KONFESSIONS AROUND THE SQUARE

BY CASEY WEI

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STILLS 4

It is tellingly existential that me and my flying cohort of two co-workers all decided to watch The Square as our first on-flight movie, despite sitting separately. Maybe we were all filled with an anxiety about our work trip to attend an international short film festival, which as alternative, cerebral, and leftist as the festival Oberhausen historically suggests, is still a capital-Fs Film Festival. My reservation towards such an industry affair hover in the same ballpark as my trepidation towards contemporary art (of the slickly bored and over-educated sort), and it finally seemed like an appropriate time to lean back into an uncomfortable economy sized middle 32F seat to stew in self-reflection over the conditions of cultural capitalism and my place within it. What follows is broken up into three parts: 1) a reaction to The Square on the 10 hour plane ride to; 2) a palette cleanser of a truly splendorous short film from the 64th annual Oberhausen Film Festival; and 3) a reflection on all of it together in some kind of dialectical post-mortem.

1.

"Why can't you admit that power turns you on?" is a line from The Square that sticks with me. Christian, our 'protagonist' chief-curator of X-Royal Art Museum asks this of his subordinate Annie, in an awkward post-coital confrontation at the office. It is such a naively masculine question to ask someone, so primitive in the way only a privileged white man can think, that it made me reconsider his subject position seriously.

When the film begins, we are introduced to him, an inoffensively handsome 40-something Swedish man interviewed by an American writer Annie (Elizabeth Moss) on his museum's upcoming Lola Arias exhibition, simply titled "The Square." The scene is set in the quintessential white cube: there are uniform piles of dirt in a grid formation on the ground and neon text-art on the wall. Anyone who is anyone with a BFA is already rolling their eyes, just three minutes into the film. It doesn't read as farcical (like Terry Zwigoff's Art School Confidential (2006), or Charlie Kauffman's Synecdoche, New York (2008)), but as very accurate, a page out of *Artforum*. So, the catalyst event is this: Christian's phone, wallet, and cufflinks are stolen outside the subway station, but one of Christian's employees, Michael, manages to locate it with an app. The two feed off the adrenaline of their expert sleuthing, and write a threatening letter to the thief. Suddenly, they're in Christian's posh car, with an appropriately sinister Justice [1] song pumping on the stereo, speeding towards their date with justice! They arrive at what appears to be a social-housing high-rise in a poorer suburb, and have a long, uncomfortable deliberation on just who is going into the building to slip the "Give me back my stuff or I'll kill you" letter into each tenant's mailbox. It is one of the numerous scenes that depict not a subversion of power (Christian is Michael's boss, but it's more macho to do it himself), but an impasse *despite* power, that emerges as a central theme.

And yes, it works. Christian gets his belongings back, but his actions have consequences. A young boy begins to stalk him, demanding an apology from Christian to his family, because they think he was the one who stole Christian's stuff, and this ongoing annoyance culminates with Christian accidentally pushing the boy down a flight of steps in his apartment building, and ignoring his whimpers for what seems like hours. Rock bottom for Christian is waiting until the boy leaves, ripping through his building's dumpster, tearing through plastic bags of trash in the pouring rain until he finds the boy's phone number, which he then calls, only to leave a very long-winded, very cerebral, very unapologetic apology.

Let's be clear: Christian's not a bad guy. He just happens to be so powerful that he is completely powerless. Isn't this institutional critique at its deepest? The film presents this

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with verité precision: the call for tolerance at a press conference being disrupted by an audience member with Turrets; the awkward confrontation between two co-workers after a one night stand; the revered artist Östlund's (named after the director but not played by the director himself) performance as King Ape at the fancy patron banquet. The Square skillfully sets up the facsimile of the contemporary art world that we all understand quite well, if not through our own experience, then from mediated experiences like this one, for us to...do what, exactly? We are shown power and powerlessness at the level of the highest-garde. The mundane and very manageable everyday stresses of a professional urbanite's life imperceptibly add up, and suddenly, Christian's whole world is unraveling, because he accidentally signed off on a YouTube campaign of a little blonde homeless girl exploding in the titular square marked outside the entrance of the X-Royal. [2] Given M.I.A.'s 2010 video Born Free, and most recently, Childish Gambino's This is America, even this is not satire, it's just reality. Lola Aria's exhibition tagline is repeated throughout the film: *the square is a sanctuary of trust and caring within it we all share equal rights and obligations.* Perhaps the line that makes up The Square can tow that lofty ideal, but inside of it a child explodes, and beyond it lies the completely volatile and chaotic mess of humanity that cannot be resolved despite our highest, most guarded forms of civilization.

2.

I watched Hardeep Pandhal's Konfessions of a Klabautermann (2017) near the end of the six day long short-film marathon that is International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. It screened in the prime slotted International Competition program on Saturday night, in the same program of the film which would win first prize the following evening. The 12-minute Konfessions… starts off with a camera facing the back of an academic running through his slides in an empty auditorium, rehearsing a lecture of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. A sudden cut takes this scene into a crude 2D MS-Paint universe: the lecture is playing on a TV monitor in what appears to be a teenager's bedroom. Cut back to the 3D world, and the lecture carries on while an animated brown bottle labeled 'LEAVING DRINKS' hovers into the frame and breaks in half silently, sending a smattering of red colored shards of liquid into the air. Blood? Red wine? 'Leaving Drinks'? I'm doubly confused, trying to listen to the history lesson (wondering about the general dire in the Gillian-walla-bag), as the camera starts to sway more and more noticeably, and a bare but very bassy beat begins. Our lecturer reads, "Lead a discussion about the possible effect news of the massacre might have had on Sikh soldiers in a British Indian Army. Brackets: it shocked a growing movement in India into demanding complete independence and may have encouraged a fair bit of distrust, suspicion, and disaffection towards the British in otherwise loyal Sikh soldiers who had fought with the British during the first World War." The screen cuts to black, and rifle shots are fired to signal the start of the song, and a 10 minute music video in that crude MS-Paint universe of a rap song that is so dense that it needs a bibliography. If Das Racist had PhDs in British colonial history via psychoanalytic media theory, they might write lyrics like Pandhal [3]:

> Degenerate/ regressive / inverts / species / inconsiderate
> Betray your country / and have sex with your enemy
> Literacy is my enemy / literally
> I'm controlling/ the means of communication/ with a jungle story
> Signifier monkey

The rap is delivered at a non-challant pace while supremely base animations of Jesus, headless chavs, a muscly arm with a Union Jack bicep-tattoo, pacifier-for-a-head mermen, kings, buildings on fire, an elderly turbaned man, pirates, fire hydrants, Greek sculptures, anthropomorphic ships, and various throbbing, hard body parts harass, assault, and fuck each other. Midway through, we are taken back into the 3D world, as two young men in a small fluorescent-lit kitchen create some kind of a floppy yellow-crown out of boiled sugar. Somewhat non-sequitur to the rest of the video, the image is that of the mid-2000s, suggesting some kind of naivety that intelligibly complements the composed nihilism of the rest of the animation. And what of the Klabautermann?

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The synopsis of Konfessions… explains that the work is a video collage loosely anchored around maritime initiation rituals, where sailors would inflict forms of abuse on the new (and younger) crew members, comparable to hazing practices of college fraternities. Pandhal's understanding is that through the re-enactments of violence in a controlled environment, vulnerability in the face of unchartered territory is repressed. The video ends with that catchy chorus hook which I hummed for days after, *"Lonely Paki needs some bed time tories! Give me that bed time tory, gimme that bed time tory, gimme that bed time tory..."* against the image of a nun with a dick fucking the Earth.

3.

If the repression of vulnerability, i.e. fear, is familiarized through repetition, if through the repetition of practice we can conquer and know that which is unknown, if knowing the unknown over time solidifies stories into facts and facts into histories, this narrative line demarcates the square, a sanctuary of trust and caring within it we all share equal rights and obligations. Only, the contents within that space of trust and caring which we all share equal rights and obligations consists of exploded children, strewn body parts, homelessness, greasy pirates fellating each other, children being pushed down stairs, and various many other depraved, messy, human shit. In a festival filled with all kinds of politicized, controversial, conceptual, ART, etc. et al. films, Konfessions of a Klabautermann was one that spoke most honestly to me, and that takes me back to better understand my ambivalence to Östlund's The Square. The Square presents so well that flaccid impasse that we have, IRL, encountered in many (potentially) brilliant men who cannot transgress their privileged subject position, and nothing else. It was such an accurate portrayal that I had to wonder whether or not art was truly powerless. It wasn't until after seeing Konfessions… that I was reassured that there is something else. In all our lofty and virtuous pursuits through theory, politics, and history, it is easy to forget the power of affect: drawings of cocks, and a monkey in Annie's bed.

1 "Genesis" from their debut album, † (2007).

2 The two Zoolander-esque PR dudes who managed to sneak the "Blonde Child gets Blown Up" campaign by Christian while he's distracted by his vigilante mission are no exageration. I've met Scandinavian PR guys exactly like that down to their inseams.

3 To hear a disimilar version of the song, you can visit Pandhal's soundcloud: https://soundcloud.com/bonethugsandhardeep/bed-time-tory-featuring-misty"

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Map of sex acts on a pirate ship in Konfessions of a Klabautermann (2017) Dir. Hardeep Pandhal.

A MOVING IMAGE TRACT

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