



## WHAT IS *PLAY* PLAYING AT?

In *Play* (2011), the latest film by controversial Swedish director Ruben Östlund, 5 black boys rob 3 white boys. This film that ignites questions concerning constellations of power and the constructedness of national identity also initiate debate regarding representational responsibility with regards to racism.

Now all of Östlunds films has been met with either heavy criticism or high praise. In both *The Guitar Mongoloid* (*Gitarrmongot*, 2004) and *Involuntary* (*De ofrivilliga*, 2008) Östlunds effort seem to propel forward with a deep desire to strip the Swede of his self-righteousness. To make the spectator face his own prejudices and weaknesses as a member of a hypocritical and coward society remain at the core of Östlunds narratives.

*Play* is no exception. His conceptual and intellectual approach is in tune with a general paradigm for contemporary art where the aim is to awaken new ideas in the spectator rather than to please certain aesthetic tendencies. It is an approach that takes into account the constructedness of human society. It is a flexible form that operates on multiple levels.

Unfortunately though, where Östlund wants to awaken his spectator, *Play* needs a spectator already awoken. The film otherwise risk pleasing a racist argument and feed increased antagonism between people outside of the screen. To grasp the refined focus of *Play* and the critical comment that it wants to be, *Plays* spectator needs to already be a critical spectator.

Because the position he affords the spectator is quite remarkable, though clearly it is not a comfortable one. His quiet observing camera that lets the action exit and enter its frame is equating its lens with the eyes of an observing human who quietly watches people pass in and out of sight. It places the responsibility of what is being seen at the ones who sees, not the one who shows.

So what is it that he wants us to see? What are the 'ideas' he wants to awaken in us?

We start out in a shopping mall, a public space as it is. Without any comment we are introduced to 5 boys in the ages of 11-13 who start to follow another group of 3 boys. The camera darts between these groups in the same fashion as eyes of a bystander, in the mall, on the bus, on the street. A passive observer, just watching out of curiosity and boredom.

Already here a suspicion in the spectator is raised. The two groups of kids, divided along skin colour lines, appear disturbingly racialised. Even before any of the action have begun an eerie feeling sets in. What am I seeing? Maybe the question ought to be; Whom am I who are seeing? Or who is this imaginary 'spectator' that *Play* is playing with?

The film proceeds in this observational registering rhythm. A cat and mouse-game of deceit, projected signifying practices and rhetoric unfolds. For a day the 5 hold hostage of the 3. But it is not with violence the power of the 5 is held. It is with words and an elaborate game. It is a play with expectations and prejudices. As Östlund plays with us, so are the children also playing.

Let's put all the cards on the table. Ruben Östlund is a white middle class swedish male, who grew up on a safe island outside of Gothenburg. He is the white middle class speaking to the white middle class using The Other as a reflection sheet in the process. This is problematic. But his bottom line is to link our participation in objectification and subjugation of other people with a form of evil. By objectifying others we deny their humanity. By exposing the swedish society as an objectifying society, an evil society he forces us to reconsider the constructedness of our national identity. With evil I am referring to the term

*banality of evil*, coined by Hannah Arendt. This *banality of evil* springs, not from evil actions, but from a passive behaviour. An evil that claims "This is not my problem". It is the quiet consent of the masses that holds the banality of evil. The film exposes with the passivity of the adult world, the passivity of the bystander, the passivity of everyone who think he is exempt from the issue. The passivity of the spectator that comfortable in his seat repeat "This is not my problem".

Östlunds strength and weakness is the notion of distance he manages to uphold in his films. As if observing from the island of his childhood he gives us the big picture of a Sweden, far from the tourism brochures. For a swede the level of recognition is high. At the same time it is a recognition ensued with shame. In all of his feature films he has been observing and reflecting back at us, a Sweden that we might not want to acknowledge. How weak we are to group pressure, how coward we are in the face of injustice. How much of our endeavours are directed towards pleasing the status quo of the group. How reckless and ignorant we are with our selves and others.

'Being swedish' is a complex concept, one that is most clearly demonstrated in a particular tone, a way of relating to others. But it is also connected with an idea of a tolerant middle class. In *Play*, class is nowhere explicitly stated, yet endless debate in Sweden has highlighted the class angle as if living in a certain high-rise buildings and being simply immigrant equals working/lower class. This film is linking power with ideas of nationality within a swedish frame, reflecting back at us as if saying, "And you? Who are you in this drama? How do you partake in placing people in signifying boxes. Where do you fit into the power structures of our Swedish society?" The ensuing debate in the press, in itself, becomes a performative epilogue in *Plays* narrative. This is clearly hugely interesting. Still I believe that the unease many spectators feel with regards to *Play* stems from this emphasis on the responsibility of the spectator. His intention might be good but without a self reflexive approach he seems to forget that not only the spectator is responsible. Looking through the camera lens can make any director forget that a spectatorial position is an anarchist one. Instead of saying 'yes, who am I?' we might just say 'and what about you?'

*By Miriam von Schantz*