THE AMBIGUITIES OF THE CIVILIZED MAN AND *THE SQUARE* (2017)

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Abstract

This article discusses the ambiguities of "the civilized man" by employing the conceptual tools of figurational sociology, using Ruben Östlund's 2017 film *The Square* as a focal point. Employing Norbert Elias's theoretical framework, the study explores key sociological themes: the tension between competition and cooperation, the evolving nature of collective and individual identities (the "We–I" balance), the interplay between personal self-control and societal control, and the contrast between formal and informal behaviors in contemporary society. Through Elias's concepts, the film's critique of social contracts, group dynamics, and morality is unpacked, offering insights into how people navigate today's complex social networks. Central to the film's narrative, the art installation called "The Square" is a powerful metaphor that reveals the intricacies and ambiguities of civilized social behavior. This study highlights how the veneer of civility often masks underlying primal instincts, exposing contradictions in modern social relations. By applying Elias's figurational sociology to film analysis, this article not only brings attention to the relevance of Elias's theories in contemporary European cinema but also contributes to the broader understanding of how civilized individuals cope with evolving social figurations. The film highlights the social tensions and ambiguities experienced by the civilized individual, as well as the fragility of the civilizing process. This study analyzes the relationships between individual behaviors, social control, and collective identity through the film *The Square*, using the conceptual tools of figurational sociology, and offers a critical perspective on the dynamics of modern society.

Keywords: Figurational sociology, Norbert Elias, Ruben Östlund, *The Square* (2017), sociological film analysis.

UYGAR İNSANIN AÇMAZLARI VE THE SQUARE (2017)

Öz

Bu makale, figürasyonel sosyolojinin kavramsal araçlarını kullanarak, Ruben Östlund'un 2017 yapımı *The Square* filmi üzerinden uygar insanın açmazlarını tartışmaya açmaktadır. Norbert Elias'ın teorik çerçevesini kullanarak, çalışma, filmi rekabet ve iş birliği dengesi, Biz-Ben dengesi, özdenetim ve toplumsal denetim arasındaki etkileşim ile modern toplumda formalleşme ve informelleşme arasındaki gerilim gibi temel sosyolojik temalar üzerinden ele almaktadır. Filmin, toplumsal sözleşmelere, grup dinamiklerine ve ahlaka yönelik eleştirisi, Elias'ın kavramları ışığında analiz edilerek, uygar bireylerin giderek karmaşıklaşan toplumsal bağımlılık ağları içinde nasıl hareket ettiklerine dair derin bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Filmin merkez metaforu olan *The Square* sanat enstalasyonu, toplumsal davranışlardaki belirsizlikleri açığa çıkaran güçlü bir mercek işlevi görmektedir. Çalışma, uygarlığın çoğu zaman ilkel içgüdüleri nasıl maskelediğini ve modern toplumsal ilişkilerdeki çelişkileri nasıl ortaya çıkardığını vurgulamaktadır. Elias'ın figürasyonel sosyolojisini film analizine uygulayarak bu makale, Elias'ın teorilerinin çağdaş Avrupa sinemasındaki önemine dikkat çekerken, uygar bireylerin değişen toplumsal figürasyonlarla nasıl başa çıktıklarına dair genel bir anlayışa da katkıda bulunmaktadır. Filmde uygar bireyin yaşadığı toplumsal gerilimler, belirsizlikler ve uygarlaşma sürecinin kırılganlığı gözler önüne serilmektedir. Bu çalışma, bireysel davranışlar, toplumsal denetim ve kolektif kimlik arasındaki ilişkileri *The Square* filmi üzerinden, figürasyonel sosyolojinin kavramsal araçlarını kullanarak çözümlemekte ve modern toplumun dinamiklerine dair eleştirel bir perspektif sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Figürasyonel sosyoloji, Norbert Elias, Ruben Östlund, *The Square* (2017), sosyolojik film analizi.

Introduction

The concept of the civilised individual has long been a cornerstone of sociological inquiry, particularly in understanding the tensions between personal autonomy, societal norms, and collective identities. Norbert Elias's figurational sociology provides a robust framework for analysing these dynamics, emphasising the intricate webs of interdependence—referred to as "figurations"—that shape human societies. Central to Elias's work is the notion that the civilising process is neither linear nor permanent but rather a fragile and ongoing negotiation between self-control, societal expectations, and power structures.

Ruben Östlund's *The Square* (2017) offers a rich and provocative case study for exploring these sociological themes. Set against the backdrop of an elite art museum, the film juxtaposes utopian ideals of equality and trust with the primal instincts and contradictions that often surface in civilised societies. At the heart of the narrative is an art installation—"The Square"—a metaphor for social contracts, mutual obligations, and the hypocrisies of modern human interactions. Through its sharp critique of morality, group dynamics, and interpersonal relationships, the film unpacks the fragility of trust and the ambiguities of civility.

Beyond its thematic depth, *The Square* is also significant as a product of Nordic cinema, a tradition that has long interrogated moral responsibility, social anxieties, and the contradictions of the welfare state (Carew, 2018; Grønstad, 2020). Nordic films frequently engage with themes of tradition, nature, and identity, reflecting the complex relationship between regional history and contemporary social structures. Additionally, Nordic Noir, a genre deeply rooted in the socio-political fabric of Northern Europe, emerges as a reflection of northern societies and their landscapes, with dark, rainy, and grey atmospheres concealing evidence in crime narratives and visually representing the struggles of seeking justice. The international popularity of this genre has also enabled deeper explorations of xenophobia, gender issues, and the visibility of crime within welfare societies, using crime fiction as a lens for broader social critique. Furthermore, dark humour plays a significant role in Nordic cinema, serving as a means to address class inequalities, existential crises, and growing social divisions (Demoğlu & Özdemirci, 2022).

This paper situates *The Square* within Elias's figurational sociology framework to address critical questions—How does *The Square* critique

the civilising process and the fragility of social trust? What does it reveal about the evolving interplay between individual autonomy and collective identity? By integrating Elias's theoretical insights with a cinematic case study, the research bridges the fields of sociology and film studies, offering a novel perspective on the intersections of art, morality, and the dynamics of contemporary society. This study explores fundamental questions about the civilised individual by applying Norbert Elias's theoretical models and concepts to contemporary Nordic cinema. Although Eliasian sociology is rarely referenced in film studies, film can be a powerful tool to illustrate and clarify key analytical concepts in figurational sociology.[1]

In doing so, this article not only underscores the relevance of Elias's theories in interpreting cultural phenomena but also contributes to broader debates on the nature of civility and social interdependence. *The Square* becomes a lens to critically examine the contradictions inherent in the civilised individual, challenging us to reconsider the boundaries between civility and primal instinct in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world.

This study adopts Norbert Elias's figurational sociology as its theoretical foundation, offering a nuanced framework for examining the evolving interdependencies between individuals and society. Figurational sociology is particularly apt for this analysis, as it focuses on long-term processes and the dynamic nature of social structures, which align closely with the themes explored in *The Square*. Elias's concepts, such as the "We-I" balance, the triad of controls (self-control, social control, and control over nature), and the interplay between formalisation and informalisation, provide the analytical tools necessary to unpack the film's critique of modern social figurations.

The methodological approach is qualitative and interpretative, employing *The Square* as a single case study. This choice is driven by the film's rich narrative and symbolic complexity, which offer a microcosmic view of broader societal dynamics. The film's critical acclaim within contemporary Nordic cinema and its explicit engagement with moral and sociological questions make it an ideal subject for applying Elias's theoretical framework.

The primary data source for this study is the film itself, with par-

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[1]   e.g., see Özgören Kınlı, 2017.

ticular attention paid to its narrative structure, visual symbolism, character interactions, and thematic undercurrents. Secondary data sources include published interviews with the director, Ruben Östlund, production notes, and relevant academic literature on figurational sociology and film studies. These materials enrich the analysis, situating the film within its artistic context and broader sociological implications.

The analysis is structured around two complementary strategies. First, a thematic analysis identifies recurring sociological motifs within the film, such as trust, morality, and the fragility of social contracts, aligning these with Eliasian concepts. Second, a symbolic interpretation deconstructs key visual and narrative elements—such as the titular art installation and its associated interactions—to reveal their sociological resonance. These strategies are triangulated with Elias's theoretical writings and existing literature to ensure analytical rigour and mitigate subjective bias.

By situating *The Square* within the framework of figurational sociology, this study highlights the relevance of Elias's theories in interpreting contemporary cultural phenomena. The methodological focus on thematic and symbolic dimensions allows for a multidimensional understanding of the film as a critique of civilisation and a reflection of the tensions inherent in modern social figurations.

Figurations and Core Ideas of Figurational Sociology

Norbert Elias (1897–1990) developed a sociological perspective known as figurational sociology, also called process sociology, due to its focus on the evolving nature of social structures, attitudes, values, and norms over time (Dolan, 2014, p. 2273). Although Elias advocated for the term figuration, by the late 1980s, he grew uneasy with the label figurational sociology, fearing it might become a static term, much like social system (Mennell, 1992, pp. 251-252). While he preferred the term process sociology, Elias's work has been widely discussed under the figurational framework, making figurational sociology the more commonly used term.

Eliasian framework synthesises classical and modern sociological thought, emphasising the interconnectedness of individuals within dynamic networks, referred to as figurations. The concept of figuration, which Elias has extensively employed since the 1960s, highlights the ever-evolving interdependencies between individuals and society. It serves as an analytical tool to describe how these shifting human networks and

long-term social processes shape and are shaped by individuals over time (Özgören Kınlı, 2020, pp. 1381-1383).

Figurational sociology is distinguished by its focus on relationships and processes, particularly emphasising the importance of long-term social developments without disregarding short-term dynamics. Its primary aim is to reveal the functional interdependence of individuals who, through unplanned interactions, create complex social processes on multiple levels. What sets figurational sociology apart is its emphasis on relationships over static situations. Elias examines the connections between individuals and social phenomena not merely through power relations between individuals, groups, or institutions but through the fluid and ever-changing balances of power that shape these interactions (Dunning, 1989, pp. 41-42; Dunning & Hughes, 2013, p. 50).

Figurational sociology employs various conceptual tools for analysis, such as the balance between cooperation and competition, the We-I balance between established and outsider groups, the balance between external social control and self-control, and the balance between formalisation and informalisation (Wouters 2014). The aim of figurational sociology is to examine how these balances shift over time in response to social variables, revealing the directions of social change. These analytical concepts will be further explored in the following section.

Civilisation's Thin Veil: A Figurational Sociological Analysis of *The Square*—The Balance between Competition and Cooperation

The fluctuating balance between competition and cooperation is a key analytical tool in figurational sociology, emphasising the close connection between this balance and levels of global interdependence and mutual reliance among societies. As interdependence networks grow more complex and denser, reflected in longer chains of dependency and greater social differentiation, changes in the balance between cooperation and competition naturally follow. These changes do not always move in the same direction. Even when competition becomes less overt, new forms of rivalry can arise, sometimes transforming cooperation into a competitive tool, where collaboration operates within a competitive framework (Binkley et al., 2010, pp. 67-68).

This conceptual framework aids in analysing and understanding changes in the size and density of figurations, as well as shifts in "differentiation, integration, and pacification" (Wouters & Mennell, 2013, pp.

556–60). In recent decades, as cooperation among individuals and organisations has become more complex and multi-layered, competition has become more peaceful, refined, and harder to detect. As cooperative and competitive networks become increasingly intertwined, we are seeing more collaboration within competitive relationships and heightened competitiveness within collaborative ones. This balance between cooperation and competition serves as a valuable lens for understanding changes in how people depend on each other, societal differentiation and integration, and the maintenance of peace.

In advanced societies, this equilibrium is more closely linked to the balance between work and leisure, emphasising how play is integrated into work and work into play. Shifts in this balance indicate changes in social differentiation and integration, leading to new strategies for managing tensions and conflicts and fostering greater levels of peace (Wouters, 2014).

As cooperation and competition blend together, interpersonal relationships become more complex and ambivalent. At the same time, individuals have increasingly felt the need to identify with others, a process facilitated by welfare state institutions. The expansion of identification spheres has softened rigid boundaries related to age, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, and religion, fostering greater mutual trust. The growing interdependence of cooperation and competition has prompted individuals to develop a more accurate understanding of themselves and others, increasing flexibility and willingness to collaborate (Wouters, 2004, pp. 209-10).

Despite increased social integration and cooperation in contemporary society, competition has not diminished. Instead, the balance between cooperation and competition has shifted, with the introduction of new tools for both rivalry and collaboration. The film highlights how the blurring of these lines creates social ambiguities. The central focus of the narrative in the film is the promotion of a new exhibition titled 'The Square', the work of a fictional Argentinian artist and sociologist, Lola Arias. This art installation consists of a clearly defined 4x4 meter square placed in a public space, such as a town plaza or city square, resembling an empty frame awaiting interaction. The premise is simple: if someone steps into the square and requests help, anyone passing by is expected to assist. The artwork's motto, "The Square is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within it we all share equal rights and obligations," reflects the

utopian ideals it seeks to represent. Through the film's metaphorical exploration of social behaviour in modern society, Östlund critiques the ambiguity surrounding human interaction and draws attention to the hypocrisy and arrogance often found within the art world, particularly among curators and museum directors.

The Square was partially inspired by a 2014 social experiment at the Vandalorum Museum in Värnamo, Sweden. Led by director Ruben Östlund and producer Kalle Boman, the experiment involved installing a physical square meant to symbolise a new form of social contract. Within this space, individuals entered into a mutual agreement designed to ensure equality and protection. The square aimed to create a safe environment based on trust among its participants. Furthermore, by blending elements of competition and cooperation, it highlights the civilised individual's dilemma, particularly the difficulty of building trust in interpersonal relationships.

The Square installation is meant to represent a space of trust and shared responsibility, yet the film consistently highlights the gap between this ideal and reality. While it is presented as a place where people are expected to act with integrity and mutual respect, Östlund contrasts this vision with scenes of conflict, disregard, and moral failure happening within and around it. This contradiction reflects a broader tension in the film—the difference between institutional values and actual human behaviour. With its carefully designed exhibitions and controlled environment, the museum symbolises order and civility, yet it becomes the setting for moments of hypocrisy and ethical lapses. Through this contrast, Östlund underscores how trust and moral responsibility often remain theoretical concepts rather than guiding principles in everyday life. The failure of *The Square* as a true safe space mirrors the broader erosion of trust in society, a recurring theme throughout the film.

In a society where bonds of mutual trust are not formed, individuals perceive others as potential threats to their own well-being. The erosion of trust between individuals is portrayed in various scenes throughout the film. A notable example is seen when visitors to the new exhibition are asked to indicate whether they trust or distrust others by selecting the corresponding option on a button.

The film highlights the ambiguity and tension between competition and cooperation among individuals, particularly across different so-

cial strata. This is exemplified through the experiences of Christian Juel Nielsen, the chief curator of the museum, who struggles with communication and trust, especially towards individuals from lower social classes. When Christian loses his daughters in a shopping mall, his pleas for help are ignored by everyone except a man from a lower socio-economic background. Surprised by the unexpected offer of assistance, Christian entrusts the man, a beggar, to watch over his shopping bags filled with expensive goods. He even asks the man to communicate with his daughters if they return, showcasing the complexity of social interactions and trust across class boundaries.

Surprisingly, Christian entrusts the care of his children to a complete stranger, despite his inherent distrust. This moment underscores the film's exploration of social inequalities, with the director making street beggars and homeless individuals more visible throughout the narrative. The film raises critical questions about whether addressing these inequalities is the responsibility of the individual or society at large. In many scenes, acts of helping beggars are depicted as driven by self-serving motives. The content, amount, and timing of donations remain solely at the benefactor's discretion, indicating that such acts may serve to alleviate personal guilt rather than reflect a genuine commitment to social welfare. Additionally, civil society campaigns for global humanitarian causes often overlook the beggars and homeless individuals directly outside the museum, revealing a disjunction between the rhetoric of charity and the reality of its practice.

A final example is found in the discussions surrounding the advertisement for the exhibition's promotion, which illustrates the tension between competition and the need for cooperation. Advertisers argue that the true competitors are not other museums but rather disasters, terrorism, and the provocative actions of far-right politicians. Rather than advocating for solidarity as a means to prevent chaos and offer reassurance to the public, the advertisers propose using sensationalised violence to capture media attention. The advertisement's shocking imagery exploits the audience's conditioned response to moral dilemmas, illustrating how media sensationalism capitalises on collective guilt. Rather than fostering genuine solidarity, it reinforces the divide between privileged spectators and marginalised subjects. This strategy reveals how institutions often manipulate social consciousness to maintain their relevance rather than address underlying inequalities. In doing so, it reflects a broader

societal tendency to prioritise visibility and competition over collective responsibility and cooperation, even in contexts that call for unity.

The We-I Balance between Established and Outsider Groups

Elias introduces the concept of the 'we-group' to explain shared attachments and loyalties, primarily among family members. According to Elias (2001), the balance between 'we' and 'I' reflects the evolving equilibrium of self-awareness within a changing society, shaped significantly by the process of state formation. In early social development, individuals depend on we-groups—such as family, kin, or local communities—which act as 'survival units,' providing essential resources like food, security, and support (Kaspersen & Gabriel, 2008). These units are not voluntary associations but innate figurations into which individuals are born, holding primacy within figurational networks. As societies progress and become more integrated, the balance shifts toward individualisation, favouring the individual's I-identity. However, during crises, this balance may revert in favour of the we-group, which reasserts itself as a survival mechanism (Elias, 2001, p. 179).

Elias and Scotson (2008) extend this analysis through their theory of established-outsider figurations, particularly focusing on we-they relations, which explain the dynamics of solidarity and social pressures between groups. Established groups often marginalise and condemn outsiders to affirm their identity and assert dominance, maintaining outsiders' subordinate status (Elias & Scotson, 2008, p. 4). One method of safeguarding this superiority is through 'blame-gossip,' where outsiders are labelled as 'lawbreakers.' In this framework, the self-perception of we-groups is closely tied to evolving social structures and interdependencies shaped by these established-outsider relations.

In contemporary society, the breakdown of traditional social relationships and weak social integration create challenges for fostering solidarity and mutual loyalty among different social groups. The film demonstrates how the complexity of social integration in modern societies tends to prioritise the individual's I-identity. However, during times of crisis, this balance shifts, with a greater emphasis placed on the we-group.

Recognising that marginalised groups are often highly visible on social media, advertisers have proposed an introductory film for 'The Square'. For the commercial launch of this exhibition, they suggest creat-

ing a video featuring a blonde homeless girl holding a sorrowful-looking kitten, walking into the Square before suddenly exploding. The tagline of the campaign dramatically flashes on the screen: "How much inhumanity does it take before we access your humanity?" They expect this provocative imagery to generate significant media attention, reinforcing a strong sense of collective we-feeling and highlighting the dominance of the we-group in shaping social responses.

Early in the film, Christian falls victim to a pickpocketing scheme while attempting to assist a woman who appeared to be under attack. To track down his stolen wallet, phone, and cufflinks, his staff utilises the GPS tracking system on Christian's iPhone. Though they are unable to pinpoint the exact location of the thief's apartment, they discover that his belongings are likely in a public housing complex situated in a poor district on the outskirts of Stockholm. Unwilling to confront the occupants directly, Christian opts to leave a note in each letterbox, requesting the return of his possessions. This act reflects Christian's perception of the residents as outsiders, as he engages in 'blame gossip,' implicitly accusing them all of criminal behaviour due to their socio-economic status.

The letter has the intended outcome, as Christian's stolen belongings are eventually returned to him by mail. However, a teenage boy from the building takes offense at the accusatory nature of the letter. The boy visits Christian's home and demands an apology for the unfair accusations against him and his family. He even threatens to create problems for Christian if he refuses to apologise. Despite the boy's request, Christian declines to act in the moment. Later, Christian begins to experience guilt and acknowledges his wrongdoing, but by then, he is unable to reconnect with the boy.

Christian then decides to record a video to publicly apologise for wrongfully accusing the boy and the other residents of being thieves. In the video, he reflects on broader social issues, questioning who should be held accountable for social injustice and who should take responsibility for addressing systemic problems. Christian expresses regret for having written a letter that unfairly cast suspicion on all the building's residents. His recorded apology is not merely an attempt to clear his conscience; it also reflects his shifting self-perception as he struggles to reconcile his privileged status with his moral failings. His decision to publicly acknowledge his mistake is an effort to reassert his self-image as an ethical individual, yet it also underscores the structural barriers

that prevent genuine reconciliation between the established and outsider groups. In his apology, he makes a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them,' acknowledging that the negative expectations and prejudices are not solely his responsibility but are part of broader societal issues. He argues that individuals alone cannot solve these structural problems. By offering a personal apology, Christian situates himself within a collective 'we,' aligning with the established group while also revealing his underlying anxieties about outsiders. This reflection exemplifies the shifting balance between 'we' and 'I' identities in modern societies, illustrating the tensions that arise from social fragmentation.

The Balance between External Social Control and Self-Control

Elias (2000) examines the shifting balance between internal and external controls, as well as the gradual internalisation of external constraints within the context of the *Civilising Process*. Further research on this topic has shown that Elias does not focus solely on the increase in self-control or the transformation of social controls into self-constraints (Wouters, 2007; Wouters & Mennell, 2013; Wouters, 2014). These scholars argue that the concept of a 'triad of controls' provides a more comprehensive and relevant framework for understanding changes in various forms of interdependence.

The stages of societal development can be traced through the interplay of self-control, social control, and control over nature (Elias, 1978, pp. 156–57). Elias argues that control over nature advances through scientific and technological progress, social control improves as social systems become more organised, and self-control aligns with the civilising process. These three forms of control are interconnected, forming a foundational framework for analysing human relations. Each type of control influences and depends on the others—no form can advance without the support of the others, and if one falters, the others may eventually follow suit (Elias, 2001, pp. 138–39). Furthermore, Elias suggests that the creation of non-violent social spaces is linked to the state's monopoly on power, which enforces a certain degree of self-control on individuals (Elias, 2000, pp. 369-373).

In civilised societies, the ability to regulate public expressions of conflicting impulses, desires, or behaviours and to delay gratification for future goals is often taken for granted. Self-control is typically linked to personal success and fulfilment, while failures in self-control are seen as

sources of individual and social challenges that disrupt modern life. The film challenges the idealisation of self-control as a marker of civilisation. In one scene, this is illustrated during a visiting artist's talk at Christian's Museum, where an audience member with Tourette's syndrome repeatedly interrupts by clapping inappropriately and shouting sexually explicit vulgarities.

Initially, the audience is unsure how to respond appropriately to the disruptive behaviour. When some attempt to ask him to remain quiet, a woman informs them that her husband has Tourette's Syndrome. Following this, another audience member, using politically correct language, urges the others to respect the man's neurological disorder, which impairs his ability to exercise self-control. Once the behaviour is understood to stem from a medical condition requiring treatment, the audience acknowledges the situation. This scene illustrates the link between civility and self-restraint, highlighting how 'civilised behaviour' is expected in more pacified and regulated societies.

Throughout the film, the director uses the recurring motif of monkeys to emphasise the notion that civilisation is, in essence, a performative façade, reflecting the primal aspects of human nature. This theme is particularly evident in a formal dinner scene where the museum invites its wealthiest, upper-class patrons to experience an art performance. A half-naked performer, portraying an ape, enacts a chaotic display of behaviour devoid of self-control. He engages in physical harassment and intimidation of the guests through menacing, abusive, and aggressive behaviours. Despite the growing tension, the attendees, constrained by societal expectations of civilised behaviour, hesitate to respond for an uncomfortably prolonged period. Director Ruben Östlund explains, "The idea of it, basically, is that we're all animals," underlining the thin veneer of civility that conceals humanity's more primal instincts (Roxborough, 2017).

Östlund deliberately constructs the dinner scene to challenge the audience's moral passivity, exposing the fragility of social norms. The prolonged tension arises not just from the chaotic actions of the performer but also from the attendees' collective inability to intervene, highlighting what Östlund describes as a societal fear of breaking social conventions. By refusing to cut away from the guests' discomfort, he traps the characters and the audience in an extended moral test, reinforcing Elias's idea that the civilising process is fragile and easily undone. Öst-

lund notes that this staging was inspired by real-life social experiments and psychological studies on the bystander effect, where people remain passive in the face of escalating crises. His use of extended takes and static framing forces the audience into prolonged discomfort, reflecting how social norms suppress instinctual reactions, even in extreme situations (Tangcay, 2017). In doing so, the film visually reflects Elias's argument that civilisation is not a fixed achievement but a precarious, socially enforced construct vulnerable to collapse under pressure.

The film explores a central question, reminiscent of Elias's reflection in his interview with Helmut Hetzel, published in Die Welt on December 11, 1989 (Hughes & Goodwin, 2013): are we all, in essence, modern-day barbarians? Östlund seeks to reveal how individuals conceal their true selves behind civilised masks, using the performance to interrogate the boundary between humans and animals. He explains that his intention was to depict how individuals, who initially appear polished and refined in their tuxedos enjoying a formal dinner, ultimately devolve into uncivilised animals. As Östlund puts it, "I think the most uncivilised thing about our time is the collective rage against individuals who act uncivilised. Isn't that the scary thing about us?" (Yuan, 2017). Through this, he questions the ambiguities of the civilised man.

The Balance between Formalisation and Informalisation

Informalisation refers to the transformation of human relationships within Western industrialised nation-states, driven by shifts in the power dynamics between social classes, genders, and generations over the past century. This process highlights the gradual reduction of disparities in power, status, and wealth between social groups, accompanied by a relaxation of social manners and a move toward more egalitarian conditions (Kilminster, 1998, pp. 149-153). The concept of informalisation was developed primarily to explain the increasing permissiveness in social norms and emotional expression observed in Western societies during the 1960s and 1970s (Wouters, 1977).

In *The Civilising Process*, Elias (2000) examines the historical developments in Europe between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries that led to the emergence of a specific form of self-regulation and a personality structure shaped by heightened thresholds of shame and disgust. This period marked a long-term process of formalisation, characterised by the regulation of manners and the disciplining of individuals and their emo-

tions. In the twentieth century, this was followed by a phase of informalisation, which allowed for greater sensitivity to social nuances, a broader range of behavioural and emotional expression, and increased flexibility in social interactions (Wouters, 2004; 2007).

Yet, the increase in permissiveness and the broadening of socially acceptable behaviours and emotions called for further regulation. As Wouters (1990, p. 69) explains, "The processes of democratisation and social equalisation have run in tandem with collective emotional changes and informalisation: more and more people have pressured each other towards more differentiated and flexible patterns of self-regulation and mutually expected self-restraints, allowing for an increase of socially permitted behavioural and emotional alternatives". Through the process of informalisation, dominant modes of social conduct, which represent institutionalised power relationships, have increasingly been both disregarded and challenged.

Elias complements this perspective by linking formality to social inequalities and informalisation to the process of functional democratisation. He distinguishes between two key dimensions: the formality–informality gradient, which reflects the simultaneous presence of formal and informal practices within a society (a synchronic distinction), and the formality–informality span, which captures changes in these practices over time (a diachronic view of informalisation) (Elias, 1996, pp. 23-119). The formality–informality span highlights differences in behaviour across formal and informal relationships and contexts. In modern industrialised societies, the gradient representing a social distance between different social strata is relatively narrow, reflecting a reduced level of formality (Wouters, 2014).

The film illustrates the decline of formal social regulations and the expansion of widely accepted behavioural and emotional alternatives, signalling the informalisation of the parent-child relationship. For example, Christian embodies a father figure who struggles with communication issues with his children in a society where the hierarchical nature of parent-child relationships has diminished. Similarly, Christian struggles to manage his interactions with the teenage boy who confronts him over false accusations. Another example of informalisation is evident in scenes where a father brings his baby to the office, attending PR meetings while holding the child, as others continue their discussions, seemingly unbothered by the baby's cries.

The film reflects the informalisation process through the relaxation of prescriptive table manners, which have lost their function as a marker of distinction among the upper social classes. For instance, during a formal banquet presented as an example of refined culinary art by the chef, the guests demonstrate a lack of patience and disregard for the decorum, interrupting the speech and rushing to the banquet hall without waiting for its completion.

In civilised societies, the balance between formal and informal communication among the established groups has shifted in favour of the latter. While the established tend to use formal communication in their interactions with outsiders to reinforce hierarchical structures, the outsiders often prefer informal communication when engaging with the established. Christian exemplifies this shift in his inaugural speech at the exhibition's opening ceremony, where he adopts an informal and engaging tone, using humour and direct address to connect with the audience. However, he deliberately avoids this personal approach when he writes his accusatory letter to the boy's family. Instead, he employs a detached, formal register, signalling authority and reinforcing his institutional position rather than fostering dialogue. This contrast underscores how individuals strategically navigate formal and informal modes of communication depending on power dynamics and social contexts.

In a similar vein, Christian maintains a certain distance from outsiders, yet both the rebellious teenage boy and the American journalist, Anne, as external figures, confront the conventional limits of formal interaction with him. Although Christian continually negotiates his boundaries with Anne, she shows a keen interest in fostering a closer, more personal connection with him.

As indicators of informalisation, one can observe a loosening of social regulations and diminished control over sexual and aggressive impulses. The film critically examines the extent of this relaxation and liberation of such drives, exemplified through the performance of the 'ape-man'. In this scene, the ape man nearly assaults a woman in the presence of other guests, who respond by passively lowering their heads, offering no immediate reaction. Only at the very last moment do they intervene, violently subduing the performer to assist the woman.

Östlund aims to reveal the hypocrisy of civilised individuals who conceal themselves within the anonymity of the crowd. He explores the

dilemma faced by individuals, who refrain from acting in alignment with their instincts for the sake of maintaining a civilised appearance. In his own words, his inner reflection while filming this scene was:

> "How far do I need to push you before you break out of your complacency [...] and take action? Do I need to go as far as to assault this girl? In the end, I almost wish I had said, 'Excuse me, enjoy your meal, while I check on the girl I nearly assaulted as you sat there in your fine suits, making sure she's all right'" (Hooton, 2018).

As Elias (1989/1991) famously remarked, "In reality, we are all late barbarians", Östlund's central concern in his film is to highlight the minimal distinctions between primitive and civilised individuals, despite claims to the contrary. This theme is further echoed in Östlund's own reflections:

> "Always, when there's a conflict between who we are expected to be and who we want to be, suddenly we're facing a dilemma that makes us behave in a different way. I think that's really the core of a human being, that we're dealing with our instincts and our needs, and at the same time we look at ourselves as rational and cultivated, that we're civilized. There's a clash between those things. That's what a human being is. We are animals! At the same time, we strive for equality. We strive for being fair. It's pointing out something about us, always, when you find that breaking point." (Crump, 2017).

Östlund underscores the fragile balance between our civilised facade and our underlying instincts through this exploration.

Conclusion

In *The Square*, Ruben Östlund presents a profound and disconcerting critique of contemporary society, highlighting the precarious nature of the civilising process as theorised by Norbert Elias. Through its narrative and symbolism, the film serves as a vivid demonstration of the fragile interdependencies that define modern figurations, exposing the ambiguities and tensions that underlie civilised behaviour.

At its core, the film grapples with the contradictions between idealised notions of civility and the primal instincts that persist beneath the surface. The titular art installation encapsulates these contradictions, serving as a metaphorical figuration reflecting contemporary society's broader tensions. By juxtaposing the ideals of equality and mutual ob-

ligation with the realities of hypocrisy, moral ambivalence, and social inequality, Östlund illuminates the fragility of trust and the challenges inherent in maintaining a civilised order.

Drawing on Elias's conceptual tools, this analysis has demonstrated how *The Square* embodies the triad of controls—self-control, social control, and control over nature—and the shifting balance between competition and cooperation. The film's portrayal of formalisation and informalisation, alongside its exploration of the "We-I" balance, further underscores social figurations' dynamic, processual nature. In this way, Östlund's work resonates with Elias's insights into the long-term developmental trajectories of human societies.

Crucially, the film reveals that the veneer of civilisation is far thinner than we might wish to believe. The recurring breakdowns of trust and the eruption of primal behaviours, even within ostensibly civilised settings, underscore Elias's assertion that the civilising process is inherently fragile and reversible. As with Elias's historical analysis, *The Square* invites viewers to reflect on the unplanned, unintended dynamics that shape social life, challenging any simplistic dichotomy between "civilised" and "uncivilised" behaviour.

Östlund's cinematic narrative also raises pressing questions about the relationship between individual and collective responsibility in addressing systemic inequalities. Christian, the film's protagonist, embodies the struggle to reconcile personal accountability with the structural forces perpetuating social injustice. This tension mirrors Elias's observations on the interplay between individual autonomy and societal constraints, illustrating the enduring relevance of figurational sociology in understanding contemporary cultural phenomena.

In conclusion, *The Square* serves not only as a critique of contemporary society but also as a reminder of the precariousness of the civilising process. Östlund's work challenges us to confront the latent contradictions within modern figurations, urging a deeper understanding of the interdependencies that bind us. In doing so, the film reaffirms Elias's insight that civilisation is not a fixed state but an ongoing, contingent process—as vulnerable as it is complex.

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