

“Repeating the *Square*: From Satisfaction to Jouissance”

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Abstract: Ruben Östlund's 2017 Palme D'or winning film, *The Square*, is routinely characterized as a “satire” of the contemporary art world, and in particular, of the film's titular art exhibit. This essay considers the question of the psychoanalytic and political implications of Östlund's ruthless cinematic caricature of his own (self-declared) successful real-life art installation of the same name. It argues that the repetition of the Square from an apparently sincere artwork aimed at building social cohesion, to a satire of the self-serving political aspirations of contemporary art, unleashes the politically destabilizing dimension of the Other's jouissance that is constrained by the Square's original iteration as art installation.

Keywords: Ruben Östlund; art world; jouissance; psychoanalysis; repetition

Ruben Östlund's 2017 Palme D'or winning film, *The Square*, is routinely characterized as a “satire” of the contemporary art world. This claim seems unimpeachable, particularly when considered in the light of the film's brutal treatment of its titular art exhibit: a 2 meter by 2 meter installation housed within the fictional X-Royal Contemporary Art museum in Stockholm. Visitors who enter the Square are asked to abide by its inscribed principles: which read, “The Square is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within it we all share equal rights and obligations.” But the values endorsed by “the Square,” which Christian [Claes Bang], the museum's urbane chief curator, movingly extols, are shown to be sorely at odds with his own actions.¹ For example, in what might at first appear to be an act of “caring,” in line with the principles of the Square, Christian agrees to buy a sandwich for a woman begging for food, but he deliberately denies her special request to order it “with no onions.” When he delivers the sandwich, he cannot help but betray a hint of perverse pleasure in honoring solely the need at the heart of the demand and refusing the surplus of her desire. For Christian, as for the Square exhibit itself, distance from the Other's jouissance, via an investment in sanitized symbolic power, scaffold any attempt to act for the good of another.

It is thus hard not to agree with the critic from the New Republic who writes that, “As an essay on the art world...the film mostly confirms popular assumptions:...[namely] that the art world makes a cynical pretense of concern for social justice when it's completely indifferent to

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¹ Christian suggests, for example, that you might enter the Square and say “My father just died, and I have no one to talk to about it, can you talk to me for an hour?”

the homeless people down the block.² But I suggest that consideration of a key extra-diegetic dimension complicates this claim. Prior to making the film, Östlund (and a partner, Kalle Boman) created an actual “Square” installation in four Scandinavian cities, each boasting the identical social pact that appears in the film.³ Not only is it nearly certain that Östlund undertook these art projects in earnest, without parodic aims, but also he frequently affirms that these real-life “Squares” have functioned to mobilize communal solidarity and political actions.⁴ In this light, the question that I take up here is why Östlund would ruthlessly caricature his own (self-declared) successful art piece in his film of the same name? I attempt not to answer the question of his motivation, but rather to speculate about some of the psychoanalytic/political implications of the repetition of the Square from an apparently sincere attempt at building social cohesion to the satirical embodiment of the self-serving political aspirations of contemporary art. I contend that the repetition of “the Square” into its filmic incarnation functions as the ruse required to unleash the politically destabilizing dimension of the Other’s jouissance, which is inhibited by the Square’s original iteration as art installation.

In particular, the move from “the Square” as sincere art exhibit to *The Square* as filmic satire works to disrupt the possibilities of both the (super)egoic-pleasure associated with earnest socially-engaged art and the cynical detachment associated with satire. Although seemingly at odds with one another, both of these positions prevent an engagement with destabilizing jouissance and conspire to uphold the ideological fantasy of socio-symbolic wholeness. The unstable alignment of the Square between these two forms, I contend, opens up a gap within which the unassimilable jouissance of the Other erupts, disturbing the ideological fantasy of completeness. Following the insights of psychoanalytic scholars, Todd McGowan, Sheldon George, Slavoj Žižek, and others, I contend that such a fantasy of socio-symbolic totality, spoiled only by unwelcome external intrusion, undergirds the logic of racism. I advocate, along Lacanian lines, that this damaging fantasy can

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2 Lorentzen, 2017

3 In the film, the artist who created the Square is Lola Arias, a real-life Argentinian artist. Arias has publicly renounced the attribution in the film. She argues, “It has hurt my reputation as an artist because I am associated with an artwork that is not mine and that I dislike... I was shocked when I saw how they used my name without consent.”

Östlund maintains that Arias had agreed to the use of her name. (<https://nordicdrama.com/artist-lola-arias-fires-allegation-at-the-square/>)

4 In a 2017 interview in the *Village Voice*, Östlund tells us: “The Square” exhibit is in two cities in Sweden and two cities in Norway now. And in one city, Värnamo [Sweden], it really has become a bit of a movement... For example, in Värnamo, there’s a group of functional handicapped people that have been protesting because they lost their benefits, so they went there and had a demonstration. The local newspaper came and took a picture and reported about it... This summer, something kind of beautiful happened. Someone put a flower in ‘The Square’ with a little note saying, ‘Thank you to you who helped our son.’”

be traversed through a recognition that the Other—as the socio-symbolic order—is *constitutively* lacking. Exposing the inherent incompleteness of the Symbolic order may work both to destabilize racist structures and free the subject to experience freedom by taking on a Symbolic position of its own.

I will argue that the film stages a series of diegetic repetitions that function as a cipher for interpreting Östlund’s repetition of “the Square” from art to film. Each repetition points us towards an encounter with the jouissance of the other. Only when the subject comes to face the Other’s negativity—the excess jouissance that emerges at the site of its lack—does, in Žižek’s words, “a unique space of freedom” emerge.⁵

I will focus primarily on what I see as the key repetition: namely, the figure of the child as it manifests in the film in two forms: 1) At the center of the narrative action is a poor, immigrant boy, who functions as the ostensible relentless external obstacle to Christian’s fulfillment and 2) Its repetition, which we encounter later in the film: a virtual image of an indigent blond girl appearing in a publicity campaign for the Square, who comes to function as the hegemonic element around which disparate groups passionately unite. I will argue that Christian’s eventual identification with the boy suggests a move away from the fantasy of society as a sutured totality, marred only by external obstacles, to a recognition of the constitutive lack in the Other.

Now to set the scene: An attempted “good deed,” albeit one undertaken with initial hesitation, sets the plot of the film in motion. Christian, interpellated by a fellow bystander, helps protect a woman running down the street towards them screaming for help. Christian’s immediate self-satisfaction at this heroic act dissipates quickly when he discovers that his phone and wallet are missing; the street scene, he now realizes, was a staged robbery. With the help of his techie assistant, he tracks down the location of his phone to a low-income housing complex in a rough neighborhood. Not knowing which specific apartment contains the phone, Christian puts threatening notes in the mail slots of every door in the building, requesting the return of his stolen items to a local 7/11. He is stunned to discover that the next day his phone and wallet (replete with his cash) arrive.⁶ But on the following day he receives another call from the 7/11 notifying him that a second package has arrived with his name on it. This early repetition inaugurates a sharp turn for the worse and portends the role that repetition will play throughout the film.

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5 Žižek, 2017 p. 334

6 Christian excitedly doles out the unexpected cash to the same beggar for whom he begrudgingly bought the sandwich.

The second package contains a threatening note from a young boy who lives in the apartment building, in which he confronts Christian with the unforeseen consequences of indiscriminately distributing his accusatory letter. The boy's parents now think that he is the thief and they are unjustly punishing him. The boy's demand is straightforward: Christian must tell the boy's parents that he is not the thief, or he will "make chaos." Christian refuses to take the threat seriously, but the boy's persistence proves distracting, and, as a result, Christian mindlessly approves a disastrous publicity campaign for the Square exhibit, which leads him to bringing chaos upon himself.

The ludicrous publicity video is the creation of two young go-getting marketers, who seek to make the exhibit relevant within the attention economy of the current media landscape, which privileges sensationalist images that garner the most clicks.⁷ The PR team points out that values inscribed by the Square exhibit carry no "edge" or possibility for "controversy" and can only forge anodyne consensus. From a publicity point of view, they liken it to a Facebook post that announces, "Daniel wants peace on earth." Rather than depicting an act of kindness occurring in the Square, they suggest stirring up shock by making something terrible happen to a vulnerable person within its borders. After some deliberation, they decide that beggars are the group of vulnerable people about whom we most often share internet links. Their campaign video features a little indigent blonde girl, dressed in dirty, ragged clothing, carrying a blanket and a kitten, wandering into "the Square," but rather than being helped she is startlingly blown up. The video promptly "goes viral," inciting predictable indignation at its shocking insensitivity. Although it becomes clear in the film that no one can pinpoint who exactly is damaged by the video and how, there is nevertheless widespread consensus that the video has created unmistakable and severe harm. The very ambiguity of identifying a victim only intensifies the outcry; it enables the Square to function as a repository for offense-as-such, bringing disparate factions together in opposition to the exhibit. We are shown, for example, a centerfold story in the following morning's newspaper, which features an imam, a priest, and a rabbi arm in arm, unified by their opposition to the Square. In Ernesto Laclau's terminology, we might say that the fictional white child functions as a hegemonic element around which the social order consolidates.

As outrage fomented, a press conference is held during which Christian announces his responsibility for the campaign, apologizes for acting "irresponsibly," and declares that "in accordance with the board" he will resign from his position. Predictably, he is subjected to a series of attacks from the assembled journalists, most of whom take pleasure in

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⁷Their position is reminiscent of András Szántó's reminder that "it would be a mistake to think that museums are still in the art business. They are now in what might be called the attention business" (Szántó 191).

smugly skewering Christian for the offensive campaign. As one reporter scolds, to the applause of the assembled crowd, "[W]here is your solidarity with the voiceless and vulnerable members of our society? You should be ashamed of yourself!" Another journalist, however, takes an opposite tack, calling Christian out for cowardly accepting the indictments of the public and for too gamely consenting to his resignation. He presses Christian on whether he "personally believes that [he] has crossed a line" and whether a video of "a fictional girl getting blown up" is truly beyond the limit of tolerable free speech. Christian responds by reiterating formulaic statements of regret until the journalist literally calls, "bullshit," rebuking Christian for "the highly alarming future [he is]...creating for our society."

It might be tempting to align one's position with this rebuke, especially in the light of Christian's readiness to take on the self-flagellation mandated by the board. This readiness seems to point to Christian's failure to stand up for, and indeed deny, his own principles, which he enunciated in an earlier scene which primes viewers to dismiss his expression of guilt as hypocritical. In this earlier scene, when Christian is initially confronted by his boss over the public outrage caused by the video, he urges her to seize it as an opportunity for the museum to take a strong stance in favor of unfettered free expression. His boss is utterly unmoved by the possibility of taking a principled stance; her concerns are purely market driven. The true disaster of the campaign, she indicates, is the museum's inevitable loss of Baby Bjorn as a sponsor.

But, I argue, it would be a mistake to both discount the resignation as an empty, hypocritical gesture and to dismiss the publicity video as a merely regrettable overlay to an otherwise worthy project. Rather, as we will soon see, the resignation helps pave the way for freeing Christian from the obstinate grip of the Other, enabling him to assume proper responsibility for his actions. And in a similar way, I argue, rather than a meaningless media spectacle, the video is integral in stripping back the fantasy of being able to marshal symbolic resources for regulating one's proximity to a sanitized other. The campaign provokes us to engage with the limits of the symbolic to protect us from the unruliness of unassimilable excess.

In short, I suggest that the readiness with which Christian apologizes for the publicity video be read within two contexts, **first** the film's treatment of the boy, who has been unrelenting in **his** pursuit of an apology from Christian. Christian's **excessive apology** for the publicity video repeats (in negative form) his **lack of apology** to the boy. I argue that this moment in which the central lack propelling the film overlaps with the film's excess inaugurates a transformation in Christian. To be specific, the forced circumstance of his apology paves the way for him to take responsibility freely, not just for damaging the boy, but also for his own chaos, as it were. He, in effect, traverses the fantasy of seeing the boy as the obstacle preventing his full satisfaction, to accepting his own identification with the cause.

The **second** context for thinking about Christian's apology occurs the night before the press conference. While publicly addressing the fate of the fictional girl, Christian is privately consumed with worry that he may have seriously harmed the actual boy. During a late-night confrontation with the boy on the stairs of his apartment, a weary Christian, with his own sleepy daughters in tow, pushes the boy away.

For Christian, as well as for viewers, the subsequent fate of the boy is left in suspension: did Christian knock him down the stairs or not? After putting his daughters to bed, Christian hears muffled screams for "help," but it is uncertain whether they are coming from the child or whether they only exist in his imagination. When he looks down the stairs, he finds no source for the sounds. In this moment (what may be seen as the gap between the two deaths), the resonant signifier of the film, "help," echoes between the domains of the Real and the Symbolic. It appears as an eerie, unlocatable return of the repressed—a residue of the symbolic's failure to properly integrate the excessive dimensions of earlier pleas for "help."

Haunted by the disembodied echoes for "help," Christian, still clad in his tuxedo from a disastrous dinner for patrons of the museum, undertakes the abject act of descending into the communal dumpsters behind his apartment, in the midst of a downpour, sifting through trash to find the discarded letter from the boy, containing his phone number. This scene prefigures Christian's loss of symbolic identity on the eve of officially resigning his professional position. After finding the number, Christian, filthy and drenched, fails to reach the boy, leaving open the mystery of his fate.

In response to his failure to reach the boy by phone, Christian then records a rambling video message, in which he belatedly honors the boy's demand for an apology. The choice of making a video recording, rather than leaving a voice message is significant, not only as a repetition of the media form of the publicity campaign. Earlier on when Christian and his assistant were debating who should go into the apartment building to distribute the letters, Christian points out that it should not be him since he is a recognizable, "semi-public" figure. In making the video recording, Christian further sheds his investment in upholding this privileged symbolic identity.

But the rambling video message wavers from this initial good intention. Christian confirms that the boy is not a thief and tells the boy to show the video to his parents as proof. He then offers what appears to be a heartfelt apology, admitting that "it was a rotten thing I did... It was so selfish of me... careless and prejudiced." He also confesses to holding a personal bias, revealing that he left the notes because he was too afraid to knock on the doors and ask people directly. "I was too afraid," he explains, "of the people I picture living in a building like yours." He then begins to discuss that "those negative expectations say something about me," but quickly qualifies this by addressing that "they say something about our society." Christian's acknowledgement

of his bias is also offset by pointing out that "I'm not the only one who is prejudiced. You must... have preconceptions about us,... because our lives are so different." His equivocation between individual and structural explanations is further deepened when he follows his apology by noting that "it is not enough to admit I was wrong... there are bigger, structural problems involved that society needs to deal with." In particular, he directly invokes the systemic problem of "the unequal distribution of assets"—a problem "which can't be fixed by individuals alone," only to promptly undercut this claim by announcing, "I actually know one of the 291 people who owns over fifty percent of the world's wealth. A guy like that could fix all this in an instant."

How might we make sense of this invocation of class inequity as holding the key to the solution for which it is the problem? Christian's wavering logic appears to mirror the function of the symptom: namely, as something which both gives shape to an underlying problem while providing a way for coping with it. Perhaps we can see this as a clue to the politics demonstrated within the film, which, I argue, plays with the tension regarding one's relationship to the symptom. Ultimately the film reveals the futility of attempting to eradicate the symptom in an attempt to achieve socio-symbolic harmony, and favors of the political efficacy of identifying with the symptom itself as constitutive to the symbolic order itself.

As we will come to see, Christian's struggle over the question of responsibility—over whether to deny or accept his own role as cause—operates as a cusp moment in the film. In particular, I will argue, it involves him grappling with the question of his relation to the lack of completeness in the Other. But, I will show, it is not until the conclusion of the film that Christian comes to terms with this question, and comes eventually to "traverses the fantasy" by putting himself in the place of the lack in the Other.

Two other repetitions in the film enable us to push this thesis further. The first involves an outburst by a man with Tourette's syndrome in the audience of a public discussion with superstar artist, Julian (a send up of Julian Schnabel, played by Dominic West), moderated by Christian's colleague. The on-stage discussion is interrupted by increasingly vulgar outbursts by a man in the audience clapping and shouting obscenities: "Garbage!" "Get Out!" "Fuck Off! "Show us your boobs!" etc. The female interviewer determinedly continues with her questions amidst the unrest in the crowd. Here unfettered jouissance triggers obvious discomfort among the audience until a fellow audience member attempts to stitch the disturbances back to the symbolic framework. He scolds the audience for showing signs of uneasiness, reminding them that this man has an illness and that they must show "tolerance." Here the explicit instruction regarding the correct symbolic response to this unexpected occurrence intervenes to contain the possibility of a destabilizing encounter with the jouissance of the Other.

As the audience struggles to remain focused on the interview, the scene nicely captures the difficulty with “liberal tolerance” at the heart of the Square exhibit. As Jodi Dean, characterizing Žižek’s insight, describes: “liberal tolerance today is in fact a ‘zero tolerance’ of the other in his excessive enjoyment... liberalism wants an other deprived of its otherness.”⁸

But the symbolic mandate is unable to fully stem the disruption. The excessive jouissance unleashed in this discussion is seized by Anne (Elizabeth Moss), an American journalist who earlier interviews Christian about the Square exhibit. An intoxicated Christian and Anne find themselves in the queue for the toilet at a party later that night. Anne gets Christian’s attention by imitating the interruptions of the man with Tourette’s syndrome. Her repetition ups the vulgarities when she suddenly claps her hands above her head and yells “cunt.” This time, the outburst comes with no explanation or any attempt to re-inscribe it into a symbolic framework; its senselessness permeates unbound. As with the other repetitions in the film, we are confronted with the impotency of the symbolic scaffold to contain disruptive jouissance.

The encounter between Christian and Anne leads them to spend the night in Anne’s apartment, where we are introduced, unremarked, to Anne’s surprising roommate: a domesticated ape, inconspicuously puttering about the apartment. The figure of the ape marks the final repetition that we will discuss. Anne’s tame, humanized ape meets its match in a performance artist named Oleg [Terry Notary], who performs as a wild ape during a special dinner for elite donors to the X-Royal Museum. Oleg’s performance changes the register of the film, creating a twelve-minute scene that has been described as “the most unnerving, uncomfortable scene of the year.”⁹

Oleg’s performance is preceded by a build-up that adds an element of edginess and excitement to the otherwise staid proceedings. As soon as diners are seated the lights flicker and ominous rain and thunder can be heard, over which a voice comes through, welcoming guests to the jungle. The announcer advises “utmost caution” as a wild animal with a hunting instinct for sensing fear is about to enter the room. The diners are warned: “[I]f you try to escape, the animal will hunt you down” but if you are still and “don’t move,” “you can hide in the herd, safe in the knowledge that someone else will be the prey.” The warning sets up diners to “enjoy” the fear and discomfort that will be coming their way. As one woman whispers to her companion: “[O]h, this will be

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8 Dean, 2006 p. 40

9 Yuan, *Vulture*. Yuan continues to describe the scene as “insane,” “bonkers,” and “fucking nuts,” before promising: “Guaranteed, you have never seen a scene like this. It is a scene of legends...” (Yuan *Vulture*).

exciting.” But Oleg, intense, grunting, and shirtless, embraces the role of wild animal beyond all expectation. Over the course of the scene, his behavior escalates from slightly amusing, to socially awkward, to outright terrifying. Oleg initially sets his sights on Julian (the artist interviewed), first mocking and mimicking him, and then swatting a water glass out of his hand sending it shattering to the floor and Julian scampering out of the dining room. More glass breaks soon as Oleg jumps upon the tables, tormenting the diners, as they work hard not to draw his attention their way. Eventually Christian calls upon his symbolic authority by standing up and courteously thanking Oleg for his performance and beginning to applaud. Oleg takes no notice as he menacingly zeroes in on a young, female guest; he begins by perching on the table in front of her chair, staring intensely and longingly at her before beginning to stroke her face. Her nervous laughter quickly gives way to desperate screams for help as Oleg forcefully gathers her hair in his hands and proceeds to pull her down from her chair and drag her by the hair along the ground before finally squatting on top of her. Eventually, a dinner guest breaks free of the thrall of the mandate to sit back and enjoy and runs to her rescue. As he begins furiously pummeling Oleg, others begin to join in the attack; all claims to civility vanish as a shout of “kill him” rings out and multiple fists rain down upon Oleg’s body as the scene cuts away.

This scene is most often discussed in terms Oleg’s excessive identification with the fiction of being a wild ape, but I suggest that we note, too, the museum patrons’ own over-identification with the symbolic mandate to enjoy. Their fidelity to the injunction keeps them docilely bound to their chairs well after the performance becomes intolerable, even as it verges on the criminal. The inefficacy of Christian’s symbolic intervention marks a palpable increase of unease among the audience, perhaps throwing into doubt the efficacy of the symbolic, more widely. But, as we see, this conspicuous symbolic failure leads not to a weakening of the social bond, but rather opens a space for the audience to free themselves from the stricture to sit back “and hide in the herd,” liberating them to take communal action. Rather than seeking to protect their individual security by hiding passively in “the herd,” they come to recognize that no one is safe unless they risk acting together. As the failure of symbolic conventions for reigning in the Other’s jouissance becomes increasingly palpable, new possibilities emerge.

Here, as in the earlier repetitions, an inassimilable, “excremental” element shifts the established symbolic terrain, foreshadowing the unexpected role that “the Square” art exhibit will come to play in the film.¹⁰ To be specific, “the Square” exhibit, through its contamination by the vulgar publicity video, becomes stripped of its ability to generate surplus jouissance by ridding it of its ability to generate “moral

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10 Žižek, 2017 p. 251

superiority.¹¹ It is only when the exhibit comes to function as an absurd object of derision, rather than a virtuous space, that it ceases to foment self-righteous satisfaction and begins to spark solidaristic bonds, in much the same way that it is only through failing as an artistic fantasy, that Oleg's performance piece creates solidaristic bonds among its audience.

But the violence catalyzed in response to Oleg's transgression must not be glorified. By contextualizing it in terms of extra-diegetic dimensions of the film, we can consider how it echoes key tensions within the film. Specifically, it functions as a way to police the intrusion of an "improper" other into the group. Once the conventional apparatuses for safeguarding against the disruptive other are exhausted, a physically repressive form of policing galvanizes. The violence, however, is excessive to the situation, leaving some critics to wonder if the scream "kill him!" is meant to be taken literally in the film. The extremeness of the response resonates with the paradoxical way in which our deep libidinal investments in protecting ourselves from the "too other" other, transforms us into the thing we seek to reject. As Östlund, himself, describes the scene:

The most uncivilized thing about our time is the collective rage against individuals that have been uncivilized... I don't know if it makes sense for you, but the most uncivilized thing today for me is that complete anger that comes like a rage, like a riot, towards individuals who have been uncivilized. And for me, the film is very much about this in some way. I understand the audience in that room because Terry Notary [Oleg] is so scary—or his character is so scary. But I wanted him to walk into a room and be like an uncivilized animal. And in the end this tuxedo-dressed audience have themselves become uncivilized. So, they are having a revenge on him in the same way that he has been behaving¹².

Östlund perhaps heightened the stakes in the clash between the "civilized" and the "uncivilized" by inviting actual elite donors from the Swedish art world to play themselves,¹³ a detail he withheld from Notary until the filming was finished. Notary confirms that the dynamics of the scene may have been altered if he knew in advance that he "was throwing water on a... billionaire donor... Because I thought they were making 120 bucks a day being extras.¹⁴" It is noteworthy, not only that the

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11 Ibid, p. 157

12 Yuan, *Vulture*

13 Östlund reassures us that the woman who Oleg drags off her chair by her hair is a stunt actor.

14 Yuan, *Vulture*

"wealth gap," to which Christian refers in his video message, informs extradiegetic levels of the film in terms of Notary's performance, but also, possibly, in terms of the donors' zealous response to Notary's performance. To be specific, Notary describes the passionate violence displayed by the crowd in terms of an injury he sustained: "[M]y right pinkie toe got broken... so painfully raked! I was like, 'Maybe on the next one, if you could not rake up my feet and kick on the floor...' But everyone was so in the moment that it was like, 'Oh well, it's going to happen every time.' It was really good, because the pain was so real.¹⁵"

The final thirty minutes of the film may appear as if Christian has finally managed successfully to activate the Symbolic in the cause of regulating his relationship to excessive jouissance. Rather than concluding with an image of Christian dramatically stripped down, "symbolically destitute," the film inserts him into an oddly banal, conventional social setting: a school cheerleading tournament in which his daughters are participating. But we should avoid reading this ending in an ideologically conservative way—as a restoration of socio-symbolic wholeness. Rather, I suggest that this concluding scene points towards a radical restaging of Christian's relationship to the fantasy of symbolic totality by identifying with the lack in the other, rather than attempting to seal it over.

As Christian, dressed in a grey sweatshirt and sporting facial stubble, undertakes this routine parental duty, he evinces no signs of self-satisfaction. He has abandoned ego-pleasure in favor of both the flickers of pleasures and the boredom involved in upholding the symbolic ritual for the sake of others/the Other. It is not incidental that the cheerleaders, performing within a delineated white square, engage in feats of trust. But rather than the pact of "trust and caring" required by individuals entering the Square exhibit, these acts of trust operate via collective responsibility. This point is amplified by the team's coach, who reminds the cheerleaders that, if anyone "messes up," she must "move on" and keep going with the routine. In specifically admonishing against dwelling in "guilt" over a mistake, the film advocates communal commitment ahead of individual ego-fortification.

After the cheerleading tournament, Christian takes further action to find the boy by returning to the apartment complex where the boy lives, this time accompanied by his own daughters.¹⁶ Rather than erect a

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15 Ibid

16 Christian's arrival at the apartment complex with his daughters follows the pattern of repetitions occurring throughout the film. The first time that Christian and his assistant go to the apartment to distribute the letters, Christian fears leaving his Tesla unattended in the neighborhood. His fears appear well-founded since while his assistant is waiting in the car, he is harassed by a guy who starts kicking the car. In this second iteration, it is this noteworthy that Christian asks his daughters to wait

distance between himself and the other, Christian now inserts himself (and his family) into the fray. Christian, I contend, comes to reject the fantasy of the “immigrant”/“other” as the obstacle to socio-symbolic wholeness by accepting that the figure, embodied by the boy, is rather the cause of his “freedom”—the freedom to inhabit the dissolution of the symbolic fiction of wholeness.

Throughout each instance of repetition within the film, we unlock possibilities for responding to the original key question this paper: what are the political ramifications of the transformation of the Square from art exhibit to filmic satire? My wager is that as an art installation, “the Square” contributed to consolidating the social around hegemonic ideals, whereas its filmic treatment continually highlights the social system’s instability that comes from the surfacing of its inevitable exclusions. In particular, the assertion of an excremental element in the place of the “all” (here accomplished by replacing the fictional blond girl with the brown immigrant boy) prevents symbolic closure. This destabilization thwarts any claim to a sutured totality, thus preventing the unavoidable exclusion totality requires and perhaps opening up a space of freedom for the subject as well.

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alone in the car, while he goes inside to look for the boy. The girls ask to come with him, and he agrees to let them accompany him. Ultimately, he is unable to locate the boy or get any definitive answer to his survival. All Christian is able to learn, from a neighbor in one the apartments, is that a boy and his family used to leave in the building, but he thinks that they moved away.