"Are we even watching the same film?"
A reception study of The Square
Abstract

This thesis examines the differences regarding the reception between American and Swedish reviews of the Swedish film, *The Square* (2017, Ruben Östlund). It explores whether or not their differences and similarities reflect different cultural contexts. By analyzing twelve reviews, six from each country, and using a qualitative analysis and reception studies as a theoretical foundation, the thesis have looked at what impacts our cultural understanding of a film like *The Square*. Janet Staiger’s theories on different type of readers (such as coherent readers, ideal readers, misreaders and competent readers) have also been brought to discussion. Furthermore, four themes have been identified as constantly present throughout the reviews, and they are: *modern times, political correctness, the art world, and the disconnection from others*. I have compared these themes with each other in order to approach the differences and similarities between the reviews in both countries.

The conclusion is that the reviews differ due to what type of reader the reviewers are, and if they are willing to go beyond their cultural framework to try to understand the cultural context, displayed in the film. The thesis is also written from a post-structural perspective, acknowledging how each interpretation says something essential about the themes in the film.

Key words

Reception studies, spectator, read, interpret, understand, reception theory, viewer, relate, connect, link, cultural context, cultural framework, read, spectator, audience, postmodern.
# Contents

1 **Introduction**  
   1.1 Introduction  
   1.2 Purpose  
   1.3 Research questions  
   1.4 Method  

2 **Theory**  
   2.1 Previous research  
   2.2 The reviews - an introduction  
   2.3 Text-Contextual approach  

3 **Part 1 of the Analysis: The American reviews**  
   3.1 Main theme: Modern times  
   3.2 Political correctness  
   3.3 The art world  
   3.4 The disconnection from others  

4 **Part 2 of the Analysis: The Swedish reviews**  
   4.1 Main theme: Modern times  
   4.2 Political correctness  
   4.3 The art world  
   4.4 The disconnection from others  

5 **Results**  

6 **References**
1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

There are movies that somehow end up leaving the movie theatre with us, and for days and weeks, occupy our minds with alternative ways of interpreting their unclear meaning. *The Square* from 2017, directed by Ruben Östlund, was one of those movies. I first saw it in Sweden right after it was released at the end of August 2017. What caught my attention was how the audience seemed to interpret some of the themes in the film regarding political correctness, modern times, moral courage and segregation, as themes related to the Swedish political and social climate.

When I re-watched the film in a Chicago movie theatre a few months later, I noticed how the reception of the film was entirely different. It was as if there was a common understanding that what we were experiencing was art, and therefore should be viewed as such. Even some of the more provocative scenes such as the stunt-performance dinner that almost erupts into rape, was seemingly received through the perspective of art performing as art and not as a statement of contemporary Swedish political and social climate.

This caught my attention at once, not that the American audience and the Swedish audience viewed the film differently, but what it is that impacts our viewing of the same film and how it leads to different interpretations. Or to go even further, what is the contributing force that shape our interpretation and understanding of a film? Is it merely our cultural backgrounds? Or is it something connected to our experiences? These questions are intriguing to think about as they capture what reception studies fundamentally is about.

Reception studies is a wide field that not only covers the field of cinema, but also theatre, literature, journalism and radio. Essentially reception studies is about how audiences in the past and in the present have viewed film. A way to unfold how a particular film was viewed is by investigating reviews (the most common way), or if possible, interviewing audience members. There are countless articles and books
written about reception theory or reception studies, aiming at discovering how our different cultures and experiences influence the viewing process. Carl Platinga writes:

“Viewer’s emotional experiences may change dramatically as their expectations are met or thwarted, and as the situation takes unexpected turns”.¹ As the quote states, a movie viewing experience is an emotional one that at any moment can take a turn (storywise), ultimately leading to a number of possible interpretations. It also reveals one of the main purpose for this thesis, which is to study the reception of The Square by analyzing twelve reviews of the film, six of them published in Sweden and the other six in the US.

1.2 Purpose
The main purpose is to compare six American release reviews with six Swedish release reviews of The Square in order to understand how it was interpreted differently. By analyzing and comparing what themes of the film the reviews have focused on, I hope to find some answers about how our cultural backgrounds impact the reception itself.

1.3 Research questions
• In what way do the Swedish and American reviews differ in terms of reception?
• In what ways do the differences between Swedish and American reviewers’ understanding of the film reflect different cultural contexts?

1.4 Method
Although reception theory will remain as the theoretical foundation of this thesis, the choice of method will be a qualitative analysis. This method comes handy when comparing a few interviews or reviews with each other to answer a question.

¹ Platinga, Carl, Moving Viewers: American Film and The Spectator’s Experience, California University Press, 2009, p. 34
Having mentioned that the main intention is to compare reviews of the same film, published in two different countries, it is also of important to stress that this is not the only way of approaching the reception of this film. Another approachable way of would be to arrange two actual screenings, and interview audience members. Due to to short amount of time, this thesis will be in line with a traditional reception study, focusing on reviews.

Another important note, which Janet Staiger informs us about in *Interpreting Films*, is how difficult it is to remain impartial when interpreting and analyzing: “One more problem exists besides those of the researcher’s subjectivity, the difficulties of interpreting evidence, and the bias of what evidence remains available for study”. This is vital when using a qualitative analysis, because as you research, you will always face the ongoing struggle of separating your own beliefs from the actual facts.

By using a reception theory as a theoretical foundation and a qualitative analysis as method, the intention is to shed light on how our cultural differences shape our movie viewing process.

2. Theory

2.1 Previous research

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, reception studies explore how audiences over time have interpreted and understood film. An audience consists of a variety of people with different cultures, genders, ages and backgrounds, and all of these traits have a role to play in the reception process.

Since reception studies is a complex field in film studies, Janice Staiger’s contribution to the field will be crucial. Staiger has written several books and articles on the subject. One book that stands out is the one that will be used for the thesis, titled: *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*.

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Staiger writes about reception studies as a complex field, suggesting the idea that a film can be given new meanings by analyzing the way it was viewed and by whom it was viewed. In order to understand how a particular film was received, we need to ask who the viewer is. By unraveling the viewers' identity, we can begin to grasp the ways in which the film was understood. She further explains: “But, overall, reception studies does not attempt to construct a generalized, systematic explanation of how individuals might have comprehended texts, and possibly someday will, but rather how they actually have understood them”.

In short, reception studies help us understand the effects that films have had on spectators in history. Staiger analyzes films such as Rear Window (A. Hitchcock, 1954) and Birth of a Nation (D.W Griffith, 1915) by looking at the release reviews and historical documents. By using these examples to approach the field, Staiger lets us know how difficult it is to conduct a reception analysis. For example, the circumstances around the film are as important to take into consideration as well as the social and political climate in which the film derives.

The reception studies she seeks is a historical one with one goal in mind: to recognize the dialectics of evidence and theory, meaning, looking at how certain films were understood in the context of texts such as documents and reviews.

Staiger describes how an interpreting process takes place and what it actually says about its times, viewers, and the power of film: “Interpreting films is not an isolated, merely aesthetic act. It is a practice transforming the material world to our use. Researching how this can happen can make a difference for the future”.

The reception study applied for the thesis will not be historical in the sense of studying the reception of older films, but rather contemporary by exploring how our cultural differences influence the movie viewing process. Carl Platinga writes about

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3 Staiger, 1992, p. 8
4 Staiger, 1992, p. 8
5 Staiger, 1992, p.10
6 Staiger, 1992, p. 81
7 Staiger, 1992, p. 97
this in his book, *Moving Viewers: American Film and The Spectator’s Experience.* Platinga is far more interested in who the spectator actually is.

Just as Staiger, Platinga is also interested in the spectators as a historical component of film history. If Staiger is interested in looking at the viewer through the light of history, Platinga is more concerned with how emotion and affect figure into the experience of the spectator.\(^8\) When we watch a film, we might have some expectations, and as we watch, we want the film not only to live up to our expectations, but also to be an overall pleasurable experience.\(^9\) Platinga asserts that his main interest is how film is somehow intertwined with emotions. As we watch a movie, we are placed in a fictional situation where we can interact with what we experience. Some movies spark our curiosity, others our sympathy and some even our inner fears.\(^10\) “A film’s narrative structure is clearly designed to cue emotional, visceral, and cognitive experience”.\(^11\) Throughout his book, Platinga explores the way the viewer consumes and understands movies through his or her experiences and emotions.

Unlike Staiger, Platinga is interested in studying the role of the viewer through American cinema. If Platinga is more interested in the way the viewer uses their experiences to interpret, Michele Aaron, looks at how films affect the spectator. What are we actually looking at when we study a certain scene? And how do films project their own world-view into ours? These are all questions that Aaron wants us to reflect upon.

Aaron also challenges us to think about how we react when we watch movie scenes that might evoke some degree of masochism, masculinity and ethics. Some scenes might challenge our stand on questions like abortion, and by reflection on how we respond as spectators and why, we can begin to understand our place in the movie viewing process. Aaron urges us to ask question of ourselves as we watch. For

\(^8\) Platinga, Carl, *Moving Spectators: American Film and the spectator’s exerience*, 2009, University of California, P. 5  
\(^9\) Platinga, 2009, p. 33  
\(^10\) Platinga, 2009, p. 33-35  
\(^11\) Platinga, 2009, p. 34
example: Why do I feel this way when watching a scene about friendship? And what does that say about my role as a spectator? Though Aaron does not articulate these particular questions, nonetheless he explores similar ones about how films trigger the spectators emotions: “Not only do films incorporate the spectator but the spectator’s response. In this way, we are presented with clear (moral) guidelines of how to react […]”. 12

Overall Staiger, Platinga and Aaron offers a unique way of looking at the reception process. They are mainly interested in bringing new ways of acknowledging the process, but with different interests in mind. Staiger, on the other hand, discusses how reception studies, as an academic field, is an ongoing process in how we constantly organize and understand the narrative plots of film. Platinga is more concerned with how the viewer uses his/her experiences to interpret, relate and obtain a sense of meaning of each film. Finally, Aaron is on different territory, exploring how films ask us to constantly respond and to reflect upon our responsibilities as spectators.

2.2 The reviews – a short introduction

During festival screenings of the film, around October 20 – 30th was when the reviews were published. Mainly in festivals like Film Columbia Festival; Middleburg Film Festival; Philadelphia International Film Festival and on limited theatres. The Swedish reviews were published around the release of the film, which was on the 25th of August, 2017.

There are twelve reviews in total that will be analyzed: six American reviews, six Swedish reviews. The American reviews are from websites such as The Atlantic, Vox, New York Times, Village Voice, Rolling Stone and RogerEbert.com. The Swedish reviews are from: SVT, Ledarsidorna, FLM, GP (Göteborgs Posten), Sydsvenskan and ETC. Ledarsidorna is an exception though, since it was published in mid September, 2017.

12 Aaron, Michele, Spectatorship: the power of looking, 2007, Wallflower Press, P. 96
The Atlantic review by David Sims, “The Square Is a Masterful Symphony of Discomfort”, takes a closer look at how the film deals with questions regarding moral courage and society. Sims is interested in Östlund’s directorial style and how it impacts the film.

In the Vox review, “The Square’s high-concept comedy targets both the art world and the social contract”, Alissa Wilkinson examines the aesthetics of the film and how it is presented. Wilkinson also discusses the connection between the aesthetics of the film and the story, trying to understand what that says about the film.

In the Rolling Stone review, “Art World Satire Will Knock The Wind out of You”, Peter Travers describes the style of the film and what it depicts. Travers review is more of a classical one with no particular aim in mind other than reviewing the film for what it conveys.

Glenn Kelly in rogerebert.com, approaches the film rather critically by looking at the society in which the film portrays and how it captures Östlund’s vision of an up-to-date Swedish society.

Bilge Ebiri in the Village Voice article, You’ll Probably Argue More About “The Square” Than Any Other 2017 Movie”, discusses the philosophical dimension of the film and how it raises questions about human values, integrity and community.

Finally A.O Scott in the NY Times review, “The Square” Takes Aim at Art, Sex, Money and More”, describes the aesthetical elements of the film and the way they symbolize modern times.

In the Swedish review from Ledarsidorna by Erik Van der Heeg, there are some important notes to mention. First of all, Ledarsidorna is – from a Swedish perspective – a controversial website with articles and reviews that in some sense take/hint a political stance. The reason why it has been choses, is that it – unlike the other Swedish reviews – discusses the political dimension of the film to a much larger extent.

The review from SVT by Sofia Olson, “The Square får hjärnan att koka” (“The Square puts your brain to work”), describes the fragmented aspects of the film and whether or not the whole film can be viewed as a sociological experiment.
In the *GP* review, “The Square vill utmana tanken” (“The Square wants to challenge the thought”), Mats Johnsson observes the postmodern nature of the film and the questions it raises regarding art and freedom of speech.

Sanir Pejkovic’ from *FLM*, argues in his review, “Ruben Östlund trollar bort sig själv i The Square” (“Ruben Östlund removes himself from The Square”), whether the society that Östlund depicts resembles a contemporary Swedish society or not.

Malin Krutmeijer in the *Sydsvenskan* review, “The Square – rolig, men en återvändsgränd” (“The Square – funny, but a dead end”) is also interested in the society that Östlund’s depicts and if there is a deeper sense of realism to it.

Finally, Ida Therén in the *ETC* review, “The Square av Ruben Östlund förtjänar en stor public” (“The Square by Ruben Östlund deserves a large audience”), discusses the notions of manhood and masculinity that the she argues the film raises.

### 2.3 Text-conceptual approach

Janet Staiger states that the reception studies she seeks is a purely historical one that “[…] would recognize the dialectics of evidence and theory, and would take up a critical distance on the relations between spectators and texts”. She writes that her ambition is to offer a historical explanation of the context in which the film derives. It is clear when reading Staiger that her aim is too look at what the historical context has to say about the way we understand films, both in the past and in the present. Staiger believes that by looking at the historical event of each film, one can better understand how it was reviewed and what might have played a part.

She mentions three different readers – the ideal, coherent and the competent readers. These three are used when discussing the various ways of approaching texts. *Ideal readers*, are “[..] likely symptomatic of fundamental epistemological and ethical assumptions held by the individual proposing them”. She concludes that *ideal*

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14 Staiger, 1992, p. 81

15 Staiger, 1992, p. 25
readers are ahistorical, meaning they lack a historical perspective.\textsuperscript{16} Staiger applies a historical materialist perspective, which in a opposite direction to ahistorical readers, highlights the importance of the historical context.

Ideal readers are also keen on immersing into the text/film and learn as much as they can about themselves.\textsuperscript{17} There is also a self-reflection implied here, that the more the ideal readers read and dive into texts, the more they reflect on how they read and why. Their longterm strive can be describes as: to learn as much as possible about the world and themselves through careful readings.

Coherent readers can be considered as a [...] “variation of the ideal reader”.\textsuperscript{18} A coherent reader is someone who assumes “[...] that a reader reads so as to pull all of the parts of a text into a single or unified meaning or experience”.\textsuperscript{19} For example: the reader/viewer believes that each film has its own meaning and that meaning can be encountered by “pulling out the parts of the film” into one unified interpretating or understanding of it. In the case of The Square, this kind of reader would look at each part of the film and try to place them so that they become coherent with what they believe to be the films meaning. This kind of reader has more of a modernist point of view, believing that each film consist of one way of understanding them. Staiger states that the coherent reader assumes that texts are coherent and that the role of the reader is to interpret texts in accordance with their logical pattern.\textsuperscript{20} However, one might argue that the logical interpretation is only “logical” to the person conducting it.

Competent readers, like the coherent ones, derives from an idealistic view that there are such a thing as ideal readers. As it is with the others, the competent reader may be able to perform a competent reading, but it is firmly based on his/her “own system of interpretation”.\textsuperscript{21} The system of his/her interpretation is largely based on their own scheme of interpretation and knowing how to read certain scenes and make

\textsuperscript{16} Staiger, 1992, p. 25
\textsuperscript{17} Staiger, 1992, p. 25-27
\textsuperscript{18} Staiger, 1992, p. 27
\textsuperscript{19} Staiger, 1992, p. 28
\textsuperscript{20} Staiger, 1992, p. 28-30
\textsuperscript{21} Staiger, 1992, p. 31
them “fit in” to their empirical understanding of the film. Hence, the ideal reader, the coherent reader and the competent reader all suggest that certain texts can be read in an efficient and logical way that will allow the reader to have a much greater understanding of what he/she reads and how he/she is reading.

Staiger also mentions Misreading as a type of reader which leans toward a deconstructionist approach, meaning that a text ought to be misread in order to retain “[…] the trace of truth”.\(^\text{22}\) Staiger stresses that even though she has a historical materialist approach, she still wants to understand how come some meanings are perceived as less “true”. A reader who belongs to the “misreading-camp” is one who believes that “[…] meaning is imminent, texts have essences, mistakes are the fault of the reader”.\(^\text{23}\) Staiger refers to Theodor Adorno and his notions of an ideal reader as one that is ahistorical. Finally she concludes that in the case of Adorno and his thoughts on misreading, what is a misreading is actually a symptom of critical method that allows the reader to “misread” in order to approach the essence of the text.\(^\text{24}\)

Staiger also describes different theories of how to conceptually approach texts. One way is when she writes about text-activated theories, stating that texts provide the reader with information that he/she understands in the context of their everyday life.\(^\text{25}\) She goes on to describe numerous ways of approaching texts – though she affirms that texts vary and carry specific features – and they way we approach them depends on what type of reader we are. A structuralist reading of a text in the style of Barthes and Eco, suggest “[…] the multitude of activities in which a reader might be involved at any moment”.\(^\text{26}\) Meaning, it all depends on which approach the reader applies to the text, e.g. if he/she believes that a text is born within itself or when it first meets its reader. The structuralist view of how to read texts, assumes the notion that

\(^\text{22}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 32
\(^\text{23}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 33
\(^\text{24}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 32-35
\(^\text{25}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 36
\(^\text{26}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 37
Stuart Hall proposed, namely, how the information of a text is encoded, but when corresponding with its reader becomes decoded.

The perspective that will be used for this thesis is a *post-structuralist* one. This means that I will not offer my own interpretation of the film since I believe that each reading is relative with different outcomes. When a film first meets an audience, its messages and themes are recognized differently depending on (1) who the viewer is and (2) on their cultural background as well as (3) their empirical understanding of reading narratives. Each reading of a film says something truthful about what the film essentially wants to say (though one can never fully comprehend the essential meaning of a text). Having said that, I will not enforce my own interpretation of *The Square* since it (in the context of the reviews) is insignificant. Instead, the reviews will offer their interpretations and understanding of the film that are all relative within the context of reception studies.

If text-activated theories tend to focus on features of texts and how they can have various of effects depending on the viewer, *reader-activated theories* is more focused on features of readers and how these features effect the reading process.\(^{27}\) This theory is concerned with the empirical way of looking at readers, suggesting that each era has its group of readers and these use their experiences to interpret texts.\(^{28}\) *Reader-activated theories* on the other hand, explores the psychological dimension of the readers and the way in which they percept and understand within their empirical frame.\(^{29}\)

The third theory, *context-activated theories*, differs from the other two by stressing the value that the historical context has on the reading experience. In other words, the historical account is crucial to this theory. Staiger asks: “[…] What contextual factors account for the interpretation?”\(^{30}\) To answer this question, Staiger underlines the value of communication. When a reader is viewing a film, he/she is exposed to a myriad of data that might enable the reader to hypothesize and draw

\(^{27}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 43  
\(^{28}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 43  
\(^{29}\) Staiger, 1992, p.43  
\(^{30}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 45
conclusions of the cinematic events: “Context-activated theories of reading assert that meaning is “in” the contextual event of each reading, not “in” one reading event rather than another”. Staiger is advocating this theory, arguing that the historical determinants are vital when studying the way we interpret moving images. She remarks: “Thus, while I shall take a conceptual approach, I do not argue that texts are not material or real; they provide sense-data to individuals”. Staiger argues that readers are developed historically, “[…] and the interpretive event occurs at the intersection of multiple determinations”.

3. Part 1 of the Analysis: The American reviews

Regarding the reviews, there is a significant difference between the themes in the reviews and what the reviewers identify as the main themes in the film. This difference is important to mention, mainly because it represents two ways of looking at (1) how the themes in the film have been interpreted, and (2) which specific theme/themes that can be found in the reviews. For instance, Glenn Kelly from roger.ebert.com interprets the film as a purely realistic portrayal of Sweden and associates that to his opinions about contemporary times. Therefore, one can argue that this is the theme of the review, namely to “read” the film as a literary depiction of Sweden. So in this case, this is an example of (1) what themes in the film that Kelly has picked up and (2) he reads/understands them within the context of Sweden and therefore the review also carries the theme of reading the film as a social critique.

31 Staiger, 1992, p. 47
32 Staiger, 1992, p. 48
33 Staiger, 1992, p. 48
34 Staiger, 1992, p. 48
Regarding the themes in the reviews: when phrases such as these appear, “the reviewer reads the film as...”, it is to indicate a theme in the review and not an interpreted theme of the film, expressed by the reviewer.

This analysis will be shaped in the scheme of a thematic analysis. After having read the reviews closely, a theme that will be referred to as modern times, has been identified as present throughout the reviews. Present in the sense that some reviewers discusses it more extensively than others. For example, the Swedish reviewers discusses modern times to a larger extent than the American. They all approach it in one way or the other, through various aims and perspectives. The theme of modern times will be (thematically) followed by three sub-themes, that are also largely discussed in both set of reviews, and they are: Political Correctness; The art world, and finally The disconnection from others.

In part 2, The Swedish reviews will undergo the same thematic scheme, and finally the themes in both sets of reviews will be compared, analyzed in the last chapter, titled: Results.

3.1 Main theme: Modern Times

Among the American reviews, Glenn Kelly from rogerebert.com is the only one who writes extensively about this theme. Kelly is laying out the case for how the contemporary society in the film, represents Sweden and nothing else: “In the Sweden of Ruben Östlund’s “The Square”, what was once Stockholm’s Royal Museum is now the “X-Royal” Museum, dedicated to contemporary art and its attendant values”.35 In the beginning of the sentence, Kelly remarks that the society in the film is not just representing Sweden, but in fact Östlund’s Sweden. Kelly does not hide the fact that he finds it difficult relating to whatever landscape the film is setting, the main reason for that is what he describes as the “contradictory nature of the film”.36 For example in the beginning of the film, while a clipboard-carrying solicitor

36 Kelly, 2017
asks people if they want to save a life, there is a homeless man lying on the ground next to the solicitor.

Kelly is constantly arguing for how the film not only depicts modern times, but also Sweden: “If you are asking why Christian did not just report the stolen phone to the police, well, that’s interesting: the Sweden of this movie seems to have no police, or security guards, or doormen”.\(^{37}\) To demonstrate his argument, he refers to the performance-stunt scene; a scene that almost erupts in rape before someone acts. The reason behind this, Kelly writes, has to do with “modern life”.\(^{38}\) Kelly is implying how the film is showing us modern life through the lens of a Swedish society. Therefore, the setting of the film (modern times) can be understood as a crucial element or even character in the film.

Kelly’s review clearly considers modern times to be the main theme in the film and that of which triggers Christians actions. As demonstrated earlier regarding the theme of the review, Kelly reads the film as a social critique of Sweden and does not hide the fact that the film has shaped his idea of Sweden. This can be found in the quote above in which he stresses that, “the Sweden of this movie seems to have no police […].”\(^{39}\)

Kelly leans towards a \textit{coherent reader} by assuming that the film can be understood in one logical way by pulling out the parts into one significant and unified meaning. As Staiger explains, this types of readers tend to strive to create a logical interpretation.\(^{40}\) One can certainly argue that Kelly has tried to apply a logical pattern to the film. Staiger also mentions \textit{misreadings} (the deconstructionists/poststructural method of reading), which are the kinds of readers who believes that a misreading is a logical necessity in order to encounter the essence of the text.\(^{41}\) Is Kelly conducting a \textit{misreading} or poststructural reading of the film? Or is he a \textit{coherent reader} who places what he reads into one single coherent interpretation of the film that might be

\(^{37}\) Kelly, 2017
\(^{38}\) Kelly, 2017
\(^{39}\) Kelly, 2017
\(^{41}\) Staiger, 1992, p. 32
too literal? Nevertheless, the case can be made that Kelly’s reading of the film resembles those of the coherent readers, looking at what is shown and not at the deeper symbolic meaning.

3.2 Political correctness

In some respect, political correctness is a highly problematic concept that lacks a cohesive definition. Each reviewer discusses it in his or her understanding of it and in the context of the film.

The Atlantic review titled “The Square Is a Masterful Symphony of Discomfort” by David Sims, observes the ambiguity of Christian’s persona. He is driven by a sense of superiority at work, and is respected by his colleagues as a cultural and intellectual authority. At the same time, this is overshadowed by the “madness and foolishness” he displays when desperately trying to take back his phone and wallet: “The Square goes on to poke further at the bubbles of entitlement and stuffy notions of politeness that guide supposedly upstanding folk into moments of madness”. Sims notes that the film “pokes of bubbles of entitlement and stuffy notions of politeness” and considers them as contributing factors to what drives people to “moments of madness”. Sims does not discuss this further, but one can argue it implies how notions of entitlement and politeness are somehow connected with political correctness. “The Square is sprawling and ambitious, diving headlong into questions of art, sex, human morality, and the value of political correctness over an intimidating 142-minute running time”. Sims does not explain what he means by “the value of political correctness”, but one might assume it has something to do with how notions of entitlement and politeness have gone too far.

The NY Times review, “The Square Takes Aim at Art, Sex, Money and More” by A. O Scott, also observed the theme of political correctness. Scott argues how the

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43 Sims, 2017

44 Sims, 2017

45 Sims, 2017
film is about Christian’s apology: “While Christian is willing to admit fault, he also feels compelled to note that the problem isn’t just a matter of his thoughtlessness”.46 Scott refers to the last scene of the film when Christian records a video of himself, apologizing to the person that has been hurt by the letters he sent. “There are social forces and economic structures at work, he says, large historical tendencies that both extend and extenuate his guilt. Immigration. Inequality. Social alienation. Global Capitalism”.47 Although Scott implies that the failing to live up to notions of political correctness or knowing how to behave might have triggered Christian’s guilt, he does not draw any conclusions of it.

“Shots of homeless people, beggars and poor immigrants emphasize his bad faith, but they also replicate it and pass it along to the audience”.48 Scott want us to reflect upon if we act any different than Christian when we pass beggars or homeless people.

In comparison with The Atlantic, the NY Times review focuses on what it refers to as “the bad conscience of the cultural elite”.49 Scott explains that the cultural elite is represented by Christian and his crew; and their bad conscience appear when they try to figure how to behave in a correct way: “Christian and his tribe are obsessed with political correctness but can’t figure out how to behave decently. They think globally, but don't know how to talk to their neighbors”.50 There seems to be an implied link here between political correctness and behaving decently in a modern society. It also suggests that we might have become more disconnected from society by only allowing ourselves to think globally and not locally.

The Vox review, “The Square’s high-concept comedy targets both the art world and the social contract” by Alissa Wilkinson, notes the following about Christian’s political views: “He’s a man with a lot of very liberal-minded notions about empathy, compassion, and equality who keeps running into walls when interacting with real life
people”. The largest of these “walls”, Wilkinson explains, appears in the beginning of the film, when he is interrupted on his way to work by a woman who is chased by a violent man. Even though he decides to help her and fight back, it does not end up well. “Christian has largely kept his life humming along by compartmentalization, putting his ideals in one box, his fathering in another, his work in another, his sex life in another […] an exercise in abstraction, which keeps life clean of messy personal ties and emotions”. Wilkinson states that by putting ideals in a box, for example how to behave when passing beggars, Christian is completely paralyzed in his actions. He does not know how to behave decently. Wilkinson does not explain further – but one could assume it has some connection to what the NY Times review noted – that he and his crew only think globally. Therefore, Wilkinson, Scott and Sims seems to consider a link between political correctness and knowing how to behave in a suitable manner.

3.3 The Art world

Alissa Wilkinson (Vox) writes that the film: “[…] feels more like long performance art than a narrative film […] a social satire by way of art-world comedy […].” Wilkinson reads the film as if it was a piece of performance art, arguing that it follows the same form as contemporary art – to make the viewer uncomfortable. Wilkinson also states that the art world is presented through the elite, an elite that communicates through the language of contemporary art, and by doing that managed to avoid reality.

52 Wilkinson, 2017
53 Wilkinson, 2017
54 Wilkinson, 2017
56 Scott, 2017
57 Scott, 2017
58 Scott, 2017
The art world is no doubt Wilkinson’s way of interpreting the main theme of the film. Her main argument is that the film, like contemporary art, intends to make the viewer as uncomfortable as the characters – as if we too were part of the story.

The Rolling Stone review is in agreement with Wilkinson that the “The Square is a satire of the art world”:59 “The Square is a satire of the art world where pretension, elitism, greed and crass stupidity hold sway”.60 Travers argues further that, by using the art world as the main story, the film shows us how fragile humanity has gone: “Ostlund takes nearly two-and-a-half-hours to tell his slapstick tragedy about the fragility of everything we call human”.61

Scott, in NY Times, recognizes how the art world is represented through the middle class.62 It is an art world without any thrill – an art world for and by the cultural elite, he writes.63 It moves on to conclude that the robbery in the beginning of the plot, enables Christian to “experience the kind of thrill that art is supposed to elicit”.64 Scott offers an interesting interpretation of the symbolic implication of the art world by analyzing the baby whom one of Christian’s colleagues brings to the meeting. What if the baby is a commentary “… on the persistence of innocence in a fallen world? […] what if human action or feeling can no longer be real?“65 Or what if the art world in the film is a symbol of a loss of something that, much like the baby, was once defined by its capacity to cause thrill?

60 Travers, 2017
61 Travers, 2017
63 Scott, 2017
64 Scott, 2017
65 Scott, 2017
3.4 The disconnection from others

Wilkinson (Vox) remarks on how disconnected Christian is to his children, and that he does not seem to have a lot of friends.\(^{66}\) She implies that the film might feel disconnected, narratively speaking, due to how every scene “[…] can be picked apart for what it says, or seems to want to say, about how humans relate to one another through speech, art, through nonverbal communication and through trust […].”\(^{67}\)

Furthermore, Wilkinson argues whether the disconnection from others is a conscious choice by Östlund to reflect upon relationship between audience and filmmaker. By showing how disconnected Christian is to everything he holds dear (e.g. his children), another question is indirectly posed, namely whether the audience are experiencing the same kind of disconnect to the film itself as they are watching.\(^{68}\)

Glenn Kelly (roger.ebert.com) tackles the theme of disconnection by claiming that Christian is “[…] distracted by Modern Life, or Postmodern Life”.\(^{69}\) Kelly seems to suggest, though he is slightly vague, that the film illustrates how distracted modern people are to all of which modern life resembles. One interesting point that Kelly offers is on the choice to withhold reverse shots to underline the theme of disconnection: “A character will ask a question, and one expects the other character to answer, and instead, Östlund holds the shot […] The Character waits. The answer comes, but there’s no cutaway”.\(^{70}\) He refers to the scene when Michael waits for Christian in the car, and a stranger approaches him to ask questions about the car: “The camera never leaves the car, keeping Michael in anxious medium-close-up the whole time. This method is effective except when it’s not; then it’s just irritating”.\(^{71}\) Kelly is seemingly arguing that Östlund’s intention is to set the tone of an uncomfortable human interaction, but at the same time, he fails to deliver that due to

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\(^{66}\) Scott, 2017
\(^{67}\) Scott, 2017
\(^{68}\) Scott, 2017
\(^{69}\) Scott, 2017
\(^{70}\) Scott, 2017
\(^{71}\) Scott, 2017
the long takes.\textsuperscript{72} Therefore, Kelly is of the opinion that the Östlund merely wants to provoke by making the film feel disconnected, rather than tell a consistent story.

Unlike Kelly – who reads the film as a social critique – Bilge Ebiri, in The Village Voice review, “You’ll Probably Argue More About “The Square” Than Any Other 2017 Movie”, reads it as social reflection of modern times. Ebiri asks us to reflect with him on questions such as: “[…] what does it take for us to come to other’s aid? Where do we draw the line between the individual and society?”\textsuperscript{73} Ebiri argues how the film is challenging our notions of integrity and community, and at the same time stressing how fragile or disconnected these notions might be.\textsuperscript{74} As we follow the story, we are “[…] forced to confront our own values, and our own visions of ourselves”.\textsuperscript{75} He invites the reader to reflect upon where to draw the line between individual and society. Ebiri approaches the theme of disconnection by describing Christian’s personality: “Christian thinks of himself as a decent, fair-minded person. But his vision of himself is as with all of us, selective. When he’s feeling good, he gives money to beggars; when he’s concerned or distracted, he ignores them”.\textsuperscript{76} Whether Christian’s selective behavior is a result of being disconnected to society, is something Ebiri leaves open for interpretation.

Ebiri seems to be a typical example of what Staiger refers to as an ideal reader. As Staiger explains, ideal readers are ahistorical, and they grasp each opportunity to immerse into texts in order to learn as much as possible about themselves.\textsuperscript{77} This kind of reader are more poststructural in the way that they focus more on how each reading can be as valuable as the other. The goal here is not to understand what the film is about, but to underline the importance of reflecting upon how we read a film and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{72} Scott, 2017
\bibitem{73} Scott, 2017
\bibitem{75} Ebiri, 2017
\bibitem{76} Ebiri, 2017
\bibitem{77} Staiger, Janet, Interpreting Films: Film Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema, 1992, Princeton University Press, p. 25
\end{thebibliography}
why. Given the fact that Ebiri constantly shares his reflections of the film with his reader, he certainly fits in to this category of readers.

Travers in *Rolling Stone*, also mentions the theme of disconnection, though not as thoroughly as Ebiri: “Ostlund takes nearly two-and-a-half-hours to tell his slapstick tragedy about the fragility of everything we call human.” Like Ebiri and Kelly, Travers too struggles with understanding what the film wants to say with its several themes. His conclusion is that the film is a satirical depiction of the art world, and the art world is a symbol of the modern world. Travers does not elaborate further, instead he leaves it open for interpretation.

4. Part 2 of the Analysis: The Swedish reviews

4.1 Main theme: Modern Times

In the *SVT* review, “The Square får hjärnan att koka” (“The Square puts your brain to work”), Sofia Olsson – the reviewer – reads the film as a sociological experiment. Olsson leans towards a competent reader by trusting her ability as a reader to make certain scenes “fit in” to her general understanding of the film, and allow her interpretation to speak for the film as a whole.

Olsson remarks on how Östlund manages to captures a realistic portrayal of Sweden by the serious and somewhat pretentious art world: “Christian is confident when he speaks about art and high ideals, but in reality, he wanders around without any goal and purpose, and does whatever he can to feel something real” (Author’s

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79 Travers, 2017
80 Travers, 2017
translation). Olson seems to suggest that Christian is somehow lost in a modern society, characterized by a disconnection between people and between ideals.

The review in *Ledarsidorna*, “Recension: Ruben Östlund, The Square, 2017” ("Review: Ruben Östlund, The Square, 2017"), Erik van der Heeg, writes: “Sweden is in many ways itself in this future, just a little more of the good: a little more segregation, consumerism, political correctness, hypocrisy and beggar issues”. Van der Heeg does not deny the fact that he reads the film as social critique of both modern and a presumptive futuristic Sweden. He also connects the theme of modern times to trust and how we are slowly moving further and further from each other: “The film centers around trust and its improbability of being fully realized”. To illustrate this, he refers to the condom-battle scene as an example of how trust and modern society are disconnected. Van der Heeg is asserting how themes such as identity, disconnection and trust are entangled within the context of a Swedish society.

Mats Johnson writes in the *GP*-review, “The Square vill utmana tanken” (“The Square wants to challenge the thought”) how the film tangles questions about freedom of speech with modern society. Regarding the theme of modern times, Johnson considers the setting of Stockholm to be literal and non-symbolic: ”The arena is Stockholm. A city in which no one offers a helping hand, and a city where no-one appologizes for anything”. Johnson is seemingly following the previous reviewers in reading the Sweden of the film as a realistic depiction.

In the *ETC* review, “The Square av Ruben Östlund förtjänar stor publik” (“The Square by Ruben Östlund deserves an a large audience”) Ida Therén chooses a different direction to tackle the theme of modern times by looking at how the film

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82 Olsson, 2017: “Christian är självsäker när han talar om konst och höga ideal, men fladdar egentligen omkring utan mål och mening, och gör allt för att få känna på något på riktigt”.

83 Van der Heeg, 2017: “Sverige är på många sätt sig själv i denna framtid, bara lite mer av det goda: lite mer segregation, lite mer konsumism, lite mer PK, lite mer hyckleri, lite mer tiggarplåga”.

84 Van der Heeg, 2017: ”Filmen kretsar kring tillit och dess omöjlighet att fullt ut realiseras”.


86 Johnson, 2017: “Spelplatsen är Stockholm. En stad där ingen vill ge en hjälplande hand och en stad där ingen ber om ursäkt för något”.

23
depicts masculinity and manhood. She reads the film (mostly) as a
discussion/reflection on masculinity. Therén might be more of an *ideal reader*,
reflecting as she interprets and tries to understand the film within her own cultural
framework. An example of this is when she writes: “All of this reminds me of
something I think about a lot. If there was a more balanced view on men, would it
then be necessary for masculinity to either be undermined or toxic?”

Staiger claims that the *ideal readers* are willing to dive deep into texts in order to
gain as much knowledge about themselves as possible. Therén is trying to encourage
her reader to reflect with her upon question about manhood and masculinity. The
themes she observes in the film are: identity, masculinity, social norms, and how
animalistic we are underneath civilization.

Furthermore, Therén remarks on the confrontational scene between Anne and
Christian about their previous night: “Would you have wanted to be with me if I
didn't possess power? De invincible signales we send through power, potency. The
animal under culture”. Therén argues that underneath the varnish of culture and
society, the animalistic side of us is exposed. She develops this further and claims
that to be “masculine” today is about feeling needed: “To feel needed, and feeling it
as if it was about life and death in a society in which a lot of men feel that they are
superfluous”.

### 4.2 Political correctness

in the *FLM* review, “Ruben Östlund trollar bort sig själv i The Square” (“Ruben
Östlund removes himself from The Square”), by Sanjin Pejkovic’. Pejkovic’

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88 Therén, 2017: ”All det här påminner mig om något jag tänker mycket på. Om det fans en mer
balanserad mansroll, hade maskuliniteten behövt bli antingen förlamad eller toxisk?”
89 Staiger, Janet, *Interpreting Films: Film Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*,
90 Therén, 2017: ”Hade du velat vara med mig om jag inte hade min makt? De osynliga signalerna vi
skickar ut om makt, potens. Djuret under kulturen”.
91 Therén, 2017
92 Therén, 2017: ”Att känna sig behövd på riktigt, på liv och död – I ett samhälle där många män
känner sig överflödiga”.

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introduces the film by stressing how it was greatly appreciated by the jury in Cannes for “[...] not being politically correct”. Pejkovic´ does read the film as a social critique of an up-to-date Swedish society, and is overall critical to Östlund’s depiction. He is more of an ideal reader in that he chooses to focus on certain scenes that he argues represent his interpretation of the film as a whole.

Pejkovic´ is also critical to the objectivity of the film, claiming: “By not taking a stance, Östlund’s film is neither important or brave, it is simply gutless”. The reason for not taking a stance, he explains, is Östlund’s way of leaving everything to the audience to interpret. By doing that, Pejkovic´ writes, Östlund is more of a “coward” than a brilliant director. Pejkovic´ argues further that there is subtleness between not being politically correct in order to make an argument, and contributing to biased views on beggars and immigrants. “In the long run, I think that The Square, by being afraid of taking a stand, contributes to normalizing and diminishing political events”. Note that this is the only review in both sets of reviews that argues for how the theme of political correctness is harmful rather than a reflection of modern times.

In the Sydsvenskan review, “The Square: rolig – men en återvärdsgränd” (“The Square: funny – but a dead end”), Malin Krutmeijer argues in a similar fashion to Pejkovic´ how the film is afraid of taking a stand:

[…] there is a line between when you depict a narrow-minded perspective, and when you make yourself guilty of it. I would like to state that the film exceeds this line when beggars, people from the suburbs,

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94 Pejkovic’, 2017: “Genom att inte ta ställning för något är Östlunds film varken viktig eller modig, den är bara feg”.
95 Pejkovic’, 2017
96 Pejkovic, 2017
97 Pejkovic’, 2017
98 Pejkovic, 2017: “I längden tror jag dessvärre att The Square, genom att vara rädd för att ta ställning för något, snarare kan bidra till att normalisera och bortförklara vissa politiska skeenden”.
cleaners [...] are being reduced to some kind of props that the main characters collides with.\textsuperscript{99}

Looking closer at this quote, Krutmeijer suggests that the way Östlund depicts beggars, people from the suburbs and cleaners is a somewhat biased representation of them.\textsuperscript{100} One might argue that they serve no other purpose than helping the characters to reach their goals. Perhaps – and this is something Krutmeijer does not suggest – by depicting them as props, Östlund is making a statement about political correctness. Judging by what Krutmeijer and Pejkovic’ writes, Östlund is depicting the people around Christian without taking political correctness to account.

Krutmeijer also notes that the film deals with topics that refers to contemporary Swedish debates about society. She reads the film as partially social critique, but as social critique without a particular aim in mind. In this sense, Krutmeijer’s interpretation is similar to Pejkovic’. Krutmeijer also fits the bill for coherent readers, especially the way she asserts her attention to the theme of political correctness, choosing scenes that validates her reading.

Michelle Aaron discusses the ethics of spectatorship and how certain films “[..] require us to reflect upon our own moral framework[[..]”.\textsuperscript{101} Especially Dogme movie have that effect on the spectator, Aaron argues: “[[..]102 films that lean most heavily on reinforcing moral processes tend to disable the spectator’s capacity to engage their own ethical judgements”.\textsuperscript{103} As we have seen, one can certainly argue that \textit{The Square} provokes the reviewers to reflect upon their own moral frameworks.

Unlike Krutmeijer, Mats Johnson, (\textit{GP}), does not focus on the depiction of the people around Christian, instead he focuses on what the film has to say about freedom of speech. Johnson reads the film as a piece of performance art, and focuses on the

\textsuperscript{99} Krutmeijer, 2017: ”[…] det finns en gräns mellan när man skildrar ett inskränkt perspektiv, och när man gör sig skyldig till det. Jag vill nog påstå att filmen överskrider den när tiggare, förortsbor, städare […] reduceras till ett slags rekvisita som huvudpersonerna liksom krockar med […]”.

\textsuperscript{100} Krutmeijer, 2017

\textsuperscript{101} Aaron, Michele, \textit{Spectatorship: the power of looking}, 2007, Wallflower Press, p. 114

\textsuperscript{102} Aaron, 2007, p. 114

\textsuperscript{103} Aaron, 2007, p. 114-116
questions that are transformed through the art project of The Square. He argues that the long scenes and (at times) incoherent scenes are examples for how film resembles an performance art piece.

Johnson reflects openly on questions as: “Where does one draw the line of freedom of speech? Instinctively, my answer is that the line is crossed at denigration and hate-speech. Right-wing extremist that marches and demonstrates? Apparently okay in the Sweden of 2017.”

Johnson appears to read the theme of political correctness as a theme of freedom of speech instead, contemplating on the definitions of freedom of speech and how far they stretch. He talks about it in the context of Sweden and therefore is viewing the Sweden of the film as literal.

4.3 The art world

Unlike the American reviews, the Swedish reviewer’s discuss the art world as a way for Östlund to approach his critique of what they understand to be a modern Swedish society. Pejkovic’ views the theme of the art world as a PR stunt, a way for Östlund to make the audience respond rather than immerse: “Everything is made up and that is why I do not trust The Square. Everything is a PR stunt, in and around the film”.

Since most of the events in the film are made up, he cannot fully appreciate what the film tries to say. He claims that the film is shaped as a “postmodern” film, filled with meta-reflections that enable the audience to interpret the film in their own way: “What does he want to get out of (referring to Östlund) the world, the square, and the people? Maybe I am naïve since I hoped to find answers. Since I am not getting any, and since it is free to interpret the work in my own way, I therefore chose to do so”.

Pejkovic’ is certainly an ideal reader and he tries to read the film through its own

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106 Pejkovic’, 2017
“postmodern” logic. He more or less implies that the theme of the art world is a kind of postmodern drivel without any meaning, and argues whether that’s the meaning of the film – to suggest meaning, but not to have any.

Krutmeijer in *Sydsvenskan*, is also debating whether or not the art theme of the film carries any significance to the political dimension of the film. She states that the film is flat and lacks diversity in the way it depicts the middle class as carriers of the art world. The problem with this, Krutmeijer explains, is that it becomes very one-sided; the point of view of the film lies in the eyes of the prestigious artsy middle class: “The others” simply become indignation increasers in a comical drama whose message, is to portray a self-hate which radical middle class pass on themselves”. Krutmeijer is therefore comparing the world theme with how the people around Christian and his tribe are being seen, and concludes that the artsy middle class are good at blaming themselves without knowing why.

In the *SVT* review, Olson writes: “It is not the first time that the dead serious self-absorbed art world is transformed into a laughing stock”. Olson argues that Christian is confident when speaking about the high ideals of art, but in reality, he has no clue where he is headed and does everything in his power in order to feel something. Olson is in a way suggesting that the theme of the art world is depicted as an analogy about feeling something, which Christian in her interpretation is striving for.

In *ETC*, Ida Therén writes: “On the surface, The Square is a satirical depiction of contemporary times, and more precisely: the art world. At the same time, I interpret the extravagant art world as the extreme notion of the “civilized” As in culture, in relation to nature”. Therén is suggesting how the film uses the theme of the art

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108 Krutmeijer, 2017: “De andra” blir enkla indignationshöjare i ett komiskt drama vars budskap, till slut, blir ett självhat som den radikala medelklassen är väldigt bra på att vältra sig i”.
109 Olsson, 2017: “Det är inte första gången den gravallvarliga och uppblåsta konstvärlden görs till driftkucku”.
110 Olsson, 2017
world to pin down questions about contemporary times and what is civil and not. The reviewer seems to consider the “extravagant art world” as a symbol for how civilized people in a modern day society ought to behave.

4.4 Disconnection from others

Pejkovic’ discusses whether the theme of disconnection is something Östlund wants to pass on to the audience or not: “When Östlund chooses to portray his fellow humans with an unjustifiable darkness, he is not – in my eyes – a realist who “tells it like it is”, but a cynic who does not trust anyone”.112 Pejkovic’ seems to suggest that reason for why the film feels disconnected has to do with Östlund’s wish to capture how human beings have turned into cold machines – a society in which every portion of goodness is either being punished or defined as egoistic.113

In comparison with the American reviewer, none of the Swedish reviewers actually uses the word “disconnection”. It is however implied as a significant element of the film that Östlund uses to set the tone of what he is trying to tell. Krutmeijer seems to suggest in the quote below that there is a disconnection between the characters:

They unfortunately appear in some unmistakably flat scenes like when well-dressed people pass by homeless people, a man with tourettes sabotages a public artist’s conversation, and when the statue of the king is dropped to the ground. The sound of children screaming is a way to illustrate that something important is being neglected.114

112 Pejkovic’, 2017: ”När Östlund väljer att skildra sina medmänniskor med en oförbätterlig svärta, är han inte – i mina ögon – en realist som “säger som det är” utan en cyniker som inte vågar lita på någon”.
113 Pejkovic’, 2017

114 Krutmeijer, 2017: ”De visar sig tyvärr i några omisskännligt platta scener som när välklädda ben hastar förbi en uteliggare, en man med tourettes saboterar ett publikt konstnärrssamtal, och när en kungastaty tappas i marken. Barnskriken som återkommer är en väl simpel illustration av att något viktigt försummas”.
This indicates that the film’s disconnected nature is partially a conscious choice to both capture it on film, but also in the movie theatre as the audience watch and feel disconnected to what they see. Pejkovic’ mention this too: “We can laugh at the awkwardness of when things get vulgar in a public stage, but at the same time, we are obliged and reluctant to acknowledge our equal value”.\textsuperscript{115} One might draw the conclusion here that the theme of disconnection is a way to make the audience reflect on how they behave in everyday life.

Erik Van der heeg in \textit{Ledarsidorna} writes that the whole film can be understood as “[…] a string of beads, in which the beads, one by one, gives the piece its beauty and meaning”.\textsuperscript{116} Van der heeg approaches the theme of disconnection by analyzing the narrative style of the film.

Even Olson in the \textit{SVT} review, makes a similar argument, explaining that the reason why the film is disconnected is because of the directors agreement with his audience: ”The one that states that we accept a created situation, because we too are curious about what happens next”.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{115} Pejkovic’, 2017: “Vi kan skratta åt det pinsamma med vulgariteter i offentliga sammanhang, men samtidigt som vi skyldigt men motvilligt måste erkänna allas lika värde […]”.
\textsuperscript{117} Olsson, 2017: “Den som säger att vi godtar en konstruerad situation, för att vi också är så nyfikna på vad som händer sen”.  
Results

In the introduction, these two research questions were posed:

1. *In what way do the Swedish and American reviews differ in terms of reception?*
2. *In what ways do the differences between Swedish and American reviewers’ understanding of the film reflect different cultural contexts?*

The most constructive way to answer them is to do a short recap, looking at how both reviews described, approached, and interpreted each theme. The first theme that was described was the main one, *modern times*. Glenn Kelly, (*roger.ebert.com*) argued how the film represents the Sweden of today. Overall, Kelly was critical of the film, reading it as a realistic depiction of modern society through a Swedish landscape. Kelly’s reading of the film differed from most of the reviewers since he read it as a social critique.

Olson (*SVT*) also viewed the Sweden of the film to be a realistic portrayal, but differed from Kelly by stating that it is a representation of Sweden through the art world. Kelly did not notice this connection. Van der heeg (*Ledarsidorna*) also acknowledged the realistic representation of Sweden, but went further saying it is a far more extreme version of Sweden. Johnson (*GP*) shared his interpretation of the Sweden in the film to be a sort of dystopia in a sort of “Darwinian” future where everyone is by himself. Therén (*ETC*) went on a different road, arguing for how the film captures notions of manhood & masculinity in 2017.

Among the American reviews, Kelly was the only one who interpreted the fictional society of the film as a realistic portrayal of Sweden. In the Swedish reviews, it was the other way around. Every reviewer – more or less – argued for how the film depicts Sweden, though *GP* believed that to be a more futuristic Sweden.

The next sub-theme, *political correctness*, was also received and understood differently. By approaching the film with a critical eye, Pejkovic argued for how the film is afraid of taking a stand, and by not doing that normalizes biased views on minorities and segregation.
Krutmeijer in *Sydsvenskan*, shared this notion, but went further claiming the film is a biased representation of beggars, suburban folks and cleaners. She also argues for how these minorities are reduced to props that does not serve any deeper meaning.

Unlike the Swedish and American reviewers, Johnson (GP) was the only one who discussed freedom of speech instead of political correctness and how far it extends. He suggests that by not defining how far freedom of speech extends, the film manages to paint a realistic Swedish society in which right-wing extremists can march on the streets and shout racial slurs.

Most of the Swedish reviewers saw a connection between the theme and contemporary debates in Sweden regarding beggars, immigration, masculinity and freedom of speech. Interestingly enough, none of the American reviews noticed how the theme is somehow true or a realistic representation of a contemporary Swedish landscape or debate climate. David Sims, in *The Atlantic* discussed it in the context of entitlement and politeness, and how a poor understanding of them – which he argues is the case for Christian – can lead to “moments of madness”.

Scott (*NY Times*) associated political correctness with behaving decently. For example: Christian and his colleagues are fixated with political correctness, but have no clue how to behave or talk to their neighbors. They understand the meaning of it theoretically, but not practically. Wilkinson (*Vox*) made a seemingly similar observation. She argues how Christian constantly runs into “walls” when interacting with people because he has organized his life in a convenient way, putting his ideals in a box and hence avoid confronting them in real life. The reason for that could be that he is stuck in his liberal-minded notions and can only embrace them in theory.

In conclusion: the American reviewers read the theme as something having to do with how to behave properly in a modern society, while the Swedish read it as something relating to contemporary debates in Sweden.

Looking at the theme of the art world, Wilkinson argued for how its purpose is to make the audience as uncomfortable as the characters. She also stressed that the art world is represented through the elite, an elite who are avoiding reality. Scott (*NY Times*) also observed how the art world is represented through the cultural elite. Scott
goes further though, claiming that the film presents an art world without any thrills. For example: When Christian decides to team up with a stranger to help the woman whom is chased, he experiences “the kind of thrill that art is supposed to elicit”.

Travers in Rolling Stone, mentioned how the film is a satire of the art world, and how this world is characterized by pretension, elitism, greed and crassness. He argues that film uses the art world to tell a story about how fragile humanity has gone.

Pejkovic’ states in FLM, that the art world is a PR-stunt and it cannot be taken seriously due to its “postmodern” vibes. Krutmeijer in Sydsvenskan viewed the film as one-sided, depicted through the narrow point of view of the elitist middle class that is supposed to represent the art world.

**One striking similarity** in terms of reception is how Olson (SVT) and Scott (NY Times) describes the art world. Olson describes it as a symbol of wanting to feeling something, similar to the lack of thrills theory that Scott presented.

**Another similarity is** that the American and Swedish reviewers described the art world as a world of its own, represented by the elitist middle class. There seems to be a mutual consent that the art world is a symbol for a disconnected world.

In the last theme, disconnection from others, Wilkinson argued for how disconnected Christian is from his children and surroundings. The theme is also present as we are watching the film and probably experiencing the same level of disconnection from the film as the characters do from each other.

Glenn Kelly argued differently, connecting this theme to postmodern/modern life, and how Christian somehow lacks the ability to act because he is “distracted by modern life”. Kelly also suggested how the long takes contributes to the disconnected style of the film.

*Village Voice* was keener on raising questions such as: “where does one draw the line between individual and society?” The reviewer implied that the theme of disconnection depends on Christian’s mood. If he feels happy he gives money to beggars, but when being confronted by the young suburban boy he does not know how to act.
The Swedish reviews approached the theme of disconnection rather differently. Pejkovic’ (FLM) argued for how the film consists of disconnected fragments that tries to comment on modern life, but fails by being too afraid to have an opinion.

Krutmeijer (Sydsvenskan) argues how disconnected the characters are to each other. For example: the Tourette’s scene, when a man with tourettes sabotages an interview with an artist.

In Ledarsidorna, Van der heeg, much like Pejkovic’ in FLM, argues for how the film has disconnected form. The film is much like a string of beads, Van der heeg writes, where each bead stands for something unique. Van deer heeg approaches this theme by observing the narrative style of the film.

There is also an interesting similarity between Olson (SVT) and Wilkinson (Vox). Both made a similar argument that the audience are experiencing the same level of disconnection as the characters do from each other. Olson goes further and connects it with the directors agreement with his audience, that we are willing to accept a fictional situation because we too are curious about what is about to happen. As illustrated, there are several of similarities and differences in terms of reception and in the way the reviewers approaches and describe the themes.

So to fully answer the first question: In what way do the Swedish and American reviews differ in terms of reception? They differ due to what type of readers they are. Ideal readers like Therén, Pejkovic’ and Ebiri, have relied on their ability to place each fragment of the film into one unified whole. Coherent readers like Kelly, have only focused on certain parts of the film that supports their understanding/interpretation of it. The type of readers they are is also intertwined with how far the reviewers are willing to go to understand the cultural context the film displays.

The second research question: In what ways do the differences between Swedish and American reviewers’ understanding of the film reflect different cultural contexts? Mainly through their cultural understanding of what the film tries to capture. The American reviewers did not observe what Pejkovic’ and Krutmeijer did, namely how the film normalized biased views on minorities by avoiding being “politically
correct”. However, the American reviews tried to understand it within their own cultural framework and read the theme as way of behaving properly. As stated earlier, some of the themes in the film, are meant to capture up-to-date debates on beggars and suburban neighborhoods. Wilkinson, Ebiri and Scott distanced themselves from these topics and focused instead on Christian’s persona and the art world. The American reviewers discussed the art world much more extensively than the Swedish reviews. Unlike the Swedish reviews, they viewed the art world as a representation of modern times, while the Swedish reviews viewed it as a representation of Sweden.

Kelly was the only American who went beyond his cultural framework to try to – like Krutmeijer and Pejkovic – fully understand the political correctness theme. Even though Pejkovic and Krutmeijer does not agree with the way it is depicted, they can at least relate to it because of their cultural backgrounds, and the fact that theme is represented through a Swedish cultural context.

**In conclusion:** The fact that we are different readers with different cultural frameworks and backgrounds will probably always impact our readings. Some readers distance themselves when they do not understand an unkown culture, others try to understand it within their own cultural context. Perhaps it comes down to how far we as an audience are willing to go in trying to understand the cultural context of a film?
6. References


**Articles on web:**


Wilkinson, Alissa (2017). The Square’s high-concept comedy targets both the art world and the social contract. Vox, 24 October.


