

“PLEASE LEAVE A MESSAGE”:
THE MEDIA ECOLOGY OF RUBEN ÖSTLUND’S
PLAY, FORCE MAJEURE, AND THE SQUARE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines three films by the Swedish director Ruben Östlund: *Play* (2011), *Force Majeure* (2014), and *The Square* (2017). It describes the role of mobile phones in the films, both on the level of content and in terms of aesthetics. Within the films, the failure of the phone to connect the protagonists to significant others is seen as symbolic of an alienation that leads them to points of crisis. Here, the mobile phone works as a device in two ways. First, as a significant communication technology, and second, as a plot contrivance to advance the dramatic conflict. Critically, the mobile phone opens an uncertain space where subjectivity becomes increasingly insecure, precisely as it becomes fundamentally intertwined with it. There is a cinematic tradition of mobilizing this ambiguity to which this process can be connected. Further, the form of these works is considered in relation to the notion of traumatic repetition, and how this expands into the wider contemporary image-culture and the key influence of YouTube within this. Here, the films are considered in relation to the changing dynamic of the public sphere in the light of the mobile recording capabilities, that have come to shape an emergent cinematic aesthetic evident in these films.

KEYWORDS

Ruben Östlund, Mobile Phone, Subjectivity, YouTube, Cinematic Aesthetics, Trauma

In her work *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, the philosopher Avital Ronell draws attention to the centrality of this apparatus to twentieth-century thought and culture.¹ Here, the telephone is seen as something that inserts itself into the very notion of being in modernity, precisely as it facilitates new electrical circuits of power. As telephonic speech establishes itself, we become sensitized to the knowledge that it signifies a place of absence – an absence that undercuts the constitution of the self in relation to others and thus raises the potential for this to be occupied by a threatening or disruptive force. Since the writing

of Ronell’s text in 1989, the mobile phone and its, by now, greatly expanded functions have permeated and saturated social life, intensifying these potentials and generating an increased state of existential anxiety with the sense that something is fundamentally lost or absent in this assemblage – what Ronell describes as the *techno-hermeneutics of mourning*.² Developing from Ronell’s thesis, this article will consider the cinematic form of the above mentioned films by Östlund in relation to the notion of traumatic repetition, and how this expands into our contemporary image-based culture. What is evident in these films is a sense of rising anxiety, generated by the recent iterations of the mobile phone as a problematic communication technology. The argument of the article is that the films plug into the tensions inherent in what Felix Guattari describes as the three ecologies: of the media, the social, and the subjective, that are perpetually in process with each other and constitutive of an environment.³ It is the notion of environment as a field of potential that is explored in this analysis of the medium of film; a medium that oscillates between what can be defined as communication and expression. Films communicate through images, ideas, and emotions, that is, by a systematic organization of elements in a familiar arrangement of perceptual cues, that operate through multimedia techniques. This is not to reduce film to the idea that it is simply a delivery vehicle for already formulated systems of thinking or ideologies (messages); it can be far more than that and can, potentially, spur new thinking into existence, forcing us to confront challenging ethical questions.⁴ In this sense, a film is a complex arrangement that has multiple relays and feedback loops between elements that constitute a field of expressive potential, whose rhythms are organized to resonate with audiences’ affective bodily interiors.⁵ From the point of view of the film director (given the arduous nature of the production process), establishing a repeatable cinematic technique allows for the exploration of other creative potentials, that will add something new to the more recognizable style they have established in their work. By working in this way, across the films of Ruben Östlund, we can usefully track the reappearance of certain motifs whilst paying attention to the specifics of each moment of articulation, that are generative of new insights.

MOBILE IDENTITIES

In his films, Östlund uses the mobile phone as a device, where the term device refers both to the phone as a communication device and, in cinematic terms, as something that moves the story forward.

a plot device that motivates a character's actions and maintains the narrative flow. In one important sense, the mobile phone has become so ubiquitous today that it is becoming an intrinsic part of the character's identity. Any disturbance of this relationship – such as the loss of a phone or lack of connection – begins to initiate an escalating series of crisis.⁶ What Östlund does well, is to articulate something of the double aspect of the mobile phone, that effectively captures the changes in behavior, driven by its expanded range of possibilities as well as the gaps and uncertainties that are simultaneously opened up. Across the films, the presence of a phone works as a point of disruption to the protagonist's world. Thus, what is highlighted is the potential of the phone to interrupt the familiar pattern of social relationships and initiate a process of dislocation, making the situation become one beyond the subject's control. Östlund weaves the mobile phone into the texture of his films as the privileged device for interrupting the call of the master, where the stability and authority of their male figures are undermined by aspects of this technology that escapes their charge. Indeed, it can further be appropriated by others, and the character becomes a victim, subject to the subaltern's regime of control.

This is something that has a long tradition in cinematic history, where drama is generated precisely by the mistakes, failings, and delays in telephone (mis)communication. Ned Schantz writes of what he describes as the *telephonic film*, where from the earliest days of narrative cinema the telephone worked to undermine the singular viewpoint of the individual, functioning as "... the somewhat wobbly vehicle that, in its inherent vulnerability to interception, delay, misunderstanding, or disguise, dependably delivers the conditions of instability that make narrative possible."⁷ As the fixed-line telephone of the twentieth century morphs into the mobile handset, and further into the smartphone of the twenty-first century, the role of the phone in cinema changes as well and becomes something that now operates in a different way. For, as Schantz describes it: they have both "... now entered a period of mutation and complex interconnection with other technologies."⁸

Across Östlund's films, the mobile phone works in different ways, each reflecting its moment of cinematic production and articulating something of the contemporary communication milieu within which it is located. The most common aspect of the phone as plot device is the frustrating inability of the character to reach a person outside of the situation, who could resolve the conflict for them. This failure of communication undermines the authority of the characters, and their abilities to find a safe solution to the



Fig. 1.
Play, poster.

unfamiliar situation that imperils them. At this stage, it is useful to consider the films more closely to engage with the dynamics of each one as they instantiate an interaction of particular moments of society, cinematic technique, and communication technologies.

Play from 2011 is, from the opening, driven by a mobile phone as the primary focus of the scam, operated by a gang of black boys. They observe the middle-class white youths carrying their bags of consumer items, purchased in the shopping mall and decide to target them in a well-practiced performance: the “brother trick,” the aim of which is a systematic loosening of the boys’ conditioning to the point where they are persuaded to reluctantly hand over their phone and possessions after failing to win a rigged contest. What is introduced from this early point, is an uncertainty: “Somebody robbed my kid brother last weekend. He had a phone exactly like this. Same cover. Same scratches. Where did you get this?” (*Play*, 1.05.04). But it is not the provenance of the object that is most significantly undermined here; it is the relationship between the boy and his father, who was the one who gave him the phone: “From my papa” (*Play*, 1.05.14). The key strategy for the gang members’ course of action is the systematic reinforcement of uncertainty in order to loosen familial bonds, rather than the aggression or threat to simply take the phone. Such actions could create a dangerous visibility and draw unwanted attention, although violence is always implicit in the “game.”⁹ Crucially, this uncertainty is allowed to grow because of the victim’s failure to be able to get through to a parent on the phone, who could otherwise intervene and extract him from this threatening situation. Faced with this uncomfortable pressure and lack of an adult intervention, he becomes progressively insecure. After a series of journeys and disruptions, once again it is after the victim fails to connect with his mother – “Welcome to voicemail” (*Play*, 1.21.28) – that a gang member carefully negotiates the situation to assume control of the communication between the victim and parent. This issue of being in control of the communication is central to the theme of the film, even appearing as the film poster, and therefore provides the most familiar iconic image of the film **Fig. 1.10**

In many ways, *Play* echoes the techniques at work in a situation such as an interrogation, where the threat of violence is ever present. Yet what is coerced is the engagement, even if reluctant, of the victim in the process itself, that is, to establish a circuit of communication. Here, the victim is encouraged to answer his phone when it rings, even if this could facilitate the end of the scam, as he needs to be reassured to stay within the game. Ultimately, however,

the resolution of the film once again sees the imposition of force in response to the gang’s tactics, as the father of a previous victim aggressively intervenes and forcibly takes a phone from one of the younger gang members. Framed by a wider culture of entitled aggression, even if anxiously applied, this exposes the limits of the boys’ power and shows where they become powerless in the face of a dominant social system, positioning them and the film between “assault and unease,” as Nikolaj Lübecke concisely describes it.¹¹

In the second film, *Force Majeure*, the range of the disruptive potential of the mobile phone expands precisely as the capabilities of the phone expand into the realm of the camera phone and its texting functions. Early on we see the central character, Tomas, lie to his wife, Ebba, as he replies to a work call: “Are you checking your phone? No, I’m not actually” – therefore foreshadowing the unravelling of the family, due to his deceit and lack of commitment, facilitated by the device **Fig. 2.**

Later, as the key traumatic event in the film unfolds, we see the family sitting at their lunch table while a controlled explosion triggers an avalanche in the background. The father’s immediate response, and that of others around him, is to grab his phone and start filming. Then, at the moment when he thinks that his life is in danger, he runs away, abandoning his family, yet still firmly holding onto his phone. Subsequently, phone footage of his panicked flight becomes the basis of his wife’s drunken condemnation of his actions and his public shaming. At this moment, his gaze switches from the screen to Ebba’s face as his humiliation plays out **Fig. 3.**

Consequently, Tomas is increasingly exiled from the family and reduced in stature. His wife is looming over him as she sits forlornly outside their hotel room and pleads: “I called. I left a thousand messages...” (*Force Majeure*, 1.29.12) in the face of her increasing indifference. At this moment, even his son laments “Pappa, there is no network” (1.29.26), signalling his symbolic loss of power and status as father figure. Yet Ebba maintains her network of communication to her independent minded female friend, with whom she chats about justifications for infidelity until Tomas is forced to intrude, and she terminates the call: “Listen, I’ll call you back” (1.30.24). For Tomas, the phone has become a duplicitous device that operates to expose his weakness and relentlessly continues to reinforce his loss of status and dissociation from the communication/family network. This way, Östlund apparently shows that without technology to mediate (culture), Tomas is revealed to be subject to nature, rather than able to control it. At the same time, the director arguably undermines this dichotomy.



Fig. 2
(Force Majeure, 0:09:21)

Fig. 3
(Force Majeure, 1:03:20)

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Reflectively, however, the device ultimately bears witness to a moment of redemption, where, in the final section of the film, the family is descending from the resort in a bus along with their friends and other passengers. This time it is Ebba's turn to panic and scream to be let off, abandoning the children, while it falls to Tomas to contain the panic her actions cause, and to marshal the women and children to safety. Everyone, apart from one passenger, stand and watch the bus make a turn before it drives away. Continuing a theme introduced in the beginning of the film, when the family was being arranged for an official resort photograph, cameras are positioned in a circuit of ocular correspondence. As the bus manoeuvres and drives off, a passenger films it on his camera-phone before panning onto the watching crowd, that is also now pointing at us, the audience, completing the circuit of complexity, initiated at the beginning of the film with the staging of the family portrait. Our complexity is produced in that we are positioned as judgemental observers of Tomas and Ebba. This interpellates us into a superior moral position, that follows the symmetries of the chiasmic structure of the film, as first one and then the other parent abandons the family. Finally, as we observe through the actual film lens, we implicitly become the subject of another lens within this in a kind of *mise-en-abyme* Fig. 4.

For Christian, the central character of *The Square*, his world unravels as, at the beginning of the film, his phone is stolen by criminals who pull him into a situation, where he chivalrously intervenes to protect a woman from an aggressive man. It quickly becomes apparent, though, that this was merely a performance, covering the theft of his phone and wallet, and Christian is immediately reduced to asking indifferent passersby if he can use their phone. However, the stolen smartphone is trackable via GPS and reveals its location. Later, he secures the return of his possessions through a strategy that effectively criminalizes an entire apartment block by hand-delivering a letter (a significantly lesser form of communication) to each apartment stating that he knows that they have his property. But Christian's triumphant attitude is soon undermined as a call from the convenience store details a letter that has, in turn, been left for him. Here, a threat is made to "make chaos with you" unless an apology for the accusation of theft is publicly withdrawn.

At this moment Fig. 5, we see how he is framed by a window, as the railings behind him close in on him like prison bars, and his status has been reduced to the level of rubbish bins. The situation now begins to spiral out of his control as a young, immigrant, boy, enraged at the accusation, pursues Christian.

"Please leave a message"

Later, after awkward scenes of confrontation between them, we see Christian attempting to reconnect with the boy to whom he feels responsible for hurting, and so he makes a confessional recording on his smartphone: "I admit I was wrong and apologize to you in a video" (*The Square*, 2.09.33). But Christian is speaking into a phone that has no destination; the number is disconnected and, while he feels a profound sense of guilt, we can tell he does not connect with anyone but remains within a narcissistic circle of reflection, where he is simply addressing an image of himself on a screen.

What should be clear by now, is that the focus on the mobile phone in Östlund's films is motivated not by its ability to facilitate communication, but rather by its tendency to mark communication failure, and for this to create in the protagonist an escalating cycle of insecurity. Östlund perceptively plugs into a contemporary phenomenon of technological control, where habitual familiarity produces dependence, which in turn generates vulnerability, potential manipulation, and self-doubt. It is the flow through the telephonic subject that, however empowering and exhilarating, is also exposed to a sense of loss, a kind of bereavement, as Ronell has described. Each of the films address the systematic diminution of control that the central character experience as they are revealed as weakly dependent upon the veneer of social conventions that sustain their position. Their power is systematically and harshly stripped from them with only the possibility of trying to mobilize others to act on their behalf in a final effort to reestablish themselves. Ultimately, they return to their lives, but they have been threatened and demeaned by figures that exist at the margins, such as beggars, immigrants, cleaners, and petty criminals: those who are normally safely segregated elsewhere, but who have entered the space of the shopping mall or the square that is presumed to be open, yet, it appears, primarily for only a certain kind of subject.¹²

By the end of each film, those affected, such as the sons of the angry father in *Play*; Tomas in *Force Majeure*; and Christian in *The Square*, realize that the aggressive show of force or hysterical self-pity, that they have been drawn into, is wrong – "We went too far" (*Play*; 2.24.20), a character in *Play* observes. In this way, the limits of the liberal public sphere become exposed, and the ideals of communicative action are shown to be distorted by power and obfuscation, disguised as insight. The familiar model of the circuit of communication works on the assumption of a particular model of interaction between parties that coordinate their actions based on agreement as to the accepted terms of the situation.¹³ For each of the protagonists within Östlund's films, they are faced



Fig 4
(*Force Majeure*, 1.54.40)

Fig. 5
(*The Square*, 1.08.57)

with the unravelling of their identity through an act of indirect aggression. But it is not an aggression directed at their bodies; instead it introduces an ambivalence that they have little ability to accommodate. The telephone device is what facilitates their breakdown, for as the film historian Tom Gunning writes in an analysis of the telephone as symbol of modernity in early cinema:

The phone may serve as a simple tool of communication, relating subordinate to superior, sender to receiver, and relaying messages through its apparatus. But, if this system malfunctions, the force of the interruption is more than a momentary check to communication. The sender's whole identity is placed in peril, because his place in the system has been lost... The system, therefore, does not simply relay messages, it maintains identity and meaning as places within a functioning series of connections.¹⁴

In each of these films, the male protagonists are further emasculated by aspects of the phone-screen technology: in *Play*, we see the black boys talking to the mother of one of their victims on the stolen phone, as they mock his sexuality; in *Force Majeure*, Ebba publicly exposes Tomas's actions to an alpha male via video playback; in *The Square*, Christian is stripped of his position in the aftermath of the viral video, as Elna, the museum director, instructs him of his resignation from his post, as a necessary sacrifice. The mobile/camera/smart phone is the device through which these multiple technologies operate to mediate, what is for the protagonists, a traumatic event with disturbing consequences. An aspect of this, which feeds into the sense of existential shock that they experience, is how the unsettling nature of this trauma generates a particular kind of episodic memory. This is experiential memory that is recallable and distinct from semantic memory, which is concerned with a more general understanding of the world that goes into the creation of stable long-term memory.¹⁵ This phenomenon of the trauma event and episodic memory as akin to the cinematic process is examined next.

MOBILE IMAGES

In an interview from 2017, Östlund points to a key element in his intermedial approach to film:

The most powerful moving images that I have seen the last fifteen years are from the Internet, especially from YouTube.

It has such a great ability to describe a human being and how we behave, even if those images are not connected to any story. They are quite often connected to a very simple situation. I think that to be a director today is challenging, because the most interesting moving images actually are presented on the internet. We have to try to create those unforgettable moments and situations where we are highlighting humans and how we behave, also in the cinema and also within the context of the feature film.¹⁶

By now, it is well known that Östlund takes ideas for certain scenes and individual behaviours from YouTube clips. The question is, whether this is merely something that acts as a source for ideas alongside personal experience and those of people around him, as he has also detailed, or whether there is something more significant at work here. Clearly, Östlund invests a great deal of time and money in producing cinematic-scale dramas that play out in fairly traditional terms of acting, *mise-en-scene* and narrative, even if worked through his own auteurist vision. In this sense, he is not greatly interested in replicating the visual qualities of YouTube and its mode of user-generated content, although there are clear echoes of the static camera shot that describes a certain kind of clip, where the distance of the observer is a key element to the behavior playing out on screen. But, as the quotation above indicates, Östlund does react to the changing media environment, where the technologies of communication and self-presentation have begun to profoundly alter the nature of social experience and relations to others as we are able to effortlessly consume increasingly intimate and, at times, grotesque spectacles of human behavior.

In an ecological sense, there is a precedent to this process, that can usefully be linked to Östlund's approach to filmmaking through the mediatization of our lifeworld and the central issue of trauma as detailed above. According to interviews with one of the three founders of YouTube, Jawed Karim, the motivation to develop the idea for the site was driven by the difficulty he had sourcing amateur recordings of two events: Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" at Super Bowl 2004 and footage of the Indonesian tsunami.¹⁷ It is the latter event and its mediation that is most relevant here. For Sweden, the Indonesian tsunami was a national trauma that left 543 Swedish citizens dead and up to 1,500 others injured by the experience out of 20,000 Swedish holidaymakers. Sweden had the highest number of casualties of any European country, and the level of domestic media coverage reflected this. No other disaster

- with the possible exception of the 1994 Estonia ferry disaster - can be seen to have had as significant an impact on contemporary Sweden, and in its aftermath government institutions and ministers were bitterly criticized for their failings at the time.¹⁸

The particular parameters of the disaster were significant in that it was not just the loss of people that was traumatic, but the spectacle of holidaying families shattered by the wave and the chaos that ensued. People's behaviour in disasters is an issue much explored in drama and news coverage, where the focus within these narratives is primarily driven by human interest and the role of individuals. Certainly, we can identify how such an experience of the tsunami can have fed into *Force Majeure*, as the father is seen to flee the avalanche and abandon his wife and children. This is directly linked to and at the same time in direct contrast to one image, widely disseminated in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, where a mother, Karin Svärd, runs *towards* the tsunami in an attempt to reach her husband and three children.¹⁹

The British newspaper *The Independent* covered the story:

A Swedish policewoman, who ran towards the oncoming tsunami in an effort to save her family, is back home with her children and husband, who also survived.

Pictures of Karin Svärd, 37, of Skelleftehamn in northern Sweden, running towards the giant wave to save her three children in Krabi, southern Thailand, have been seen around the world.²⁰

Östlund's reversal of this Swedish woman's behaviour in his cinematic rendering, subversively undermines the nation's push towards unity, and conversely uses it to explore fragmentation. By having the mobile phone footage at the heart of this process, he reinforces the ways in which this new kind of witnessing has, in a wider cultural sense, altered the ontology of the event through intervention of the mobile recording device. Richard Bégin discusses how this new type of image has shattered many of the pre-existing representational techniques:

The mobile digital camera allows a particular writing of the disaster, i.e. more specifically, an inscription of the mobility of the witness. The aesthetics of the disaster requires then a "mobiolographic" study that would understand how an event is

built by the single individual mobility, writable by the portable device.²¹

A platform for user-generated content such as YouTube is not simply, therefore, a source for ideas or scenarios. Rather, what has been initiated is a fundamental change in our shared and global image-culture, where disturbing footage can be compulsively replayed. For the developer of the YouTube website, the lack of being able to access amateur footage motivated him to facilitate something that has had a profound impact on the social realm. For Östlund, it actually changes the practice of film making. As he states in an interview:

If cinema wants to stay contemporary and not be like the opera, we have to adapt to the time that we are living in. I prefer to talk about moving images more than I do "the cinema".

If you look at YouTube, sometimes people have captured a moment that highlights the existential better than the professionals are doing. When I am making a film, I really try to compare myself to the amateurs: What are the best moving images they have produced? This is what we are aiming for: to do a scene that is better.²²

Östlund would seem to want to connect with a key quality of the YouTube clip, that is, its authenticity, its claim to truth. For contemporary news broadcasters, only amateur footage of an event will provide the necessary guarantee of its affective power. This has quickly become fetishized, as the media always do, into a new aesthetic, a disaster aesthetic, that privileges the sensible over the intelligible. In a paradoxical way, footage such as that of the tsunami works in terms of the spatial positioning of the witness, as we are able to perceptually occupy the body-space of the person holding the device. Similarly, we are positioned as a viewer by Östlund's practice of working with a wide-screen, fixed camera shot, that also produces us as subject-viewer.

Further, what Östlund is pointing to in his call for a shift towards YouTube as inspiration for filmmakers, is what we might call a fascination with the obscure: the desire to look at scenes of human behavior that activate something of a sense of attraction/revulsion of the grotesque on an affective level. So, there is an awkward examination of limits, of boundaries, where what is tolerable (or not) is blown wide open, and I find that its effect is

precisely explosive. This is the idea explored dramatically in *The Square*, where the protagonist is brought down by the actions of two advertising-agency 'creatives' who produce a viral-video where all the ingredients are derived from the margins of the socially acceptable/unacceptable.

In one sense, the impact of something such as YouTube on cinema is quite new, but arguably it has a historical precursor that goes back to the founding of the medium. The film historian Tom Gunning has described cinema pre-1906 as acinema of attractions.²³ Here, film in its infancy has not solidified into conventions of narrative with which we have become familiar. Instead, the cinema of attractions engages the viewer's curiosity directly by appealing to an act of looking – an act that they are indeed aware of, as they consume thrilling images, an exhibitionist cinema. Teresa Rizzo takes this concept and reworks it to argue that YouTube fulfills many of these criteria to produce a form of moving image that re-stages this idea of exhibitionism, as the viewer is concerned not with character and narrative but momentary attention.²⁴ Now, as said, it is not the case that Östlund simply aims to recreate the YouTube clips, but rather that he derives from it an experience – an experience that is actually defined by the genre itself. For instance, there has been a blurring or shift in terms of what constitutes private and public in this domain. There are certainly precursors for this, but the ubiquity of the mobile phone as digital video recorder has greatly intensified this process. The compulsion to record has even led to a significant number of deaths from individuals seeking to take selfies and records of their high-risk behavior. This connects back to the tsunami, where the frisson of the footage derives from the knowledge that those taking the pictures did not know what was about to engulf them; it is the shift from pleasure to panic that fascinates the viewer, and what Östlund replicates in *Force Majeure*. Today, any experience, including anything occurring in a public space, can potentially be uploaded and viewed by a global audience. The primary effect of this is a profound change in terms of what we might describe as the economy of shame. Anything said or done is now available for retrospective screening, as many have found to their cost. Hence, in *Force Majeure*, while not exposed on YouTube, Tomas is exposed to others for his running away. In *The Square*, Christian is coerced into a not entirely convincing performance of shame for his sanctioning of the viral video, that has caused public outrage. This can be seen to be more motivated by his private shame at the threatening behavior towards the boy and sexual encounter with a journalist on a one-night stand.

Finally, there is another way in which it is possible to consider the films of Östlund in the light of YouTube and its disaster aesthetic, which is in terms of its episodic structure. So far, Östlund has not moved much beyond a classical narrative structure, as even if consisting of relatively discrete scenarios, he adheres to a linear timeline and conventional chronology. However, there is a clear sense that the fragmentation in the structure of his films problematizes the relationship between technologies of communication and the shifting interior-to-exterior social space. Indeed, it is the coincidence of the normally parallel lines of private and public, which creates the moments of tension, that threaten the stability of the character's hold on the matrix of social networks. In each of the films, the status quo is disrupted by aspects of the devices they carry: for the boys in *Play*, their pleasure of consumption is brought to a halt; for Tomas in *Force Majeure*, the leisure pursuit of family skiing; and for Christian in *The Square*, the functioning of an art space. All three realms of consumerism, leisure, and culture are interrupted. The narrative of self is undermined, as socially repressed or controlled forces push at their limits to make it impossible for the character to carry on as usual, where experience has now become abnormal and uncertain. The locations of all these films – the shopping mall, ski resort, and art-space – are built-environments that overlay the landscape with a set of economically dominant values, constructed to enable a particular kind of subject, whose status is dependent upon the servicing by others elsewhere in the system. In each film, Östlund stages the actual crisscrossing of the location-frame: the mall interior; the ski slope; the exhibition square, by the characters in a way that effectively mirrors the crisscrossing of the social space by forces of capital, power, and technology.

By arranging this into an episodic structure, Östlund is able to explore more effectively the ways in which the experience of space-time is figured in terms of a social order that assumes harmony, rather than antagonism, as the normal state of affairs. The synchronous time of the subject is brought into conflict with the asynchrony of communication technologies, where instant connection is assumed, but in these film scenarios fails. In a similar way, in the rise of popularity of episodic serial drama we can identify something of how this is matching the deeply changed media environment of the twenty-first century. It is relevant here, that Östlund himself is committed to his next project as a TV series and not a film.²⁵ Östlund's use of time and connections between scenes contribute to the sense of the challenges faced by the subject

in this media-saturated environment. The fact that he favors the use of long-takes also draws upon certain media aesthetics, where it is fundamentally connected to an assertion of a kind of authenticity. Prior to film school, Östlund made ski films in a pre-YouTube culture, where footage of extreme sports was validated by not being edited so as to maintain a truth-value to the athletic feats.²⁶ Similarly, the typical YouTube clip is an unedited and continuous shot that underpins its genuineness. By constructing the films in such an episodic format, an aesthetic is established that frames and displays these affectively resonant moments of candid behavior, while simultaneously drawing attention to its very mediated nature.

NOTES

- 1 Avital Roneli, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
- 2 Avital Roneli, *Fighting Theory*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 64.
- 3 Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 4 William Connolly, *Neopolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xlii.
- 5 Yvette Biro, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).
- 6 This is of course well established in film where, for the genres of horror and thrillers amongst others, the malfunction of a telephone is a key moment of escalating tension.
- 7 Ned Schantz, "Telephonic Film," *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (Summer 2003), 23.
- 8 Schantz, *Ibid.*, 25.
- 9 The title of the film itself, *Play*, is suggestive of the notion of a power play, where the public spaces are zones of boundary behaviour, manifest as play rather than simply places of conformity, leisure, or consumerism.
- 10 It should be noted that this is an edited image that does not appear exactly as in the film, rather, here the black boy is moved to the foreground and the victim therefore reduced in scale.
- 11 Nikolaj Libecker, "Östlund's *Play* – Between Assault and Unease" In *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 104-110.
- 12 *Play* was the subject of enormous controversy in Sweden, with much discussion in the media as to whether the film replicated racist stereotypes. For discussion of aspects of the film and this controversy see: Ingrid Stigsdöter, "When to push stop or play: The Swedish reception of Ruben Östlund's *Play* (2011)," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, Volume 3, Number 1, 2013; Helena Karlsson, "Ruben Östlund's *Play* (2011): Race and Segregation in 'good' Liberal Sweden," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2014.
- 13 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and Systems, a Critique of Functionalist Reason: Critique of Functionalist Reason*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).
- 14 Tom Gunning, "Fritz Lang calling: the telephone and the circuits of modernity," In John Fullerton and Jan Olsson, *Allegories of Communication: Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to the Digital*, (Rome: John Libby Publishing), 31.
- 15 Russell Ainslie Mearse, "Episodic Memory, Trauma, and the Narrative of Self" in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 31(4): 541-556, October 1995
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- 17 Matthew Crick, *Power, Surveillance, and Culture in YouTube™'s Digital Sphere*, (Hershey, PENN: IGI Global, 2016), 36.
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- 22 <https://www.aesop.com/de/de/r/the-fabulist/ruben-ostlund>
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- 25 Annika Pham, "Östlund: It's not contradictory to deliver an important message in an entertaining way" (23 May, 2017) quotes Östlund: "I am working on an English language TV comedy drama project called *You Know That Weekend When You Were Away With The Kids?* It deals with the notion of couple. It's like an anthropology, with different couples at each episode. One of them says to the other...you know, last weekend when you were away with the kids?.. and this opens up for different scenarios." <http://www.nordiskfilmotvond.com/news/interview/ostlund-its-not-contradictory-to-deliver-an-important-message-in-an-entertaining-way>.
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