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## Film Review: The Square

*This Palme d'Or winner is a meaty film of ideas with instant-classic set-pieces and moments of mind-blowing freakiness, a stunning follow-up to 'Force Majeure.'*

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Oct 27, 2017



Reviews

Specialty Releases



In *Force Majeure*, Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund explored the way animal instinct and self-interest can trump civilized, altruistic behavior—particularly in the male of the species. Now, in *The Square*—winner of the Cannes Palme d'Or and a high point of the New York Film Festival—Östlund weaves that theme into a stunning film that's part art-world satire, part critique of economic inequality, and itself a kind of performance piece, like the art it lampoons. The film is leavened by humor of the squirmiest sort, while its depiction of social issues is skewed by surrealistic touches and a sense of menace that evokes Michael Haneke.

At the center is Christian (Danish actor Claes Bang), curator at a modern art museum, and the picture of elegance, with his red-frame glasses and suave good looks—maybe a wink at the Metropolitan Museum's mellifluous Philippe de Montebello? While crossing a busy square, he shelters a woman from an "attack," which turns out to be an ingenious pickpocketing scam. Christian and his assistant locate the whereabouts of his cellphone on the Internet and embark on a rather loony mission to pry it loose from the perp, lodged in housing for immigrants. The ploy soon veers out of control, threatening to dislodge Christian from his cushy life.

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Interwoven with the phone-heist thread is Christian's struggle to stroke the museum's donors and promote its new art work, "The Square." The piece is a "safe space" traced in light on the ground, and intended as a "sanctuary of social awareness and responsibility toward others." (Östlund noted during the New York presser that versions actually exist in four European cities.) This high-mindedness is flouted by the museum's trollish marketing people, who propose an outlandish "promotion" in a desperate bid to flag the attention of a public overloaded with stimuli.

Between lectures on art that verge on BS, Christian manages to work in a dalliance with Anne, an American journalist (Elisabeth Moss). Their bedroom scene has to be one of least sexy couplings in film; you won't soon forget the pair's hilarious, cringe-making fight over who will dump the condom. Anne apparently shares the apartment with an ape—no explanation offered; it's one of many surreal touches that tip the film off-kilter and keep the viewer on edge. This unusual pet foreshadows the ape-man (motion-capture actor Terry Notary) hired to perform at the museum's black-tie fundraiser, who literally turns the tables on his patrons.

Östlund looks deep into the hearts of men and refuses to let his sex off the hook. In a scathing scene in the museum, Anne calls Christian on using his prestige to seduce women, relentlessly grilling him on exactly how he views their night of intimacy. Östlund, known for doing 50 takes, keeps his camera on Christian's eyes as he parries Anne's attacks in moments that reveal more about male entitlement/guilt/ambivalence than other entire films. The scene is accompanied by an off-camera racket of chairs banging around, presumably to set up an installation. As always, the film's sound design projects unseen threat and seems to say: Beware of feeling too comfortable in an affluent society with beggars on every street (and they form a voiceless chorus to the posh art crowd). In a weirdly hilarious scene, the obscene outbursts of a man with Tourette's syndrome interrupting an art lecture suggests that animal impulses lurk just beneath civilized discourse.

At every turn, Östlund sidesteps piety and goes for weird mischief. In a climactic moment, after a Muslim kid from the high rise vents his anger at Christian for being unjustly called a thief, Christian delivers a frantic *mea culpa* that pins the culture's malaise on the fact that "291 people own more than half the world's wealth." But because it's delivered on YouTube and digresses way beyond sound-bite length, the tirade turns farcical. *The Square* is a big film that sets an individual's crisis within the larger world, a film of ideas delivered with anarchic brio.

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