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Cringe!
**Discomfort and Embarrassment
in the Cinema of Ruben Östlund**

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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Cringe!

**Nepohodlí a Rozpaky
ve Filmech Rubena Östlunda**

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Přidělovaný akademický titul: MgA

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Declaration

I declare that I have elaborated the Master's thesis entitled

Cringe! Discomfort and Embarrassment in the Cinema of Ruben Östlund

independently, under the expert supervision of my thesis supervisor, and using only the literature and sources cited therein, and that the thesis was not used within the scope of a different university programme of study or to obtain the same degree or a different degree. I consent to the publication of the thesis/dissertation in accordance with legislation and with AMU internal regulations.

Jules Roux



Prague, 13/05/2025

.....
[given name(s), surname and signature]

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Swedish director Ruben Östlund creates and portrays awkwardness and embarrassment in his films *Force Majeure*, *The Square*, and *Triangle of Sadness*. Through close readings of each film, and drawing on psychological theories of vicarious embarrassment and emotional/cognitive discomfort, the study develops a "toolbox for cringe" based on Östlund's narrative and stylistic techniques. The analysis focuses on three key aspects: **social awkwardness** (depictions of socially uncomfortable situations and characters making fools of themselves); **sensorial discomfort** (the use of sensory cues to provoke discomfort and irritation in characters and viewers alike); and **formal tools** (cinematic elements that help cultivate an unsettling atmosphere).

Key words: Ruben Östlund, cringe, discomfort in film, awkwardness

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá, jak švédský režisér Ruben Östlund vytváří a zobrazuje trapnost a rozpaky ve svých filmech *Vyšší moc*, *Čtverec* a *Trojúhelník smutku*. Studie rozvíjí „sadu nástrojů pro cringe“ na základě Östlundových narativních a stylistických postupů, a to prostřednictvím pozorného čtení jednotlivých filmů a na základě psychologických teorií druhotných rozpaků a emocionálního/kognitivního nepohodlí. Analýza se zaměřuje na tři klíčové aspekty: **společenskou trapnost** (zobrazení společensky nepříjemných situací a postav, které ze sebe dělají hlupáky), **smyslové nepohodlí** (využití smyslových podnětů k vyvolání nepohodlí a podráždění nejen u postav, ale i u diváků) a **formální nástroje** (filmové prvky, které pomáhají utvářet znepokojivou atmosféru).

Klíčová slova: Ruben Östlund, cringe, nepohodlí ve filmu, trapnost

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Introduction

Responding to a request to speak about the awkward embarrassment that is characteristic of his films, two-time *Palme d'Or* winner Swedish director Ruben Östlund replied:

I [am] interested in characters and people that [are] breaking the social contract completely, doing something that is absolutely not allowed within normal behavior. And I love to look at how people react to that (Östlund, personal communication, 05.07.2024).

Östlund's last three films, *Force Majeure* (2014), *The Square* (2017) and *Triangle of Sadness* (2022) indeed left a strong impression on me, based on their depiction of the transgression of social norms, to which I seem to be very sensitive. They triggered an acute feeling of uneasiness in me. Watching them was a very peculiar experience: I often wanted to look away out of discomfort, yet I remained utterly fascinated by the situations presented. This ambivalence - a kind of painful enjoyment - is precisely what made the experience memorable. The reaction I was supposed to manifest wasn't clear: was I to laugh? Or to retreat in horror? In any case, it did offer a quite unique spectatorship experience. As Geoff King, author of *The Cinema of Discomfort*, a book to be often referred to over the course of this thesis, points out: "The[se films] can be hard to watch. [They] might make us squirm in our seats, or make us more aware of our seats and of the act of *sitting through* certain kinds of material" (2022, p.17).

Why were the scenes – whether it be a father weeping like a kid on his wife's lap as he feels that his virility is at stake; a performance artist impersonating an ape traumatizing a bourgeois audience at a dinner gala; or a couple fighting over who pays the bill – so memorable and why did I feel so strongly about them? What did I feel exactly? How was it prompted? In this thesis, I will argue that the causes and the effects often follow the ensuing diagram (Figure 1), which will enable us to better identify and define what is at play:

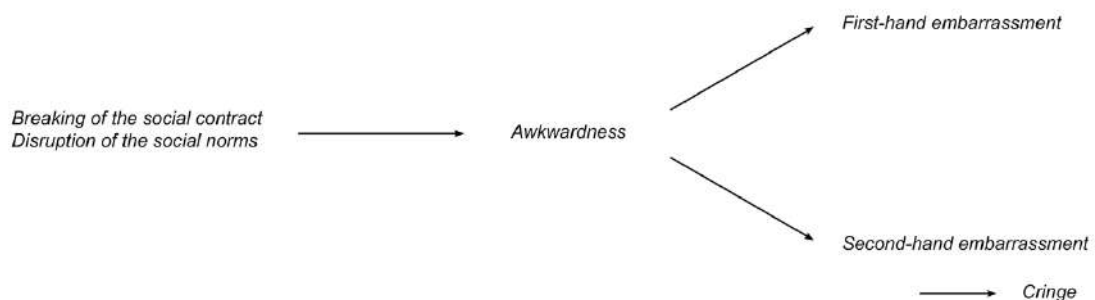


Figure 1: Diagram showing the process of emergence of social embarrassment

In most cases, awkwardness seems to arise when a character breaks the social contract – understood here not in the political philosophy sense of the term, but rather as an *etiquette*, a set of unspoken behavioral norms designed to codify and regulate social interactions, and to establish social roles and statuses. *Awkward* etymologically refers to something “turned the wrong way” (therefore further emphasizing the idea of breach in norms). The adjective describes a situation that is difficult to deal with and tense, lacking social ease and grace. In a word, uncomfortable. This can lead to embarrassment, an acute feeling of self-consciousness and shame, connected to a possible fear of loss of honor and dignity. Interestingly enough, this feeling of embarrassment can be experienced first-hand or vicariously. In the case that interests us, it means that it can be experienced by the character that broke the social contract, within the diegesis of the film (the spectator also being able to feel the embarrassment, according to the emotion contagion theory); or it can be experienced second-hand by the audience, at the expense of the character who is not aware of the awkwardness they have caused and thereby makes a fool of themselves. The latter is what we can define as *cringe*. In their research, Annalina Valpuri Mayer, Frieder Michel Paulus and Sören Krach go on to note that “cringe humor combines two seemingly opposing emotional reactions: the pleasant experience of amusement and laughter, and the unpleasant experience of embarrassment or shame due to others’ normative transgressions” (2021, p.1), thus summarizing the experience I had in front of Ruben Östlund’s films.

The topic of embarrassment and discomfort in film is a relatively unexplored field of academic research. Nikolaj Lübecker did investigate the *feel-bad film* in his 2015 eponymous book, where he identified three sub-categories, *assault*, *unease* and *transgression*. The author reviewed an earlier film by Östlund, *Play*, which he analyzed as being the link between *assault* and *unease*, this film featuring physical violence, rather absent of the three films I am studying. However, Lübecker makes observations about the Swedish director’s *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-cadre* that are still applicable and instructive in the context of the three films I will focus on.

One author pioneered research in the field: Geoff King with his aforementioned opus *The Cinema of Discomfort* (2022). In his book, he explores the notions of discomfort according to two modalities: *cognitive* (the audience feels at unease because the film doesn’t follow the standards of traditional storytelling and withholds salient information —a feeling of frustration linked to incompleteness can emerge) and *emotional* (the audience feels at unease because of the content of the film, thought- and emotion-provoking situations and characters). He also aims at providing more or less convincing social and historical explanations to the emergence of the cinema of discomfort. King dedicates half a chapter to Ruben Östlund (shared with fellow Swedish director Roy Andersson) and his films *Force Majeure* and *The Square*, giving valuable insight. He also gives interesting food for thought in his conclusion when he develops the notion of *comedy of discomfort*, which is certainly applicable to Östlund’s films. However, since the

book was written before the release of *Triangle of Sadness*, that film is not included in the selection made by the author. This thesis therefore is a good opportunity to conduct a thorough analysis of the three.

These three films, *Force Majeure*, *The Square* and *Triangle of Sadness*, have had substantial success, especially following the winning of the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes Film Festival for the last two. Consequently, they have been described and analyzed in numerous articles, which provide interesting readings of the films, investigating for instance on the themes of social contract, social responsibility and saving face. However, none of them focus on the study of the theme of embarrassment over the three films.

Lastly, *cringe comedy*, which is a suitable concept to approach the trilogy, has been discussed in a few academic articles, including the one mentioned earlier (*A Psychological Perspective on Vicarious Embarrassment and Shame in the Context of Cringe Humor*), notably focusing on television content, and investigating the psychological and social processes behind vicarious embarrassment. These articles do not include the three Swedish films in their corpus.

Consequently, it seems justified and adequate to study these three films with this perspective. Why focus on *these* three films in particular and not just one? Why exclude Östlund's previous works? I would argue that *Force Majeure*, *The Square* and *Triangle of Sadness* constitute a trilogy, exploring the downfall of masculinity in the 21st century, which was not the case with his previous works, having more the form of anthologies (instead of following a restricted set of characters) and dealing with other topics. Together, the three films question the role and status of man in society (as father, leader, lover) and tackle the notion of fragile masculinity.

Arguably, there is a link between the choice of discomfort as a storytelling modality and the themes of the films. As established earlier, embarrassment and cringe derive from the twisting of etiquette and social expectations. The films, by questioning the place of a man in the social contract, do exactly the same. Thematically, they challenge expectations and established norms. This is not simply a parallel, but a strong and meaningful link between form and content, between modality and theme, giving substance and justification to the use of cringe (which therefore doesn't seem gratuitous) and expressiveness and power to the themes depicted.

How does Ruben Östlund engage with awkwardness and embarrassment in his films? How does he trigger discomfort in the viewer? What filmic tools does he use to achieve these effects? The aim of this thesis is to conduct a detailed analysis of each film of the trilogy, examining story, characters, acting, cinematography, editing, sound, music. By investigating both style and form, the study seeks to understand how these elements work together to elicit cringe and reinforce the thematic content of the films.

A chapter will be devoted to each film. We will firstly focus on *Force Majeure*, which follows the downfall of a family father, utterly questioned in his role of *paterfamilias* as he cowardly ran for his life instead of taking care of his relatives in a (harmless) avalanche and won't recognize his flaws. We will then tackle *The Square*, a film describing the questioning of the authority and status of the director of a contemporary art museum as his property gets stolen and he goes on a vengeful mission. Lastly, we will study *Triangle of Sadness*, featuring a couple of influencers on a cruise ship for the ultrarich which wrecks, forcing them to develop a new form of society, where patriarchy and male domination are drastically interrogated.

For each film, the analysis will proceed to point out the awkward situations which trigger embarrassment, explore the sensory discomfort within those situations and delineate the formal tools used by the director to achieve the effects of cringe in the audience. Though the first two subsections will primarily focus on content, the formal ways of achieving this content will also be addressed, as form and content are in tune with each other. Similarly, the last subsection, while being dedicated to formal tools, will give context to how and why these tools are used.

The conclusion provides a comparative analysis of the three films, underscoring which techniques are repeated and how the films work together to highlight the discomfort of the contemporary male. Through this summary, it is hoped that the reader interested in developing a toolkit for creating cringe, may learn from the techniques of Ruben Östlund.

1 *Force Majeure*

The first film of the trilogy, *Force Majeure*, follows the misadventures of a family father, Tomas, after he runs for his life instead of taking care of his wife and children following an avalanche, that turns out to be controlled and harmless. The adversity reveals his true nature and character, leaving his spouse Ebba shocked and disappointed. Furthermore, his inability to acknowledge and recognize his cowardice leads to intense moments of awkwardness and jeopardizes the stability of the marriage.

It is interesting to notice that the filmmaker chose a *controlled avalanche* as the trigger for the crisis. There is something contradictory and antithetical in that very notion: the oxymoron expression puts together a natural catastrophe, in theory unstoppable and of an overwhelming magnitude, with a human supervision over things. In other words, chaos and control. This appears to be a good metaphor for what embarrassment and cringe are: chaos in a controlled environment. Losing face is about losing control. It is about feeling inadequate, unproper, unfitting. It is, and especially in this case, about nature jeopardizing culture: Tomas' socially constructed role dictates him to take care of his family in the face of danger, but his instinct makes him abandon children and wife to selfishly prioritize his own survival. In a word, he breaks the social contract, the expectations linked to his social status. As mentioned in the introduction, this disruption of social norms gives birth to an intense feeling of awkwardness, leading to embarrassment. This structure applies both to the overall story of the film and to the scenes taken independently.

1.1 Social awkwardness

In his film, Ruben Östlund creates embarrassment for the characters and for the audience by relying on social awkwardness, whether it be through the depiction of socially awkward situations or through the portrayal of characters making fools of themselves.

1.1.1 Socially awkward situations

Arguably, the film presents three recurring types of socially awkward situations, where the social contract is broken: characters being forced to do what they do not want to do; characters publicly exposing the contents of private conversations; and characters having private conversations in public. In each case, the disrespect of the social rules and etiquette leads to an embarrassing moment where the characters do not really know how to deal with the situation. Let us delineate how.

1.1.1.1 Characters forced to do what they do not want to do

The opening scene of the film appears to be quite programmatic: it sets the topic, the language and the tone of the movie. It depicts the Swedish family being offered, or rather forced, to take a ski holiday portrait by a French tourist photographer. The film tells us that it will be about family and its image. It will explore the discrepancy between what seems to be and what is effectively. The photographer directs the family (Figure 2), staging the pictures, which will immortalize an artificial, fake image, misrepresentative of the actual reality. In the photographer's words, "the beauty picture together" (Östlund, 2014, 00:00:14). This scene also reveals the film language to be found throughout the film: wide, static, lengthy. Relying on offscreen space. Creating a sense of disconnection, of blankness, and of floating undeterminedness, matching the main characters' feelings, as they are not sure what to do. The scene indeed establishes the ironic, awkward mode that the film will present throughout. The photographer breaks the social contract, insofar as he doesn't respect the parents' initial rejection of his offer and forces them to take the picture. He doesn't allow them the freedom or possibility to choose. He even drags the son Harry by the hand. The parents look visibly ill at ease, put in a socially difficult situation, wanting the uncomfortable moment to pass as fast as possible. The awkwardness is brilliantly rendered in the acting, especially in the beat where the photographer asks/orders Tomas to put his head against Ebba's. The heads hit each other, hurting Ebba, and highlighting the artificiality and forcedness of the moment.



Figure 2: The family directed by the photographer (Östlund, 2014, 00:00:54)

In this respect, the attitude and behavior of the photographer is very telling. Not only does he interrupt the peaceful holiday of a family that didn't ask for anything and holds them hostage (they are indeed asked to follow his orders and to stay in place under his command, not being able to move at their will), but he also acts in a rather annoying way. From his audible lack of interest in the answers to the questions he asked (the inflexion of his voice – with a

thick, somewhat annoying French accent – struggles to hide his indifference when he learns that the family is from Sweden) to the awkward, cringeworthy proximity he tries to establish with Harry, who doesn't understand English, by way of his irritating *wuh-wuh*, everything sounds forced and phony. The discrepancy between a staged attempt at being (freely) friendly and the reality of what is happening (i.e., a monetized service) makes the character look annoying and the situation truly unpleasant, thus creating some empathy from the audience for the family. Arguably, choices made for the *mise-en-scène* help create this feeling: the fact that the photographer is off-screen for most of the scene reinforces his bothersome character, while focusing the spectator's attention on the family's uneasiness. All in all, this scene encapsulates what the film is going to be: a dive into discomfort.

1.1.1.2 Characters exposing private conversations in public

In order to trigger that feeling, Östlund also resorts to situations in which a character publicly exposes what was said in a private conversation. It differs from holding a private conversation in a public space (to be investigated next). Rather, a character unilaterally decides to reveal the content of a private conversation to an audience, sometimes taking them as witnesses or judges. One scene perfectly embodies this idea. After having experienced the controlled avalanche, the couple has dinner with their friend Charlotte and her newly met American companion (who is, interestingly enough, played by Brady Corbet, one of the main actors from Michael Haneke's *Funny Games US*, another paramount of the cinema of discomfort).



Figure 3: *The American* feeling embarrassed after being exposed by Charlotte (Östlund, 2014, 00:24:17)

The sequence starts in a very awkward manner with Charlotte saying that the American told her that he is very religious (Figure 3). The young man seems extremely uncomfortable about his privacy being publicized like this and strongly denies it. His nervous laughs and

attempt to change topics reveal his uneasiness. The wording of the dialogue is important: “So, you told me that you’re very religious”, says Charlotte to the American (Östlund, 2014, 00:24:04). Until then, she was answering Tomas’ question and responding using the first person of the plural (“we”) to talk about the day they spent together. This shift to “you” is very telling: it is a twisted way to open the discussion among the four of them by addressing a private confidence made earlier. A form of thoughtless religious outing. The camera lingers on the two-shot of Charlotte and the American.

The reaction shot on Ebba and Tomas, that is expected by the viewer to alleviate the heaviness of the situation, does not come. We can hear their reaction, but we do not see them. No cut, no escape. As Geoff King notes:

Unlike diegetic witnesses, film viewers cannot really ignore, or pretend to ignore, such fictional behavior, given that it is part of the material of the work they have presumably committed to watch. They are obliged to experience the more or less sustained vicarious discomfort likely often to result, if they are not to cease viewing (2022, p.198).

The two times that Ebba exposes Tomas in front of their friends (during this scene and later in the film with another couple) follow the same idea. The smooth unfolding of the social interaction is broken by a revelation that should have remained in the private sphere.

1.1.1.3 Characters having private conversations in public

Lastly, the filmmaker creates moments of discomfort for the characters and for the audience by placing private conversations in a public setting. In doing so, Östlund creates the possibility for a third party to overhear the private matter. In his own words:

[I] force the characters to have these conversations in places where other people can hear it. And for me, it highlights [...] a convention and the expectations on the contract that you write in the nuclear family and the difference between that and what happens in a public space where you are not allowed to expose your partner or things like that. [...] It's so much more interesting when you put the third eye, observing things (Östlund, personal communication, 05.07.2024).

In the film, Ebba and Tomas discuss their problems, following the father's unexpected reaction, in the corridor of the hotel, so that their children cannot hear them. This, however, exposes them to the scrutiny of passersby and to the invasion of their personal space. One character embodies this idea: the hotel janitor. He is always present at the wrong place at the wrong time (or is it the right place at the right time?), witnessing the couple’s quarrels (Figure 4), which he observes with a mixture of fascination and entertainment. In an interview with Richard Porton in *Cineaste* in 2014, Östlund notes: “For me, the janitor is like an anthropologist

observing human behavior. Unlike the family, he's from the working class and has a different view of economic and social reality. He's able to have some perspective on their silly behavior" (Porton, 2014, p.39). The janitor thus offers the audience some perspective, which enables them to gain some distance from the characters and realize that the latter are inadvertently making fools of themselves.



Figure 4: No privacy (Östlund, 2014, 00:35:32)

1.1.2 Characters making fools of themselves

In their research on vicarious embarrassment, Annalina Valpuri Mayer, Frieder Michel Paulus and Sören Krach argue that embarrassment arises when social rules are transgressed, intentionally or not, by an individual (or "target") aware of it or not (2021, p.4). From this double segmentation, they derive four categories: *non-intentional transgression and aware target* ("tripping on stage": the target accidentally violates a norm and notices it); *non-intentional transgression and unaware target* ("spinach in the teeth": the target accidentally violates a norm without noticing it); *intentional transgression and aware target* ("ableist joke": the target knowingly transgresses the norm); *intentional transgression and unaware target* ("self-aggrandizement": the target willingly transgresses the norm but doesn't realize that it actually harms them). I will argue that Östlund's characters make fools of themselves in the *non-intentional transgression and unaware target* and *intentional transgression and unaware target* modalities. Their unawareness of what is happening emphasizes their lack of control and communicates embarrassment to the audience.

1.1.2.1 On their own

Multiple scenes can be studied to support this claim. During the dinner party with their friends, after Charlotte starts the uncomfortable talk about religion, the conversation switches to what Tomas and Ebba have been up to. He explains that they witnessed a controlled avalanche. He knowingly adopts a rather patronizing attitude towards Ebba, emphasizing for his friends the fact that she got scared, thus diminishing her. Following that attack, Ebba exposes Tomas: he ran away. Tomas, feeling uncomfortable in having this private conversation (in Swedish, while it started in English) in front of their friends and trying to keep face, gaslights Ebba, claiming that it is impossible to run away in ski boots. He thus deploys a despicable strategy of specious and fallacious arguments against his own wife to remain untouched. This, however, has the opposite effect. He, unwillingly and inadvertently, appears low and ridiculous. Furthermore, in refusing to acknowledge the truth, for a large portion of the film, Tomas makes a fool of himself even more. What is so difficult for his ego about accepting the hard facts? He seems to believe that his status of man forbids him from recognizing his faults and limitations. If he did, he would risk appearing weak and powerless.

Later in the film, after finally recognizing that he ran away, Tomas collapses and cries like a child. Ruben Östlund reveals, in his interview with Richard Porton in *Cineaste*, that “[he] wanted Tomas to be both crying in a fake way and crying when he’s losing control. That’s not poetic at all. It’s almost provocative and doesn’t create sympathy for the character. You think, *what is he doing?*” (Porton, 2014, p.42) The director thus emphasizing the fact that the character does nothing but embarrass himself. Arguably, this embarrassment comes from a crisis experienced by Tomas, in which he realizes that he cannot play his social part anymore. In fact, many elements hint at the fact that he is not acting as an adult, but rather as a child. His crying is evidently the best example of this. There is even an editing trick (Figure 5) presenting his weeping as a boy’s: in a scene during Day 6, we see the couple’s children crying in their bed. Next is a closeup of Ebba, with sobbing sounds coming from the off-screen space. We are led to believe that she is looking at her children, about to console them. But the next shot is instead her over-the-shoulder shot looking down on Tomas. He is the crying child. Other hints are spread throughout the film, notably his drone, which is presented as a toy.



Figure 5: Boyish Tomas – Editing trick (Östlund, 2014, 01:33:33 / 01:33:40 / 01:33:50)

1.1.2.2 Because of others

Sometimes the characters are not making fools of themselves on their own but are getting fooled. One scene perfectly exemplifies this idea. Following Ebba's direction, Tomas goes to ski with his friend Mats. The two men spend the day together, exteriorizing and acting their masculinity out. At some point, they stop to drink a beer at a mountain bar. As they are enjoying this moment of rest, a young woman comes to tell them that her friend finds them to be the most attractive men of the place (Figure 6). The two men feel appreciated and boast. But the young woman comes back and apologizes: she made a mistake. They are not the men her friend was pointing at. This rectification comes as a blow to the two men's egos, with Mats becoming violent as he feels mocked. In this moment, awkward because of the error that has been committed, the audience feels for the characters. It is painful to receive a compliment and realize that it was not aimed at you.



Figure 6: Tomas and Mats receiving someone else's compliment (Östlund, 2014, 01:22:17)

The mise-en-scène supports the effects of the scene with its zoomed-in long take and use of off-screen space, as well as the stereotypical choices of colors (pink for the women, blue for the men) and the careful choice of music (intensified when their egos are boosted and stopped when the woman returns to clarify the situation). The song, *Reload*, by Sebastian Ingresso and Tommy Trash, has very telling lyrics in the context of the scene: *Take my hand and / Reload / This is free love / That's what we are made of / Yes, we are, are, are*. These lyrics indeed seem to match the feelings of the characters, who feel acknowledged and receive free love that they consider owed to them. Here, Tomas and Mats appear ridiculous when they feel empowered and overplay their gendered role. This sentiment is heightened when it is revealed that they didn't even have a valid reason to do so.

Thus, Ruben Östlund creates intense moments of embarrassment by depicting social awkwardness, whether it be through the presentation of awkward situations or the portrayal of

characters making fools of themselves. Arguably, these would not be as effective if the filmmaker didn't create an environment of sensorial discomfort.

1.2 Sensorial discomfort

Östlund indeed presents situations that involve sensorial discomfort. They can be scenes occurring through a disturbing interruption from the environment, or moments of identification for the audience that rely on sensory annoyance.

1.2.1 Disruption

One of the signature traits of the filmmaker is to abruptly interrupt a scene involving an emotional moment with a trivial, annoying element coming from the environment. In *Force Majeure*, the first example of this is Tomas' phone ringing, interrupting the perfect family sleep. The same ringing will also interrupt Tomas and Ebba's initial attempt at reconciling after the avalanche. The bothering sound constitutes an auditory disruption but also incarnates Tomas' distance from his family: his work is always around, calling to threaten the holiday peace.

However, this disruptive effect is even greater when it interrupts a deep conversation. Two examples of this can be found in the film. The first one is in the dinner scene with Charlotte and her American friend. The awkward conversation that Ebba and Tomas have in front of them, where Tomas is cornered by Ebba, is interrupted by the singing of *happy birthday* for another guest of the restaurant. Here again, an auditory disruption, off-screen, breaks the moment and rescues Tomas. Later, during the conversation with Mats and Fanny, when he is obliged to recognize that he ran away, his drone invades the space, visually, physically and sonically, once again delaying Tomas' duty to address the situation. In both cases, it is a trivial, grotesque element that comes to put an end to an emotionally charged moment. This exuberance creates an awkward situation (the social contract is broken: the solemnity of the situation is not respected), discomfort and frustration.

1.2.2 Multisensorial annoyance

In *Force Majeure*, Ruben Östlund relies on situations of sensory annoyance to elicit discomfort. He depicts moments that involve different senses and perceptions (sight, hearing, touch, perception of temperature...) with which the audience can relate their own experience. Four scenes particularly stand out in that regard. The first one is when the family is on the moving ski walkway, during the first day (Figure 7). The environment is constrained, prompting a claustrophobic feeling, which is reinforced by the composition. The shot, a long take, gives

a sense of real time and communicates how long this ride is. The creaking sounds in the tunnel reinforce the tenseness and discomfort. The son of the family, Harry, is quite agitated. He cannot take it anymore and moves away from his parents who try to control them. But the enclosed environment and the fact that they are wearing ski equipment limits the efficiency of their action. Any audience member who has been in a similar situation can understand and feel the discomfort the characters experience.



Figure 7: A claustrophobic ski ride (Östlund, 2014, 00:07:09)

A similar feeling is evoked a few scenes later, when Tomas is in charge of his children's ski equipment and tries to keep them tidy, leaning against the wall. The skis and poles keep falling. Visually, sonically, something indubitably irritating is communicated to the audience's senses. The same goes for the scene in which Tomas tries to take off the sticker on the door of his room, while being on the phone. The audience can have the tactile sensation of the sticker disintegrating under the fingernails, of the glue sticking to the skin pores. And the knowledge that, unless Tomas uses solvent, some residue will always remain on the door panel. These two scenes play with annoyance but also frustration as they depict apparently simple physical tasks that actually require effort to be fully completed.

One last scene should be studied in the context of the creation of sensory discomfort. It is the scene in which Ebba, who went for a ski day on her own, needs to urinate while on the slope. She has to get rid of her ski suit, squat in the cold and hide behind the trees, making sure that no one sees her. Such a trivial, mundane action was arguably not necessary to the progression of the plot, but it does help communicate the discomfort experienced by the character, giving a sensorial rendition of it. "The viewer might feel a vicarious version of the annoyance experienced by this character," notes Geoff King (2022, p.198). It is also connected to the overall arc of the character: the scene culminates with Ebba in tears as she sees her family on the slope.

In summary, these situations of sensorial discomfort, while they do not relate directly to the embarrassment discussed earlier, create a climate of unease throughout the film, that help build a world of cringe. This world, as we will next examine, is also created by a set of technical tools that Ruben Östlund uses.

1.3 Formal tools

The film language and technical tools used by the director contribute to the creation of the atmosphere of awkwardness and discomfort, in a way that links form and content.

1.3.1 Distantiating cinematography

In his essay *Family Framing and the Comedy of Conventions in Ruben Östlund's Force Majeure*, Roger Edholm notes:

Östlund's films, especially his first three films, are often associated with a "fixed camera position resulting in detached objective perspectives" and "long, drawn-out scenes that emerge slowly in the cinematic environment," as described by Ursula Lindqvist. Although *Force Majeure* can be regarded as a departure from his earlier films, based on the use of shifting camera positions and different uses of framing and cutting, the detached objective perspective characteristic of Östlund's visual aesthetics can be found in several key scenes in the film (2018, p.125).

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, some major scenes of the film (the opening scene with the photographer – even though it is broken up into chunks by title cards –, the avalanche scene, the error compliment scene, and the crying scene where the children go to comfort their father and ask their mother – who should be the one receiving comfort – to come to support him), happen in one wide shot. For Geoff King:

the detail of what happens is often obscured by the statically distant camera. [...] Nothing is done here, or elsewhere, to focus in on any close detail – of action or emotional engagement – that might indicate a more particular reading of events (2022, p.212).

Which, according to King, "provoke[s] unease at least partly by leaving viewers in the characteristic cinema of discomfort position of having to decide for themselves how to interpret difficult or awkward material" (2022, p.181).

These wide angled, long takes are often coupled with (digital) zooms, which create a sense of tension, dramatize the situation and emphasize the discomfort. This is what happens

for instance in the scene where the children comfort their weeping father. Here, the push-in and zoom-in highlight the absurdity and quirkiness of the situation.

Östlund's decisions on framing are radical and create the atmosphere of uneasiness. He often films people from the back, or beheads them, isolating their body parts. This prompts a dehumanization, a depersonalization of the characters. Something feels off. Similarly, the frequent use of mirrors and reflections materializes the uncomfortable distance that grows between Ebba and her husband.

1.3.2 Unsettling editing

One last technical aspect that needs to be addressed is the editing. More precisely, the pacing of the transitions between shots and reverse shots. Ruben Östlund indeed delays the appearance of reaction shots, focusing on the character experiencing discomfort. He holds shots for a much longer duration than is usual in more mainstream, commercial cinema. He doesn't necessarily cut to show the person talking. One scene that perfectly reflects these observations is the conversation with Fanny and Mats where Ebba reveals what happened (Figure 8).



Figure 8: A tense scene of public revelations (Östlund, 2014, 00:48:20-00:56:03)

The scene counts 27 cuts, with 8 shots: a medium closeup on the four characters; a medium profile shot of Tomas with the nervous guests in the blurred background (that shot appears when Ebba finishes telling the story); a two-shot on Fanny and Mats; the point-of-view shot of the drone; and a wide shot establishing the setting at the end, when the drone attacks and Tomas leaves.

The analysis of this scene provides enriching findings. First, there are more shots featuring Fanny and Mats than Ebba and Tomas. This highlights two things: reaction shots are pivotal in the building of awkwardness, even if they are delayed, insofar as they emphasize the

emotional response to the situation; and Ebba's obsession with what happened finds its expression in the repetition of the same, unique shot. Second, the timing and placing of the shots is quite unclassical and creates an uncomfortable sensation. There is no system as to when we see who (as noted earlier, a character talking does not mean that his shot will be presented). Third, the scene elongates the awkwardness of the situation by sustaining shots for longer than classically expected and prolonging the embarrassing silence over the shots of different characters. Thus, the form of the film itself contributes to transmitting the feeling and telling the story accordingly.

In this chapter, *Force Majeure* was examined for how awkwardness and embarrassment is elicited by displaying social awkwardness, offering sensorial discomfort and relying on technical formal tools. The next chapter explores how these categories apply to Östlund's subsequent film *The Square*.

2 *The Square*

In an interview with *IndieWire*, Ruben Östlund explains why he decided to add a chimpanzee in the apartment of Anne, a journalist with whom the main character of the film, Christian, sleeps:

Something was boring in the [script]. It wasn't wild enough. I came up with an idea: What if Anne has a monkey at home? One hour in [the film], suddenly comes a monkey into the apartment and sits down. Anything can happen from [there]. You are opening up the movie for the audience, they're insecure, you get them on their toes again, you play with them. You don't know what I'm going to do with you! (Östlund, 2017).

Unpredictability is therefore at the core of the film and the story the director wants to tell. The story of a well-off contemporary art museum director, Christian, who faces challenges in his personal and professional lives that will jeopardize his position of power. The film indeed follows two main narrative threads: on the one hand, Christian gets robbed and tries to recover his phone and wallet, which involves a questionable scheme consisting of putting threat letters in all the mailboxes of an apartment building, leading to the wrong accusation of an innocent boy. On the other hand, Christian administers the museum and prepares new exhibitions. He organizes fundraising events, talks to a journalist and (loosely) supervises a promotional video for a new art installation – the *Square*. The installation is met with much controversy and leads to his resignation. In both storylines, the unexpected is at play, leading the characters (and the audience) in unforeseen directions.

Unpredictability also characterizes (and helps us conceptualize) cringe. As established before, first- and second-hand embarrassments form in the context of an awkward situation, when the social contract has been transgressed. In other words, the expected (i.e., following the social script) hasn't happened; it is the unexpected that appeared. From there, there is no prewritten code as to how to respond and behave. From there, what will unfold becomes unpredictable. From there, it is a road into the unknown or the realm of "anything can happen," thereby trapping the characters and the audience in the midst of indeterminacy. We will study how *The Square* creates this indeterminacy and uneasiness.

2.1 Social awkwardness

In *The Square*, social awkwardness is rendered through the depiction of socially awkward situations and through the portrayal of characters inadvertently making fools of themselves.

2.1.1 Socially awkward situations

The film presents a larger palette of awkward situations than its predecessor. Four main categories can be identified: lack of listening; status inversion; awkward intimacy; and situations of uncontrollable nature.

2.1.1.1 Lack of listening

A first type of social awkwardness emerges when a character believes that they haven't been rightfully listened to. Indeed, the social etiquette entails a certain form of respect towards the speaker, who should be heard and acknowledged. When this doesn't happen, cracks emerge. The film presents two situations involving such an unfolding, met with two opposite reactions from the speaker. The first one is the scene in which a chef presents the buffet menu he has prepared in front of an audience of inattentive patrons of the arts at a fundraising event organized by the museum. As he starts his introduction and believes that he has captured his audience's attention, a large group of loud older sponsors appears behind him, invading his shot, going down the stairs to the dinner party. A reverse wide shot reveals that this gives the go-ahead to the rest of the assembly who rushes to reach the food and beverages. The cook continues presenting the menu with a quiet, unassured voice, visibly overwhelmed by the way things are turning. He starts by timidly inviting the guests not to rush and to listen until the end of his menu description. But seeing that this doesn't work, he explodes and yells at them, ordering them to slow down. He then resumes his presentation. This scene constitutes an awkward situation for two reasons: one, the speaker is being ignored; two, he retaliates and gives an order to his clients, thus transgressing the etiquette of the service industry. This heated reaction is met with an awkward silence.

Silence is also the attitude that characterizes a second instance when a character is not being listened to. The scene happens when Christian and his assistant Michael are driving to the apartment building where they plan on distributing threat letters. They are nervous and excited, feeling as if they were in a film. Michael asks Christian to put some music on. Christian agrees. "How about a golden oldie from back home... *Gasoline!*" he says with a big smile (Figure 9), sure to have chosen a hit that matches his assistant's expectations (Östlund, 2017, 00:30:12). But Michael discards it and asks for something more upbeat. Christian chooses a second song, but it still doesn't fulfill Michael's wishes, who ends up telling his boss which song to play. A track by *Justice*. He even reaches to the front of the car from the back seat to turn the volume up. Interestingly enough, this scene only consists of one shot, one continuous long take: it starts with an insert of the road where bikers are driving fast, viewed through the windshield, then pans to Christian behind the wheel, and only reveals Michael as he comes forward to turn the volume up. In other words, the entirety of the sequence around the choice

of music happens while looking solely at Christian. His facial expressions communicate the emotions he goes through, and the sustained shot reveals his embarrassment. The spectator knows how personal and defining musical tastes are. When one's musical preference is questioned, it is as if their social identity was interrogated, put at stake. Christian thought that he had the same references as Michael, that they had a mutual understanding of what 'upbeat music' is, but it turns out not to be the case.



Figure 9: Christian putting some music on, seeking Michael's reaction (Östlund, 2017, 00:30:12)

Michael very candidly and thoughtlessly criticizes his choices, showing none of the expected professional reverence he should have for his superior. In a word, Christian is losing face. Contrary to the chef, he adopts a different strategy to cope with the affront: he chooses to remain silent, potentially so as not to aggravate the awkwardness of the situation.

2.1.1.2 Status inversion

In this scene, Michael enables himself to be very honest with Christian, being even critical, irrespective of the social hierarchy that exists between the two. The friendliness of their interactions, that we have seen in previous scenes, and the extraordinary nature of the task they are after (which blends Christian's personal and professional lives), may explain Michael's non-respect of the social rules. He acts as if they were equals. But the film at times goes further than this, showing an inversion of the social status in a dialogue between two protagonists: the powerless becomes the powerful, and vice-versa. It is already the case in the scene that follows the choice-of-music one: the two men have reached the apartment building and realize that they are not as brave as they claimed to be. The question of who should go to deliver the

letters emerges. Christian believes that he should stay in his car and send his assistant to do it. But Michael sees it differently: it is Christian who was robbed and needs to be the one dealing with it. He ends up winning the argument, claiming that he never said that he would be the one distributing the letters. Christian thought he was in the position of power, higher in the hierarchy, but he does not manage to get his orders followed. The scene is cringeworthy as it depicts two men who boasted but are not brave enough to walk their talk and rely on specious arguments to avoid taking responsibility. Christian, who visibly feels defeated, exits frame and comes back in to invert the powerplay. He asks Michael if he can trust him for the next time he needs to count on him. In a nutshell, he wants to have the last word. The result is an amusingly embarrassing battle of egos.

Another scene follows this idea of a shift in the power dynamics, taking it to a superior level of discomfort and oddity. Christian stops at a 7-Eleven store. In the shop, a female beggar asks him for a sandwich. Christian, feeling humane, decides to help her. But instead of the reverence and thankfulness he and the audience are expecting, the woman *orders* him to get her the sandwich without onions. There is something inherently embarrassing in this situation, where the power dynamics are switched. In theory, the giver has the upper hand over the beggar, and the beggar should embrace a respectful and grateful attitude owed towards the giver. Yet here, the woman not only shows no gratitude, but she is rudely picky about what is to be given to her. She completely overlooks the rules of politeness and modesty. We do not get to know whether she does so knowingly or not, willingly or not, but perhaps it doesn't matter. Her situation of precarity is such that she might feel excluded from the social system to the point that the rules of the said system do not matter to her anymore. Still, this normative transgression shakes Christian, who thought he was in power. As a consequence, and to reassert his theoretical and wished-for social superiority, he tricks her: he does get her the sandwich but tells her to take the onions out herself.

2.1.1.3 Awkward intimacy

That notion of shifting powerplay is also at the core of what can be call "awkward intimacy". The film depicts the three stages of mating (flirt, intercourse, debriefing), each of which is involving a high level of disturbing material and embarrassment. It starts with the flirting part during a party organized at the museum. Christian is shown trying his luck with any woman who gives him attention (an already cringeworthy behavior). As he is waiting for the bathroom, he notices Anne, the journalist who interviewed him a few days before. She is leaning against the wall (Figure 10). He observes her body, from top to bottom, in a rather ostensible and inelegant manner, gauging the journalist as if she were a piece of meat (also cringeworthy). Anne notices it and tries to engage into the charming game. But the museum director is already looking away.



Figure 10: Awkward flirt (Östlund, 2017, 00:56:42)

To regain his attention, Anne references a conference they both attended, imitating a man with Tourette syndrome who was part of the audience and disturbed the talk. She adopts quite grotesque gestures to do so. But Christian doesn't get the reference. Anne tries and fails again. She has to explain what she was hinting at. The scene is uncomfortable, for multiple reasons. It indeed depicts a situation of miscommunication or rather, of mis- (or lack of) understanding. Anne was counting on the establishment of a bond through shared knowledge. But her comical way of referring to it doesn't hit the target: she only succeeds in inadvertently and unwillingly making a fool of herself. The fact that the situation drags, and that Anne persists in her attempt does not make it easier for the viewer, who can feel for her, seeing her endeavor to get attention and her nervousity.

Once Christian has been convinced to come to her apartment (a realm of weirdness and discomfort, where a chimpanzee freely moves around), they engage in awkward intimacy. The filmmaker indeed represents a scene of passionless sex where Christian is not fully present (see how his point-of-view shot rack focus from Anne to the chandelier behind her, thus expressing his disinterest in his sexual partner) with the intercourse ending as soon as the museum director has reached orgasm (showing that he doesn't care at all about Anne's pleasure). From then on starts a most absurd and cringe conversation, that might make the audience want to look away from the screen: Anne and Christian fight over who will get to throw away the used condom. The situation is fascinatingly hard to watch because it involves an extremely personal topic and plays with the unspoken/the unsaid. It indeed seems that, even if it is never clearly expressed, Christian is afraid that Anne would try to impregnate herself with his semen, the last thing that he would want. The grotesque character of this paranoid thought (indeed, why would Anne do that?) sheds a rather disfavoring light on

Christian, who appears to be acting in a haughty way, without having the courage to voice his concern.

The last part of this awkward intimacy has to do with the aftermath, with the ensuing conversation when what happened gets discussed. The scene is set in the museum hall. A jump of the axis (the 360° rule thus getting transgressed) between the wide establishing shot and the first closeup of the conversation hints at the fact that it will not be an enjoyable or comfortable moment. Geoff King notes that “Christian [...] faces potential embarrassment or loss of face by being confronted in public spaces” (2022, p.210). And indeed, he is worried about having to answer Anne’s intimate questions in the communal space, telling her to be quiet as a museum guard is present and could overhear them, invading their privacy (a role reminiscent of that played by the janitor in *Force Majeure*). Not only that but a disruptive sound installation constantly interrupts them, generating awkward pauses and elongating the moment. The scene involves a masterfully written dialogue that constantly flips the power dynamics. At first, Anne confronts Christian, who once again shies away from voicing and wording (he repels his duty of clearly naming what happened, like Tomas in the previous film before him). She accuses him of using his power position as a museum director to sleep with female strangers, which he doesn’t completely deny. Instead, he asks her if this is what convinced her to sleep with him. Here, Christian sneakily uses Anne’s question against her, thus managing to shift the powerplay. The fact that she obviously wishes for him to care about her, whereas he doesn’t really have any type of attraction towards her, can make the spectator pity her but also feel embarrassed for her, as she is making a fool of herself by trying so hard for a relationship that has no future. Added to the publicity and dilation of the scene, this element makes it a very cringeworthy moment.

2.1.1.4 Uncontrollable nature

The last category of social awkward situations presented in the film is linked to the idea of uncontrollable nature. As *Force Majeure*, which dealt with a man who struggled because of the discrepancy between the normative expectations for his social role (culture) and the behavior triggered by his survival instinct (nature), “*The Square* pokes at the tender spot where our primal instincts (like fear and self-preservation) meet our moral values, or our animal desires puncture the facade of cultivated society,” notes Anthony Carew (2018, p.53). Two of the most memorable scenes of the film explore that idea.

The first one is the conference scene interrupted by the man with Tourette syndrome saying profanities. A major artist (Julian, played by Dominic West) is invited to come and talk about his work, which he describes in very abstract and pompous ways. But he gets disrupted multiple times by a man who swears and claps his hands. “*The Square* might be best described as a film about infraction, or interruption, both of which are, etymologically, break-ins,” notes

Elizabeth Ezra (2020, p.106). At first, the audience (both the viewers depicted in the scene and potentially those of the film) does not know how to react to these interventions which break the social contract of listening to a guest speaker while he is on stage. That initial reaction however transforms into anger as the disruptions get more frequent and irritating, leaving the moderator of the conference in a difficult position. But the situation becomes a dilemma when it is revealed that the man suffers from Tourette syndrome and is therefore not responsible for his actions: should he be held accountable and therefore be blamed, or should he simply be let be, out of tolerance and openness? A character even steps in to defend him, but the socially acceptable reaction to adopt (complaint or understanding) is far from being defined and splits the audience of the conference.

The most commented scene of the film (which features on its poster) pushes the limits of cringe and embarrassment even further. Christian has organized a gala dinner with performance artist Oleg impersonating an ape (Figure 11). Before the performance starts, the guests are told about the rules. A new social contract is forged, as an ominous voice warns:

I'm asking for your utmost caution during this performance. Welcome to the jungle. Soon you will be confronted by a wild animal. As you will know, their hunting instinct is triggered by weakness. If you show fear, the animal will sense it. If you try to escape, the animal will hunt you down. But if you remain perfectly still, without moving a muscle, the animal might not notice you. And you can hide in the herd, safe in the knowledge that someone else will be the prey (Östlund, 2017, 01:45:00).

Here starts the confusion that triggers the awkwardness of the moment. Even though the rules are crystal clear, the guests do not know how seriously they should take them. They are at a "gala dinner [...] a safe space, designed to be free from the threatening intrusions of the outside world" (Ezra, 2020, p.107). It is a place (in the golden décor of a royal ballroom) where the sense of etiquette is supposedly very strong: behavior is ruled, regulated, going like clockwork. Among the guests, the way to act in society is well known. Everything is made for the evening to go smoothly. "It is all the more shocking, then, when the social boundaries marked by [this safe space] are breached," continues Elizabeth Ezra (2020, p.107). At first, the man-ape is welcome with amusement and goodwill. He indeed plays with some of the guests, displaying a spirited irreverence. But

the performance goes far beyond the bounds of polite society when the ape-artist attacks a woman, pulling her by the hair and straddling her as if to rape her, and first one man and then a number of men attending the dinner beat him up. A space of hospitality has turned into a place of hostility (Ezra, 2020, p.107).

Christian tries to solve the crisis by thanking the artist and politely inviting him to end his performance. But he only manages to get silenced by him. Multiple elements make this scene cringe and hard to watch, not to say frightening. The first of them, is precisely what

Christian experiences: the disappearance of rationality because of the confusion of identity. In other words: Christian believes that he can still address and reason with the artist Oleg, but the latter is so immersed in his role that he has given up on his humanity to respond solely as the ape he impersonates.



Figure 11: *Disturbing man-ape* (Östlund, 2017, 01:49:41)

There is a sense of *uncanny*, of unfamiliar familiarity. Who is the character terrorizing the audience? A man impersonating an ape? Then it should be possible to reason with him, which turns out not to be the case. An ape? He does act like one, but he sports human features. All in all, it comes down to the disconcerting nature of the concept of roleplay. Are the guests addressing the artist or the role he enacts? At what time is the play going too far and becoming improper? When must reality command the act to stop? Here, the audience might also feel embarrassment for Christian who organized the event, invited all the generous patrons (that he owes) promising them a memorable event, and trusting Oleg with delivering a successful performance, within the borders of the acceptable. But the artist is free-spirited and an uncontrollable force of nature: he will do as he sees fit. Christian loses face and makes a fool of himself, endangering his guests, something a host (especially one in need) should never do.

2.1.2 Characters making fools of themselves

Depicting characters inadvertently making fools of themselves is indeed a way for Ruben Östlund to create social awkwardness, fostering embarrassment. *The Square* is a film about status and the challenge of status, so it should not come as a surprise that the two most

striking instances of a character making a fool of himself are closely linked to the question of ego and power position.

2.1.2.1 Asking for help from someone they refused to help

The first instance of self-humiliation happens during a scene at a mall when Christian is looking for someone to watch for his shopping bags while he goes and looks for his two daughters. Earlier at the same place, Christian passed in front of a beggar and refused to help him. In a very ironic and satirical Östlund signature way, when looking for someone to help him with his bags, Christian finds no one and has to ask the beggar himself. The man accepts immediately, turning out to be more humane and reliable than Christian. Here, the audience might feel uncomfortable with the museum director's behavior: does he have so little consideration for others and, to a lesser extent, so little self-respect, that he would ask assistance from a person much more in need that he refused to help prior to that? It seems that his ego is such that he navigates the world in a very utilitarian way, seeing others as mere tools to help him achieve his goals, which is discomfoting and disgusting.

2.1.2.2 Inability to apologize

The second instance of indignity features Christian being unable to entirely recognize his faults and apologize. By distributing threat letters to the entire building, Christian harmed a young boy who was wrongly thought by his parents to be a thief and consequently punished. The young boy demands official apologies, going as far as waiting in Christian's house for his return. Their interaction turns bad, Christian pushing him in the stairs by accident. From then on, the museum director gets haunted by the weeping voice of the boy desperately calling for help in the staircase. Unable to find him, he eventually decides to record an apology video for the kid and his family. There, the audience may believe that Christian is finally doing the right thing, putting his ego aside and acknowledging his wrongdoing. And the attempt indeed starts in an encouraging manner, with Christian apologizing for his deeds. But then, he starts elaborating on the prejudice he had for the young boy and philosophizes on how society shaped his perception of him. In a word, he shirks. In doing so, he annihilates the sympathy that the audience could newly have for him. He does not and will not change. Interestingly, when later in the film he tries to apologize once again, this time in person, after having resigned from his functions, he realizes that the boy and his family have moved out. The film will not give him the possibility for redemption, which is a potential source of discomfort and frustration for the audience. In Geoff King's words:

Uncomfortable forms of disorientation can result [...] if we are denied a narrative development we have been encouraged to expect. This might be a denial of a conventionally framed 'happy ending', for example, or the lack of closure that results from uncertainty or ambiguity (2022, p.23).

2.2 Sensorial discomfort

As in *Force Majeure*, Ruben Östlund expands the experience of uneasiness for the spectator of *The Square* by representing elements of sensorial discomfort. The director uses sound and image to trigger the spectator's different senses, showcasing a world characterized by ache, annoyance and malaise.

2.2.1 Sonic annoyance

The way the film starts is very telling from that perspective. Even before any image appears on the screen, the opening credits play over sounds of a party. Annoying techno music and drunk people's screams bombard the viewer: from the first seconds, the audience knows that the film is going to be an attack on their senses. And indeed, Östlund presents the audience with situations that they will be able to sensorially recognize and secondarily experience.

2.2.2 Haptic annoyance

One striking instance of secondary sensorial experience is happening during the ape performance at the gala dinner. Towards the end of his presentation, the artist pulls a young woman by her hair. The viewer can almost feel the intense pain experienced by the character, in a haptic sense of discomfort, as if it were their scalp, not hers, that was under tension.

2.2.3 Waste and dirt

In a similar fashion, the scene where Christian looks for the threat letter from the young boy in a pile of garbage also communicates physical sensations visually. He has to climb over the fence since he doesn't have the key to the door. His clumsy attempt at passing over the obstacle conveys an impression of difficulty. Christian is no action hero. He embarrassingly struggles and almost gets stopped by the barrier. Once he manages to cross it, he realizes that to find what he's looking for, he has to dive into the trash bin. Two successive exaggerated wide overhead shots present him immersed in a sea of garbage (Figure 12), while wearing a

tuxedo. The audience can almost smell the putrid waste and imagine its repugnant texture. The rain that showers over him adds to the drama of the scene and the sensorial experience of being wet and sticky, uncomfortable and disgusting – a world away from the smart cleanness that Christian aims to project.



Figure 12: *Christian in a sea of garbage* (Östlund, 2017, 02:06:35)

Waste is a strong symbol, present throughout the film. Indeed, Ruben Östlund multiplies the shots representing homeless people living in utter poverty and being surrounded by dirt and trash. Such dire living conditions can trigger a sense of tactile uneasiness in the audience, but also create a moral discomfort, only reinforced by the sensorial one. How can we live in a society that lets people live in the street? How is it possible that the most common reaction is to ignore homeless people and not provide them with help? The director thus presents the viewer with difficult questions, making them reflect on reality and their own behavior, potentially triggering a feeling of guilt and shame.

2.3 Formal tools

In *The Square*, Ruben Östlund employs different formal strategies to create and communicate discomfort, some of which are reminiscent of those he used in *Force Majeure*. These tools include his use of frame, composition, shot size; sound/off-screen space; and editing.

2.3.1 Frame, composition, shot size

Östlund uses unusual, oddly balanced framing to communicate the awkwardness of the situations he depicts. I would like to argue that these odd framings not only visually render the oddity experienced by the characters (on a symbolic, metaphorical level); but also create a sense of weirdness in the storytelling itself. In other words, the narration in and of itself becomes bizarre, if not unsettling. Right at the beginning of the film, the interview scene with the journalist Anne presents unorthodox framings that hint at the fact that the interaction is not smooth. The first shot, wide, displays Christian at the center of the image, looking towards the left of the frame (Figure 13). His position in the frame seems strangely odd. Even though he is on the central axis of the composition, his head is slightly off centered, but not enough to give an impression of balance.



Figure 13: Christian getting ready for an awkward interview (Östlund, 2017, 00:02:16)

Behind him, the background is flat, with a white wall and grey floor. Interestingly enough, Christian sits in such a way that his thighs are positioned at the level of the junction between the wall and the floor, as if he were stuck in the environment. In a way reminiscent of the first shot of *Force Majeure* with the movement of the tourist photographer, the assistants and the journalist come and go, entering the frame from before and behind the camera. This gives an impression of depth in an otherwise extremely flat image. The discrepancy between the two creates an unsettling effect: something uncomfortable is about to happen. And indeed, the interview to unfold constitutes a very awkward moment. The journalist is nervous and accidentally drops her notes. She feels very unprofessional and is worried about how Christian will perceive her. The camera work communicates it: the initial wide shot is followed by a

medium closeup of the journalist, getting her papers back. However, that shot starts in a very unusual manner: the journalist has leaned forward to pick her sheets up, so the frame is empty (Figure 14). We only see a glimpse of the edge of her dress. She then leans back and gets into position. A more classical film wouldn't have featured the beginning of that shot.



Figure 14: An oddly empty frame (Östlund, 2017, 00:02:36)

The lack of figure requiring our attention (the frame is indeed almost entirely empty and out of focus) makes for a curious, somewhat uncomfortable image: what is there to watch? In reality, it seems that the shot when Anne is already getting up (cut in movement with the previous shot) captures and represents the vulnerability of the character. It is precisely that vulnerability, that is interesting to watch. In other words, the cinematography communicates both a mode of narration (quirky, stylized, blank) but also the emotional state of the characters.

The film language of *The Square* relies on both wide, detached shots, and sustained (medium) closeups. The first ones arguably create an effect of blank style. Geoff King notes that “blank style remains distanced and withdrawn from the on-screen action, creating what Sconce terms ‘a sense of dampened affect’, regardless of how disturbing or bizarre the narrative material with which it is associated” (2022, p.31). There is a sense of detachment, of disconnect, that fosters a feeling of oddity. Potentially highly emotional situations are presented from far away, which in return reinforces, almost counterintuitively, the unsettling atmosphere of the situations. One example of this can be found in the scene during which Christian is waiting for Anne, who wants to talk about their sexual interaction. He is seen in an uninterrupted, prolonged flat wide shot, framed, not to say imprisoned, between the lines made by the structure of the staircases. Even though we do not see his facial expressions clearly, we can experience his discomfort. He doesn't want to be there. He knows that the

conversation he is about to have has the potential to be awkward. His body language and his surprise when Anne appears transmit his nervousity. Perhaps because the wide shots leave more room for the spectator's interpretation and therefore imagination than tighter shots, these wide shots effectively communicate the character's feelings, despite not showing them ostensibly. They also contribute to establishing the stylization of the world depicted in the film. Both qualities participate in setting the mood and modality of discomfort.

On the other side of the spectrum are the (medium) closeups that offer us a good perception of the characters' facial expressions. Like the wide shots, they are characterized by their length. Östlund doesn't cut, he lets his camera linger on the characters, revealing the full scope of their discomfort. A telling example of this is the closeup on Michael, Christian's assistant, as he is driving away from the housing block where his superior displayed the threat letters, after having scratched the car (Figure 15). He was trusted with his boss' precious possession, a *Tesla*, and he just damaged it, in front of him. We never get to see the scratch, which a more classical film could have shown. It is solely indicated by sound and some sparks.



Figure 15: Michael's shame and worry (Östlund, 2017, 00:40:20)

Instead, Östlund prefers to remain on Michael's face for a whole minute. We can see the whole range of the emotions he goes through: surprise, embarrassment, remorse, guilt, shame, fear. We feel for him and worry with him about Christian's reaction to come. Here, the closeness of the camera actively permits the identification with the character and the emotional contagion.

2.3.2 Sound and off-screen space

In the aforementioned scene, Östlund relies on off-screen space, expanding the world of the film through sound. Sound is, as mentioned before, a source of disturbance that creates discomfort. In *The Square*, the director however uses the conjunction of sound and off-screen space in an interesting way that creates confusion and even more unsettledness. In the scene with the artist's talk interrupted by the man with Tourette syndrome, Östlund starts by spatializing the disturbance off-screen. Or rather, on-screen but in an indiscernible manner. The scene indeed starts with a wide shot of the stage where the artist and an interviewer are, with the audience silhouetted in the foreground. The first disturbance comes when the man moans and claps his hands in the air, which we see on frame. But we cannot attribute it to any identifiable character as we only see the audience from the back, in the dark. Therefore, when the next shot comes, a wide shot of the audience, we don't know who to look for (Figure 16).



Figure 16: *Where to watch?* (Östlund, 2017, 00:46:20 / 00:46:21)

The destabilization that comes from the feeling of something hiding in plain sight, invisible in the visible, reinforces the embarrassment. The threat is ungraspable, it could come from anywhere and consequently, feels more threatening. As the scene unfolds, the disruptions by the man with Tourette syndrome appear off-screen, communicated only through sound. It is only at the beginning of the last third of the four-minute scene that we get to see him and recognize him as the author of the interruptions.

2.3.3 Contrast Editing

The last formal element that strikingly contributes to eliciting cringe is the use of contrast editing. The movie indeed features several moments in which the same technique is employed to transition from one scene to another: a character says something at the end of a scene, pretending to be in a position of strength; but the cut to the first shots of the subsequent scene reveals the opposite. The character didn't hold their promise. Two examples illustrate this principle.

The first example happens in the car as Christian and Michael are on their way to distribute the threatening notes. They cheer up to the pumping music and feel unstoppable. Cut to the next scene: no music anymore, an empty parking lot with concrete traffic cones. The two men laugh nervously. They are not as self-assured as they were. Quite the opposite. Here, the contrast created by the cut reveals their cowardice.

The second example happens at the museum party. Christian is in the bathroom, promising himself that he will not sleep with the journalist that night. Cut to: him awkwardly standing in her bedroom (viewed in a wide shot). Here, the transition reveals the weakness of his will (and probably as well his submission to carnal impulses). In both cases, the cut enables a contrast between expectation/promise and reality. By their inability to walk their talk, the characters appear ridiculous, making fools of themselves. The juxtaposition of the two images therefore reveals the true nature of the characters and helps create the effect of cringe. Here again, form creates content.

This chapter has demonstrated how *The Square* elicits awkwardness and embarrassment (as sources of cringe) by displaying social awkwardness, offering sensorial discomfort and relying on technical formal tools. In the next chapter, we will see how these categories apply to Östlund's latest film *Triangle of Sadness*.

3 *Triangle of Sadness*

The last film of the trilogy tells the story of a wreckage. Not only that of the luxury yacht on which the characters stay but also of the societal model they represent and stand for. The movie follows a dysfunctional couple of fashion influencers, Carl and Yaya, on a cruise for the ultrarich. On board, they meet a collection of colorful characters, from the Russian capitalist oligarch Dimitry and his exuberant wife Vera to the American Marxist ship captain, by way of Jarmo who presents himself as “very rich” and Clementine and Winston, a couple of English aristocrats, made wealthy by the arms business. The idyllic voyage turns to a nightmare when the captain decides to organize his dinner during a storm, making his guests violently seasick. The ship becomes a dump, filled with human filth, before being attacked by a group of pirates with a hand grenade. The boat is cut in halves and sinks in the sea. The survivors are stranded on a desert island and are forced to cooperate. A cleaner from the yacht, Abigail, turns out to be the only one able to fish and make a fire. Consequently, she becomes the new leader, introducing a new form of society based on a matriarchal contract. The other members of the group must follow her authority, with the extreme case of Carl who exchanges sexual favors against food and special treatment, making his girlfriend extremely jealous. At the end of the film, Yaya discovers that the island is not deserted: a luxury resort is actually located on the other side of it. The survivors are saved. Soon they will be able to return to the world they always knew. Afraid of losing her newly gained power and being forced back into her servant position, Abigail seizes a rock to kill Yaya and keep the discovery a secret forever. The film ends on a very ambiguous note: Carl is running – away from a threatening Abigail or towards Yaya to rescue her?

The film introduces the end of a form of society and the (temporary) establishment of a new one. But it also shows one constant: the appeal of power that ends up corrupting the soul. Östlund seems to hint at the fact that humans are all in the quest of power and that, once they have it, they will do everything to retain it. If the form of society changes (from patriarchy to matriarchy), it remains a class system, with ruler and ruled, oppressor and oppressed.

But the wreckage is not simply the symbol of a change of societal paradigm. It is also an efficient metaphor to approach cringe. As we have seen, awkwardness is created by a break in the social contract, leading to embarrassment and discomfort. There is no social script to follow anymore, thus creating a chaotic situation of emergency. As in the previous chapters, we will see how Östlund exploits it to create a unique experience for the audience.

3.1 Social awkwardness

In *Triangle of Sadness*, discomfort is created through the depiction of socially awkward situations and characters making fools of themselves.

3.1.1 Socially awkward situations

Four main categories of awkward situations can be identified: incomprehension, calling someone out in public, characters being disrespected, and characters stepping outside of their comfort zone.

3.1.1.1 Incomprehension

With this film, Ruben Östlund makes clear that incomprehension among characters creates uneasy situations that can soon become embarrassing. Incomprehension can emerge either from the inability to express oneself clearly or from expressing something incoherent. One character embodies the first: Therese, a wealthy passenger of the cruise, paralyzed after she suffered from a stroke and now only able to say one sentence, “in den Wolken” (“in the clouds”). She is introduced during a meal in the dining room of the yacht, where she has been paired with a couple of English aristocrats. They introduce themselves, but Therese doesn’t respond. They therefore reiterate their presentation, waiting for Therese to tell them who she is. From their perspective (and ours too, at first), her lack of response seems strange, not to say misplaced. Is she ignoring them? Making fun of them? Why is she not following the rules of politeness? Here, the lack of a clear, prompt, rational explanation, coupled with the lack of reverence for the norms of social etiquette create an off-track moment. The situation is becoming awkward. Not only for them, but also for her. She is visibly embarrassed by her inability to respond and to communicate the reasons for her silence. She seems to be looking for some help, for someone able to voice her reasons and her excuses. Her husband eventually joins and explains the situation. Once logic enters, peace returns. But the spectator could sense the oddity felt by the characters and can foresee Therese’s handicap causing her trouble again. It is indeed the case. On the desert island, she remains in a life raft, left to her own devices when the other survivors are away. At the end of the film, while she is on her own, a miracle happens: a potential savior arrives. He reveals himself to be a traveling salesman. If Therese manages to explain her situation of shipwreck survivor, he may save her and bring her home. She tries to communicate with gestures, but he does not understand. He believes that she is asking for sexual favors and leaves. The awkwardness takes a tragic turn. Therese’s

inadequacy, her inability to communicate has sent a wrong message that isolated her even more and damages her chances of being rescued.

Incomprehension can result from miscommunication or the inability to express understandably what one means. But incomprehension can also result from the understandable expression of something incoherent. A character presents something irrational as the truth and forces the others to deal with the illogic. This is exactly what happens when a female passenger goes to see Paula, the crew manager, and then the captain to tell them that the ship sails are dirty and ask for them to be cleaned. The problem here is that the ship is fully motorized and has no sail. The female passenger is therefore breaking the contract of rationality. How should the other characters deal with it? Paula, aware of the service etiquette and her duty never to contradict her guests, agrees with the request and says that she will see what can be done. The situation unsettles her because the guest makes an idiotic remark, but she cannot let her lose face. Though she does not understand the passenger's reasoning, she must pretend it is sound and conceal the awkwardness, which deepens the scene's embarrassment. In contrast, the captain, in a higher power position, openly corrects the mistake, unafraid to speak the truth. The guest, unsettled by the rectification, feels her grasp on reality challenged. Unlike Paula, the captain does not absorb the awkwardness, but lets the passenger deal with it.

3.1.1.2 Calling someone out in public

When the captain sets the record straight, he does it in front of his second in command Darius and the passenger's husband. The conversation happens in front of a restricted audience, thus limiting the publicization of the awkwardness. But in other instances, the film shows characters being called out in public, feeling very embarrassed because of it. The first instance of this is a pivotal scene in the first part of the film. Carl and Yaya are having dinner at a "stuffy" – in Yaya's words – restaurant. The bill comes. She, eyes riveted to her phone, thanks her boyfriend for inviting her, taking it for granted. Carl seems upset and visibly wants to say something (Figure 17). Yaya sees it and tells him to say what he has on his mind. So, he does. He calls her out for forcing his hand and leaving him no option but to pay. In doing so, Carl breaks a taboo: the gendered partition of money in a heterosexual relationship. Commanded by gallantry, the man is supposed to invite the woman. Yaya plays by those rules. But Carl feels used and faces a dilemma. Should he clear the air and feel better, risking conflict, or should he remain silent, frustrated, but keeping face? The director places him against the wall, while Yaya has a lot of space behind her: Carl is cornered. He decides to speak out on the spot, in public, breaking the social contract and therefore creating an awkward situation. Yaya firstly deals with it with humor, making fun of her boyfriend. In return, he reminds her of

the promise she made the previous night about paying for their next meal. She answers that it looked like he wanted to pay, so she didn't want to go against it.



Figure 17: Carl awkwardly staring at Yaya, about to clear the air (Östlund, 2022, 00:10:56)

Carl retorts that the bill stayed on the table for a while before he grabbed it. She clearly had the opportunity to take it, had she had wanted to. Yaya claims that she did not see it. Carl, and the spectator, know that it is not the truth. Carl could stop there, accepting to put an end to the debate and sooth the conversation with his partner, but he decides to go back to the front and call her out for her nonsense. He thereby only adds to the awkwardness of the moment. This is too much for Yaya, who stands up and wants to leave. Carl has to get up to prevent her from leaving. The exchange becomes loud. A wide shot, displaying more guests from the restaurant, reminds us that the scene is happening in public and that their privacy is relative (they even get asked to be quiet). Carl manages to convince Yaya to sit down. She takes it upon herself and decides to pay for the meal. Carl now feels very bad, even though he obtains what he wanted in the first place. Once again, the scene could end here. But Ruben Östlund enjoys drawing out the pleasure. "I think that what maybe separates me from many other directors, is that I let the scenes play out for a long time," he told me during our talk (Östlund, personal communication, 05.07.2024). Yaya's card turns out not to be working and, as she doesn't have enough cash, Carl ends up paying. In prolonging it, the scene takes unexpected and unpleasant turns.

Noticeably, the diegetic music of the scene is edited in a way to support the escalation of the dramaturgy. At times, it stops to give room to awkward moments of silence. It suddenly restarts when a character attacks again.

This scene, involving a public breach in the social contract, is followed by three scenes that form the narrative arc of the awkward conversation begun in the restaurant. Going back to their hotel, Carl and Yaya take a taxi. Instead of accepting to let things be, Carl wants to have the last word and reopens the topic. This leads to a very heated conversation in the hotel

elevator, where Carl fights against the annoying closing doors and erupts when Yaya gives him some cash. The couple part ways. The situation resolves when Yaya visits Carl's room and admits that she never intended to pay for dinner.

This early scene where Carl publicly accuses Yaya, finds its counterpart in a scene towards the end of the film, on the island, when Yaya witnesses Carl caressing Abigail during a group gathering (Figure 18). Feeling betrayed and jealous, she confronts him out in front of everyone, asking what he is doing. Carl claims that he was simply resting his arm. Yaya senses the nonsense and retaliates by kissing Jarmo in front of him. The scene is very much cringeworthy insofar as a private issue is made public, leaving Carl cornered, unable to respond with the ease he would have if happening in private. He gaslights Yaya and makes her look like a fool. The reaction shots on the other members of the group highlight their embarrassment. In calling Carl out so publicly, Yaya disrupts the pleasant and smooth moment that the other group members were having and somewhat ridicules herself by overreacting.



Figure 18: Yaya calling Carl out (Östlund, 2022, 02:06:11 / 02:06:12)

3.1.1.3 Characters being disrespected

If Yaya responds so strongly, it is also because she believes that she has been disrespected, ostensibly and in front of others. Being disrespected is another way that Östlund represents the advent of an embarrassing situation, with the characters feeling shamed or not treated with consideration. An example happens on the island in a scene where Dimitry, the Russian oligarch, meets with Abigail, Paula and Yaya, on their way back from fishing. He compliments Abigail on her hunting skills. Realizing that has done nothing to contribute to the preparation of the dinner, he offers his help. Since there is nothing left to do as everything has already been done, Paula mockingly answers “yeah sure, get some Nutella” (Östlund, 2022, 01:53:40). Here, she references something that happened earlier on the yacht: Dimitry had the Italian spread especially delivered for him by helicopter¹. Paula thus highlights the break in the

¹ On a side note: one element that Östlund does to create an awkward (“turned the wrong way”), ridicule atmosphere, is to depict a twisted world where the high and the low, the important and the trivial, get mixed up and collide: delivering Nutella by helicopter (as if it were a highly prized possession); asking for a latte for a guest on the walkie-talkie; threatening someone with punishment for having stolen pretzel sticks. In a word, a postmodern world where money is the only thing that matters, everything else being relative.

social contract (she is not at his service anymore), meaning that she can now be irreverential towards him. Dimitry is mocked and feels ashamed. The scene is uncomfortable. To make amends, he decides to light the way with his torch. But the embarrassment is there to stay.

The audience can also feel vicarious embarrassment for characters that get disrespected insofar as they do not receive the consideration that they should. They are not treated the way they aspire to be treated. A clear example of this is found at the beginning of the film. At a fashion show, a hospitality agent asks three members of the audience to give up their seats for VIP guests that have just arrived. The three spectators feel angered for being disfavored, unsure why they must comply with the order. The social situation is not smooth anymore, but rather tense. The social hierarchy reveals itself in all its inequality. The VIP guests turn out to be four, not three. The operation is not as easy as it seemed, and the agent asks the entire row to move one seat to their right. A lateral tracking shot emphasizes the complexity of the maneuver, ultimately revealing that one person will have to abandon his seat: Carl. Right from the beginning of the film, Östlund thus tells that the character who could be considered as main, does not even have a chair on which to sit. He will be constantly stepped upon. Embarrassing.

3.1.1.4 Characters stepping outside of their comfort zone

The last type of awkward situation involves characters stepping outside of their comfort zone. In doing so, they can appear gauche and make social situations difficult. Jarmo, a guest on the cruise, is the character that embodies this tendency. One evening, he is alone on the yacht deck and sees two women (one of which is Yaya). He has a rather uneasy look and seems to lack confidence (Figure 19). “He is hunting. Big dilemma: he takes a risk or goes [back] to [his] room,” observes Dimitry who watches him (Östlund, 2022, 00:41:17). Still, Jarmo decides to go and see these women, stepping outside of his comfort zone, to ask them to take a picture of him, as a prelude to a possible flirt.

Carl and Dimitry observe the scene with amusement. They constitute the third-party viewers similar to the janitor in *Force Majeure* and guide the audience’s perception of Jarmo and his attempt. It seems that he is never going to succeed. He will simply manage to make a fool of himself. Unexpectedly however, his attempt is a success, and the women take his picture. Just after, they even invite him to take a picture with them. Carl and Dimitry cannot believe their eyes. Jarmo's clumsiness and social inadequacy, which had the potential to be extremely cringeworthy, did not impede on his chances, quite the opposite. His uncomfortable endeavor outside of his comfort zone was awkward but worth it. He then offers to buy the women a Rolex as he is “very rich” and wants to thank them for their generosity.



Figure 19: Jarmo is “hunting” (Östlund, 2022, 00:41:30)

His lack of flirting skills and his blunt straightforwardness make the situation embarrassing – for us, the audience – though not for him. He steers the conversation back to something he can control: his wealth. Yet, Jarmo does get embarrassed when Yaya repeatedly invites him to dance. He declines, claiming that he doesn’t know how to dance. He doesn’t want to appear ridiculous. He cannot go this far outside of his comfort zone. Yet in refusing, he kills the mood and causes Yaya to lose face, making the situation awkward again.

3.1.2 Characters making fools of themselves

Like its two predecessors, *Triangle of Sadness* prompts cringe by depicting characters making fools of themselves. Three main types of situations in which this happens can be identified: characters being self-centered; characters being contradictory; and characters inappropriately celebrating.

3.1.2.1 Characters being self-centered

Throughout his filmography, Östlund consistently explores characters who are far from being righteous. *Triangle of Sadness* is inscribed in that vein, satirizing the mediocrity of humanity. One vibrant way of doing that is through the depiction of the self-centeredness of the characters, who lack consideration and empathy for others. Two scenes perfectly illustrate this idea. The first one is set on the yacht. Carl and Yaya are asleep when Abigail, the cleaner, knocks on their door to offer room service. Receiving no response, she knocks again, speaking louder. Carl wakes up. Still sleepy, he answers. But Abigail doesn’t understand what he says, so she repeats herself. She offers to come back in half an hour. Carl asks for more time. Abigail

who needs to know when she can work, offers to come back in one hour, waking Yaya up. Yaya is very angry and sends Abigail away in a rude and condescending way.

If the scene is striking, it is because it presents some moral difficulty: who is in the wrong? Abigail for disturbing the couple's sleep, having to be thanked several times before giving up and leaving? Or Carl and Yaya for scornfully overreacting and not understanding that Abigail must do her job? Östlund places us in the middle and asks us to evaluate the situation with its dynamics of status and class imbalance. Carl and Yaya don't seem to realize the privilege that they have and treat Abigail in a rather obnoxious way, seeing her only as their servant and not as another human being worthy of their attention. In doing so, they appear as selfish and make fools of themselves.

Yet, this scene, which could be described as a micro-aggression, does not reach the level of disgust and disapproval raised by the second example. In this scene, Dimitry, the Russian oligarch, mourns his late wife Vera, whose corpse he found inanimate on the shore. He is holding her in his arms, visibly devastated by her passing away. But soon enough, he notices that she still wears her ring and necklace. He decides to take them off her, which proves to be quite difficult, causing the scene to linger awkwardly (Figure 20).



Figure 20: Dimitry taking the necklace off his late wife's corpse (Östlund, 2022, 01:48:52)

Dimitry's actions depict him as a man with no morality, having no respect for the dead, being solely interested in money. From a cold economic perspective, his behavior could be seen as rational: his wife having passed away, she won't need jewelry anymore, so there is no point in leaving them with her. Yet, it feels incredibly wrong and low on a human level. In dealing with the situation this way, Dimitry reveals his vile and venal nature and Östlund offers a revolting and uncomfortable vision for the audience.

3.1.2.2 Characters being contradictory

Another way the characters make fools of themselves and appear ridiculous is by being contradictory. They pretend something but act differently. They are either oblivious or hyper aware of the image they present of themselves. A first case arises when Carl, annoyed by the flirt between Yaya and a muscular crew member, goes to denounce him to Paula for being shirtless, which he claims to be inappropriate. Yet, ironically, Carl does this when shirtless himself, which makes his claim absurd. This scene however further underscores the class disparities on the yacht: not everyone is allowed to be bare-chested. Later, Carl witnesses the crew member leaving the boat after having been fired. He reacts in a quite expressive way, seeming to have remorse over what he has done. Did Carl not think that his complaint might lead to the worker's dismissal? He got rid of his competitor, but at what cost? Even though no other character sees Carl's reaction, the camera is there to capture it, registering how foolish he is.

At the other end of the spectrum, characters can make fools of themselves by being overly concerned with their image and acting falsely. Given that *Triangle of Sadness* has social media influencers as its core protagonists, it necessarily addresses the notion of fakeness and the discrepancy between illusion and reality. Yaya constantly takes pictures of herself (or gets others to take pictures of her) – not only out of vanity, but also because it is the price she has to pay to be on the cruise. (She was invited by a sponsor in exchange for content for social media.)

In one scene in particular, Yaya takes a picture pretending to eat pasta (Figure 21). Dimitry notices that she is not actually eating it and asks her directly about it. She answers that it is only for the picture (for which she sports a fake smile) as she is gluten-intolerant.

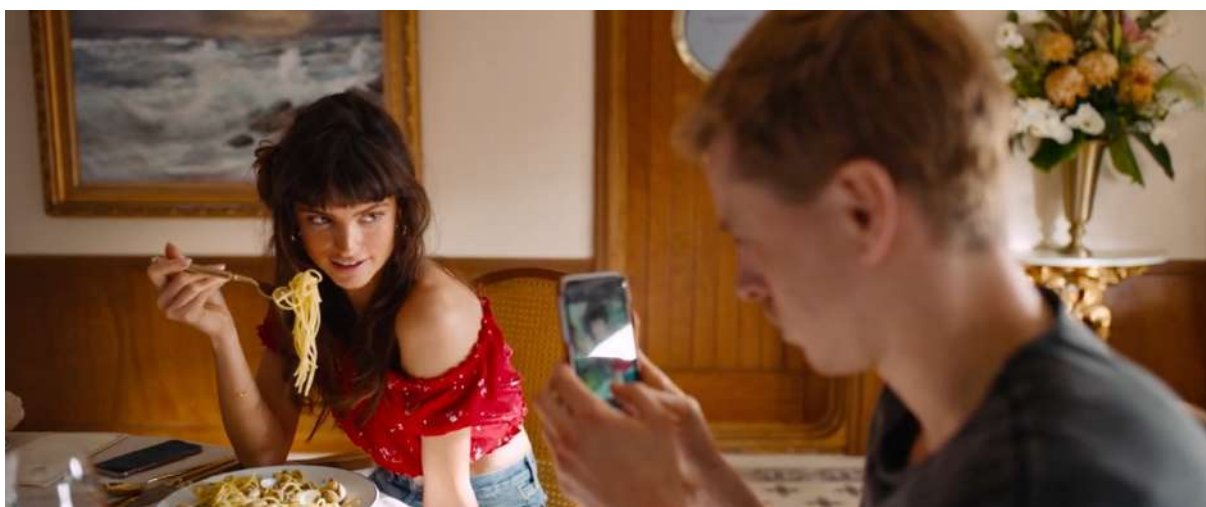


Figure 21: All for the looks (Östlund, 2022, 00:35:46)

With this scene, Östlund straightforwardly displays and verbalizes the contradictions inherent to social media and presents Yaya for what she is: a faker. The scene might be perceived as amusing, but it also exposes the influencer's cynicism.

3.1.2.3 Misplaced celebration

The last way characters make fools of themselves is through inappropriately celebrating something. Inappropriately either because what they are praising lacks value or because they rejoice prematurely. When Yaya returns to the hotel room after the fight she had with Carl over money, she confesses that she has a tendency towards manipulation. She uses others as puppets, pulling their emotional strings to get what she wants from them. As he hears that, Carl has a rather unexpected reaction. Instead of being mad at her for fooling him, he thanks her for her honesty and tells her that he loves her. He seems delighted that she acknowledges the fact that she was manipulating him, as if he needed confirmation that it was happening and not all in his head, and praises her generosity and truthfulness. There is a sheer sense of gleeful celebration. But Carl seems to forget the content of what Yaya has just revealed: he has been played by her. His reverential attitude following it makes him look ridiculous because he seems to care more about her acknowledging that she was manipulating him rather than about having been manipulated. Awkward.

Later in the film, another character wrongfully celebrates, this time doing it too soon. On the island, in a classical survival film trope, the characters start to hunt to sustain themselves. In the jungle, they find a sleeping donkey that Jarmo is designated to kill. He lifts a rock and throws it on the animal, knocking it down. Thinking that he was successful in his attempt, he turns to the rest of the survivors and boasts (Figure 22).



Figure 22: Jarmo boasting (Östlund, 2022, 02:04:11)

But the agonizing beast starts moaning. Jarmo realizes that his job is not fully done and that he has to get back to it. That proves to be more uncomfortable and difficult than he thought it would be as the animal seems to suffer very much and as he needs to renew his attempts. Jarmo emerges traumatized by the experience. The awkwardness of the scene is amplified by the initial premature celebration. There is a discrepancy between what seemed to be and what actually is, putting the character in an uneasy position.

3.2 Sensorial discomfort

In *Triangle of Sadness*, Ruben Östlund multiples the sources of sensorial discomfort, whether it be the sense of touch, balance, smell or hearing.

3.2.1 Touch

The film features several situations triggering the sense of touch in a disturbing manner. The tone is set by the opening title sequence where male models, half-naked and therefore vulnerable, get sprayed with paint. Their anxious expressions and flinching reactions when the acrylic violently hits their skin reveal the level of physical harm and discomfort they experience. The audience can imagine the unpleasant sensation felt by the characters, who suffer for fashion. A similar hurtful experience appears in the very last shot of the film, where Carl runs (most probably for his life) in the forest, hitting branches and harming himself. The faster shutter speed of the shot compared to the other shots of the film and the continuous lateral tracking emphasize the pain felt by Carl as his skin gets scratched by the stems and the spines. The film is therefore framed by two tactile scenes of physical harm, highlighting the discomfort that is persistent throughout.

3.2.2 Balance

In this last scene, Carl nearly trips and falls multiple times. His balance is fragile, and he must be extremely careful not to collapse. Balance is a sense that the film keeps on attacking, perhaps metaphorically suggesting that the (unfair) societal status quo is unstable. One scene is the epitome of this: the dinner scene on the yacht during the storm. While Paula, the crew manager, had stringly advised the boat captain against organizing it on the day of the tempest, he stubbornly insisted. The result is a disaster. The huge waves keep preventing the ship from ever being stable, leading to the passengers feeling extremely seasick. Östlund marvelously renders the sense of unbalance. The film's production designer explains that to achieve this, the set was built "two meters up on a hydraulic platform; [...] [the crew] could

control having slight movement in the beginning, and then as the chaos comes closer and closer, [they could] make it more and more intense” (Åsberg, 2022). As a result, the horizon line and floor never appear to be straight (Figure 23). As the storm gets stronger, objects and people start to fall and to be shaken in all directions.



Figure 23: Disbalance (Östlund, 2022, 01:00:52)

The spectator gets to experience the dizziness of the characters not only by witnessing it but also by being put in similar audiovisual conditions. In other words, the framing and movement of the horizon line, objects and people within the frame might generate a sense of discomfort and seasickness for the audience members, even though are not physically on the ship with the characters. One shot in particular emphasizes the effects of the storm on gravity: Vera, the passenger who ordered the crew members to go for a swim, gets very sick from the ship's pitching and tossing. She vomits, aiming for the toilet bowl. But the harsh movements throw her around, making her slide in her own bile.

3.2.3 Smell

The sequence displaying the reaction of the passengers to the storm has become a cult film moment, making a strong impression due to its span, its excess and its disgusting character. Östlund indeed shows at length the wealthy guests vomiting and defecating, trying the audience's senses of sight, smell and touch. The excessiveness and grotesque ostentatiousness of the sequence make it especially unsettling, causing the audience to want to tear their gaze away. In an interview with Guy Lodge, the director notes: “We react to that stuff almost in this primal way, this urge to get away: we are just completely programmed to back off from it, because it means disease or bacteria or stuff like that.” To which, Lodge observes: “The film, needless to say, doesn't give viewers the option of backing off” (2022, p.60).

3.2.4 Hearing

Lastly, Östlund solicits the audience's sense of hearing to create and communicate uneasiness. Here, the director uses sound, diegetically and extradiegetically, building an atmosphere of tension and annoyance. As the characters get on the cruise ship, they get repeatedly surrounded by flies. These insects form a nuisance that comes in contrast with the supposedly idyllic setting of the luxury cruise. They bother the characters by flying around them, disturbing their peace and quietness. Their small size makes them nearly invisible, thus furthering their capacity for annoyance: they are ungraspable, thereby unstoppable. But the disturbance they create is not solely sonic. Flies are known for their proximity to waste and are therefore associated to dirtiness and to hygiene hazard. The characters (and most probably the audience members) want to avoid being in their presence. One last characteristic feature of the flies is their symbolic value. They embody the rot and filth associated with the scornful and selfish behavior of the ultrarich depicted in the film. The flies appear to be a bad omen of their doomed fate.

The passengers' literal and metaphorical wreckage comes soon after the scene with flies. Filth becomes literal with the vomiting of body fluids in great amounts, requiring intense and energetic cleaning. Östlund depicts a group of cleaning ladies washing up the carpet while listening to heavy metal. The music starts diegetically (as it comes through the characters' headphones) before expanding extradiegetically. As its volume increases, it becomes the soundtrack of a montage sequence depicting the passengers in extreme discomfort. The music serves two purposes: giving rhythm to the cleaners' tedious task, but also and most importantly expressing the craziness of the situation, a situation that goes beyond the limits of control, comfort and bearability – the aggressive soundtrack of an aggressive scene.

Sound can become triggering and bothersome because of its aggressivity, but also because of its repetitiveness. Once the ship has wrecked and the survivors have formed a new matriarchal society on the island, a special bond emerges between Carl and Abigail. Carl exchanges sexual favors against food. Abigail whistles to call and command him. The instrument she uses has a piercing and immediately recognizable sound. The rest of the survivors gossip and make fun of Carl for giving in to Abigail, and use their whistles whenever he walks past them. Here, sound becomes a marker of mockery and shame. The recurrence of the raillery only reinforces its annoying character.

3.3 Formal tools

In *Triangle of Sadness*, Ruben Östlund uses film language to trigger and formally render discomfort. The movie resorts to similar strategies as its predecessors. Its long takes enable the filmmaker to play with real time and letting the scene drag longer than what would

be comfortable, prompting awkwardness. An example of this can be found in the sequence where Paula shows engagement rings to Carl. The long take and lack of cutting to other shots emphasize the grotesque nature of her hyper-reverent behavior. The use of wide-angle shots, mentioned in the earlier chapters, also helps creating a sense of blank disconnect throughout, creating the unsettling feeling of something being off, like in the scene where Dimitry accuses Nelson, another survivor of the yacht who was working in the machine room, of being a pirate, with a racist undertone. But, as we will see, the film also uses film language in unique ways.

3.3.1 Expressive camera movement

One tool used by Östlund to trigger discomfort is expressive camera movement. As seen with the use of sound, annoyance can emerge from the repetition of an element. This is true for the repetition of the same camera movement. The scene that illustrates it clearly is the scene between Yaya and Carl fighting in a cab after leaving the restaurant. The shot starts over the driver's shoulder, looking at the rainy street through the front window of the car. (It should be noted that the rain creates disturbance and discomfort since no one has an umbrella – Yaya protects herself under her small purse, a very symbolic image.) The camera pans to follow the couple as they pass by the car and Yaya enters. An awkward silence reigns among the couple following their altercation. Östlund keeps his camera on Yaya for a while before panning to Carl to reveal his unrest. Unable to remain quiet anymore, the male model clears the air: it should not be so difficult to talk about money and he wants men and women to be equal. Yaya strongly disagrees with his points. The camera pans six times in total among the two during the scene. This back-and-forth motion, even though it links the two characters in the same shot, further highlights the distance that exists between the couple. They have a fierce exchange, that the camera and the audience almost follow like a tennis match. The noisy and annoying rear windshield wiper seems to count the points between the two players and to metaphorically represent the dynamic existing between the two. Interestingly enough, this shot can remind the audience of a similar shot in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*. At 01:04:35 indeed happens a shot that seems to be the spiritual ancestor of the one in Östlund's film: a back-and-forth tracking shot, lateral (not panning), going between Paul (Michel Piccoli) and Camille (Brigitte Bardot) as she acknowledges that she doesn't like him anymore (Figure 24).

Here, the switching element between the two is not a windshield wiper, but a lamp that repeatedly turns on and off. Whether this reference is intentional or not, it does reveal something: the long, continuous, back-and-forth take enables the filmmaker to disclose the cold and awkward distance that exists between two lovers who do not love each other as much anymore.



*Figure 24: Triangle of Sadness meets Contempt
(Östlund, 2022, 00:15:38-00:17:44 & Godard, 1963, 01:04:35-01:07:07)*

The back-and-forth arguably heightens the discomfort, as it creates a sense of real-time unfolding of the situation. There is no cut to shorten it or to escape from it. Each camera movement is heavy, costly.

3.3.2 Contextualizing editing

Another tool that Östlund uses in the film is based on framing and editing. It revolves around cutting away to reveal the ironic awkwardness of the situation. The scene happens on the cruise ship when Alicia, a crew member, talks with Vera who tells her about the equality between all humans and orders her to relax and have fun. The scene starts with a medium closeup on Alicia, identifiable as a crew member through her uniform. She is talking to a female guest that we do not yet see, who asked for more champagne and complains about how unfair life is, hinting at how privileged she is, without it being her fault. Östlund cuts to a wide shot revealing the situation: the guest is Vera, sipping her glass of champagne in a jacuzzi. More specifically, the director cuts to the wide shot (Figure 25) when Vera claims “We are all equal” (Östlund, 2022, 00:50:25). The wide shot reveals exactly the opposite: Alicia is at Vera’s service, she is not her equal.



Figure 25: “Everyone is equal”, some more than others (Östlund, 2022, 00:50:20 / 00:50:25)

Alicia is forced to listen to Vera's nonsense with a smile. This reveals the absurdity of the claim, while making us feel for Alicia as she faces someone completely disconnected from reality and making harmful insensitive comments, Vera thus making a fool of herself. As

Östlund told me during our conversation, “it's about zooming in and zooming out. Zooming in on the individual, zooming in on what the individual is dealing with. Zooming out and putting it into context” (Östlund, personal communication, 05/07/2024). This is precisely what he does with this sarcastic and satirical cut: he reveals the general context, enabling the audience to understand and reflect on what is really happening. The scene then extends, dragging the absurdity of the situation. Vera offers to invert roles and then orders Alicia to get in the water and relax (while she is fully clothed). The scene is very uncomfortable for Alicia who is torn between her duty not to contradict a guest and her wish to remain true to herself. The fact that Vera uses her status to convince her to obey her orders make the scene even more unsettling. This does not match the universal equality she was claiming to believe in a few moments before.

Conclusion

Ruben Östlund is a filmmaker celebrated for offering challenging viewing experiences for his audience. Throughout this thesis, the tools and techniques use in the trilogy formed by *Force Majeure*, *The Square* and *Triangle of Sadness*, have been examined, focusing on three main fields of investigation: social awkwardness; sensorial discomfort; and formal tools.

Reviewing the socially awkward situations that Östlund features in his films, the different categories identified are: characters being forced to do what they do not want to do; characters making private conversations public; characters having private conversations in public (*Force Majeure*); lack of listening; status inversion; awkward intimacy; uncontrollable nature (*The Square*); characters calling someone out in public; characters being disrespected; characters stepping outside of their comfort zone (*Triangle of Sadness*). Multiple points of similarity can be identified (underlined in the following text).

Östlund focuses on the social arena. He views humanity through the scope of its interactions, and of the implicit rules that govern these interactions. More than other directors, he therefore focuses intensely and almost exclusively on the social contract. His characters have little to no backstory, and a limited number of personality traits. Some of them are caricatural or symbolic figures rather than fully fleshed psychological individuals. That is because the filmmaker is most interested in the role they play in the social game he presents. He describes in detail their reaction when facing uneasy situations, awkward moments that do not follow the social expectations. That is the first point of similarity in the creation of discomfort: the disrespect of the etiquette. His characters are inquisitive, invasive, disrespectful. They do not follow the rules of social hierarchy. They go beyond the limits, beyond the norms, beyond the acceptable.

This can be felt by the other characters as an intrusion. And indeed, Östlund often elicits discomfort by blurring the line between public and private. He places private interactions in a public setting, making his characters vulnerable. They cannot speak as freely as they could in a closed and discrete environment. In public, they are subjected to the gaze of others, which modifies their behavior, making them self-aware, shy or awkward. Embarrassment emerges when the characters worry about the opinion and judgement of others.

The characters are often put in difficult situations, where they feel exposed, and are not in control. In a word, they are taken out of their comfort zone. They get forced to do something they do not want to do. They are not as mighty as they thought and do not receive the respect and consideration they expect. They do not have command over what is happening. They are vulnerable. This is especially the case in situations of romantic interaction, where the characters must get naked, physically or metaphorically. In these moments, the characters should let their instinct express itself, follow their nature and not overthink, to smoothen the interaction.

But there is often a discrepancy between nature and culture. The characters either behave too naturally, not respecting the social rules, as established earlier (Tomas failing to protect his family because of his survival instinct in *Force Majeure* being the most striking example), or on the other hand, do not let themselves go and remain too socially aware in a moment of animality (cf. the awkward sex scenes in *The Square* and *Triangle of Sadness* where the male character fails at focusing on the intercourse). In these socially intense, intimate situations, the characters often make fools of themselves.

Ruben Östlund is fond of showing characters who inadvertently self-ridicule. In *Force Majeure*, he shows how the characters can fool themselves or be fooled by others. In *The Square*, a film about solidarity and apathy, about the bystander effect and running away from responsibilities, the director depicts how Christian makes a fool of himself by asking help from someone he previously refused to help and by his inability to properly recognize his shortcomings and apologize. In *Triangle of Sadness*, he demonstrates that being self-centered, being contradictory/a hypocrite or inappropriately celebrating belittle the characters. In a nutshell, Östlund makes fun of the fallibility of people who get blinded by their ego. There is a discrepancy between what seems to be and what is. The characters claim to be something but behave differently. They pretend to be powerful but lack agency. They call themselves adults but act like children.

Östlund works with sensorial discomfort, for the characters and for the spectators. The director indeed depicts situations that annoy and trigger different senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, balance. Disruption and disturbance. All of this creates an environment in which comfort and easiness are inexistent, thus favoring and supporting the advent of awkwardness.

Lastly, Östlund's use of form and film language to create and transmit discomfort and embarrassment has been explored, finding that the form is supporting the content, but *is* also the content. As noticed earlier, the films have a special, unique form, different from the canons of classical storytelling, that in itself constitutes an element likely to elicit discomfort for the audience. The different tools identified concern cinematography, sound and editing. Long takes, wide angles, peculiar framing (beheading characters, playing with the balance of the composition) and expressive camera movement were all analyzed for how they create the impressions of real time, emotional disconnect and awkwardness, leading to the establishment of a blank style, matching the satirical nature of the three films. Sound was also investigated for its use in creating a disruptive and uncomfortable experience, often linked to the use of off-screen space. Finally, editing, by playing with expectations (not cutting to a reaction shot when it is expected, for instance), temporality and context, was studied for how it helps to create the feeling of embarrassment.

All in all, Ruben Östlund resorts to these different tools to interrogate the society that we live in. His films deal with the status of man – as father, leader, lover – in the contemporary world. In recent years, the masculine position of power has been drastically questioned and

challenged. Östlund depicts male characters that experience a crisis, a dilemma, torn between societal expectations and their own will and individual inclinations. Their embarrassment constitutes the core of the films, both in content and in form. And Östlund wants the audience to relate to it.

Indeed, the discomfort is aimed at making the viewers reflect and ponder. His intention, as he told me, is

to create situations where we [the spectators] can identify with [a] behavior that we are not proud of. Identify with [a] behavior [about which] we usually say, “oh my God, it's connected to a bad person or an evil person”. And then instead [...] create the context where the audience understand “I would do the same thing”. [...] [In a word,] making it as hard as possible for the audience to turn away from the characters and disqualify them (Östlund, personal communication, 05.07.2024).

The director thus wants to offer a difficult viewing experience to his audience, making them adopt a reflective attitude during the screening. He is showing them a mirror, inviting them to reflect on themselves.

But if the emotions associated with these films are rather negative, one can wonder why spectators would like to subject themselves to such a challenging viewing experience. In our conversation, Östlund gave me his take on that as well: “it's entertaining to watch something that we are afraid of, [while] we don't have to participate in [it]” (Östlund, personal communication, 05.07.2024).

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Annex 1: Transcript of my conversation with Ruben Östlund

Jules Roux:

How did you get introduced to cringe?

Ruben Östlund:

I was a child. It was at a party that I attended with my mother. She was a little drunk... I was almost falling asleep in her lap. I don't 100% remember how old I was, but I couldn't have been very old. And all of a sudden, I heard my mother say [to someone]: "Johan. Please. Can't you look at me also? When we're talking. Now you're only looking at Anet all the time. And then of course I feel excluded." And, when she said this, it was something... In the moments after, no one really knew how to react. What she said was like... That presence, that moment was like [something] you could cut with a knife. And I realized that she had also some kind of social code or social contract. What you are allowed to say. That she was actually exposing that she was excluded in some way, even if this was a very subtle way and it became embarrassing for everyone that was involved. This scene was something that I did something with in *Involuntary*, [a movie] that consists of five different parts. One of them is focusing on a teacher. And my mother was a teacher. She was a primary school teacher. Grade 1 to 3. And that character is based a lot on my mother. So, it was just something in those moments that I had remembered during my childhood. And many of them were connected to some kind of an awkward feeling that was connected to the group expectation on how you should behave. And when that expectation was broken, there was a very awkward, strong, feeling that that got present.

J.R.:

This awkward feeling, was it something enjoyable or was it something that you didn't like? I'm very sensitive to these awkward moments, I have this, physical reaction where I try to avoid them as much as possible. So, how did you... Was there a moment for you that became a shift, where this embarrassment started to be something, I don't know if enjoyable is the right term, but at least of more interest than just creating this physical reaction of avoidance?

R.Ö.:

Maybe nowadays I'm not so sensitive to it anymore. And that has to do with many different things. Of course, my position as a director and being older and so on makes [me] less sensible and less vulnerable to those things. I think that the reason that we are so sensible to it is, of course, that the group hierarchy must be connected in some way to surviving and to the fear of being excluded by the group and so on. And when you're safe and secure in your position, you probably are less ashamed of these kinds of awkward moments. But I think I realized when I was doing my first feature film, *The Guitar Mongoloid*, where I was interested in characters

and people, that were breaking the social contract completely, doing something that is absolutely not allowed within normal behavior. And I love to look at how people react to that. And I so wanted to expose the audience to that: "Okay, how do you react on this small boy sitting here on the street singing this punk rock songs with very explicit lyrics and so on?" After doing that film, I started to look for the kind of situations that I just told you about. Memories that I have, where I have been dealing with the fear of losing face, or where I had friends that were dealing with the fear of losing face. I remember that during the shooting of *Involuntary* I very often had a hard time to be silent, not laugh when I was shooting. So, the sound guy had to come to me and say, "hey, you can't laugh because we don't want to hear your laughter into the mike". So, I had to apologize, but I thought it was so comical. And I think it's something about, like that you secondary can experience something that you're afraid of... That you see something that you are afraid of, and that provokes a certain kind of stimulation. It's almost like, violence in movies, where we can get the adrenaline from watching a dangerous situation, but we don't have to participate. But it's a pain in it. And the same feeling I had with these awkward situations like that. I get the same kind of like alertness in myself, but I don't have to participate. So therefore, I could also enjoy it. And I think it was somewhere when I was working with *Involuntary* that I read somewhere that awkward is one of the most googled words on the internet. I don't know if that's the case anymore, but back in the day, in 2005, 2008, I don't know exactly, that that was one of the most googled words. So, I think it's really something universal that is almost like *Candid Camera*. *Candid Camera* is very open, dealing with someone breaking a social contract, losing face, and we can laugh about it at the same time. It says something about human behavior. It's also connected to human behavior for me. You know, like a study module.

J.R.:

And it's interesting because it seems that *awkwardness* is something quite recent. I mean that it has taken the stage in the past 20 years... Is it because we are less shy, do you think, or because we are more connected to our inner emotions?

R.Ö.:

You mean these days? (Yes.) It's very interesting that you say it because I felt like my daughters that are 22 now, when they were brought up, they were never ashamed of me. And I remember that I was ashamed of my parents. I've been thinking a little bit about that. If it is that today people are so much more transparent of who they are and, constantly exposing themselves, like in social media and so on. We see so many references from different people. So, it becomes, maybe less dangerous to show something because it's already approved that there are other people that are similar. Maybe there are more references of how you can be as a human being. And I heard something very interesting that is that shame is also connected

to how centralized power is. So, for example, if back in the days you read books about how the etiquette was [regarding] eating, you know, when they were trying to create a new social contract around eating habits – you should not spit on the table, you should not burp, etc. – It seems like then people were not really ashamed at all. But when there was a strong centralized power that was further away from us, then shame became a factor in order to control our behavior. So maybe it is that these times are more shattered when it comes to power, that powers are actually being spread out and, and we feel more in power over our own lives. We feel that power has been this decentralized. So, this is a thing that I don't know enough about to really talk about, but I think it's an interesting thread to really investigate. And I think it's been written in a book that the more centralized and further away you are from the power, the stronger, social control around behavior and shame and what you should be ashamed of, is created. But, as I said, my daughters, they are not they have not been ashamed of me in the same way that I was ashamed about my parents. I think there's something about the fact that we are exposing so much more about ourselves and are more used to see different nuances, and we feel that we recognize ourselves in other people by taking part in a lot of people's lives.

J.R.:

When I was thinking about this notion of embarrassment and the way I see it in your three films, it seems to me that it's a lot about breaking things. It's a lot about social norms that are disrupted, where you have expectations and then reality happens. It's something about the social contract, the unspoken rule that we all abide by and then someone decides to break it. And one thing that I find extremely interesting is how there are many situations where you have unsolicited honesty, where people communicate really what they feel and what they think, because it feels that it goes against the social contract. Because if we want to function as a society, then we need to live in a peaceful environment. And if someone says exactly what they think, then it might create chaos. So, I wanted to know if you could elaborate on this.

R.Ö.:

I think you're right. I think that so much of the core in my films is about someone that is dealing with the outside perspective, the contract of being a man. And then, the conflict between that and our nature. So, in survival instinct, abandoning the family is something that is considered a crime because we have created a cultural agreement that the man should sacrifice himself for his family. And I love when I find research for that proves that it's actually the opposite than what we expect. So, I don't know if you heard about this, but I read and researched [studies] where they were comparing statistics from Estonia to Titanic. All ferry catastrophes from Estonia to Titanic. And it turns out that men in a certain age are the ones that survive and the ones that die are women and children. So, the opposite of “women and children first in the lifeboats”. And the conclusion of that research was that men have the ability of acting egoistic

when survival instinct hits. So, it's interesting [to see] that when survival instinct is put in, culture is put out. And then afterwards when you have survived, culture is coming back, and you start to see the change. So, there are very interesting examples of people that have been led by survival instinct and then later on committed suicide because they were ashamed. I mean, it's pointing out something that is very extreme about the human being, that in one moment survival instinct is so strong that we are signing out of the social contract. But then in the next moment, survival instinct is not strong enough to prevent us from committing suicide. It's a contradiction, an absurdity that I think is super interesting. It's very much about our nature and the civilized expectation of who we should be and the conflict between those things.

J.R.:

There is one aspect that I find recurrent or repeating in some scenes in your films, which is the invasion of privacy. So, for instance, in *Force Majeure*, they are trying to have this conversation at the ski resort, but they cannot have it inside the apartment. So, they have it in the hall. And there is the cleaner who is peeking at their conversation. The same thing goes for *The Square* when the journalist and the director have the conversation where she asks him about the night they spent together. And then there's the sound of chairs that are broken, the art installation. So, there is something about placing a situation in another location that makes it very unbearable and at the same time, constant interruption. I saw you talking about the PR people in *The Square* and the fact that there was a baby in this scene, which kills communication. And I feel that in your films, a lot of the awkwardness comes out also from the end of communication.

R.Ö.:

Or maybe, simply that a lot of the awkwardness is coming from where you have a certain specific conversation. So, in my next film, that is called *The Entertainment System is Down*, that takes place on a long-haul flight, London to Sydney, 22 hours, the entertainment system stops working. And then there's a couple, and the man is falling asleep. And the woman is awakened, she's bored. So, she decides to take his phone. And on his phone, she finds out that he has an affair. So, they argue on this 22-hour flight. And I have decided to put them in the middle of the ocean of passengers. So, in the middle of the middle row, they are 20cm away from the others. They will have a passenger sitting next to them and hearing basically everything they say as soon as they're raising the voice. So, it's something about the privacy of the couple relationship, the privacy of the nuclear family. And force the characters to have these conversations in places where other people can hear it. And for me, it highlights a certain kind of absurdity about how we are trying to.... Maybe not an absurdity, but maybe it highlights a convention and the expectations on the contract that you write in the nuclear family and the difference between that and what happens in a public space where you are not allowed to

expose your partners or things like that. I think that as soon as you write the dialog in a film, you try to figure out which setting makes this dialog most interesting. If they sit alone in the apartment and talk to himself. If you had a couple relationship, it would be a fight, and people would be starting to scream at each other because there's no reason for anyone else to hear it. It's very boring, you know, but it's so much more interesting when you put the third eye, observing things.

J.R.:

One thing I read also is that you enjoy having characters face dilemmas, because it reveals something about them. So, I wanted, you to elaborate on this, if possible. What do you find so interesting and dilemmas for characters?

R.Ö.:

I think that since I was a kid, I have an interest in *Candid Camera*. My mother loved to watch *Candid Camera* and it's very open. *Candid Camera* is putting a character in a dilemma. And *Candid Camera* is not so far from sociology and psychology. If you think about the, the famous sociological experiments like the Milgram experiment or Solomon Asch's conformity test and so on, all of them are dealing with dilemmas. So, it's a character that can choose either to believe in themselves or what they think is true or right, or they are adapting to the context of the situation and the hierarchies of the situation. And the dilemma in itself is very good material for creating drama and creating a tension. A dilemma is something where we can identify with the situation. It's easy to identify with, but it's hard to handle. In the dilemma, there are two options, but none of them are easy. And all of them will have consequences. It's a dead end where someone is cornered and we are going to reveal something, that these characters maybe don't want to reveal, or human beings don't want to reveal. Personally, I think that social sociology is one of the most beautiful topics that have been invented, the study of behavior. Because it doesn't put guilt and shame on the behavior. When we are acting in a way that we don't see that we are proud of. You know, it just says, look at the context of the situation: in this context, we might do in this way. So, it doesn't have this, like, neo liberalistic way of putting blame on everyone and saying, "you are like this and you are like that", and or "I succeeded because I fought so hard". It's basically, it's very connected to Marxism, on materialism and on how we put things in the context in order to understand it. So, for me, there's many different links, and dilemma are interesting to deal with. I'm completely not interested in psychopaths. And if you look at movie history, how many films are about like a psychotic murder that is murders and have no moral and no ethics? For me, this is nothing that I would spend four years on working to make a film about. Because the problem is already solved from the beginning. The person should be taken care of. Problem solved. So, there's no dilemma in that. So, I think it's, it's very connected to sociology for me.

J.R.:

One thing I've noticed as well is the fact that these dilemmas, you sometimes put them in the context of quite absurd situations, meaning: where very strong feelings, noble feelings are associated with very trivial elements. So, there is this mixture between the high and the low, which... I don't know if it makes you postmodern, but in a way, it creates this cringing effect. You know, when in *The Square* he goes and he has the conversation with the small kid, the feeling of unfairness is very strong, is very noble in a way. But what they are talking about doesn't make sense. That a man of his age and power should be so angry at the small kid.

R.Ö.:

I love when triviality gets blown up and gets a little bit too much attention. And I love to show that, and I think that there are certain aspects of being a human being where we can't let go of trivialities, even though the absurdity that we are alive, the unique miracle that we are alive, we are living ones, and still we are consumed by trivialities. And once again, to talk about *The Entertainment System Is Down*, it's the real problem on the airplane is starting when the crew is offering them a compensation. Because the entertainment system is not working. And the compensation is a cheese sandwich and mineral water. Then people are freaking out, you know, like, "No way. We want a free bar!" I put that into the context also that this airplane is going to crash and everybody's going to die. At the beginning of the film, you get to know "flight number XXX crashes and everybody dies", and then I want to mirror everything that happens on the flight. People complaining about the problem with the entertainment system or complaining about the cheese sandwich or, not being able to enjoy life with your partner because it's just something that that triggers you to create conflict instead and then put it in the context of soon you will be dead. So that is another example of, why I think that is interesting. To put things in a context is always interesting. To put the trivial thing in the context of death. To put the cheese sandwich in the context of death is interesting. It's about zooming in and zooming out. Zooming in on the individual, zooming in on what the individual is dealing with. Zooming out and putting it into context. Looking at life in general, in a broader sense. And at the same time, I'm thinking that moment when people are irritated, you take that moment also seriously and respect the feelings we are wrestling with. Zooming in and zooming out.

J.R.:

Now I would like to ask you more about the formal aspect of how you put this embarrassment and cringe in context. So, perhaps in the directing how you work with actors in the timing of situations, in the timing of their reactions. There is this scene in the *Triangle of Sadness*, you know, the bill scene where, it's all about the fact that the reaction is not happening at once, but delayed. So, is it something that you create in the editing, or is it something that you create on the set?

R.Ö.:

Well, that scene in *Triangle of Sadness*, when it comes to the bill, is something that I experienced myself. So, the whole scenario from the restaurant to the hotel room, pushing down to shift the bill in the elevator shaft was something that happened to me and my wife. When we met. And I was like, you know, from a Swedish middle-class upbringing, to get away to German that maybe lived in a more a patriarchal family structure. There were some clashes between how we looked at the contract of being a man and a woman. And it was like something that I thought was so interesting because to feel cheap when it comes to money in front of a woman is so connected with sexuality. And connected with a woman's "currency", with her beauty and sexuality. That was a perfect scene to me to go into that. But I think that the way that scene plays out is based on or inspired on something that happened for real. And it was so interesting to see how much time it consumed. That little bill. So, I don't know if I can have so much more than that. I think that what maybe separates me from many other directors, is that I let the scenes play out for a long time. And I put turning points that bring energy to the scene so we can spend a little bit looking at it from a different angle, like, you know, okay, she's giving the card to the waiter, and then it turns out she doesn't have any money. The card doesn't work. You know, that is a starting point. And then he has to pay anyway. And then he's trying to approach the problem with a little distance and saying, "it's interesting that's so hard to talk about money". And then she says, "I think it's unsexy to talk about money", another turning point. You're looking for the turning points where you bring energy to the scene. And if I get these turning points, I also can make a scene that is dealing with the trivial content to push them a little bit longer.

J.R.:

In terms of cinematography, I saw you did this interview with *Vanity Fair* where you were explaining this in the bill scene and the fact that you had to expend digitally the shots on Carl because you wanted him to be cornered. So I was wondering how much, when you storyboard, how much do you think about the visual rendition of what the characters are feeling? Is there something symbolic, in your framings? It seems to me that in *Force Majeure*, when you behead the characters in the frame, it's to reveal what they are feeling. So, I was wondering how you proceed with this.

R.Ö.:

I don't know if you've seen my books, but in my books, I have storyboards that are very detailed. When I'm working with them, I work quite much with the body position and trying to find a body position where I feel this expresses in some way what I want the characters to be dealing with. What I do is that I try to google a reference image on internet. I was drawing a picture of the

actor that plays Dimitry. On the island before I had decided who is going to play the character before the shooting. And I wanted the alpha male sitting, you know like very pompous way, and I found a picture of Jack Nicholson when he's watching LA Lakers. And the two last buttons on his shirt were open so you could see his belly, his belly button like this. And he didn't care at all. Then I used, that body position of him, and I draw an outline of that character. The storyboard pictures that I do, they are not really like made for shooting scheme or anything. I'm doing it to find images. This is one image that I want to do. I did another image of Yaya when she's covering her face with the mirror when the bill is put on the table. That is based exactly like the like the shot in the film. It's a careful and long-term work, in order to get to the feeling that you're aiming for.

J.R.:

And what is the experience that you want to create for the audience if there is one thing? Do you want them to look at themselves and feel ashamed? Do you want them to experience catharsis? Do you want them to laugh? Is there anything you want from the audience or for the audience?

R.Ö.:

Well, I think first of all, I think it's always about a certain kind of knowledge about human behavior that is in the core, that I think is interesting. If there's like a consensus of what we should think about man and woman, what we should think about sexuality when it comes to man and woman and trying to decide it as for example. I really believe that these are things that are connected to power structures and power. And it's not that men are abusing women because men are eviler than women are. It's about what position you have in a hierarchy. And so, trying to assign, as I enjoyed a lot to turn it over to hierarchy and letting the cleaning lady that I have as the oppressed being the oppressor. Which are things that are quite simple, but I strongly believe that these things are actually simple. I think it is simple why we are exploiting other human beings and, and it's an ongoing struggle to avoid us to do that. So, always zoom out and look at our behavior from that perspective and try to create situations where we can identify with the behavior that we are not proud of. Identify with the behavior where we usually say, "oh my God, it's connected to a bad person or an evil person". And then instead they create the context where the audience understand "I would do the same thing". Or "I have the ability of doing the same thing". So. Yeah it is really making it as hard as possible for the audience to turn away from the characters and disqualify them.

J.R.:

While still keeping watching the film. Because there is, there is something very entertaining in your cinema. But at the same time, I was evoking this physical reaction that I have, to cringe

in situations. Which I find extremely interesting because it makes you aware that you're watching a film and at the same time you're so fascinated that you're captured.

R.Ö.:

I think that, as we talked about before, it's entertaining to watch something that we are afraid of, and we don't have to participate in. It's something that we are very, very interested in because it's part of being a human being and it's part of our survival, to be, to maneuver social situations and therefore we are interested in it. And therefore, we also think it's entertaining. Even if something that we are scared of.