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Songs from the Second Floor

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Abstract
This is a review of Songs from the Second Floor (2000).

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*Songs from the Second Floor* is a challenging and ambitious film, one that raises many issues regarding the depiction and critique of the place or lack of religion in modern western society, and the uses of religious iconography in contemporary cinema.

Essentially a series of loosely connected scenes linked together via a thin narrative thread, each scene portrays an instance of decay and social breakdown through the trials of a handful of central protagonists who suggest that they could have been picked at random amid the general malaise of modern existence.

Written and directed by Roy Andersson, the film is striking in its insistence on a static camera that records only one shot per scene, quite often in long and extremely stylised takes. Long-serving employees are summarily fired, furniture salesman burn down their stores for the insurance money, immigrants are attacked and stabbed in full view of a passive bus queue, and brilliant sons are institutionalised because they "write poetry until going nuts." All these sketches are quite magnificently filmed—their horror depicted in deadpan tones, played straight for minimal emotional manipulation.

One of the film's central tasks is to meditate upon the relationship between the living dead of today and the actual dead of yesterday. The play between absences and presences points to the extremely problematic inter-generational relationships that exist in contemporary Europe, and which most of us choose to
continue to forget, handing a vicarious victory to the destroyers of Europe's twentieth-century. References to lost traditions are not the reactionary musings of a simple nostalgia but rather a searching philosophical accusation that the ideals of the Enlightenment have been surrendered to such an extent that people's humanity has become defined by their resistance or capitulation to the vagaries of the stock market.

It is through the comic representation of personal calamity and the humiliations of its protagonists that the film succeeds in portraying the absurd reality of modern life. And it is in the rich European tradition of articulating the absurd that this excellent film sits. Existential crises abound, providing the philosophical context within which more overtly religious themes and representations take shape. All of the protagonists appear to be flailing amidst a world gone crazy, where any higher order or purpose to existence is intimated but can no longer be named or appealed to. When religious authority is represented, a resigned acknowledgement of communal suffering is declared, with absolutely no indication that a remedy can or indeed will be offered.

In a representative scene, a nameless governmental committee are invited to suggest a way out of "the problem" and one respected colleague declares confidently but resignedly, "all we can do is hope." And here is the central metaphysical paradox: the film presents hopeless people (read "society" or
"civilisation") with nothing at all, except hope. The common view, whether articulated in individual disaster or communal hell, is that the betrayal of the past is complete and non-reversible. Aside from this philosophical or sociological view of a society without a functioning religious underpinning, the focus upon the paradox of hope explores the need for such a religious ideal while commenting upon the loss of any coordinates via which hope can have a meaningful place in individual and collective experience.

The film becomes most explicit in its treatment of religious issues in the painfully comic use of the image of Christ on the Cross. The sociological and philosophical "death of God" is first introduced at an anonymous trade conference where a misguided Millennial entrepreneur presents his idea of selling icons of the crucifixion. One life-size statuette becomes unhinged in the background, swinging like a metronome for the duration of the long scene upon the Saviour's outstretched left-arm, a wholly effective symbolic treatment of modern society's prevarication between maintaining and debunking the place of institutionalised religion.

This iconography is further used in the film's final scene as the failed entrepreneur discards crucifixion statuettes of every size onto an enormous garbage heap, the very image of a community's rejection of the prophet in its midst, and thus presenting a desperately sad image of the turning away from God.
Ultimately, *Songs From the Second Floor* is a dark and bitter indictment upon the state of modern existence and its betrayals of the ideals of the past, interestingly, both the doctrines of religion that underpin the developments of Western European cultural values and the liberal, democratic, secular visions of the Enlightenment that did much to displace organised religion. The film is thus an erudite and far-reaching paean to a lost imaginary time when man had taken up his residence in the world and all was right with the universe.