

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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The Square (dir. Ruben Östlund, 2017)

Cast

Christian (curator): Claes Bang: Danish actor of stage and TV; *The Girl in the Spider's Web* (18)
Anne (reporter): Elisabeth Moss: TV's *Mad Men* (07-15) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (17-18)
Oleg (ape-man): Terry Notary: played a primate in the recent *Planet of the Apes* reboots (11-17)
Michael (assistant): Christopher Læssø: Danish series *The Bridge* (11-18), along with Claes Bang
Julian (artist): Dominic West: *Chicago* (02); TV's *The Wire* (02-08) and *The Affair* (14-18)

Off Camera

Director/Writer: Ruben Östlund: also a film professor at the University of Sweden in Gothenburg
Cinematography: Fredrik Wenzel: also shot Östlund's previous feature; lots of creative influence
Prod. Design: Josefin Åsberg: prior work with Östlund and fellow Swede Lukas Moodysson
Film Editing: Östlund cuts the initial versions of each individual scene himself; when it's time to arrange the whole film, he enlists Danish co-editor Jacob Secher Schulsinger

Also directed by Ruben Östlund...

Involuntary (2008) – An early effort that addresses how bystanders consistently fail to intervene in social situations that are running off the rails; composed mostly in unedited still-camera shots

Play (2011) – Five black Swedish boys steal cellphones and other valuables from three white Swedish boys; they then spend a full day together of arbitrary tests, dares, and competitions

Force Majeure (2014) – Östlund's breakthrough to the US and the globe, about a young-ish father who races to save himself in a brief moment when his wife and children appear to be in danger, then finds it impossible to escape their judgments or to admit his own instinct to abandon them

If you enjoyed *The Square*...

Me and You and Everyone We Know (2005) – Another vignette-driven quasi-comedy that starts as a satire of contemporary art but widens out to broader questions about human connection

Holy Motors (2012) – If you liked *The Square*'s episodic structure and embrace of exaggerated storytelling, try this utterly unique tale of a French businessman who gets driven around all day in a limousine; every time he climbs out for an appointment, he is a totally different person

A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence (2014) – Yes, that's really the title. Another award-winning blend of dry sketch comedy and worldly meditation from another Swede

The Swedish Theory of Love (2015) – Documentary that played the Chicago Film Festival about the recent trends toward individualism in Swedish society, despite its "socialist" reputation

The Square's competition for the 2017 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar...

A Fantastic Woman (Chile; Amazon) – The winner, by the same director as *Disobedience*, about a young transgender singer who is ostracized by the family of her older, newly deceased lover

The Insult (Lebanon; Amazon) – Suspenseful drama about an escalating feud between two men, a Lebanese Christian and a Palestinian refugee, who eventually take their personal war into court

Loveless (Russia; Amazon) – Immaculately shot, deeply sad drama about a married couple on the edge of divorce who cannot even join forces when their young son goes missing after school

On Body and Soul (Hungary; Netflix) – Winsome, elliptical drama about two employees, male and female, of the same meat-processing plant who realize they've been having the same dreams

Films The Square beat for the top prize at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival...

The Beguiled (USA; Amazon for purchase) – Sofia Coppola won Best Director for her mysterious, suspenseful remake of a Clint Eastwood drama about an injured Union soldier (Colin Farrell) nursed by the students and headmistress of a Confederate girls' school during the Civil War

BPM: Beats Per Minute (France; Amazon) – The runner-up prize went to this extremely moving, sexy, inspirational, and sad ensemble study of anti-AIDS activism in Paris in the early 1990s

In the Fade (Germany; Amazon) – Diane Kruger won Best Actress as a white German woman investigating the murders of her German-Turkish husband and their young son in a bombing

Okja (South Korea; Netflix) – Dystopian drama / vegetarian manifesto / adventure story about a young girl protecting her pet "super-pig" from a corporation that wants to harvest its flesh

Wonderstruck (USA; Amazon) – A children's film for grownups, about two deaf children in the 1920s and 1970s who journey to New York City for different reasons and whose lives overlap

You Were Never Really Here (UK; Amazon on July 19) – Extremely violent, and not for the faint of heart! Joaquin Phoenix won Best Actor as a haunted contract killer living off society's grid, trying to rescue young girls from sexual predators and traffickers in contemporary Cincinnati

Other recent winners of the Palme d'or at Cannes...

I, Daniel Blake (UK, 2016; dir. Ken Loach) – Protest piece about an older man laid off from his job who cannot access unemployment and has trouble training for a new job in the modern UK

Amour (France/Austria, 2012; dir. Michael Haneke) – This unflinching study of old age, starring French legends Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Louis Trintignant, earned five Oscar nominations

The Tree of Life (USA, 2011; dir. Terrence Malick) – One of the most breathtakingly shot films of the last decade; a Texas coming-of-age tale that assumes cosmic, planetary, and religious scale

The Class (France, 2008; dir. Laurent Cantet) – This year-in-the-life of a suburban French high school was based closely on the memoirs of an actual teacher, who stars as a version of himself

4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days (Romania, 2007; dir. Cristian Mungiu) – One of the greatest, tensest films of the new century, about two college roommates in Communist Romania whose friendship is tested when one of them requests the other's help to procure an illegal abortion

Facts about *The Square* you may appreciate...

The Square is a real art exhibit that Östlund and a collaborator devised prior to the idea for the film and debuted at a contemporary art museum in Värnamo, Sweden, in 2014. The idea originated in part from the sudden rise in gated communities in Sweden after 2008; the research Östlund did for *Play*, a previous film about a wave of robberies perpetrated by and against children, with no adult intervention; and a story that Östlund's father told him about how adults elicited automatic trust from their neighbors when he was a boy in Stockholm in the 1950s, but they no longer do. (Christian gives his daughters a version of that speech in the movie.) The night the installation premiered, some teenagers stole the brass plaque with the message of "The Square." Since then it has remained a site for begging, busking, protests, wedding proposals, and other activities. Three additional "Square"s have been installed in Sweden and Norway.

Many scenes hail directly from Östlund's experiences or those of his friends. A female friend was robbed in almost the same way Christian is at the start of the film and responded by planting letters under the doors of every resident in the building where her phone was tracked. Östlund attended a theater performance that a man with Tourette's repeatedly interrupted. The barely-comprehensible text that Anne reads to Christian during their opening interview originated as real prose on the website of one of Östlund's university colleagues. The list goes on and on.

Östlund follows an unusual production process where he starts with a provisional script and spends one entire day on each scene, during which he and the actors improvise very different versions of the entire 7-8 minute scene. They average about 40 different versions over the course of the day, and sometimes as many as 70-80. At the end of the day, Östlund writes a "locked-down" version of the scene, incorporating all the best discoveries from all those improvisations, then asks his cast to perform about five more takes of the now-finalized scene, sticking to the script.

The scene where Oleg terrorizes the museum-donor dinner was too elaborate for the process I have just described, requiring one day just to choreograph the action and camera movements, then three more days for filming (which did include a lot of improvisation). Östlund found Terry Notary, the actor who plays Oleg, through a YouTube search for "actors impersonating monkeys," and discovered Notary giving demonstrations of how he devised movements and voices for his roles in *Planet of the Apes* and *King Kong*. The 300 extras in the scene were actual donors to the National Museum in Stockholm. This scene, too, echoes a real-life event, wherein Russian performance artist Oleg Kulik starred in a piece called "Beware of the Dog" in a Swedish museum. When patrons got too close or otherwise upset him, he lunged at or bit them, including the daughter of the museum's curator, who eventually called the police.

Claes Bang was totally unknown in Sweden and not even that prominent in his native Denmark when Östlund cast him. Östlund asked all the actors auditioning for Christian to write their own version of the speech he gives on the stairs to the gallery patrons, explaining the concept of "The Square" and trying to encourage their empathy with the experiment and with their fellow citizens. Bang's draft is very close to what you hear in the film; the line that sold Östlund was, "I recently lost my father and have nobody to talk to—could you spare me 30 minutes of your time?" The role has abruptly made Bang a star at 50 years old. While filming each scene, Östlund repeatedly asked, "Would *you* actually behave as Christian does, if you were in the same situation?" Whenever Bang said no, they found a way to adjust the scene.

Östlund maintains that the themes of *The Square* apply to many countries, especially in the West, though he did see some elements as specifically Swedish. For example, Christian and his assistant speak Danish throughout, a language close enough to Swedish that residents of each country easily understand the other. Despite close cultural ties, Östlund and Bang describe an undercurrent of rivalry between Sweden and Denmark; audiences in both are apt to see this as a factor in some of the Swedish characters' mixed-to-negative feelings about Christian.

Given the European specificity of some facets of *The Square* and its early goal of advertising the actual installation, Östlund had not wanted any English-speaking actors. He also doubted his ability to judge subtleties in English-language performance. However, he held one day of casting sessions in London when he met Moss and West and was impressed at their abilities to improvise and to challenge him. He was also surprised by the impact *Force Majeure* had made in the US and UK and saw this as a chance to expand his reach. His next movie is an English-language film about a male model who is panicking as he starts losing his hair (inspired in part by stories Östlund hears from his wife, who is a fashion photographer).

In trying to raise money and interest for *The Square*, first as an installation and then as a movie, Östlund and his collaborators heard several times that the theme was too broad and the notion of "equal rights and obligations" too easily acceptable; the premise evidently lacked drama or controversy. Östlund wrote these objections into the scenes with the PR team who eventually create the appalling promotional video. The two actors in that scene actually do work for advertising, fundraising, and media-campaign firms, extending Östlund's interest in realism.

Broad conversation topics...

Art: Reporters often call *The Square* a "satire of the art world." Does this gloss encompass every theme in the film? Did you think the film was any less critical of the real world than of the installations or conversations inside the gallery? Note how many of the scenes outside the gallery are decorated with the same white-walled, rectangular austerity as the museum spaces, and how many images beyond the museum mirror those inside. (For example, the pyramid-shaped structures that delineate parking spots outside the building where Christian deposits his letters look a lot like the piles of gravel in Julian's installation; Michael damages Christian's car by running into one, just as a custodian wrecks one of Julian's piles.)

Aid: Note how often characters call for "help" in *The Square*: the thief passing as a target of violence; the woman attacked by Oleg at the gala dinner; the boy who demands justice at Christian's apartment; and Christian himself, asking to borrow a phone after he is robbed or imploring a homeless man to watch his shopping bags while he seeks his daughters. When is hope actually furnished in this movie? When is it withheld? Who *doesn't* ask for any help?

Children: *The Square* withholds the information that Christian is a father until halfway through, after which his daughters become near-constant presences. It ends on a long cheerleading performance, on shots of his youngest child in the back seat of his car, and shots of Christian driving that originate from her perspective. Real or hypothetical children also figure heavily in the disastrous video, the disastrous subplot with the letters, and the post-coital debate with Anne. How did you judge Christian or the film differently as kids became more prominent?

Masculinity: Both of Östlund's last two movies have been about handsome, self-confident, upper-middle-class men who begin to lose the esteem of their families, their co-workers, and/or the public at large, and who dig even deeper holes in trying to redeem their reputations or avenge the ways in which they feel they have been wronged. When did you feel *The Square* was most actively critical of masculinity and its particular foibles? Did you think Christian was the chief or the only target of satire in the film, or did most of the characters seem to invite critique? When particular characters call out Christian's failing—most obviously Anne, the journalist, and Elna, his most senior colleague at the museum—did you feel the movie supported them?

Separation of Art and State?: The grounds of the royal palace in Stockholm encompass several major museums, including the National Museum of Art. The movie intensifies this relationship by naming Christian's museum "Royal X" and by claiming that the museum and the former private quarters share a wall, to which he has key access. By implying such a close relation between the palace and the galleries, the film opens up the possibility that any critique of the museum may also apply to the state, the monarchy, or the nation. When did you feel that *The Square* served most as a more public or political indictment of more than just the art world?

Animals: Oleg's catastrophic performance as the ape-man at the gala is the culmination of many appearances by animals or animal-like humans in the film, including Oleg's own gallery piece where he huffs and hoots like a gorilla onscreen; the bonobo who inexplicably inhabits Anne's apartment; the dog who accompanies Elna to work meetings and into the parking garage; and the small kitten toted around by the girl who gets blown up in the promotional video. What do you make of this steady stream of creatures? Were they a way of highlighting the "animalistic" behavior or inner natures of the human characters, or was the connection more subtle than that?

Money: The least obviously absurd moment in Anne and Christian's interview might be when he names constant fundraising as the hardest part of his job as chief curator. However, we never see him struggle with this—in fact, the museum has just landed a windfall donation from two (real-life) donors that will pay for *The Square* and several other subsequent exhibitions. By contrast, Christian fails abjectly at many other responsibilities of his job, like paying attention at meetings, making smart promotional decisions, responding to controversy, maintaining professional boundaries (against, for example, sleeping with journalists who are writing about him), or selecting artworks that make a sturdy case for themselves as art. Do you think his lament about the demands of raising cash are a red herring? And/or do you see money, to include the harsh divide between haves and have-nots, as a key tension in the film nonetheless?

Music: *The Square* does not credit any original composer. Its soundtrack has been "curated," you might say, with excerpts of existing music, all the way from Scandinavian rave music to a Bach orchestral suite. The most recurrent musical passages are two pieces by American jazz vocalist Bobby "Don't Worry, Be Happy" McFerrin: one an extended vocal improvisation (which recalls Östlund's own improv-heavy filming process, as well as Christian's desperate attempts to respond on the fly to surprises and budding emergencies), and the other a rendition of "Ave Maria" that McFerrin performed with Yo-Yo Ma. How did these musical choices, in their eclectic spread or in particular instances, influence your response to the film's story?

Some specific touches worth contemplating...

Intro: The first shot of the movie finds Christian asleep on the couch in his office and late for an interview. Is it fair or too easy to call *The Square* a movie about Christian having to wake up?

Camera and Editing: The first PR meeting starts with a shot of a woman (unnamed, played by Maja Gödicke) who welcomes everyone to the meeting but then is cut out of almost every shot while four men debate strategies for several minutes. She only returns when suggesting an “ice bucket challenge,” an idea the other attendees quickly dismiss. This is one of a few moments in the film when women are sidelined in conversations, in the film’s images, and in its editing.

Production Design: The poster over Christian’s desk in his office is a lakeside landscape print—exactly the sort of artwork in which neither he nor his museum show any interest. What do you make of its prominent placement in his workspace? Do you ever see other images like this?

Lighting: As Christian and Michael work late into the night on the letters they soon drop in the working-class apartment building, the office gets very dark, lit only by an overhead fluorescent bulb. This feels like a direct allusion, albeit ironic, to the lengthy strips of fluorescent track that constitute “The Square” in the courtyard outside the museum, to which this scene cuts away.

Geometry: As Christian races to deposit his letters, the camera emphasizes the square shape of the stairwell, accentuating what a bad job he is doing of inhabiting the spirit of his progressive-minded enterprise. On the night the irate young boy visits Christian’s apartment, we note that his own building includes a square-shaped stairwell, too, which is again shot from an overhead angle that plays up that shape. Other “square” motifs abound in the film, including an abstract painting in Christian’s apartment that depicts a series of concentric squares within squares.

Behavioral Echoes: Many characters in the film unwittingly echo each other’s actions. For example, when Christian drops his sheaf of letters during his fast-paced attempt to stuff them all in the apartment doors, the image recalls Anne dropping all her notes in their interview.

Costumes: Julian, the artist behind “Mirrors and Piles of Gravel,” shows up to his public interview and the gala dinner in pajamas and sneakers, rendered superficially presentable by his blazer. He himself is a sort of “found object,” like his art pieces—he shows up more or less without any polish. His clothes also reflect a thin veneer of social expectation on top of listless laziness.

Sound: Östlund employs no sound or music at all in the shot through Christian’s windshield as he gives the cash in his newly-returned wallet to the beggar outside 7-Eleven. Why, do you think?

Framing: As Christian gets the phone call about the second package that has arrived for him at the 7-Eleven—arguably the moment when his fate begins unraveling—the camera shoots him through a very small window inside a door, as he stands outside the garbage-collecting area. Adding to the feeling of visual entrapment, he is framed against the high, pointed, jail-like bars protecting the dumpster, which also reflect a “Keep out!” message inimical to “The Square.”

Framing: Östlund builds a visual joke into Anne and Christian’s sex scene, filming it almost entirely through the respective points of view that each character has on the other. Not only are their perspective comically unflattering but they are almost never in the frame together in their moment of ostensible intimacy, and their experiences of the event don’t correspond at all—even before their war over the not-yet-disposed condom underscores their failure to connect. *The Square* has so few point-of-view shots throughout—Östlund tends to prefer a more distant vantage on his characters and scenarios, almost as if they were installations or artworks viewed from afar—that the visual choices in this scene stand out all the more.

Costuming: *The Square* debuted in festivals mere weeks before *The Handmaid’s Tale* premiered on Hulu, so few people would have noticed a potential joke in Elisabeth Moss wearing a scarlet bathrobe—loosely reminiscent of the garments worn by Atwood’s handmaids—in the scene where Anne may or may not be extorting Christian’s semen for her own reproductive ends.

Film Editing: The PR team emphasizes in their pitch for “breaking through the clutter of media” that many viewers make a choice within two seconds—and never more than 10-15—about what to click online. We might understand Östlund’s preference for long, static camera shots as not only an art-film staple or a way of drawing out situational comedy but a rebuke to this cross-cultural pattern of shortened attention spans.

Sound Effects: The grinding sound element that accompanies that huge, precarious pile of chairs in one of Julian’s artworks—implying that the whole tower might collapse at any moment—was apparently added midway through filming Anne’s and Christian’s tense exchange about the night they spent together. It feels like a departure from Julian’s aesthetic of simply letting objects “speak for themselves” but it plays right into Östlund’s taste for situational humor and for throwing his actors off-guard as they experiment with new twists on each scene.

Framing: Much like the point-of-view shots during the sex scene, the moment when the art gala attendees finally rise up against Oleg and begin pummeling him en masse represents a major visual departure for *The Square*. Not only does this moment sport a shaky, handheld camera—something Östlund has previously avoided through entire films—but the images even tilt way off the usual horizontal axis. It’s easy to imagine that many viewers will side with the folks who are beating Oleg, but Östlund uses the camera to make their violence as scary as possible.

Mise-en-Scène: During the scene where Christian films his video apology to the young boy (in a dark room with a single light-source, evoking the scene where he and Michael wrote the letters in his dark office), you can make out Christian’s cufflinks on his table. This detail is realistic in the sense that he has just returned from that catastrophic gala but also symbolically linked to his bad faith, since these were the same items he cited as part of the robbery only to rediscover them later in his own pocket—a fact he never bothered to correct to anyone who heard his tale.

(For this sheet, I consulted the following online articles: [Playlist interview](#) with Claes Bang and Elisabeth Moss; and features and/or interviews with Ruben Östlund in [The Guardian](#), [GO](#), [Collider](#), [IndieWire](#), [Cineaste](#), [Playlist](#), [Slate](#), [Slant](#), [Deadline](#), and [MovieMaker Magazine](#).)