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**THE ART OF STATIC: RUBEN ÖSTLUND - AN EXPLORATION
OF FORM, FUNCTION & EXECUTION**

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**UMĚNÍ STATIČNOSTI: RUBEN ÖSTLUND – STUDIE FORMY,
FUNKCE A PROVEDENÍ**

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Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

THE ART OF STATIC: RUBEN ÖSTLUND - AN EXPLORATION OF FORM, FUNCTION & EXECUTION

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date:

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ABSTRACT

This thesis *The Art of Static: Ruben Östlund – Exploration Of Form, Function & Execution* focuses on the minimalist visual language of the Director Ruben Östlund and his cinematographers Marius Dybwad Brandrud and Fredrik Wenzel. Östlund's most recent work *The Square* (2017) being nominated for an Oscar for best foreign language film.

This thesis focuses on how Östlund's visual approach encapsulates his philosophy as a filmmaker through analysis and deconstruction of the visual language of individual scenes within three of Östlund's films: *Play* (2011), *Force Majeure* (2014) and his latest work, *The Square* (2017).

Its analysis focuses on his anti-Hollywood aesthetic, and how he avoids leading his audience's emotional responses. The main features of which can be categorized into aesthetical choices around composition, perspective of the camera and shot duration in the context of his static language. These fundamental visual principals underpin his key visual motif of the "Observers Perspective" that is carried across all of his films. Bringing the filmmakers morality to the forefront through his characters, while also creating powerful and evocative pieces of work.

Each chapter also discusses how this visual language implemented by him and his cinematographer's has and is evolving across the body of his work. From one of ridged locked-off camera, to sequences containing tracks and fluid movement. Yet in his evolving visual language, Östlund manages to retain his principled philosophy visually and narratively.

ABSTRAKT

Tato magisterská práce s názvem *Umění statickosti: Ruben Östlund – Studie formy, funkce a provedení* se zabývá minimalistickým vizuálním jazykem režiséra Rubena Östlunda a jeho kameramanů Mariuse Dybwada Brandruda a Fredrika Wenzela. Östlundův nejnovější snímek *The Square* (2017) byl nominován na Oscara v kategorii nejlepší cizojazyčný film.

Tato práce si všímá způsobu, jímž se do Östlundova vizuálního přístupu promítá jeho filmařská filozofie prostřednictvím analýzy a dekonstrukce vizuálního jazyka jednotlivých scén ve třech jeho filmech: *Play* (2011), *Force Majeure* (2014) a v jeho nejnovějším snímku *The Square* (2017).

Analýza těchto děl se zaměřuje na jeho „protihollywoodskou“ estetiku a na způsob, jímž se vyhýbá snaze určovat emoční reakce svého publika. Její hlavní rysy lze rozdělit do tří kategorií: estetické preference týkající se kompozice, perspektiva kamery a délka záběru v kontextu jeho statického jazyka. Tyto fundamentální vizuální principy podporují jeho klíčový vizuální motiv „perspektivy pozorovatele“, který je přítomen ve všech jeho filmech. Jeho snímky vyjadřují morální postoje filmaře prostřednictvím hlavních postav, ale zároveň představují mocná a evokativní umělecká díla.

Jednotlivé kapitoly se rovněž zabývají tím, jak se realizace tohoto vizuálního jazyka režisérem a kameramany v průběhu jeho díla vyvíjí – od jedné vyvýšené zavěšené kamery až po sekvence pracující s kamerovými jízdami a plynulým pohybem.

Navzdory vývoji jeho vizuálního jazyka se však Östlund drží své principiální filozofie jak vizuálně, tak narativně.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Birth of an Art Form

John Mullarkey states:

“It is a commonplace to say that each century has had its distinguishing art form, that it was poetry in the eighteenth century, the novel in the nineteenth century and cinema in the twentieth.”

(John Mullarkey, Refractions of Reality, 2009, p1X)

Film did not necessarily begin as a form of artistic or philosophical expression, contained to the realms of the scientific world in its earliest conception. But practitioners of the medium became acutely aware of its power, as a commercial medium in its ability to entertain the masses, rather than its power as an art form. But that was to follow shortly after.

As the nineteenth century transitioned into the twentieth, technical innovations such as the Latham loop allowed film makers to use longer lengths of film negative in cameras without them breaking, facilitating the production of more complex films giving rise to short simple narratives and eventual experimentation with editing.

Georges Melies, a renowned stage magician at the time, could see the possibilities that motion picture film held for stage magic. At first his films were simple, not unlike that of the Lumière brothers, as a placed single shot presenting his stage magic tricks, until a happy accident occurred where his camera jammed while he was filming an exterior shot. When he managed to get it working again he continued rolling and on developing the film discovered a jump in linear time. People, who had occupied the shot, had now disappeared and a stage coach had become a hearse.

I am recounting this story as I think it can be considered one of the first pioneering moments of discovery, which eventually lead to film as a form of artistic expression.

His use of in-camera techniques allowing him to manipulate time and space, culminated in his seminal piece "Trip To The Moon" which demonstrated to the world the possibilities of film making with his use of elaborate scenography, special effects and story. Its international success would spur a drive for spectacle in cinema and is something that is still championed to this day.

From *Birth Of A Nation* by WD Griffith, who alongside some of his peers left the north east coast of the states to California, to found what was to become Hollywood and its studio system. These early film practitioners began the incessant drive to push the limits of what is possible in filmmaking. Stanley Kubrick, Orsen Wells and Alfred Hitchcock have all carried this torch.

But in these fledgling years for film, it was not only the technical aspects which where beginning to thrive. As film as an expressive and cultural art form was also rapidly developing its voice at the same time. From German expressionism and new objectivity movement of the early 1920's in what was the Wizen republic (Germany), home to film-makers such as Georg Wilhelm Pabst. Cinema deviated from spectacle to one of social and societal critic and philosophical introspection. Inspiring the French new wave and Italian neo-realism to the New Hollywood of the 60's and 70's.

It was these movements that solidified cinema, in my opinion, as an art form. But I also stand in defense of the big budget Hollywood machine, as both a necessary platform of expression for both ideas and the advancement of the craft. Without one the other would not have flourished, and today's independent filmmakers and Hollywood alike are equally inspired and inspirational to one another.

Hollywood's recognition of spectacle in drawing audiences to theaters, alongside filmmaker's ambition to immerse their audience, has lead to outstanding cinematic achievements.

1.1 THE ART OF STATIC

Films are born on the page but live on the screen as images, movement, color, form, sound and music. From a script, as an abstract concept, it must be visualized and portrayed to the audience. And this portrayal is generally one of a character's emotions, with which the audience must identify. In order to convey this emotion there are techniques, which influence and guide the audience in understanding the character's emotions. It is not just as simple as placing a camera and pointing it at an actor who portrays the emotion. Because the achievement of communicating an emotion is only half of the battle, as we are trying to make our audience feel an emotion as an immersive experience and not just understand it.

This is why the relationship between director and cinematographer is one of extreme importance. As the cinematographer you are involved in the creation and guidance of the visual aesthetic of the film, but not just from the perspective of creating pleasing images, but in sculpting the language of the film, which conveys the characters' struggles and achievements.

In today's industry there are many technical tools at a filmmaker's disposal allowing for seemingly unbroken shots and extravagant moves within films such as *Gravity*, *Birdman* and *The Revenant*.

But in this thesis I will focus on the stripped back, minimalist visual language implemented by the Director Ruben Östlund and his Cinematographer's Marius Dybwad Brandrud and Fredrik Wenzel, which I will call the "Art of Static."

Ruben Östlund is fast becoming one of the most prominent and current Directors who embodies a static and minimalist aesthetic, who for his most recent work *The Square* (2017), was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign language film while also

winning the Palm D'Or, along with a plethora of other awards across the international film making community for many of his previous works.

I will focus on how Östlund's visual approach encapsulates his philosophy as a filmmaker through analysis and deconstruction of individual scenes within three of Östlund's films, *Play* (2011), *Force Majeure* (2014) and his latest work, *The Square* (2017). Assessing how his visual language brings his films narrative and characters morality to the forefront, while also creating powerful and evocative pieces of work, I will also contextualize his early works to that of his most recent, discussing how his visual language has evolved across the body of his work.

It is therefore necessary for me to outline what the parameters of static in this thesis will be. I do not want to confine myself to a locked off frame as I believe this is too restrictive, although used by a fellow Swede, Roy Anderson to great effect in creating almost hypnotically strange films such as *Songs From The Second Floor* (2000) and *A Pigeon Sat On A Branch Contemplating Life* (2014). So, I will include the following; panning, tilting, zooms and fixed camera to an object such as a moving car. But keeping a guiding principal of a fixed perspective of the camera within a scene as the foundation of a static shot.

2. EXPLORATION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION: SHAPING HIS VISUAL LANGUAGE

Östlund's underlying principal of exploration in his films, is the social and societal examination of human flaws or weaknesses in the personality and the conditioning of society into conformity due to those flaws.

Östlund achieves this by presenting human reaction or inaction to circumstances outside of his characters control, hung on the backdrop of societal constructs, making his work both deep and challenging to the viewer on an introspective level as well as challenging the foundations of society that surrounds us the audience.

The key themes which reoccur across his work are: the bystander effect; cause and effect in response to confrontation; gender constructs, primarily centered around the man.

But it is important to note, he approaches his exploration of these weighted philosophical questions by implementing a visual aesthetic at odds with the classical Hollywood aesthetic viewers are accustomed to as stated by Mullarkey on Bordwell in *Refractions of Reality*:

“there is an enduring style of ‘classical narration’ created and subsequently sustained to this day through Hollywood film-making. It is a narrative style composed of individualized character-psychology, local agency as primary plot motivator, cause and effect logic, and canonical storytelling (moving from an initial situation, through its complication, to an eventual resolution).

(John Mullarkey, 2009, p31)

By using this anti Hollywood aesthetic, Östlund avoids leading his audience emotional responses by presenting his films through a visually neutral base. The main features of which can be categorized into aesthetical choices around composition, perspective of the camera within a scene and shot duration. This results

in the utilization of the “Observer Perspective” within a scene, one of the most fundamental visual motifs carried across all of his films and is something on which these are centered.

2.1 Technique:

Östlund’s unique voice has matured over his body of work, advancing both his craft and impact as storyteller. His style shifts from one of rigid locked off camera, to sequences containing tracks and fluid movement. I think it is important to contextualize this by looking at those techniques, and how he has employed them in his early work, to that of the technique used in his later work. And how those creative choices impact the emotive characteristics of his films philosophically and artistically.

So I will briefly touch on the techniques he employs in his cinematography and their implications.

2.2 Observer’s Perspective:

He achieves this Observer’s Perspective by distancing the audience from the scene with a combination of framing using wide lenses and organic compositions that fall outside of classical framing techniques, such as in *Involuntary* (2008) and *Gitarrmongot* (2004) or long lenses with the camera placed far back giving an omnipotent view of his characters and their surrounding world, such as in his films *Incident by a Bank* (2010) and *Play* (2011). This allows his films to become an exploration of a greater question than just his characters’ emotional states.

“Framing is a way of showing a wider perspective than a psychological one.”

(Ruben Östlund, 2011, Ioncinma Interview)

As he refers to above in an interview on *Play*, this aesthetic enables his audience to focus on the wider questions he is presenting and challenges the audience pre-

conceived notions, rather than him manipulating and constructing emotional signifiers through his cameras work. This technique of a distant static camera is also utilized by Roy Anderson in his later work, and Östlund often talks about Anderson's influence on him. But the polarity between Anderson's compositional construction is fundamentally different to Östlund's, as the principals he employs are one of absurd heightened reality, whereas Östlund's is one of organic naturalism, similar to the work of Michael Haneke. Two polar opposite results from a similar defined technique.

2.3 Organic Compositions:

Östlund's use of anti-framing in his compositions, where the subject and their surroundings are not framed in the classical sense of using *golden ratios* or the *rule of third's* to give particular significance to either a character's motivations or established laws of aesthetics, imbues a naturalism to his mise-en-scène. Östlund uses this framing to build on his observer's perspective while retaining a voice of honesty in his narration. One of my favorite examples of which is the simple framing of feet in a scene in *Involuntary*. Shoes and physical blocking of the characters narrate the scene, while the frame looks as if the camera has accidentally rolled off while in its position on the floor.

“Why should the human face be the place to look to learn about character in a film? The way he or she stands, the movement of a hand, or the spatial configuration of bodies might be far more telling;”

(John Mullarky, *Refractions of Reality* 2009, p 53)

Yet his compositions often evolve during a scene to reveal a purpose within the frame, just not on their initial presentation. This is something I will discuss further in the following chapter about *Play*.

This naturalism in framing also contributes to his observer's perspective as I have mentioned, in, for instance *Involuntary's* bus vignette, where the frame is often

obstructed by objects or the physical space itself, as if taking the view of an actual third party observer within the scene. A tool similarly used by the likes of Michael Haneke in *Caché* (2005) and *Funny Games* (1997) or Yorgos Lanthimos, in his early feature films *Dog Tooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011).

2.4 Shot Duration:

Another key tool Östlund utilizes, along with Lanthimos and Haneke, is *real time* or *long shots*. This allows for reflection from the audience, dramatic emphasis and awkward human interactions, which underpin the majority of his films scenes, giving his work a unique sense of the absurd nature of the human condition. The fact that his camera remains almost entirely static in these long shots, heightens these effects yet keeps the directors voice subtle. Alternatively, long shots, which roam with a character in the likes of *Birdman*, *The Revenant* or *Son of Saul*, situate the audience in the skin of the protagonist, dissolving them of rationale and immersing them in the protagonist's arc. An equally effective visual tool using real time, but ultimately an opposite result is drawn from the viewer.

2.5 Broken Vignettes:

Östlund, while breaking from traditional Hollywood aesthetics in using these visual techniques, does retain a recognizable philosophical structure in his work, as outlined by John Mullarky:

“there is a major premise(beginning), a minor premise (middle) and a conclusion (end). In narratology, the tripartite plot is most often understood in terms of an equilibrium at the start, a disequilibrium somewhere towards the middle and either a restored or new equilibrium at the end.”

(John Mullarky, 2009, Refractions of reality p18)

This allows his audience a catharsis in viewing his work, and a sense of completion to the presentation of an argument by retaining this structure. Which is key to the political and social agenda of his films. *Play* and *Force Majeure*, in particular fall into this category.

“ one of the main goals of the film, it should be a political film.”

(Ruben Östlund, Cineuropa: Giornate DegliAutori Interview 2012)

In summary, it is his rejection of the classical Hollywood aesthetics and the application of a more experimental approach, rooted in this static observational camera, which is what I find most interesting about his work. I want to explore this approach across his three most recent films, *Play*, *Force Majeure* and *The Square*, the development of his visual static language, why it is effective and how it has evolved. And although I am focusing on his latest's films, I will analyse them in the context of his earliest work to outline this evolution.



(Source - *Play*: Ruben Östlund 2011)

3. **PLAY: SHIFTING FROM EXPERIMENTAL TO NARRATIVE**

Play (2011) is Östlund's third feature and is the first fruition of his experimental visual approach married with his social and philosophical propositions developed throughout his earlier work.

Play is based on a series of true cases of bullying and theft, which took place in Gothenburg between 2006 and 2008 and is an intriguing observation of identity, manipulation and collusion. Visually appealing, not for its beauty but its intrigue. On the surface, it is a story about five black boys robbing three white boys one of which is of Asian descent. But *Play* is actually an exploration of compliance and the bystander effect.

Östlund laces his narrative with absurdist comedic moments, throughout its five interweaving stories that satirize Swedish conformity, and it is this *saturation of conformity* which Östlund continues to explore in his later work following *Play*. It is also his first venture out side of his usual dissection of a familiar middle class world to confront racial tensions in Sweden across the class divide.

Östlund takes this study of human responses, and imposes it on a narrative arc, yet retains a familiar structural approach to his earlier films, using a series of vignettes like that in *Involuntary* and *Gitarrmongot*, but this time placing his center vignette over a traditional narrative with a beginning, middle and end containing his main protagonists arc. Thus making his vignettes far more digestible for the viewer to decode, as the interweaving narratives link associatively to one another. Whereas in *Involuntary's* vignettes, which explore the action and reaction mechanisms of people when confronted with situations they are uncomfortable with, narratively do not share an interlinking plot, other than Swedish society as whole. Which I think can leave the viewer, if not Swedish, yearning for an arc to grasp.

In using this traditional narrative structure *Play* becomes more accessible as a platform for his discussion on Swedish society as a whole, and race relations to take place within that context. With the creation of this complex layered piece of work, it can be seen as the genesis of Östlund's directorial voice

3.1 Visual Narrative Experimentation

Visually, *Play* retains a number of elements Östlund utilized across his earlier films. His super wide compositions are seen in *Autobiographical Scene Number 6882* and *Incident by a Bank*. His anti framing through observational camera positioning from *Gitarrmongot* (2004) and *Involuntary* (2008) as well as the real time long shots that are evident in all of his films.

But *Play* is the first film where Östlund employs any narrative camera or frame movement, albeit minimally. Although this is not completely true, as we do see movement in his frame in his short film *Incident by a Bank*, where he manipulates the composition by panning and scanning around the frame, presenting brief focused moments and reactions within the narrative. Which serve to heighten the absurdity of

the films scenario, by highlighting those particular moments as the heist goes almost impossibly wrong for the assailants who tear tangled plastic bags from their getaway vehicles wheels while being filmed by a disbelieving public - and are subsequently quickly apprehended due to their incompetence. So this visual style suits this film, as its premise is that of an anecdotal story told over a cold beer. And Östlund takes up such a removed, god-like perspective with the positioning of his camera to the narrative. His zooms in *Incident by a Bank* serve a very different purpose to that of the zooming technique he uses in *Play* which is narrative led.

But the fact that he does look to embrace movement in *Play*, albeit as little as conceivably possibly, embodies his shift from experimental study to narrative exploration. There are two incidences in which this is the case. The boys walking across the astro-turf pitch where the camera tracks behind them, and the opening shot/scene where Östlund uses a zoom to constrict the frame, guiding the audiences view, as he reveals narrative information.

This opening scene where he does this, is a statement of intent from the director, and also serves as a microcosm of the whole film. So I will deconstruct his visual approach to that scene. I will look at how his use of static observational compositions throughout the film helps to convey his philosophical narrative across the entire film. And explore how in the final scene of the film, his real time shot duration allows for a cringingly honest dissection of the morality of his characters and subsequently his audience - which he repeats as a key motif in the iconic scenes of his later films.

3.2 Building Narrative Into The Frame

Play consists of five interconnected stories across the city of Gothenburg. The opening scene, which is a provocation to his audience on race relations in Sweden:

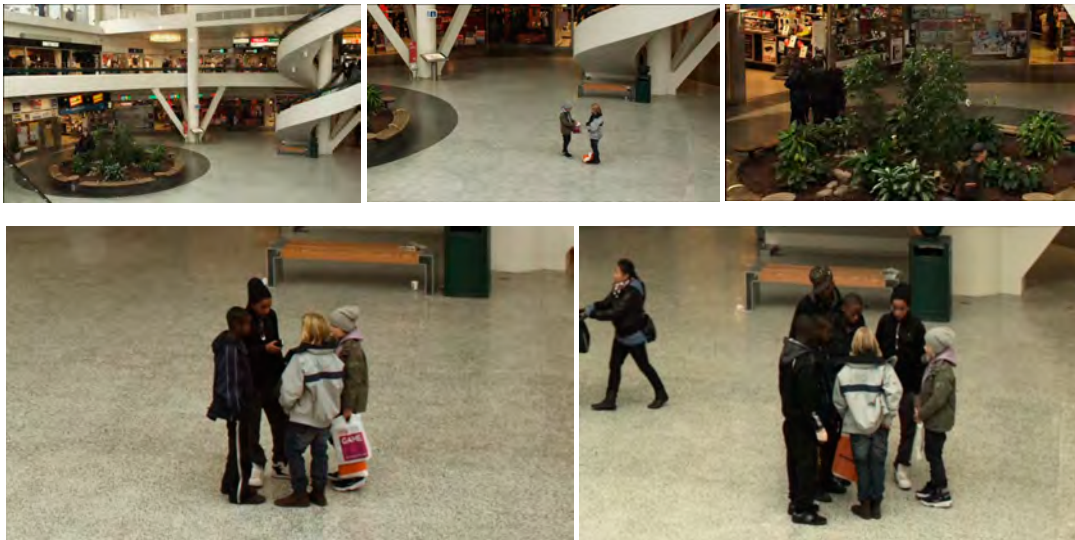
“I was interested in the image of five black boys robbing three white boys, and why this image is controversial. Why am I provoked with this image”

(Ruben Östlund: Valerio Caruso, Cineuropa interview 2012)

At first we are presented with a broad view of middle class society Sweden, a shopping center layered with the trappings of the consumerism of the middle classes. Two white boys wander the shops, and begin bickering on discovering that one of them has lost money. They are soon confronted by a group of black boys, where a game of *good cop - bad cop* results in one of the white boys presenting his phone to the group of black boys, to resolve the issue of ownership over his phone.

Unique to this scene in the film *Play*, Östlund employs a similar visual technique he used in an earlier short film, *Incident by a Bank*, which consisted of a single shot combined with digital zooms, cropping and panning the frame throughout the whole short film. Östlund's desire to focus the audience attention, through his digital zooms, in *Incident by a Bank*, feels measured in its purpose to heighten the absurdist moments within the larger scene and the individual character's reactions to the events that unfold. But when it comes to *Play* he utilizes it to purposefully focus the audience on narrative beats mirrored by his changing composition.

Östlund fades up on the wide of the shopping mall, slowly introducing the audio of two boy's discussing how nice their surroundings are, and how eager they are for Halloween's approach - a holiday second only to Christmas for consumerism and consumption.



(Source- Play: Ruben Östlund 2011)

The two white boys enter the frame with the backdrop of the shop sign '*brothers*' hanging overhead. This super wide opening composition contains both offending groups, the two white boys along with the group of black boys below them. The two white boys positioned higher in in the composition reflective of their prevailing status in Swedish society in which our story takes place.

A slow pan and tilt follows the boys down to the atrium. One of the boys has lost 500kr (equivalent to €50) a hefty sum of money for boys this age. Yet the stakes are not too high for this loss, based on the assumption that the money was given to him by his parents.

The two boys begin bickering over the lost sum of money, one of them throwing his new purchase from *Game* to the floor on discovering he now has less money to spend. A distasteful attitude towards wealth and the value of money displayed by both white boys - Östlund's portrait of middle class privilege is rather close to the bone.

Unbeknownst to the two boys bickering, the frame slowly contracts around them. It is not only the audience's attention which is directed towards the two boys, but also the

attentions of a group of black boys across the atrium, who Östlund pans over to. This separation of the groups in his compositional framing, and using the distance of the pan, highlights the stark contrast and separation between the two groups of boys. Östlund has therefore propositioned his audience with the question of race within the structures of Swedish society and predisposed characterizations in relation to them. Having presented his audience with this, he now faces his characters with it.

The group of black boys, begin to play *zig zag zoo* a precursor to determine who will accost the two white boys and initiate a game of intimidation with them. Östlund uses this game of *zig zag zoo* as an audio motif, that is used once more later in the film, to draw tension across a similarly constructed scene where they prepare to confront another set of boys - the films main protagonists.

He pans off the black boys and back to the unsuspecting white boys. Just as they are about to leave, the black boys make contact with them asking for the time. There is an immediate unease, understandably so, for the white boys in being questioned by the black boys. The initially innocuous request for the time turns into an interrogation of where his phone was acquired, leading to the *good cop - bad cop* play between the two black boys.

Throughout this exchange Östlund slowly tightens the frame, this constriction conveying a sense of intimidation faced by the boys mirrored by the encroaching blocking of the black boys. The tighter frame also suddenly becomes filled with passing shoppers walking by, ignoring or remaining unaware of the incident taking place in front of them. This introduces a second theme of Swedish conformity, which I will talk about later. The level of maturity or lack of 'street smarts' of the two white boys means they are not equipped to cope with the situation and become complicit out of sheer unease with the black boys.

This successive presentation of narrative beats through movement with this panning action and gradually constricting composition shows an early mastery of building a rhythm and suspense across the scene using cinematic language - which is something Östlund plays with throughout the film. The tighter frame also allows Östlund to narratively guide his audience rather than relinquishing control of their gaze by holding on a wide composition.

3.3 Observer's perspective: employing narrative movement

This opening scene compositionally places the audience in the perspective of the observer by placing us at a distance and height to the action, as if we are viewing from the perspective of a fellow consumer in the mall. Östlund defines this framing as:

“a way of showing a wider perspective than a psychological one. I am not looking for psychological answers I look for behavior answers.”

(Ruben Östlund: *Ioncinma* Interview from Cannes 2011)

But this observer perspective plays a deeper roll in also questioning the bystander effect that underpins *Play*. This is something that must pose a question for Swedish society due to the frequency of these incidents occurring over a two-year period of time, and the lack of intervention from the public. Östlund comments on the conformity of the society, and rigidity of societal rules resulting in strangers not daring to intervene. This theme presented through his observer's perspective with slight narrative camera movements reoccurs across a number of scenes in the film. Most significantly, in the introduction of our main protagonists to the group of black boys in the sports shop, and then again in the scene on the tram where older men attack them. Key to these compositions is that his movement does not disturb his observer's perspective, allowing his frame to stay objective rather than emotive in its movements.

After a series of short vignettes, that underline his film's themes, Östlund returns to his main narrative plot, introducing his protagonists as they try on shoes in a sports store next to the group of black boys we saw in the previous opening scene. The camera takes up a position in the back of the store framing the boys in a wide that takes in the surroundings of the shop. His observer's perspective allows us, the audience, to analyze the behaviors of both groups in an analytical way rather than emotional.

But again, he uses a similar pan between the two groups of boys as we saw in the opening scene, rather than holding the scene on a single static shot. This movement helps to separate our characters as it did in the opening vignette, and as it is a repeated motif, it instantly builds suspense in the scene. As this repeated use of this visual language has now become foreboding as to what is about to happen. So his use of camera movement with the pan becomes a signifying tool to the audience but remains unemotional in its presentation.

In the scene on the tram, he uses movement of his frame to reveal information to his audience, creating a dynamism in his shot. The scene opens on the boys boisterously acting intimidatingly to the other passengers on the tram while the white boys, meekly comply by following them around in this game of cat and mouse. One of the black boys eventually goads a white man with dreadlocks into giving up his earphones. Östlund positions his camera, like a fellow passenger, at a distance looking back down the tram as the incident occurs. Suddenly a group of young men violently confront the boys, shoving and smacking them around. They eventually jump from the tram and run to safety while the camera remains in its position.

Östlund uses depth in the shot to create a dynamic composition, with the attack happening in the middle ground and the boys running off in the deep background out

the window of the tram. Which as it moves off from its stopped position, turns a corner, shifting the frame to reveal one of the white boys remaining on the tram in the foreground. It is both clever in its compositional construction, and exacting in its timing and rhythm, and is a technique we will see him use again in both *Force Majeure* and *The Square*.

3.4 Real Time: The Unbroken shot

This is a technique Östlund experimented with in his earlier shorts and features as I mentioned, most notably in *Autobiographical Scene number 6882*. This consists of four shots, all of which are held at an extreme distance on a medium length lens for a lengthy duration of time.



(Source - *Autobiographical Scene No 6882*: Ruben Östlund 2008)

This use of real time, allows the viewer self-reflection on the scene which otherwise would be missing if the scenes were shot with traditional coverage of Wide-shots, Mid-shots and Close-ups. And they build Östlund's subjective analytical visual language.

This technique of real time plays its most significant narrative role in the scene where two grown men confront a boy they suspect has stolen their child's phone. The scene unfolds in a similar long shot manner to that of the opening vignette with a slow contracting frame as the confrontation grows. Its unflinching gaze, imbuing the scene with a squeamishly honest dissection of the film's presentation of Swedish society's principles and ethical morals.

The mention of skin colour and the issue of race is never actually referred to, other than in this scene, and one other when one of the black boys points out to one of the white boys "you never should have shown your phone to a bunch of black boys." Which considering the content of the film, this is a highly complex comment onto itself.

The only other racially different group presented takes place in the short vignettes of Native American buskers in *Play*. We see them performing in a public space, and then once again, as they take a momentary break from their Orientalized profession of performing traditional music and dance to a white audience, having a meal in McDonalds. This is a strange and seemingly unconnected vignette, other than it being a comment on the romanticised image of immigration to juxtapose that of the conflicted realities of immigration in Sweden the rest of the film tackles.

This, the second incident where it is mentioned in the confrontation between the white men and the black boy, is by a woman who takes issues with the intimidation by the white men of the black boy, as she refers to the black boy as an *immigrant boy*. Interestingly, by avoiding any direct racial labeling, Östlund is perhaps underlying the sensitivity of such issues in Sweden. It is a complex scene, presenting a further question of doubt with how to resolve these conflicts, which Östlund has just

confronted his audience with for one hour and twenty minutes. And it shows a refusal to present an opinion by the director.

Interestingly if any of the white children had reacted similarly to the black boy in this scene, potentially these events would have been avoided, as surely a passer by would have come to help if any of the white boys had cried out for help. Either way you are left feeling resoundingly uncomfortable and morally challenged with the scene and the film as a whole.

3.5 Conclusion

“ Bordwell thinks that films contain propositions, so that in each film scene there is some isolable information being communicated to us”

(Mullarkey 2009: Refractions Of Reality p 44)

It would be very easy for a film with such a plot to fall into, and rely on, stereotypes of race to play its central role. And racial stereotypes do play a significant role but it is how they are used and to what effect, that elevates the films narrative.

The notion that black boys are intimidating by their mere presence, features heavily. Physical violence is almost never used, but the boy’s awareness of their own attributed stereotypes is their weapon - used to engender fear, guilt and acquiescence in their targets. And it is through these stereotypes that Östlund challenges his audience with this concept.

Visually, the film incrementally experiments with a shifting view of its characters. At times moving closer, such as in the train when the boys sit dejected, returning home after they have been robbed, to the discerning distance in its final vignette. This change to a more structured narrative with visual dynamism is the maturing of Östlund’s voice as a director but also a storyteller. And Östlund looks to replicate the

power of these moral conundrums in *Force Majeure's* avalanche scene as well as *The Square's* performance art scene.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

4. FORCE MAJEURE: AN EVOLVING STYLE

Force Majeure is Östlund's "most intimate and mature"¹ film to date, delving into the intricacies of family relationships. Whereas in his earlier films, Östlund's work can be viewed as consisting of a proposition to his audience, presented as a detached visual statement symbolic of societal problems within the greater world.

Force Majeure crosses this societal threshold and into one focused on interpersonal relationships within a family, mounted on an arcing narrative question on that of the male gender, its role and the construct of the family.

A "sharp-edged marital drama"² it revolves around Tomas's, (played by Johnanes Kuhnke) reaction to an avalanche that looks set to engulf the ski resorts restaurant as he lunches with his wife Ebba (played by Lisa Loven Kongsli) and their two children Vera (played by Clara Wettergren) and Harry (played by Vincent Wettergren). Tomas flees, leaving his family behind in the wake of a dramatically encroaching avalanche, which ultimately fizzles out in a powdery snow smoke cloud. This near catastrophe creates a dramatic fulcrum point, hinging the film on him and his family's struggle to come to terms with his abandonment of them.

¹ Roddick, Nick: Sight and Sound

² Chesire, Godfrey: Force Majeure Review

“In this sense Force Majeure is an essay on the crisis of masculinity.”

(Muredda, Angelo: Force Majeure –Cinemascope)

Östlund’s interest in the theme of masculinity was inspired by (as he discusses in Roger Eber’s article) an incident recounted by a Swedish couple, friends of his, who had vacationed in Latin America. They were having dinner when gunmen burst into the restaurant and began firing. Rather than protecting his wife, the husband dove for cover. The wife was stunned, “back in Sweden”, the director said, “she could not stop, after a glass of wine or two, telling the story over and over again.”³

Östlund later researched this type of event and found couples who had survived disasters had a strikingly high divorce rate. And he used this as his “*dramatic kernel*”⁴ upon which to build his film.

It is not that Östlund has not approached intimate relationships before, as he has done so in *Involuntary* and *Gitarrmongot*, all be it in a very “*anthropological*”⁵ way. But this time he has crossed a physical boundary with his camera evolving his visual language. *Force Majeure* could be seen as Östlund’s first, for lack of a better expression, traditionally constructed narrative.

In this chapter I want to discuss Östlund’s progression of visual language: his use of camera movement interjected between a visual foundation of static shots; his breaking of the observer’s perspective by intimate placement of the camera; the evolution of his compositions utilizing the close-up and mirrored compositions; his use of montage edits; short vignettes containing expressive imagery over up tempo⁶ *Vivaldi* scores reflective of the films broader themes. But, ultimately to explore how

³ Chesire, Godfrey: Force Majeure Review

⁴ Chesire, Godfrey: Force Majeure Review

⁵ Ioncinma , Interview: Ruben Östlund – Force Majeure(2014)

⁶ Cineuropa , Cannes 2014: Ruben Östlund

he retains his voice of originality, creating some of his most impactful and dynamic scenes to date.

It is also interesting to note, it is his first piece of work with the Cinematographer Fredrik Wenzel. All of Östlund's previous films had been shot by Marius Dybwad Brandrud, but both *The Square* and *Force Majeure* are a collaboration between Wenzel and Östlund. Östlund's authorship of his visuals means that they hardly waver between his different Directors of Photography. But there is a definitive elevation of his craft through his collaboration with Wenzel and his exploration of dynamic cinematic narrative.

4.1 Retaining His Voice

First, I will look at how he has retained his distinctive voice, deconstructing three scenes that I consider to fall within his previously established visual language: the avalanche scene, the bathroom scene, and the dinner table scene. I will focus on his ability to express his vision, and how it has matured beyond one of experimental study to exceptional human insight.

4.2 Avalanche scene

As in all of his films Östlund has the uncanny sensibility to create some of the most powerful cinema in its simplest and raw form, as seen in his short film, *Autobiografical Scene Number 6882* and his debut feature *Gitarrmongot*. But *Force Majeure* - with its pivotal avalanche scene is the fruition of this study - while also being the visual embodiment of Östlund's style in its unflinching presentation.

The scene utilizes Östlund's developed visual language, as discussed in the previous chapter. His nuanced compositional framing is presented through the Observer's Perspective. The scene's real time unflinching single shot with subtle blocking

reveals his overwhelming ability to present the human condition under duress, while wading through an undercurrent of absurd realism.

His previous films have used these techniques as underlying narrative principles, rarely ever breaking from them. But *Force Majeure* is different, with its intimacy of camera placement, montage editing, single coverage of characters within scenes and the sparse but present use of movement. This subtle shift in visual language, positions the avalanche scene within the linear narrative of the film in such a way as to maximize its unflinching sense of exhilaration.

The first act of the film, which presents what appears to be the ideal, picture perfect nuclear family, culminates in this avalanche scene. Östlund, lulls the audience, through his previous scenes, into a seemingly banal family holiday. Subtly revealing the cracks in the surface of their veneer of perfection through the physical distance held between the characters as they make their way around the ski resort. The white lies told by Tomas as he checks his phone in bed and Ebba's reaction to the family portraits as she collects them at the reception desk. All of which is poetically interweaved with the maintaining of this veneer, symbolized by the family brushing their teeth in unison, contrasted to the ski resort as it is manicured into perfection.

This final montage leads us into a seemingly innocuous shot in a restaurant on the ski slopes as the family wait to be served their lunch. Compositionally, Östlund takes up his favored removed observer's perspective, choosing to place the audience back into the restaurant, in what would normally be the deep background, if the scene were to be traditionally covered.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

Behind the family the dramatic mountains stretch up above the frame. No conversation is taking place between them until a drab, uniformed one begins once the food is served. The single long shot gives weight to the emptiness between their words.

Östlund, begins his masculine deconstruction with god-like booming cannons that echo over the landscape. The avalanche enters the frame. The power in this shot lies in its real time interpretation of the individual and the group reactions to impending catastrophe. As Östlund puts it:

“I was very interested in the 3 seconds, where the sharing goes from joyful, to nervous laughter, and then screaming into panic. How different moods can be so close to each other.”

(Cineuropa , Cannes 2014: Ruben Östlund)

As the exhilaration grows the onlookers rise to their feet. And when it looks all but set to hit them with its full force, panic breaks loose. We watch on in horror as Tomas desperately pushes another man out of his way to run for safety, as the restaurant is engulfed in snow smoke - leaving Ebba to grab the children in an effort to lift them to safety.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

The single long shot not only perfectly encapsulates the growing panicked reactions of the crowd, but it also allows the audience the closest possible experiential reaction to the event. There is a point, I am sure, in every viewer where his or her own survival or fear instincts are invoked by this shot - an almost litmus test for the audience.

As the dust dissipates and bodies begin to enter back into the frame, the second half of the scene plays out. Östlund holds on the same frame. It is a full 32 seconds before Tomas arrives back to the table. Every second that passes without him in the frame is a damning appraisal of his cowardice. Östlund's morbidly dark sense of absurdist satire is his final ending note. The patriarchal male hero dismantled, an even deeper silence engulfs the others as only Tomas speaks. Each lingering sentence is uttered in an effort from him to retain face. Ebba slowly dawns her sunglasses masking her shock and horror.

This is a truly masterful piece of writing, blocking and photography. This scene almost outweighs the rest of the film for dramatics. But what is to follow is one of the most honest and delicately handled pieces of family drama one can find.

4.3 Dinner Table

The second typically Östlund shot is that of the dinner table. The family are joined by Tomas's friend Mats and Fanny, his young twenty something girlfriend. An intimate frame for Östlund is created by the closeness of the camera to the group, along with soft high contrast lighting. Caravaggio-esk around the table, a possible compositional hint to the betrayal of truth that Ebba will later share with Mats and Fanny - similar to that of *The Taking Of Christ* by Caravaggio.



(Source - National Gallery Of Ireland, 2018)



(Source - Force Majeure: Ruben Östlund 2014)

Compositionally, Östlund has placed the camera within the circle of his characters. And although a more intimate frame than in his previous work, as I will discuss later, he still retains the characteristic of his visual language by playing the entirety of the scene out on this single shot. Using his real time technique to allow for the unsettling

tone of Ebba to hang in the air as Thomas follows her round the table with his eyes.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

The opening composition is framed with the two visiting guests bordering the frame, the family between them, centered. A symbolic mirror to the opening family portrait scene and a visual motif to their effort to mask the underlying strain they are currently under. Only, in this frame something is off.

Östlund returns them to their previous social rolls within the family, the children passively participating in the appearance of a harmonious family by banking the parents on either side. Tomas centered, returning to his patriarchal family leader roll, as seen from the opening shot of the film - he is the grounding force. Ebba though, is stood cut-off by the top of the frame creating an imbalanced composition.

This imbalance is meticulously carried through in the scenography. The guest's wine is empty, whereas hers is full. Tomas looks as though he is not drinking while Ebba's plate and cutlery is untouched, as the rest of them tuck into their dinner.

As she rounds the table her proposition of a boy's day alone, is countered by Tomas' verbally mild mannered consideration for their guest's holiday: "I was thinking this is their vacation." Ebba must apologise as she takes her seat "*I am sorry, I didn't mean to take control of your vacation*". (*Force Majeure*, 2014)

Yet as she takes her seat, practically crashing into the shot, she almost completely obstructs the rest of the characters as her silhouetted figure now dominates the frame.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

The true composition of this shot not paying off until the very end, with the choice of lighting and the depth of field of the shot coming to the fore. The children, Vera and Harry, are thrown into soft focus peaking out from either side of her while Tomas is completely obstructed. The composition is as unhinged as is Ebba's behavior, but its subtlety in portraying this is masterful. Ebba has circumvented outright abandonment of social politeness for now, but her deeper internal struggle is reflected in the framing and blocking to camera – foreboding what is to come. She is on the brink of emotional eruption - like the avalanche, it cannot be stopped.

4.4 The Bathroom

The final scene I will mention is the bathroom, which is returned to on a number of occasions. Symbolically, it juxtaposes the family's routine with that of the maintenance of the ski resort and is another scene in which Östlund has chosen to place the audience intimately within.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

An entirely static shot, the scene's composition is repeated each time we return to it at different stages through the film. This repetition of composition allows the subtle body language between the actors to tell the story. Micro aggressions in blocking and facial expressions dominate the staging with the actors. But he does use subtle compositional changes throughout. For example, using deep space when he opens with Tomas in the extreme foreground as he uses the toilet, pulling to Ebba as he steps up to the sink. It is a small space but this shift in focus accentuates the distance between them. And the extreme closeness of Tomas to the lens cannot help but feel as though he is under a microscope. Aptly used after the "god awful dinner" (*Force Majeure*, 2014) with Charlotte and the American (see below) where Tomas asserted, passive aggressively, his dominance through his interpretation of the events.

Östlund, to great effect, uses layered sound design of the electric toothbrushes, maintenance of the ski slopes and Vivaldi music, ratcheting up the tension between his acts with these visual interludes. Somehow he has managed to translate this tension to the audience in a similarly passive aggressive manner, mirroring that of the couple themselves through this layering of the sound.

4.5 Stylistic Adaptation

Östlund, with such a distinct visual language across his films, has matured this language in *Force Majeure*. And yet he has not allowed it to fog his vision. No camera movement, cut or composition is without his typifying exacting precision.

His boldest move being that the audience is no longer held at such a great distance to the characters and, in turn, the story. Or from an absolutist, set perspective, within a scene such as in *Play*, or *Involuntary*, he now cuts in and around scenes, favoring characters reactions and actions within those scenes. Shifting one of his most dominant aesthetic elements, unique to his previous work - the proliferation of single shots - Östlund now also turns to montage sequences to bring tension and energy to the film.

4.6 A step closer

One of the most significant shifts, stylistically for Östlund in this film, is the distance he has chosen to close between the camera and the audience. Predominately he places the audience closer than ever before, and he even goes so far as to use close ups, although sparingly, in a few of his scenes.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

Most notably as Ebba relieved herself in the woods, and in his cut to Tomas, in the middle of the conversation around the coffee table. The scarcity of these close-ups gives even greater weight to them.

The close ups I will look at from a point of view of the choice of framing made by Östlund, whereas I also want to touch on his fundamental positioning of the camera to the action. As that closer positioning to the action is in its own right, a huge perspective shift for him.

One of the key scenes to note for this shift in perspective is the sitting room scene, which follows the dining table scene as I have discussed above - in relation to the retention of his director's voice. We cut in on Ebba as she finishes off another glass of wine, having briefly been shown her attending to her wifely duties in the kitchen. As that previous scene was taken from behind her, Östlund has now placed us next to her as the dinner party winds down into informal conversation in the sitting room.

Unlike in his previous films, Östlund has elected to cover the dialogue scenes in a far more traditional construct than ever before. Previously, he would often place the camera in a fixed position throughout the scene. But in this film, and in this scene particularly, he has chosen to cover characters individually. Placing the camera in a participating position within the circle of the characters.

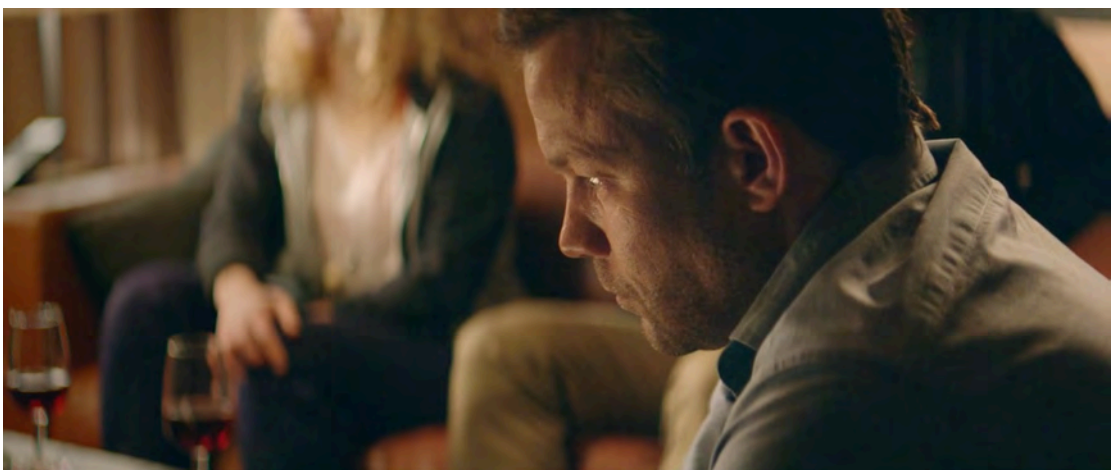
With this element of participation in the interrogation of Tomas, the audience becomes like Fanny and Mats, our attention jumping from Tomas to Ebba and back again. I think Östlund is searching for an answer, an understanding to why people do what they do. And he wants his audience to search for this, by identifying and sympathising with his characters.

When he uses his removed observer's perspective such as in *Play*, our emotions are less connected to the characters. The audience is able to transcend a scene and

dissect it in an analytical light. But the questions he poses in *Force Majeure*, are routed in a far deeper place within the human subconscious. So, it is fundamental that the audience feels a personal, experiential connection to the characters in order to elicit this response from the audience.

This film is also all about saving face, as Östlund puts it. And without placing the camera close enough to the actor, their subtle body language and expressions would not read to the audience. Something, which I am sure as a director, Östlund was conscious of.

He still retains an element of distance by choosing to capture these singles on a lens around the 50mm to 85mm range. This choice, retains an element of the observer's perspective, but from within the confines of the conversation circle. To choose a wider lens and move the camera closer, would place the audience beyond the boundary of observer and into one of identification through subjective framing. But because Östlund so rarely moves this close to his subjects, it gives a unique balance to his coverage, allowing it to float somewhere between subjective and objective. But for one brief moment he does choose to take another step closer. This time with an extreme close up of Tomas.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

In an almost $\frac{3}{4}$ over the shoulder profile of him lingering just above his eye line, his shoulders are weighted down by the frame as well as his guilt. Like a schoolboy being scolded, it is a brief moment of subjective sympathy given by Östlund to Tomas which helps to guide the audience to question their own integrity when faced with such a scenario.

4.7 Effective FRAMING

Östlunds lingering static shots, using his mastery of real time, as discussed in the previous chapter, slowly reveals the cracks in this picture perfect family, to the full and total dismemberment of his characters actions as the film unfolds. But in his daring to take up a closer perspective in the film, Östlund is now able to utilize the close-up for the first time, which was previously inaccessible to his observer's perspective. For example, the $\frac{3}{4}$ close-up on Tomas that I have touched on, the mirrored couple shots and the individual framing of characters within scenes. This is something that Östlund explores further in his work in *The Square*.

Along with the use of the close-up, Östlund also relies on mirror compositions to reflect onto his characters. The best example of this mirrored framing is in the first dinner scene with Charlotte and the American. A simple two shots of either couple are used to cover this scene. The couples are placed in direct reflection of each other.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

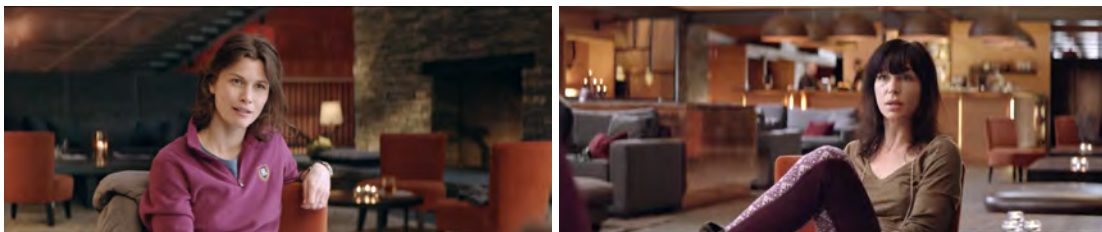
Tomas is still the authoritative figure in their dynamic, but it is the opposite in the reverse for Charlotte and the American, enforced through her belittling exchange with

him in the opening of the scene “*Found this one*” (*Force Majeure*, 2014). In contrast Tomas belittles Ebba at the closing of the scene after a confrontational debate about the facts of the avalanche experience: “Should I take this away?” (*Force Majeure*, 2014) Tomas refers to the wine in front of Ebba.

Even their respective ages are reversed, Charlotte is clearly a few years older than the American, and I presume the opposite is the case with Tomas and Ebba.

Östlund keeps his compositions dynamic with his use of deep space by utilizing the reflection in the glass behind Ebba and Tomas, to reflect the goings on in the background of the scene. Happy birthday rings out across the restaurant as a cake is carried to a table, stifling the conversation and leaving an awkward hanging moment between both couples. Östlund, as ever, eager to stifle his characters by their surroundings and interactions, has not allowed his new closer compositions to remove his lingering single shots.

He uses this mirrored composition once again, in the conversation between Ebba and Charlotte. Propositioning both the audience and his characters with two opposing symbols of womanhood.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

One free spirited, without the constraints of society, Charlotte – and then Ebba, the unsure, conformer to patriarchal society. The question is posed, can either one be truly happy in their roles?

He repeats this framing between Tomas and Mats on the sky lift, in the deteriorating group family compositions and the juxtaposing of his visual vignettes to the family brushing their teeth. This visual construct adds another dynamic layer to his narrative.

4.8 DABBLING IN MOVEMENT

There are 10 tracking shots in total in the film, four of which seem born out of necessity to cover the characters as they ski on the slopes. But in principal these shots are more or less static frames whose purpose it is to follow the action. This is why the primary shots of importance where Östlund uses movement as a guiding narrative tool rather than as a necessity for compositional movement will be the ones I will focus on.

I will begin with his first tracking shot, not only for its importance narratively, but also as it is the first time Östlund has a moving shot in one of his films. It is key to note what shots pre-exist it, and also follow, in order to give context to the purpose of its movement. Although seemingly insignificant as the movement is, in typifying Östlund fashion, it articulates his entire film.

The film opens on a static shot of the family posing for a group photo, the “*bourgeois family’s favorite totem*” (Muredda, Angelo: Force Majeure –Cinemascope) with the stunning backdrop of the alpine mountains behind them. Under a photographer’s directions they awkwardly shuffle between poses, dressed in corresponding outfits, aligned in descending order and alternating orders of genders.

In a typical Östlund composition, he uses real time and layered visual motifs to underpin the films themes by presenting us with the picture perfect nuclear family. The veneer of magazine perfection becomes evidently thin in the following sequence, any doubt of which is removed by Ebba’s reaction to the picture of her and Tomas as

she collects them at the desk. And Östlund will spend the remainder of the film dissecting this image in a series of absurd and reactionary scenarios.

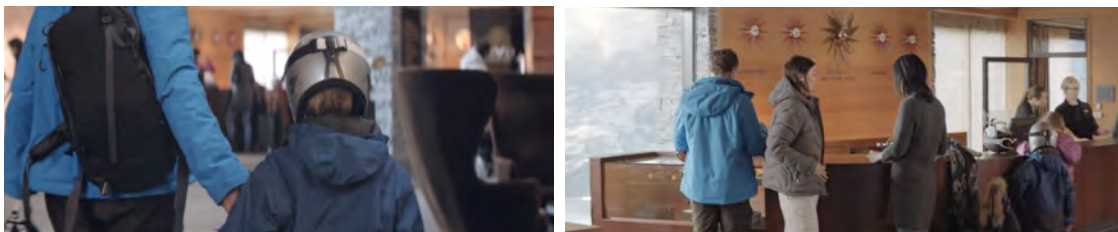
“they have all the things that we should want in our society”

(Ruben Östlund: *Force Majeure*, Interview - *Force Majeure* 2014)

Östlund, a “*sharp visual stylist*” (Muredda, Angelo: *Force Majeure* – Cinemascope) presents his greater thematic construct, setting his nuclear family against the chalet’s hidden mechanical façade as the film breaks into its high paced sequence of tubes sticking from the snow, welcome signs flashing and avalanche prevention infrastructure which litters the mountainside. This imagery I will talk about again in the context of his use of montage editing for the first time.

In his next scene we see the son, peeing in the urinal, his blue overalls matching that of his father - his and his family’s patriarchal leader. Choosing this setting highlights the mechanical difference between a man and a woman. He is also the protégé, the malleable seedling of what is to become a man, yet lingers in the shadow his father casts.

Finally, and for the first time he breaks his static camera, leading us into the story as he tracks with Harry’s walk through the reception of the hotel. His father entering and dominating the frame by breaking it and occupying space outside of it, until the shot hangs back to bring the entire family together in one composition.

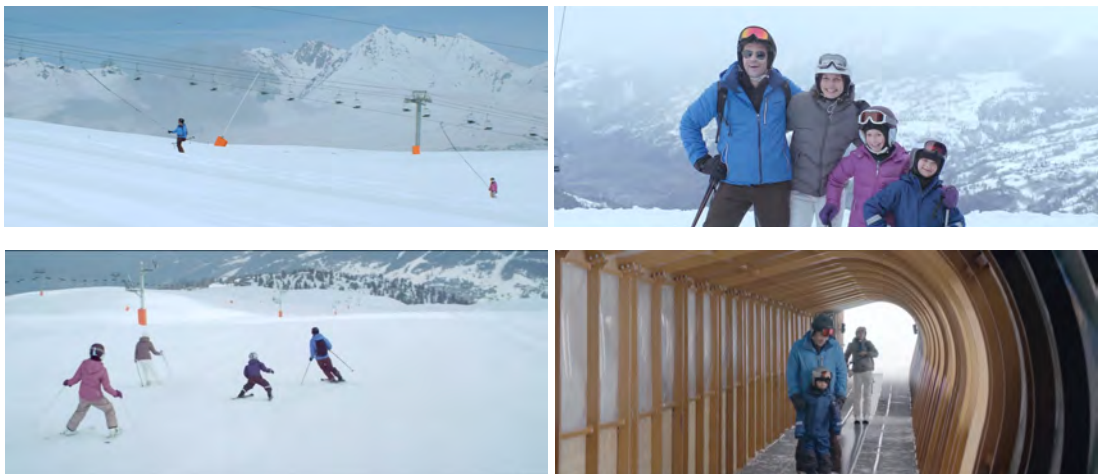


(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

The following composition's main function I feel is to demonstrate how men are presumed, and still to this day, take the leading role in the family and society. So does Tomas in Östlund's composition leading, the camera and the audience's gaze into the story.

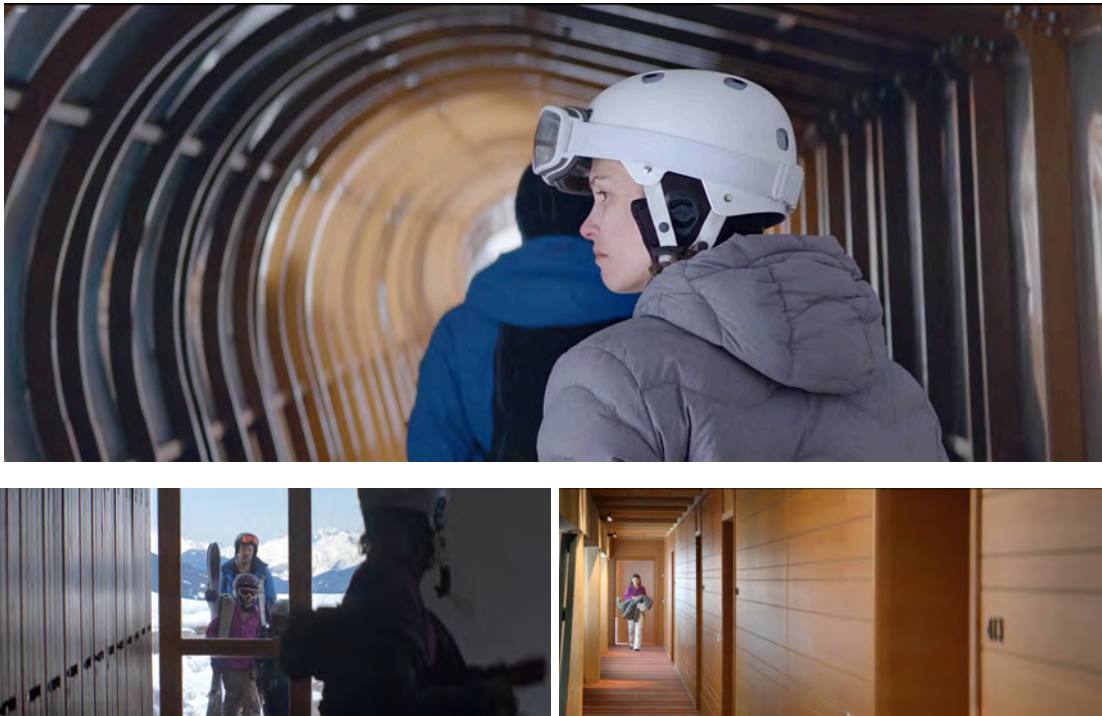
His tracking shot is un-indulgent, becoming a static frame after its short journey, hinging the scene on the blocking in relation to camera, but also between the actors. In doing so, Östlund makes his first and only real comment on how society's constructions of gender rolls are established. As they exit, Harry is tended to by both Ebba and Tomas while Vera, the daughter calls after them, seeking their help. She is swiftly told to hurry up if she wants help, while Harry is the main focus of their attention. A possible prerequisite to the selfishness of man established early on in childhood. Outside of this scene, Östlund never looks to provide answers but rather to present characters in an honest and unbiased fashion, as he does in all his films.

Tomas continues to lead all the following shots as they ski their way across the slopes: creaking tunnels, lingering silences and compositional distance between characters forebodes a different story to the one seen in the family portrait.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

Östlund turns this established visual language on its head, when after the catastrophe, Tomas is no longer the leading principal character in the frame but Ebba. He cuts directly to her in the tunnel as they return to the hotel. She leads the family as she walks to camera entering the ski storage facility and again in the hallway - with Tomas gingerly following behind in each scene.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

It continues as such for the rest of the film. Even after the dinner with Charlotte and the American, when Tomas has belittled her, he momentarily takes back the leading roll as he walks down the corridor. But Östlund has placed the camera behind Ebba, positioning her as leading the shot.



(Source - *Force Majeure*: Ruben Östlund 2014)

In changing this small compositional blocking element, Östlund has removed Tomas from the traditional patriarchal leading role. The narrative focus becomes her emotional processing of the events and Tomas' denial and unwillingness to confront them, emasculating him to the audience, It is a subtle visual shift with the “Forensic exactitude”⁷ of which Östlund is a master.

4.9 Dynamics in static

In his previous films, Östlund often cuts solely from scene to scene without deviating from his key theme. Or when he does so, as with the scene of Native Americans in *Play*, it holds a philosophical position in the narrative rather than relating story arc. In *Force Majeure* however that is not the case. So, his use of montage is an interesting exploration in the development of his film language.

Östlund discusses his struggles with his previous film *Play* (in his interview with Cineurope) in creating dynamics in his static long takes, that make it incredibly difficult to edit.

As explored in the previous chapter on the film, long takes and real time are used to explore the spectators reaction to the events that unfold in that film. In *Force Majeure*

⁷ (Chesire, Godfrey: Force Majeure Review)

he wanted to be able to create up tempo moments while not losing this subjective view, resulting in juxtaposed high tempo edited montages and slower drawn out takes in the film.

The high tempo moments are his first use of montage editing since his ski film days, but in so doing, he creates dynamism through the powerful music of *Vivaldi*. This is combined with the quick succession cuts of static shots of the laborious processes carried out by machinery around the sky slopes, and the relentless monotony of creating the pristine conditions for skiing.

These interludes are intercut with long singles shots in the bathroom of the family brushing their teeth as they prepare for bed. Returned to, like that of the sky slopes, multiple times becoming the symbolic representation of maintaining face in the film.

It also becomes symbolic of the balance of power in the relationship between Tomas and Ebba. Its stillness allowing for the micro movements of Ebba and Tomas, as well as the kids, to become magnified and yet remain downplayed. The flick of the toilet seat, the use of depth in Tomas' close-up, their body language and the layered sound of the brushing, juxtaposed to the droning maintenance of the snowplows.

4.10 Conclusion

Östlund has masterfully constructed a visual narrative interweaving poetic visual language for the first time. His montage editing of the ski slopes layering his narrative with more depth than his previous films carried. And this depth is imbued onto his films characters. Bringing them to life for the audience, allowing the viewer to identify and sympathies with them. Combining this with his new use of camera techniques by incorporating movement and expressive framing in his close ups evokes even further character depth and intrigue, yet he still remains true to his core with his use of real time centerpieces such as the bathroom, avalanche scene and the dinner table.

“Unlike American movies, where our identification with one character or another would likely be imposed from the outset, “Force Majeure” stands back from its couple, allowing us to inspect the characters from a distance and draw our own conclusions.”

(Cheshire, Godfrey: Force Majeure Review)

His new found intimate positioning of the camera, closer than ever before to his subjects, wonderfully engages his audience. Connecting them with his characters emotional turmoil. Avoiding his typifying style that predated this film.

“if we take a step back, so we are not looking too emotionally, more of a voyeuristic way of looking, like an anthropology”

(loncinma , Interview: Ruben Östlund – Force Majeure 2014)

Whereas before one could argue, his removed observers perspective, is distancing to such an extreme, it lacks emotive engagement from his audience. Thus making his films a challenge not just to edit but also to watch.

In doing so Östlund has created one of his most celebrated works, and in his next film *The Square* we see him once again look to further shape his visual language yet retain his unique voice and approach.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

5. THE SQUARE: MASTERING OF FORM AND FUNCTION

Östlund faces criticism for an apparent loss or diminishing cohesion to his narrative, which has divided international opinion on *The Square*. This response has resulted from a lack of clarity born from an overly ambitious layering of subtext to his narrative vignettes. In *The Square*, Östlund tackles four principal themes, in four different narrative arcs, some of which he has returned to from his previous work.

- Inequality in Swedish society, depicted as the result of social and cultural stratification - a theme that is also present in *Play*. Östlund uses the backdrop of a modern art gallery to deconstruct the absurdity of that prudish cultural construct.
- Lack of moral fiber amongst the middle class, personified in Christian the main character, and director of the museum of contemporary art.
- Broader themes of the bystander effect, which acts as a pivotal hinging scene with a performance art piece acted by a bare chested ape-man. This theme again showing up in *Play*, *Involuntary* and *Force Majeure*.

- And the theme of the social contract, which is reflected as the artwork presented in the film as well as the scenes between the two principal characters: Christian and Anne.

It is easy to see how the film's narrative becomes convoluted in tackling such a vast array of themes, and ones as broad as these. And at points it does feel rambling and disconnected, in its effort to link so many themes. Yet Östlund, by no mean feat, still manages to shape a:

“potent, disturbing work that explores the boundaries of political correctness, artistic liberty and free speech in provocative ways and should receive significant exposure internationally.”

(Todd McCarthy, 2011 Play: Cannes Review)

But it is fair to say that Östlund:

“continues to rework similar themes with even more spite but dwindling vigor, the cumulative effect is an expression of condescending, all-embracing contempt.”

(Camia, Marchini, Giovanni: The Square review 2017)

This increasing cynicism leaves his characters somewhat hapless in their pursuit of redemption, as seen in the final shot of Christian as he drives away from his failed redemptive act. But it is Östlund's departure from the rigid long take formalism of his early work, a “*felicitous change of course*”⁸, seen first in his razor sharp dissection of masculinity in *Force Majeure*, and again in *The Square*, is what bares most fruit for the director.

Visually, his most ambitious and complex piece of work, Östlund utilizes fluid movements interspersed throughout sequences, such as in the performance art scene. Stand alone camera set pieces such as in the staircase, whip pans and poetic

⁸ (Camia, Marchini, Giovanni: The Square review 2017)

tracking movements, heightening tempo combined with editorial cuts, reflective of his characters internal struggles as seen in the car and hallway scenes.

This confidence in movement, first experimented with in *Force Majeure*, allows his static scenes and moments greater impact, helping to create a visual rhythm that was lacking in his earlier work.

In this chapter I will look at two sequences that embody this poeticism and break from Östlund's established observers naturalism. The car scene leading into the hallway, which underpins the main protagonist's - Christian's, narrative arc of failed redemption - and his pivotal and most iconic scene from *The Square*, the performance art piece in the palace.

Finally, for my conclusion I will discuss the cringingly awkward sex scene, which proliferates his absurdist "sulfurous weirdness"⁹, heightened through his aesthetic of static subtlety with brief moments of objective poeticism. And how the development of these narrative tools has led Östlund to the mastering of both the form and function of cinematics in *The Square*.

5.1 Breaking from Naturalism

The car scene begins with Christian, Östlund's main protagonist's demise, in his efforts of reprisal to retrieve his phone, wallet and cufflinks. This particular narrative arc of Christian's moral struggle contains the majority of Östlund's poetic or cinematic camera moves, giving this narrative arc a distinct language outside of the film's other scenes, thus helping to define it. For example, in the scene in the kitchen, when he is momentarily afraid of confrontation from noises in the hall, Östlund uses a long pan and track, building suspense in the audience.

⁹ Todd McCarthy, *The Square*, Review: Cannes 2017

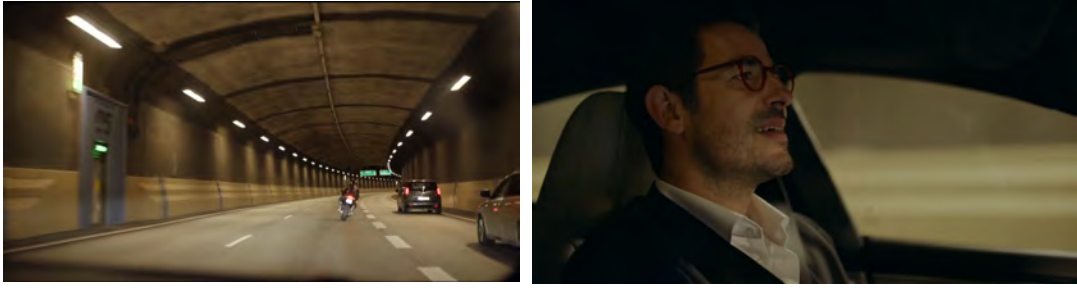
The shot in the car is the third moving shot in the film, with the two previous ones consisting of tracks. The first opens the film's fourth scene following the title card of the film. It tracks parallel to Christian as he walks through the city square on his way to work, where suddenly he becomes embroiled in protecting a hysterical woman, resulting in him being robbed.

The second moving shot is a subtle track in on him as he addresses an audience in the museum about a new exhibition. All of these moves are naturalistic, subtle visual tools to guide the audience narratively through the use of dynamic movement and embolden his characters emotions.

The first example of his use of emotionally leading camera movement and framing in any of his films is in *Force Majeure*, for example, the scene where Ebba relieves herself in the woods. Östlund slowly tracks in to a big close up on Ebba as she watches the family pass her on the ski slope.

The syntax of this shot in the car, which uses a whip pan, is very different to Ebba's close up in the woods or the previous two tracking shots in *The Square*. It is closer in its nature to a static shot, consisting of a series of whip pan's from subject to character to character and is a significant break from the naturalism that generally proliferates his films.

It opens on two motorbikes thundering past frame in a quick turn of pace from the previous scene of Christian and Michael writing the demand letter. The camera, positioned in the passenger seat, whip pans onto Christian in the driver's seat.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

This positioning of the camera is worth noting now, as something I will discuss in more detail later.

Michael leans forward, breaking the frame as he turns the music up. Christian's choice of tracks, clearly shows his lack of experience with such provocations. The camera whip pans following Michael as he sits back down. And whip pans once more back on to Christian as the beat kicks in.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

Wenzel talks about their effort “to create a feeling of suspense” and anticipation in the audience questioning “where it is going to go?”.¹⁰ The choice of using whip-pans, allows for this suspense to build, rather than to dissipate by cutting around the scene.

¹⁰ Fredrik Wenzel “à propos de *The Square*”

Christian and Michael's war cries are fortified by the tracks heavy beats "*coming at them with a hammer*" and "*the tesla of justice*" (The Square, 2017). The absurdity of such remarks is highlighted by Christian's stating that they are in a tesla. This show of bravado is brought to an abrupt end with a hard cut out to a static POV, looking out the car window at the entrance to the apartment block. The safety of the *tesla of justice*, feeling suddenly finite reflected in the return to a static shot.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

But it is a clear withdrawal from the naturalism we are used to from Östlund - for two reasons. One, he has broken his naturalism by imposing the camera on the actors through a choice of a wide lens in a confined space, probably brought about out of necessity, as well as a consistency of look across the film, where a 35mm lens is primarily used.¹¹

And the second comes in the form of the positioning of the camera in the passenger seat, forcing Michael into the back seat. A rather strange peculiarity in blocking which is never addressed and yet somehow works in the scene's context, in that it also reflects the social status of each character.

¹¹ Fredrik Wenzel "à propos de The Square"

The whip pans precision, mechanical in its exacting marks, helps to heighten the disconcerting tone by removing any naturalism of movement in the whole scene. This also separates this scene's language from the rest of the language of the film.

When you look at it in the context of the linking scenes that narrate Christian's story, there is a common approach to the poeticism in their visual construct. But the movement used in those scenes is much more fluid and naturalistic in comparison to the whip pans. So, this scene sits adjacent to those other vignettes in the film.

This panning movement in the static shot is only as effective as the context within the sequences that presents it. The hard cut, as mentioned previously, suddenly breaking the bravado behavior of Christian and Michael, shocking them and the viewer back into the reality of the situation they have placed themselves in and makes the whip-pans deliver on this suspense.

Östlund diverts back to static single coverage of each character in the scene as they sit in the car outside the apartment block. This time he chooses single framing and a profile composition both increasing the conflict and separation between the two characters over the predicament of delivering the letters.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

He uses a whip pan one last time as Michael hands the letters over to Christian. This time, the emphasis of such a movement is on the real time delayed reaction of Christian, now challenged with taking responsibility for distributing the letters. His

pause hangs in the air like his fear. The unbroken shot once again delivering on this awkward moment between the two characters.

Östlund then returns to naturalistic flowing movement in the following scene, as Christian delivers the letters through the letterboxes. With each floor his movements becoming increasingly desperate, letters drop to the ground as he struggles to shove them through the slots. In unison, but disconnected to the movements of Christian, the camera tracks in both the same direction as him and also against him.

This kind of movement imbues the camera as the narrator in these scenes, and brings a heightened tempo reflective of his characters increasing desperation. This visual poeticism was something he lacked in the strictness of the rigidity of his locked off shots in his previous films. And this ability to control tempo and rhythm is what I will discuss in my next section on the art performance scene, which is Östlund's centerpiece standout scene in the film. But the lack of consistency to a visual language, in that one scene contains mechanical moments and blocking which has been dictated by camera placement - rather than flowing camera moves or actor motivated camera movement which we see in the film's other scenes. This means his language becomes abrasive to the audience, and confusing with its lack of consistency. These are sentiments which proliferate throughout this film.

5.2 Modulation Of Tone And Rhythm

The centerpiece sequence, which occurs about half way through the film, is an almost thesis to Östlund's maturity as a director with his undulation of pace and tone through his use of movement, or lack thereof, and its creation of suspense. His informed compositions, and dissection of the upper societal stratus (along with the human condition) is this time focused on the bystander affect. It is Östlund at his greatest and as Giovanni Marchini Camia writes in his review for sight and sound;

“It is a veritable tour de force that would be better served as a stand-alone short.”

(Camia, Marchini, Giovanni: 2017 *The Square* review – Sight and Sound)

It is a lengthy scene which, similarly to that of the avalanche scene in *Force Majeure*, is a series of escalations from playful to threatening to finally erupting in violence resulting in near rape. But in this sequence, although dealing with similar emotional beats as with the avalanche scene, both Östlund's topic and approach to analysis through his visual language is very different. In the avalanche scene, he is presenting the male archetype as the hero, in the context of danger, and the deconstruction of that within the group whereas, in this scene, his attention is turning to that of the bystander effect but also within the group context.

Across both scenes there is a unifying approach to how he conveys them to the audience. The avalanche scene contrasts with the performance art scene by holding on a single static shot to great effect. But both scenes utilize the observer's perspective and real time, heightening the suspense brought through unbroken shots.

But in *The Square*, Östlund brings another dimension to his work, a visual symphony of shots that engages the audience at a deeper experiential level, rather than the analytical approach of his previous films that I will now breakdown.

The scene opens on a black-tie dinner party for the museum's benefactors in a lavish palatial hall in which a performance artist will prowl through, impersonating a gorilla. The scene is masterful for its pacing and modulation of tone through the combination of static shots along side movement - amalgamating all the tools Östlund has learnt in his previous films.

The opening sequence of shots consists of a static long shot, looking across the room following Christian as he enters the hall and takes a seat.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

It is followed by a static shot of two guests of importance and Christian's boss. They are the financiers, and represent an outside view of importance to the continued well-being of our main character Christian, on to a slow pan across another table of guests, as the opulence of the setting and the formality of its guests is reflected in these opening shots and their compositional formality and movement.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

Östlund then cuts to the wideness of the hall, taking up his favored observer's perspective from within the crowd. Similar to that of the restaurant shot in *Force Majeure*, the audience becomes a participant in the scene building a sense of anticipation as we wait for the performance. Oleg finally emerges in the doorway, but disappears taking a step forward on all fours.

Östlund cuts to another static mid-shot of a table of guests, his composition placing the viewer just under the eye line of the guests, obstructing our view with them as they crane their necks trying to get a glimpse of Oleg.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

Again the composition and static perspective mirrors the perspective of the guests, transposing their intrigue to us the viewer, by concealing Oleg from view building the visual anticipation.

It is also key to note that this shot also forebodingly introduces our final victim in this sequence - establishing a familiarity with the compositions and also the geography of the room. This is something which helps to orientate the viewer in what could otherwise be a confusing scene, due to its physical scale and large amount of extras.

He cuts back to a tighter mid shot, but from the same perspective as the wide that prefaced it. It is physical move of camera rather than a lens change due to the angle of view we are presented. Choosing to continue covering the scene with the wider lens, a 35mm retains the feeling of the observer, rather than using a longer lens, which would give a more constructed, field of view to the composition.

This keeps the audience engaged in a participating observer's view which heightens the sense of threat to Oleg's encroaching walk as he closes the distance between himself and the camera, walking deeper into the crowd

d.

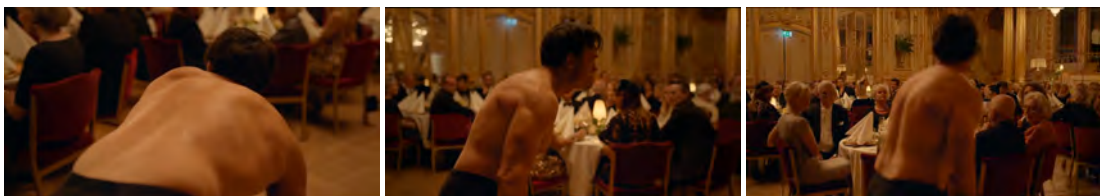


(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

Our sense of his physical threat grows in tandem with his physical presence in the frame. But Östlund holds this anticipation at a medium level, releasing the tensions with a moment of levity as Oleg raises his arms and the crowd claps in appreciation. Östlund in sync with movement cuts out wider, placing the audience at a more comfortable distance, mirroring this relief of suspense for now.

5.3 Building of pace

Östlund then cuts to a static mid of another table, and suddenly our sense of geography is thrown as we have not see this angle before. Reflective of this confusion, the characters in the frame are forced to also turn awkwardly, trying to follow Oleg's movements. Oleg suddenly appears in the bottom of frame in a Close-Up over the shoulder.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

His physical presence in the shot overwhelms it, the sense of threat now raised to its highest, the tension is ratcheted up once more. Reflective of this change of pace, the camera is suddenly no longer static, both panning and tracking with him, holding him in the foreground. Compositionally, we are angled looking a little down on Oleg's back, the angle accentuating his muscular physic, which builds to him standing up tall as he surveys the crowd.

Östlund accentuates the suspense in this shot by raising the visual tempo through his blocking and staging of the camera. Because Oleg stops his walk and stretches tall, this allows the camera to round him. The motion of the crowd in the parallax of the field of view, increases the dynamism of the shot without needing to increase the speed of the actual track, which could otherwise be distracting.

This shot also jumps the viewer, from one as a spectator to the perspective of the predator. Suddenly, we sense the impending summit to his choice of pray as the camera scans the audience. In keeping Oleg framed as part of the composition, the threat of him to the audience is retained, rather than the viewer being fully emerged in Oleg's perspective.

With a throw of focus we see his selected target, and Östlund returns to his static coverage, cutting into a mid of Julian still unsuspecting at this point, but clearly uncomfortable in the setting.

5.4 Real time long shot:

The sequence then breaks down into a series of two long takes which pose as microcosms of the whole scene, repeating but incrementally increasing a build of suspense through nervous laughter, to fear by intimidation, to violence. Östlund uses the long takes to play with suspense and tension in the scene, similarly seen in all of his previous work.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

A mid-shot of Julian holds on him throughout the confrontation, with a slight adjustment to height as he stands up from the table. Narratively and uncharacteristically Östlund breaks this long shot by cutting back to Julian. This cut appears to be a possible cut between takes, rather than a stand-alone shot with no apparent adjustment to height or position of camera. This only serves the purpose of reminding the audience of Christian's responsibility within the context of the scene. Eventually Julian is chased from the room with Christian standing up in the foreground in an effort to diffuse the performance and tension. This serves to emphasize the theme of the underlying absurdity of art world that has apparently turned on its audience.

This long static aesthetic is repeated in the following shot and attack. The camera jumps to the other side of the room, taking up a position just behind Oleg as he scans the crowd once more and begins another prowling walk through the seated dinners. The fear is now resolute as no one moves a muscle.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

Östlund relieves the tension ever so slightly by allowing a shorter conflict to occur at a distance to the viewer, suddenly increasing it once again as Oleg dashes towards camera, mounting a table and howling over the audience.

He finally breaks his static shot, with a creeping track in on his final victim as Oleg plays with her hair. He has lowered the pace of the scene once more through this action, but has achieved the holding the suspense by using a track, keeping the unbroken real time elements of the shot.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

The use of the long shots and observer's perspective (like that in *Force Majeure*, *Play* and *Involuntary*) propositions the audience with their reactions in such circumstances. Addressing the question of the bystander effect and questioning to

what extreme - or how violent an attack must become - before people are willing to intervene. Even in the context that they are many against one, so with their sheer numbers they can overpower him. Yet, the herd mentality is one of self-preservation in allowing others to fall pray while the individual remains safe in the crowd.

The endnote of this scene, when finally one of the dinners runs to her aide, is that of the “mob mentality” which is suddenly induced. Oleg is swarmed by joining dinner guests, with the cries of “kill him” as they pile on top of him in a flurry of fists.



(Source - *The Square*: Ruben Östlund 2017)

This modulating building of anticipation, utilizing static shots to build upon the stillness of the audience, with a subtle increase in tension, relieved in cutting out wider, and suddenly increasing it once more with a tracking shot that brings great tonal rhythm to the sequence. The fact that it takes an assault to trigger an intervention, which builds rapidly to a mob, encapsulates *The Square's* central themes much more directly than the film as whole.

This rhythm shows a new mastery to Östlund's work from a visual sense. Whereas before with *Force Majeure*, his scenes rhythm was translated through his long shot

and its blocking, he now carves his scenes up into a sequence. What could be seen as a dilution of his visual style, creates the most dynamic sequence he has shot to date. The dinner's increasingly acute paralyzed discomfort is transferred to the viewer, without this dynamism in coverage, the emotive impact of this scene would be less so. And it stands, like with his other films, as a detached statement rather than experiential one for the audience.

His zealousness in overly layering his films themes and narrative arcs, in combination with a sporadically detached visual language throughout, means *The Square* fails to deliver as a film with a cohesive whole. But. at the same time, the strength of individual scenes surpass anything he has done before.

6. CONCLUSION

Östlund is a unique and original filmmaker in both the development of the craft of filmmaking and in the exploration of key themes in a wider political-cultural context. For Östlund, filmmaking is at its heart a political process. But, in his engagement with the political, he embraces a particular kind of creative originality in his use of the 'observer's perspective' which allows the audience to draw its own conclusions on the activities of the film's characters, rather than be directed by the filmmaker to a specific judgment on the ethics and moral principles displayed by individuals in situations of conflict and catastrophe.

As his work has evolved, and his visual language has matured, his political commentary is still the genesis for his films, but his desire to engage the audience with them seems to be coming to the fore.

His use of cinematic language in *Force Majeure*, symbolic montage edits, intimate framing and positioning of camera, engages the audience deeper in his explorations than ever before. This compositional layering and dynamic blocking such as the imbalance in the framing in post-catastrophe scenes in *Force Majeure*, reflecting the unbalancing of emotional interactions among his characters, brings symbolic depth to his visuals that was previously missing.

But *The Square*, while attempting to do the same, unravels due to its over-complexity in its presentation of themes. But it does show an ever-blooming ability to cinematically narrate the same themes he continues to return to. Only now, with close-ups and intimate placement of the camera, his audience is put into a position of discomfort, which at times can create a sympathy, or identification with the experiences and moral choices of the characters in his films.

Maybe this use of cinematic technique distracted from the core function of *The Square*'s narrative. His technical execution with the help of Fredrik Wenzel has elevated his visuals to a pinnacle in both *Force Majeure* and *The Square*, but now it is his narrative that must do the same. Perhaps the simpler construct of *Force Majeure*'s character arc must be returned to but his poeticism can remain.

But it means this new found visual style has now opened him up to a wider audience than his previous *avant-garde* works. And does it mean he has swapped his director's principles for ones of commercialism and the success that brings. I do not think so, but I believe it will fall to his collaboration with his cinematographer Fredrik Wenzel to uphold his cinematic principals.

Östlund's themes demand to engage his audience in a perspective, through the creation of a visual language that poses reflective questions to his audience. And this can only be achieved through the visual language he utilizes.

And Östlund does, for now, retain this through his techniques of long shots and distance between the audience and his characters. But the tools he has garnered through his work, that has shaped his cinematic language, can act in tandem with these themes. So what appears to be an ironic slide into conformity from the director himself, does not mean that his work must diminish its ethos. Moreover, it will become cinema for the masses, which can be culturally significant if achieved. But it comes down to his collaboration with Wenzel to continue to implement these techniques - but not allow them to limit his language. And if the burden of this responsibility can be better shared between Östlund and Wenzel, this may well be the fruition of their next venture.

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