

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS

by Roy Andersson



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2019
Official Selection



Cast

Martin Serner (The Priest), **Jessica Louthander** (The Narrator), **Tatiana Delaunay** and **Anders Hellström** (The Flying Couple), **Jan Eje Ferling** (The Man in the Stairs), **Bengt Bergius** (The Psychiatrist), **Thore Flygel** (The Dentist)

Crew

Directing and Script: **Roy Andersson**

Cinematography: **Gergely Pálos**

Set Design: **Anders Hellström, Frida E. Elmström, Nicklas Nilsson**

Wardrobe: **Julia Tegström, Isabel Sjöstrand, Sandra Parment, Amanda Ribrant**

Sound Mix: **Robert Hefter bvft**

Casting: **Pauline Hansson, Katja Wik, Zora Rux**

Production

Producers: **Pernilla Sandström, Johan Carlsson**

Senior Advisor: **Kalle Boman**

Co-Producers: **Philippe Bober, Håkon Øverås**

Executive Producers: **Sarah Nagel, Isabell Wiegand**

Produced by: **Roy Andersson Filmproduktion AB**

In co-production with: **4 ½ Fiksjon AS, Essential Films** in association with **Parisienne de Production, Sveriges Television AB, Arte France Cinéma, ZDF/Arte, Film Capital Stockholm Fund**

Supported by: **Swedish Film Institute, Eurimages Council of Europe, Nordisk Film & TV Fund, Norwegian Film Institute, Film- und Medienstiftung NRW, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg**

International Sales: **Coproduction Office**



ABOUT ENDLESSNESS

By Roy Andersson

Sweden, Germany, Norway, 2019, 76 min, colour



The Priest (bearing the cross)
What have I done wrong?



Synopsis

A reflection on human life in all its beauty and cruelty, its splendour and banality.

We wander, dreamlike, gently guided by our Scheherazade-esque narrator. Inconsequential moments take on the same significance as historical events: a couple floats over a war-torn Cologne; on the way to a birthday party, a father stops to tie his daughter's shoelaces in the pouring rain; teenage girls dance outside a cafe; a defeated army marches to a prisoner-of-war camp.

Simultaneously an ode and a lament, ABOUT ENDLESSNESS presents a kaleidoscope of all that is eternally human, an infinite story of the vulnerability of existence.



Long synopsis

A reflection on human life in all its beauty and cruelty, its splendour and banality.

We wander, dreamlike, guided by our gentle-voiced narrator. She leads us through scenes where inconsequential moments take on the same significance as historical events: a couple floats over a war-torn Cologne; on the way to a birthday party, a father stops to tie his daughter's shoelaces in the pouring rain; a defeated army marches to a prisoner-of-war camp.

Where there is tragedy there is also hope, and humour. A priest who feels utterly hopeless, having not only lost his faith but his vocation, seeks help from a psychiatrist, but the doctor doesn't work for free and is intent on catching his bus home.

There are moments too of vitality, the infectious energy of teenagers dancing outside a café; a young man who has not yet met love; another who expands his mind with scientific thought.

Each vignette captures the essence of what it is to exist. Simultaneously an ode and a lament, ABOUT ENDLESSNESS presents a kaleidoscope of all that is eternally human, an infinite, timeless story of the vulnerability of existence.

The Priest
I have lost my faith...

The Psychiatrist
*I'm sorry, but I have to
catch my bus.*





Roy Andersson on ABOUT ENDLESSNESS

An interview by Philippe Bober

Some of the themes in ABOUT ENDLESSNESS are present in your other films: optimism represented by youth, but also war and despair, and the absence of God. Here you show a priest who doesn't believe in God. Would you say there is always a balance between hope and despair?

Roy Andersson: The main theme of my work is the vulnerability of human beings. And I think it is a hopeful act to create something showing vulnerability. Because if you are aware of the vulnerability of existence, you can become respectful and careful of what you have.

I wanted to emphasize the beauty of existence, of being alive. But of course, to get that, you need to have a contrast. You need to show the bad side, the cruel side of existence.

Looking at art history, for example, a lot of paintings are very tragic. But even if they depict cruel and sad scenes, by painting them the artists have in some way transferred the energy and created hope.

For each of your films you have taken inspiration from paintings. What were your influences for ABOUT ENDLESSNESS?

I am interested by the Neue Sachlichkeit artists because of the strength of their paintings. In my opinion they are extraordinarily sharp and detailed: everything is in focus, everything is very clear and distinct. You can't find this sharpness in film history: the background has to be out of focus. That's why I find these paintings very inspiring for my scenes: everything is in focus, even the grotesque moments in life.

I am often very jealous of painting because I feel that film history doesn't have the same quality as painting history. I really want movies to be as rich as painting can be.

Is there one specific painting that inspired you for this film?

I like Otto Dix's "Portrait of the journalist Sylvia von Harden" very much.

The Neue Sachlichkeit movement took place in the 1920s just before the apocalypse. Would you say that ABOUT ENDLESSNESS is also taking place just before an apocalypse?

I hope not. It would be very pessimistic to think we are living in such a moment. I don't think even Otto Dix believed an apocalypse was coming, but he warned us about the possibility. All of his paintings can be seen as warnings. That is also true for the Old Masters, they portray our existence but also warn us about its briefness: "Let us remember that life is not eternal. And you have to be thankful for the time you have left."

You also mentioned architecture as an influence, that the Swedish Functionalism movement of the 50's was an inspiring aesthetic element for your films.

What is the connection between functionalism and ABOUT ENDLESSNESS?

I had the ambition to show existence in all its aspects: that includes functionalism, modernism, Stalinism. It's a mixture of multiple ambitions to create houses, to create societies. I didn't have the ambition to create a pure style, I wanted to show our time, and in Sweden, functionalism was very popular and used abundantly.

You have said that the presence of a narrator in the film is inspired by the character of Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights. Is this also why you chose a woman to be the storyteller?

Yes, that was a choice. I was hesitant: I tried with a man, and even with my voice but finally found it more interesting to choose a woman. She's like a fairy, very clever, maybe even eternal. It is the first time that I have used a voice over, it is new to me. I was influenced by the voice in HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR. In certain scenes, the main character describes what the audience sees on screen at the same time. And I really loved it.

Your films always include historical scenes, why is it so important for you?

I've always been very interested in history. It was my major at university: I studied history of literature, history of philosophy, even Nordic languages. I was especially interested by the two World Wars. For instance, I was fascinated by the pictures of WWI that I saw as a teenager.

In the film, the war scenes depict the losers. Why?

Yes, winners are not interesting. Because we are all losers in some sense. It is important to acknowledge that in the end no one is a winner. I am not a pessimistic person but the fact is: there is no hope. Life is a tragedy. I'm not the first person to say it.

I thought it was about hubris, represented by Charles XII, or Hitler in your films.

Yes, in some periods in your life, especially when you're young, you experience this hubris. You think you are invulnerable, that you will always win. That is very characteristic of young and strong people. I also experienced that feeling myself, especially when I was around 25 and had just made A SWEDISH LOVE STORY. That was my hubris period, when I thought I would always be a winner, that I would never lose if I fought and worked hard enough.

I wanted to ask you about youth in your films: what does it represent for you?

It's very beautiful, most of the time. I especially like to look at children because they are so full of ideas, hope and vitality; it's beautiful to look at. As long as you are young you keep this hope but then you lose it step by step, as you grow older. For instance, I really like the scene showing the father and daughter



Woman

It's September already.

*“This film is about the
endlessness of signs of
existence, the signs of
being human.”*

-Roy Andersson

in the rain, on their way to a birthday party. The father forfeits his umbrella to help her, an act of selflessness, whilst the daughter just wants to have her shoes tied, and that is so nice to see. Also, in the scene with the girls dancing, I think it's very charming to see the vitality of these young people who are very happy to exist, they love to dance and so that is what they do. There is something contagious about their energy.

You have a very special sense of humour. What do you find funny?

I think truth is very often funny. When I started my career, I was inspired by Milos Forman, Jiri Menzel and other Czech filmmakers. They showed us existence in a very humorous tone. Depicting people that are a little lost, so to say. Not losers, but a little lost. And I really like these films, showing us that kind of humour: small but very funny stories. A lot of filmmakers attempt to create this everyday humor, but it's very easy to fail. I also fail many times, but I don't give up.

Did you shoot everything in your studio?

Yes. Apart from one exterior, the scene with the German army marching, which was shot in Norway.

What were the most challenging scenes in the film, from a technical point of view?

It has to be the flying couple scene. Even setting aside the making of the model city of Cologne, it took us a very long time. The scale is maybe 1/200. For example, the Cathedral, is half a meter high. The whole city is an enormous set. It took a month to build.

What does this scene mean to you?

It is a terrible reminiscence from History: that a beautiful city was bombed and destroyed. But in spite of that, I wanted to show that life goes on. Love, tenderness, sensuality keep existing. It was important to show these sides of existence over a destroyed city.

Though you have these historical scenes, there is a sense of timelessness to your films and here it also ties into the title.

Yes, I wanted to have these scenes which are very close to being timeless though we see it is September or snowing or a historical scene there should be a feeling of timelessness. Again, I am inspired by paintings, an artwork that talks to us in our time

talked to others two hundred years ago, or more. It suggests that we human beings are quite similar throughout the ages and time.

The "endlessness" of the title has nothing to do with the never-ending space. It is not in terms of science, endlessness in this film is about the endlessness of signs of existence, the signs of being human.



Passenger

*Are you not allowed to be
sad anymore?*

Other Passenger

*But why can't he be sad at
home instead?*



About Roy Andersson

Notes on a Transcendental Filmmaker By Larry Kardish, film critic and curator

The world premiere in Venice of ABOUT ENDLESSNESS is, for those of us who love the expansive possibilities of cinema, an occasion to celebrate. Andersson has developed such a genuinely distinctive and original way of making films that his works qualify as a genre of their own. His films have been highlights of festivals the world over and have received many significant international awards. Andersson has had retrospectives around the globe, including two in New York at The Museum of Modern Art in 2009 and the Museum of Arts and Design in 2015 titled, the latter under the telling title "It's Hard to be Human".

Roy Arne Lennart Andersson was born in 1943 in Gothenberg during the Second World War when Sweden, a neutral country sold iron ore to Germany and provided a refuge for Jews fleeing Occupied Denmark and Norway. Although Andersson was an

infant then, later, as filmmaker, the ambivalent position Sweden maintained during World War 2 echoes through the artist's recurring themes of genocide, cruelty, bystander non-involvement and salvation.

A graduate of the Swedish Film Academy, Andersson's early work was much influenced by the free-spirited youth-inflected and short-lived Czech New Wave best represented by Milos Forman (BLACK PETER, 1964 and LOVES OF A BLONDE, 1965), Vera Chytilova (DAISIES, 1966) and Jiri Menzel (CLOSELY WATCHED TRAINS, 1966). Like the exuberant Czech films Andersson watched at the time, his own student works were also about relationships between young people and authority figures - parents and teachers, and like the films Andersson would go on to make, their narrative tension builds from miscommunication and a robust sense of the absurd.

“If you can combine technical perfection with a beautiful energy and poetry, then it is fantastic. That’s what I want to achieve, and it is extremely difficult.”

-Roy Andersson

Andersson’s first feature-length narrative, A SWEDISH LOVE STORY, was released to both critical and popular acclaim in 1970. A tale of puppy love between two working class adolescents with problem parents, A SWEDISH LOVE STORY is a refreshingly unsentimental and honest chronicle of hopes thwarted. Audiences identified with it, and although it is considered Andersson’s most “traditional” feature, its “surprise” ending and its shots that are held slightly longer than convention, portend something “other”.

That “other” was GILIAP (1975) which went massively over budget and opened to virtually unanimous scorn in Sweden. Andersson, didn’t want to continue to make only films like A SWEDISH LOVE STORY, and he broke through his melancholy with a fantastical story of a new employee at a strange undistinguished hotel inhabited by a strange cast of characters.

Failure, in fact, made Andersson more famous than ever in Sweden as he turned to making commercials - about 400 of them - that featured not only domestic appliances and comestibles, but insurance plans and even promotions for political parties. Their humor was deadpan, persuasive, and fellow countryman Ingmar Bergman thought Andersson was “the best commercials director in the world”. It is in and with these small “movies” that Andersson developed his idiosyncratic shooting strategy.

Andersson’s success from his work in commercials gave him the

financial means to establish a production house in Stockholm, Studio 24, and to assemble in 1981 a dedicated crew of technicians and assistants, many of whom have worked with him ever since. The creation of his own studio allowed Andersson to work in his own manner and perfect a signature style that would distinguish the films in the “Trilogy”.

Andersson said he was inspired to return to filmmaking by Kieslowski’s DECALOGUE. Both Kieslowski and Andersson are artists concerned with humanity’s penchant for turning on itself. In 2006, Studio 24 organized a gallery exhibition, “Sweden and the Holocaust”, which traveled across Sweden trying to comprehend the incomprehensible – the genocide which took place in the countries surrounding Sweden in the early 1940’s.

Andersson’s films comprise a series of standalone sequences, each off kilter in itself, that as a whole cohere spiritually. Sometimes a character from one absurd scene appears in another sequence, providing a kind of narrative thread - but not necessarily. The films evolve through an alchemical reduction of visual and acoustic elements, precisely controlled by a master artist. As Andersson himself puts it, “If you can combine technical perfection with a beautiful energy and poetry, then it is fantastic. That’s what I want to achieve, and it is extremely difficult”.

The miracle of Andersson’s films is that they illuminate much that is unpleasant and unmoored about us, but this illumination is motivated by a moral responsibility and a love of humanity.

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS is inspired, Andersson says, by the frame of “1001 Arabian Nights” a collection of stories told by the virgin bride Scheherazade to her husband, the king, night after night to postpone her unjust execution the next morning for alleged future infidelity. Scheherazade would break off her stories mid-plot to keep her listener wanting to hear more on the next evening, and so for 1,001 nights she kept the king in suspense and herself alive. At that point the king rescinded his order for her death.

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS is the purest of Andersson’s films. In spite of its caustic view of humanity it soars like its lovers, and its despair has the weight of helium. It is an authentic transcendent work. I, for one, like Scheherzade’s royal husband, am eager for more Andersson tales, and impatiently look forward to ABOUT ENDLESSNESS, Part One Thousand and One.



Boy

The first law of thermodynamics states that everything is energy and it can never be destroyed. That means you are energy, I am energy. And that your energy and my energy can never cease to exist. It can only be transformed into something new.

Theoretically our energies can meet again in millions of years. And then, maybe you're a potato... or a tomato.

Girl

Then I'd rather be a tomato.

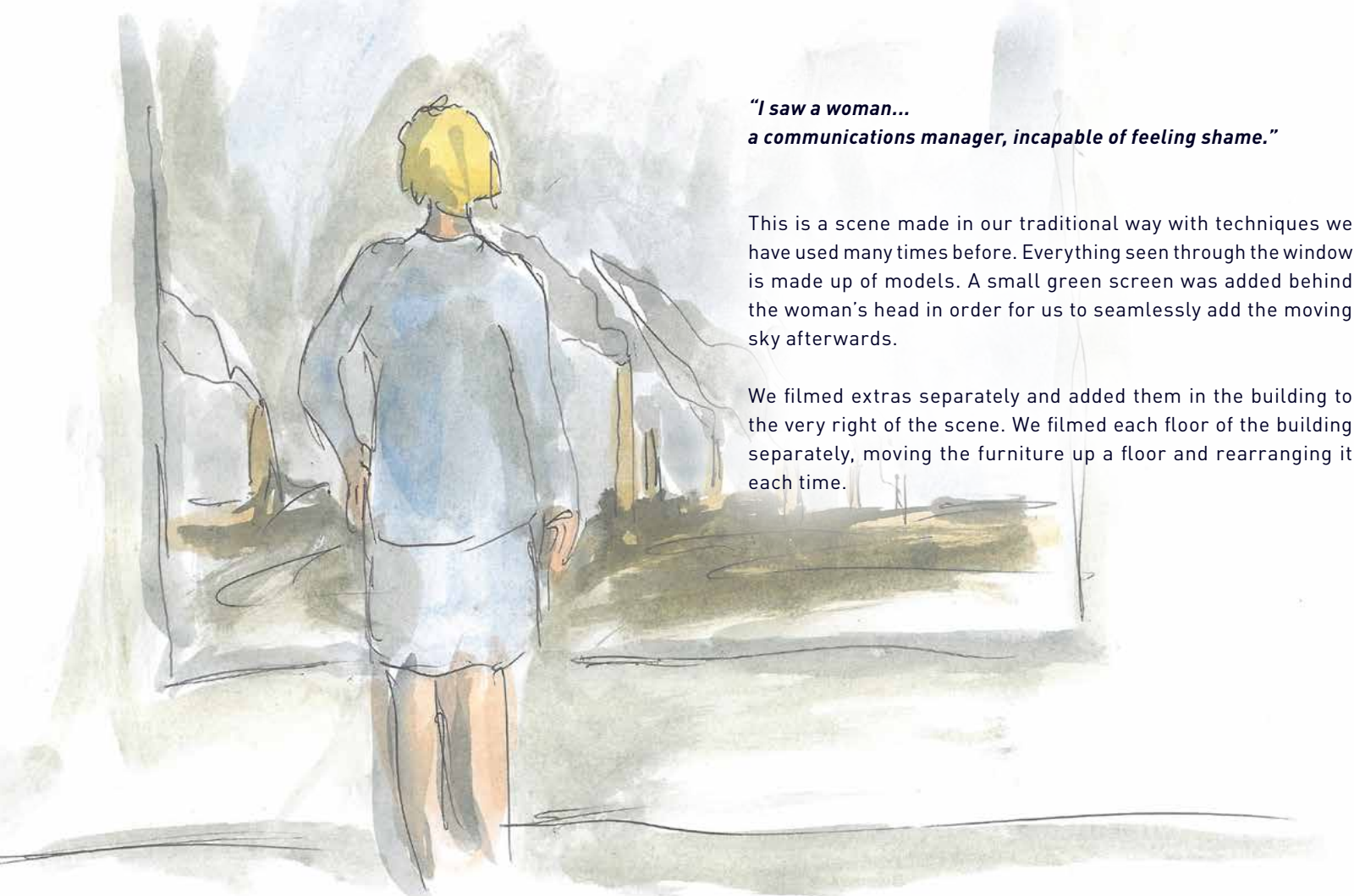


Making ABOUT ENDLESSNESS

A conversation with producer Johan Carlsson

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS was made using the traditional Studio 24 methods but we also had to develop and refine some of our production techniques to be able to bring to life the images that Roy envisioned.

We sketch out scenes with drawings and Roy's paintings, but we are now also using computers to create 3D images of the scenes. We are using new methods such as laser-cutting (for example, for cutting out buildings from Styrofoam or the intricately detailed trees used in backgrounds). This hasn't really sped up the process that much but it allows Roy greater freedom in creating the scenes.



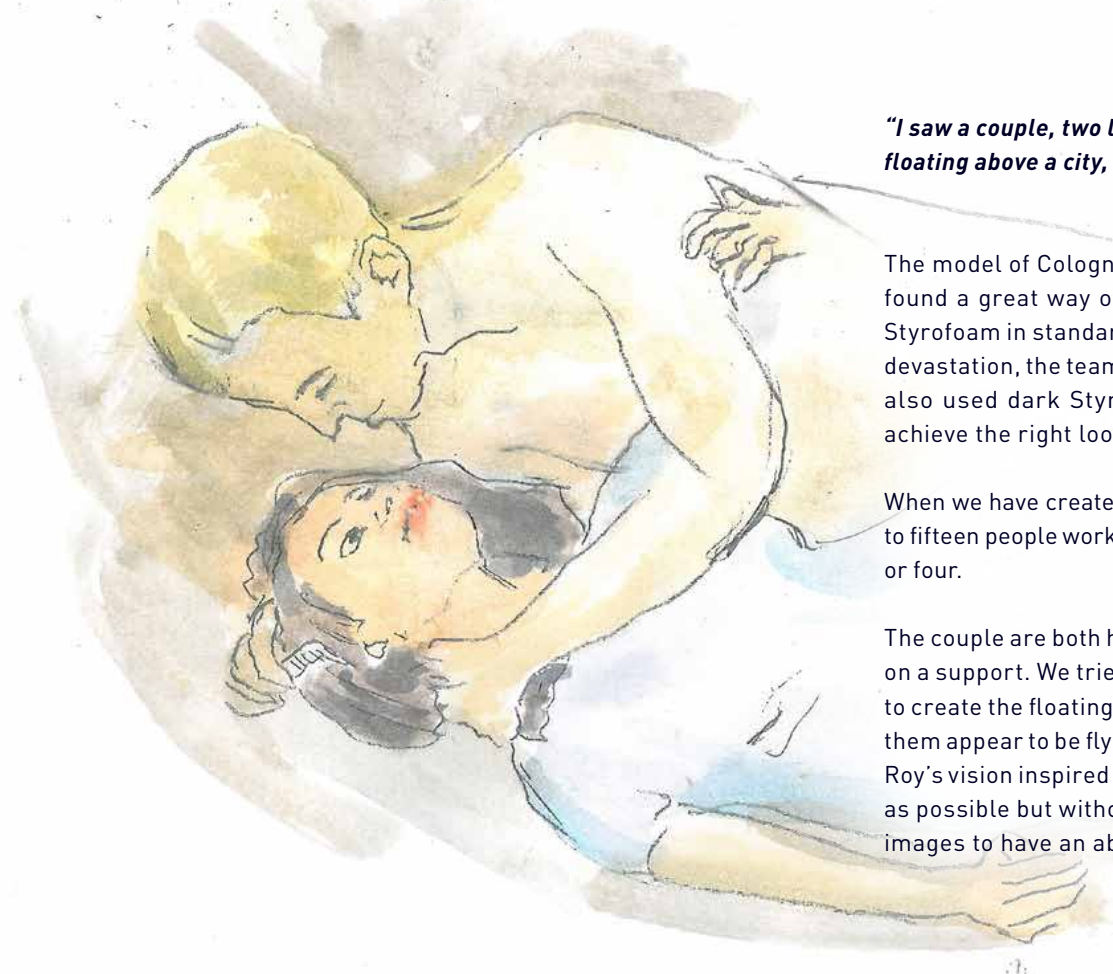
***"I saw a woman...
a communications manager, incapable of feeling shame."***

This is a scene made in our traditional way with techniques we have used many times before. Everything seen through the window is made up of models. A small green screen was added behind the woman's head in order for us to seamlessly add the moving sky afterwards.

We filmed extras separately and added them in the building to the very right of the scene. We filmed each floor of the building separately, moving the furniture up a floor and rearranging it each time.







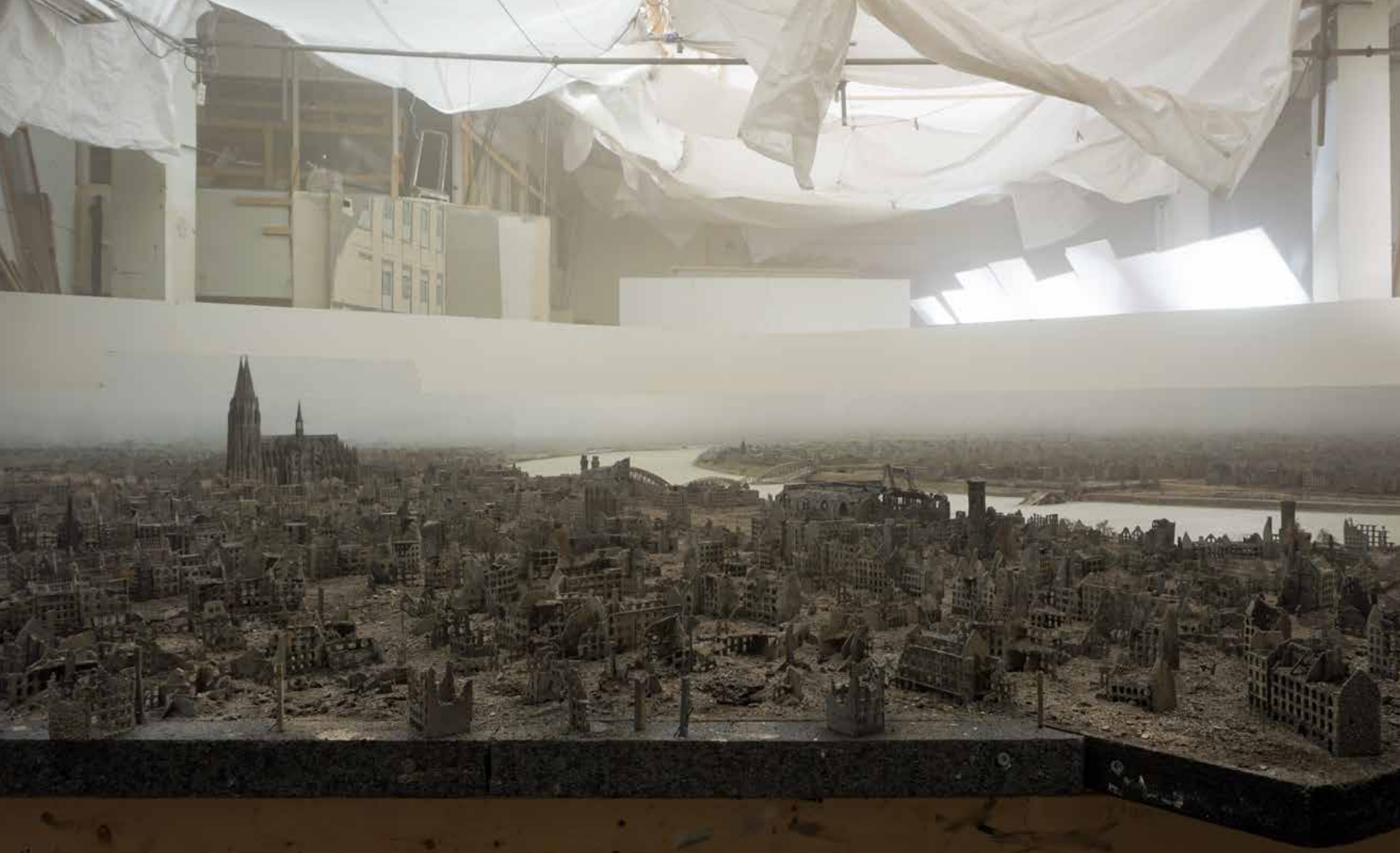
***"I saw a couple, two lovers...
floating above a city, renowned for its beauty, but now in ruins."***

The model of Cologne was built in our studio. The set designers found a great way of doing this by laser cutting models out of Styrofoam in standard building shapes and to achieve the look of devastation, the team crumbled bits off the models by hand. They also used dark Styrofoam so it didn't need much painting to achieve the right look.

When we have created big scenes like this before we have had ten to fifteen people working with the models, but now it was just three or four.

The couple are both hanging from wires, but the man is also lying on a support. We tried a lot of different methods to work out how to create the floating couple. Suspending two people and making them appear to be flying is easy to do, but we were trying to create Roy's vision inspired by Chagall's paintings. Making it as realistic as possible but without making it too real, Roy always wants the images to have an abstract quality.







*"I saw a man with his daughter on their way to a birthday party...
it rained a lot."*

It is a technique that we have previously used in *A PIGEON SAT ON A BRANCH REFLECTING ON EXISTENCE*. What is seen in the center of the image was shot in the studio with the actors, and the rest was a model that we built in our smaller studio.

We built a rain machine to make the rain the way we wanted it to look, but we couldn't use it when we shot the background (as the rain droplets would have been too large for the smaller model) so the water hitting the puddles was inserted digitally.





Man at the counter
Isn't it quite fantastic?





Biography

Roy Andersson

Roy Andersson was born in 1943 in Gothenburg, Sweden. In 1969, he graduated from the Swedish Film School, and the following year his first feature, *A SWEDISH LOVE STORY*, won four prizes at the Berlin Film Festival.

Andersson's second feature, *GILIAP* premiered at the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 1976. Following *GILIAP*, Andersson took an extended break from filmmaking and became a successful commercials director, winning a total of eight Golden Lions at Cannes. His advertising career enabled Andersson to establish Studio 24 in Stockholm in 1981, allowing him to freely produce and make his films and where he would develop his unique style. His short films, *SOMETHING HAPPENED* (1987) and *WORLD OF GLORY* (1991) won prestigious awards including the Press Prize at Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival.

Andersson began filming *SONGS FROM THE SECOND FLOOR* in his studio in 1996 and it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival

in 2000, where it won the Special Jury Prize. It was the first chapter of *The Living Trilogy*, which was followed up in 2007 with *YOU, THE LIVING*, also premiering in Cannes, where it was selected in *Un Certain Regard*.

In 2009, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held an exhibition of Andersson's work, presenting not only his films but also a number of his commercials. The exhibition celebrated Andersson's distinctive filmmaking style, characterized by stationary shots, meticulously conceived tableaux, absurdist comedy and an essential humanity.

Fifteen years in the making, Andersson's fifth feature film and the final chapter of *The Living Trilogy*, *A PIGEON SAT ON A BRANCH REFLECTING ON EXISTENCE* premiered at the 2014 Venice Film Festival, where it was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Film. *ABOUT ENDLESSNESS* is Andersson's sixth feature and premiered at Venice Film Festival in 2019.

Filmography:

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS (2019)
A PIGEON SAT ON A BRANCH REFLECTING ON EXISTENCE (2014)
YOU, THE LIVING (2007)
SONGS FROM THE SECOND FLOOR (2000)
WORLD OF GLORY (1991, short)
SOMETHING HAPPENED (1987, short)
GILIAP (1975)
A SWEDISH LOVE STORY (1970)





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