



The Square Discussion Guide

Director: Jehane Noujaim

Year: 2013

Time: 95 min

You might know this director from:

Rafe: Solar Mama (2012)

Control Room (2004)

Startup.com (2001)

FILM SUMMARY

THE SQUARE brings the viewer into Tahrir Square to witness the raucous energy and exultation of the Egyptian revolution as well its terror and heartrending grief, through the personal stories of six very different revolutionaries. Each comes from a different background and upholds a different philosophy and aim, but all six are fighting for a new Egypt. The film was shot over three years and culls together footage from over 1,600 hours shot by the filmmaker, her crew, and those in the streets.

THE SQUARE's verite immediacy and intimacy allows the viewer to experience the tumultuous events of the revolution, from its awe-inspiring beginnings as people first gathered in the square and the joyous celebration when Mubarak stepped down, to the violence of military crackdowns against civilian protesters, which included arrests, attacks, and killings. But this brutality cannot quell or silence the revolutionaries. They return to the square to protest against a new regime that uses the same old tools of a police state and emergency law. They return to the square again to protest against President Morsi who is then ousted from office. And they will return to the square again and again to voice their demands, unite with others, and create a culture of conscience.

Both harrowing and inspiring, THE SQUARE is an important, urgent film with world-wide resonance. Its spirit of protest has inspired those in Kiev, Ukraine and Caracas, Venezuela. But the revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere are just beginning. This film is only a part of a much larger conversation that requires the participation of all.

FILM THEMES

THE SQUARE covers Egypt's popular uprisings and the tumultuous aftermath, revealing how a revolution is not only an overthrowing of a dictator, but a protracted process of transition, as a nation tries to rebuild itself into something new.

NEW NAMES, SAME REGIME

Within a few years, the Egyptian government cycled through Mubarak, the army, and Morsi, then back to the army. Power changed hands, but the regime continued the abuses of Mubarak's 30-year dictatorship. The regime change was in name only. Under different leaders, the Egyptians still suffered human rights abuses and restricted political freedoms, their voices silenced through violence. Egypt was still a police state with emergency law. As Aida said, "Tools of the state remain the same."

UNITY AND DIVISION

At the revolution's start, people from varying backgrounds were united as they had a common enemy. Divisions began when Mubarak was ousted, because people disagreed on how to form a new constitution. 91% of the Egyptian population is Muslim, but the Muslim Brotherhood represents an Islamist far-right position. Their candidate, Morsi, won the presidential election with 51% of the vote. During Morsi's term, the political role of Islam was strengthened. After Morsi's removal, hundreds of pro-Morsi supporters were killed. The Muslim Brotherhood was labeled as a terrorist group by the military-backed interim government in late 2013. Hundreds have been arrested and sentenced to death.

SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

This film could not exist without new technologies such as digital cameras that looked like photographic cameras, which allowed events to be captured onto memory cards and quickly hidden from police. The footage - despite the chaos, violence, and confiscations - is a testament to the new weapons of revolutionaries who witness and record, holding those in power accountable. Since the revolutionaries could not rely on state media to tell their story, they posted their videos online, sharing them with the world. Social media helped to further mobilize and inform. Though the film was banned in Egypt, the filmmakers found a way to distribute it through a digital streaming service.

CULTURE OF PROTEST, OF CONSCIENCE

At the film's end, Ahmed and Khalid say that the revolution has achieved a new way of thinking, a culture of protest, and the realization that the "streets are our ballot." Previously, the Egyptian people felt powerless and voiceless. But now, there is a sense of possibility and hope. People believe they can make their voices heard. This new culture of conscience is a necessary foundation for change. It supports and creates new opportunities to advance the aims of the revolution.

"We are not looking for a leader to rule us, because everyone who went to Tahrir is a leader. We are looking for a conscience."

Ahmed Hassan

"We go to Al Midan (the square) to discover that we love life outside it, and to discover that our love for life is resistance. We race towards the bullets because we love life, and we go into prison because we love freedom."

An Egyptian protestor from prison

FILM FACTS:

- Egypt’s population today is estimated to be around 86 million. Egypt is the most populated country in the Middle East.
- The Peterson Institute for International Economics and other proponents of cliodynamics claim that Egypt’s major problem is unemployment driven by a considerable youthful demographic. An estimated 75% of Egyptians are under the age of 25. New people enter the job force at about 4% every year, creating high unemployment, especially for college-educated urban youth, many of whom were active in the 2011 uprisings.
- Noujaim’s cameras were confiscated when she landed in Cairo in 2011. But she met Muhammed Hamdy, who became the film’s DP, in the square. He gave Canon EOS 60D and 5D cameras to four people, including Noujaim. The cameras had “a cinematic quality, and a kind of invisibility,” said Noujaim. “They were only confiscated when there were run-ins with the army or police.”
- When Cressida Trew, another crewmember and wife of Khalid Abdalla, filmed shots of the police dumping a body, the footage was posted online and soon picked up by the international news. “Within two hours, the square was packed with people standing in solidarity,” says Noujaim.
- THE SQUARE won the audience award at Sundance, but filmmaker Jehane Noujaim decided to return to Cairo to capture the new developments.
- Khalid Abdalla is a British Egyptian actor and activist, who starred in United 93 and The Kite Runner. His father is an exiled activist and his grandfather was also a well-known activist fighting against the regime in Egypt.
- In 2011 Abdalla helped to establish the Mosireen Collective, a group of filmmakers and activists dedicated to supporting citizen media. Three months after it started, Mosireen became Egypt’s most watched non-profit YouTube channel.
- Noujaim is planning to make two more films from the footage she shot from 2011 to 2013. One will be about Egypt’s first presidential campaign. The other will be about Ragia Omran, the human rights lawyer featured in THE SQUARE.
- In 2013, the military-backed interim government labeled the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Magdy, a member for 25 years, was jailed and tortured during Mubarak’s rule. On March 24, 2014, an Egyptian court sentenced over 500 members to death. Magdy and his brother are currently in hiding. Magdy is still active on Twitter and Facebook.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Visit the THE SQUARE’s website to learn how to host a screening at your local U.S. theater. You can also learn how to host a screening at your local film festival, school, or community organization.
2. Download the film’s graffiti stencil from the film website and spread the message.
3. Support the Mosireen Collective and check out their videos and events.
4. Support Noujaim’s other films, including “Egypt, We’re Watching You,” which the military police found in Noujaim’s car. She was interrogated for hours. First she denied making a political film and tried to shove the DVDs down a bathroom drain. But when confronted with a glass shard, she said, “Look, I made a film that I’m proud of about three incredible Egyptian women who were fighting for change. And that’s what the film is about. Please watch it. There are more DVDs in the car.”

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.