of the bed and the planned positioning of the children of the woman who is about to die around this axis construct a rational, distant, and cold tableau of this power struggle centered on ownership. Within Roy Andersson's stable framing, with characters on the same plane, along with the pale shades and overall shot choice, the scene's tense, cold nature is enhanced. Close-up shots that would establish emotional intimacy with the characters are not used in the scene. No character's facial expression is clearly shown. With these mise-en-scène choices, the scene emphasizes the situation rather than emotions.

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The elderly woman's tight grip on her bag while lying in bed symbolizes not only her vulnerability in the face of death and her distrust of those around her, but also her possessiveness. The elderly woman's tight grip on her bag while lying in bed symbolizes not only her vulnerability in the face of death and her distrust of those around her, but also her possessiveness. The scene offers no explanation for this behavior. Her refusal to let go of her bag even at the moment of death suggests that love and trust have been replaced by transactional relationships, even within families. When those around her attempt to take the bag from her, the woman screams sharply while clutching the bag tightly. The struggle during the attempt to take the bag causes the wheelchair to shift.

At the end of the scene, a nurse who hears the sounds appears on the threshold of the open door. The nurse, dressed in a white uniform and positioned on the left at the doorway, merely observes the event from a distance. An open door, which Andersson uses in almost all scenes, is not open to external intervention. It creates a depth of field, breaking the one-dimensional structure of the theater stage. The nurse at the threshold remains a passive and distant observer, not intervening in the event.

All the *mise-en-scène* elements on the scene support the cold, distant, and apathic nature of the I-It relationship established between the characters.

### **Guilt and Guilt Feeling: Watching or Remaining a Spectator**

As mentioned earlier, a sense of guilt pervades Andersson's cinema. The director's films show guilt through references to historical events and the normalization of inhumane acts. This feeling of guilt, related to the I-It relationship, fosters a passive connection characterized by a lack of empathy and solidarity.

The film does not move from an I-It relationship to an I-Thou relationship, nor does it depict a process of self-enlightenment. The characters do not experience any transformation. Therefore, we need to question how the director tried to establish a relationship in the film with a sense of guilt. The film reminds the audience of their role as spectators. This does not only appear in the form of self-reflexive elements, such as characters looking directly at the camera and speaking towards the audience, which reminds the audience of their position as spectators. The film's complex structure highlights the audience's passivity and indifference towards society, others, those in difficult situations, cruelty, and injustice. In this way, the film encourages the audience to question their existential guilt by making them consider watching and being a spectator.

In almost every scene of the film, the characters in the frame seem to be spectators/passive observers of everything happening around them. Sometimes the camera shows the passive observers directly in the frame, without showing what they are looking at. In the opening scene of the film, we see people watching stuffed animals in an exhibition hall. Among these animals, there is a pigeon, which also serves as a reminder of the film's title. Even though people watch animals in the exhibition hall, it is thought that stuffed animals also watch the people. Compared

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to the other scenes, such as those standing over the woman dying in her hospital bed, looking at the man who died in the dining hall, watching people eat in the restaurant from outside, and observing those kissing in the bar, all are equally indifferent and emotionless to what they are looking at.

In several scenes, we move to a layered dimension of watching. In a poetry reading event for children with Down syndrome, the camera is positioned behind the stage. It shows both those on stage from a back-plan and the spectators watching the event. In another scene, we directly observe the indifference of those watching dead people. In the film, the question 'what would you do if you were in the situation of those who are watching?' is posed not through a specific event, but through various circumstances. According to Buber, the event that triggers existential guilt cannot be undone, but the individual can become a better person by accepting their guilt, taking responsibility, empathizing with others, and establishing an I-Thou relationship in their future life. At this point, following Buber, we can say that this narrative structure seeks to foster self-enlightenment in the audience by questioning. This structure, which invites the audience to an active spectator experience, is similar to Buber's invitation to take action and assume responsibility to recognize human existence.

The phrase 'I'm glad to hear you're well', which is frequently heard in the film, appears especially in phone conversations. What makes this expression even more striking is that each time the sentence is repeated, the other person does not understand what is being said at first, and the person repeats the sentence, saying, 'I said, I'm glad to hear that you're well'. This phrase highlights the characters' communication gaps and their tendency to ignore one another in the film (Brodén, 2017, p. 5). Brodén (2017) notes that, in one scene where this expression is used, a woman talking on the phone in an old, neglected laboratory, while electroshocks are administered to a monkey, conveys loving messages in a monotonous, indifferent voice (p. 6). According to King (2021), this monkey scene is one of the most striking examples of the themes of indifference and apathy that Andersson frequently explores in his films. Indeed, it emphasizes that contemporary indifference is just as frightening as humanity's existential guilt over past crimes (p. 193).

This phrase also appears to carry an important possibility for empathy and an I-Thou relationship. On the other hand, this sentence is an ordinary, everyday phrase. While it could be seen as an expression of the individual caring about the other, its monotony and lack of emotion do not constitute a dialogical relationship. The effort to establish dialogue is most evident in Jonathan and Sam. The two who complain about each other also know how to apologize when they hurt one another. Still, it is not possible to say that their dialogue is filled with meaningful love and empathy. While fragments of the I-Thou relationship are visible, they do not materialize. However, this absurd structure suggests potential.

One of the scenes in which inhumane indifference is displayed, and the audience is invited to become accomplices, is the two-shot scene at Boliden.

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### *Boliden Scene:*



**Image-2**



**Image-3**

The Boliden scene in the *Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* consists of two shots. In the first shot, a massive cylinder occupies most of the frame, positioned at a slight diagonal angle to the camera. The cylinder is placed in an open, calm area, with a few peaceful houses and trees visible in the background. Soldiers around the cylinder are forcibly pushing chained black people into the cylinder (*Image-2*). As the scene opens, the barking of dogs in the background heightens the tense atmosphere. After all the slaves are loaded into the cylinder, it is set on fire by the soldiers. The dogs fall silent, and the soldiers watch as the cylinder spins and releases toxic gas, killing those inside. As the cylinder spins, the 'Boliden' sign becomes visible on it (*Image-3*). Boliden is a Swedish mining company that, in the 1980s, sent toxic waste to Chile (Daglidén, 2014, cited in Barış, 2022, p. 105). While Sweden has protected its own nature from pollution, it is reminded that it has poisoned the soil of a distant country with its waste. The scene is shot from a stable, wide-angle. When the cylinder begins to spin, tense music plays in the background. The expressions on the faces of neither the soldiers nor the slaves are clearly visible.



**Image-4**

In the second shot of the scene, the reflection of the cylinder from the first shot appears on a building's glass door, establishing a unity of space and time within the frame. Andersson's use of frame-within-frame causes two scenes to intertwine. The curtain behind the glass door opens. Then, the door slowly opens. A crowd approach

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hing the camera in a stable and wide shot exits through the door with heavy steps. It's as if the curtain has been lifted and the actors have stepped onto the stage. This crowd is filled with characters reminiscent of zombie movies. Their faces are as white as chalk, and their eye sockets are as dark as possible. The crowd, dressed in clothing indicating high social status, appears quite old. The men are wearing tuxedos, and the women are dressed in long beige dresses matching their pale skin tones. In many scenes of the film, Jonathan, who sells odd items, appears as a waiter, refilling the champagne glasses held by the crowd. Among the crowd, a woman with a gray suit, distinguished from the others, walks arm-in-arm with an elderly man with a cane at the forefront, holding a champagne glass (*Image-4*).

It is understood from the reflection at the beginning of the shot that the crowd's gaze is directed towards the burning cylinder. At the same time, this gaze is directly to the camera, that is, the audience. All the characters are expressionless, emotionless, and almost motionless. They remain in this position for a while, like a tableau.

The visual composition emphasizes those responsible for this brutality and passive witnesses rather than the perpetrators of violence. The fact that some figures within the community directly face the camera, that is, the viewer, and that their faces show no emotional expression, shifts the testimony from passive observation to making the viewer the direct recipient of this moral burden. Despite the harshness of the situation on both levels of the scene, a calm and orderly atmosphere prevails. This second shot of the scene directly reveals a lack of empathy, social indifference, and complicity, while also exposing the I-It relationship.

### Conclusion

There is a broad literature in the fields of cinema and philosophy studies. In this paper, the deeper meaning and philosophical inquiries of Roy Andersson's films from after 2000 are examined in relation to the concepts of I-It, I-Thou, and guilt, as discussed in Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. To reveal the relationship between Andersson's unique cinematic language, created through complex image, and the philosophical inquiries, a combination of *mise-en-scène* analysis and philosophical analysis has been employed.

Each of the four feature films the director made after 2000 has a fragmented narrative that seems independent from one another and consists of episodes. In these films, which are not plot-driven and do not follow a straightforward event, ordinary everyday situations are emphasized. The language of classical narration that identifies with characters has not been deliberately preferred; instead, the focus is on questioning what is happening on the scene rather than forming an emotional bond with the characters.

In these films, the relationships between characters, their reactions to everyday situations, or their responses to human conditions reveal mechanical, unresponsive, lack of empathy, and emotionless, which are identified as non-dialogical relationships, as defined by Buber's I-It relationship. By exaggerating the I-It relationship, it draws attention to the absence of genuine, dialogical relationships,

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known as the I-Thou relationship.

With *mise-en-scène* elements, lack of communication and alienation are absurdly visualized. In all four films, the characters' white makeup, limited movements, and artificial dialogue are featured. The camera angle is almost always a wide shot and stable. The lighting is high-key; dramatic, shadowy lighting is not preferred, and every part of the scene is illuminated equally. Depth of field is sometimes achieved by using an open door in indoor scenes or by a frame-within-frame technique. These choices aim not to establish an emotional connection with what happens on the scene but to direct audiences toward intellectual engagement and questioning. Andersson's characters are mostly those who either avoid confrontation or are unprepared for it; however, their states of loneliness and helplessness leave the audience face-to-face with their own responsibility towards society. The scenes with stable angle, wide shot, and pale shades not only remove the audience from being just an observer but also compel them to adopt a moral stance in response to what they watch.

The gaze in scenes targeting especially immigrants and those pushed to the margins of society shows that this alienation produces systematic indifference. By framing all kinds of human contact that cannot be established despite physical closeness, it exposes the audience to the state of disconnection. In addition to unestablished relationships, the act of watching/staying as a spectator itself is a central theme in Andersson's films.

The essence of philosophy lies in asking questions and inquiry. Even if you find an answer, the questioning process continues (Şan, 2024, p. 13). In the film *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*, which was analyzed in this paper, the act of watching can be linked to being a spectator, a passive observer. This serves as a reminder for audiences to take action. Therefore, the first step Buber suggests for developing the I-Thou relationship, awareness and acceptance will be realized. Just as philosophical inquiry proceeds with new questions, Andersson's films do not provide solutions but instead encourage the audience to keep questioning themselves and the world they live in. We hope that this paper's examination of *mise-en-scène* elements will contribute to future research on their role in shaping philosophical inquiry.

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