

Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness*: Today's "master class" and "subject class"

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Triangle of Sadness is a satire about celebrity, wealth and inequality, written and directed by Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund (*Force Majeure*, *The Square*). It won the highest prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Östlund's previous films have concerned themselves with the self-involved middle class in particular. *The Square* (2017) concentrated on the art world, with mixed results. The director allows himself to be carried away in that work at times by secondary issues or simply wrongheaded conceptions.

In the new film, reflecting the force of processes too obvious to be ignored, Östlund has expanded his scope. The English-language film is uneven, but its skewering of capitalism is certainly welcome.

Triangle of Sadness (a phrase in the modeling field, referring to the space between one's eyebrows, where stress and grief are supposedly expressed) opens with scenes of a male model, Carl (Harris Dickinson), undergoing numerous humiliations as part of his professional life.

Carl is involved with Yaya (Charlbi Dean, who died, sadly, this past August at the age of 32), a model and, more importantly, a social media "influencer" with a considerable and growing following.

Various forms and degrees of inequality dominate the film. Female models, we soon learn, earn far more than their male counterparts. At some type of fashion event, Carl is forced to give up his front-row seat for someone truly important. ("She's coming.") The event flashes the titles, "Everyone's Equal," "Act Now," "Love Now." It's all rubbish.

Carl resents Yaya's continuous efforts to have him pay for meals and more, although she has a larger income. After a tense scene in a restaurant over that issue, he suggests that talking about money is "such a

hard thing." Yaya, having stuck Carl with the bill yet again, disingenuously complains that "it's un-sexy to talk about money." Carl doesn't want them to "slip into gender roles ... I want us to be equal." The conversation goes nowhere. Each of them might as well be talking to him or herself.

A few days later, the couple find themselves on a luxury yacht. They've received a free cruise thanks to her influencing efforts. The other passengers include a Russian fertilizer tycoon ("I'm the king of shit"), a genteel, elderly English husband and wife who happen to have coined a fortune in land mines and hand grenades, a lonesome "tech" multi-millionaire, a German woman who can hardly speak as the result of a stroke, etc.

The first view we get of the lowest-level crew members is of them scrubbing the deck on hands and knees.

The personnel who deal with the passengers are instructed by their supervisor to do everything the customers ask of them. It's "Yes, sir," "Yes, ma'am," no matter what. And if they perform well, at the end of the trip there might be a "generous tip." She leads them in a wild chant of "Money, money, money!"

A crew member is fired because he flirts with Yaya. The Russian oligarch Dimitry (Zlatko Burić) tells Carl and Yaya that "You have to be in the right place, at the right time." For him, it was "Eastern Europe ... in the late '80s and early '90s," i.e., during the reintroduction of capitalism. "Money must not sleep," he lets them know. He has both his wife and mistress along on the cruise.

The wife, Vera (Sunnyi Melles), gets it into her head that all the staff need to go for a swim ("Everyone's equal"). When one young woman hesitates, Vera asks: "Are you saying no to me?" Everyone, including the

men from the engine room, are forced to dive into the ocean, with their clothes on.

The Captain (Woody Harrelson) is drunk in his cabin, and refuses to come out. In the end, he grooms himself into presentable form for the “Captain’s Dinner,” a pivotal event of the cruise. It turns into a disaster. Bad weather, bad food combine to render the passengers violently and graphically ill.

During the commotion, the captain and Dimitri get into a debate about the merits of socialism and capitalism, much of it over the public address system. “A Russian capitalist and an American Communist!” exclaims Dimitri, “on a \$250 million yacht.” The captain scorns the Reagan-Thatcher “freedom” the Russian speaks of as “freedom for slave-owners.”

The captain further explains, “I’m not a Communist, I’m a Marxist,” presumably making a distinction between Stalinism and socialism. He goes on a rant against the wealthy. “But you can’t be rich, and expect the rest of the world to be poor.” While the rich are immersed in pleasure, the rest of the world is mired in poverty. “That’s not the way it was meant to be.” But the captain complains about his drunken, self-indulgent self, “I’m not a worthy socialist.”

He goes on to claim that the US government killed the Kennedy brothers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and destroyed democracy in Chile, Argentina, Venezuela and throughout South America. “We” installed puppets and created artificial borders in the Middle East, he says.

“Every bomb that’s dropped, somebody makes a million dollars,” the Harrelson character continues. Interestingly, he then cites US socialist leader Eugene V. Debs from the latter’s famous 1918 Canton, Ohio speech against World War I: “The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose—especially their lives.”

Whatever else goes on in *Triangle of Sadness*, this lengthy speech cuts a path to the thinking viewer. It is memorable.

The rest of the film is something of an anti-climax. Pirates board the yacht, and it eventually sinks. A small group of passengers and crew, including Carl and Yaya, manage to reach shore on an apparently deserted island.

A lowly crew member, Abigail (Dolly de Leon), becomes the leader of the group because she is the only one who knows how to catch a fish, make a fire and so forth. Abigail, something of a vengeful “Pirate Jenny” (out of *Threepenny Opera*), puts it bluntly, “On the yacht, toilet manager—here, captain.” She even takes Carl as her sex companion.

In interviews, Östlund asserts that he deliberately made the rich people “all nice.” The “conventional way” of describing “people on the bottom,” he commented, is that “they’re genuine and generous,” while “rich people are egoistic and superficial. I didn’t want to go down that road because I don’t believe it’s true.” (*Vanity Fair*)

That’s not really the point. There may well be affable, generous capitalists and surly, selfish workers, but the critical question involves what the classes *objectively are*, “and what, in accordance with this being” (to borrow from Marx), they will “historically be compelled to *do*.”

Furthermore, the *Independent* assures us (and themselves), Östlund is “not against the rich or capitalism itself,” but merely “questions the legitimacy of a system where the economy is valued higher than the quality of people’s lives.”

That may well be the case, but Östlund, to his credit, has created a film whose primary impact will be to nourish the swelling global opposition to the entire economic, political and cultural set-up.



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