

“I’m asking for your utmost caution during this performance” – Intermedial reception and the limit(ation)s of (art) performance in *The Square* (Ruben Östlund, 2017)

About 90 minutes into *The Square*, the visitors of an art exhibition at the X-Royal Museum in Stockholm are divided into two categories. To enter the exhibition, they are required to choose between two paths, according to whether they “trust people” or “mistrust people”. The visitors are therefore classified according to their perception of people, which also defines their ability to suspend their disbelief about the art performances and installations to be found in the museum. With such classification, the film explicitly identifies its main subject matter for its viewers: the difficulty of telling performance from spontaneity, truth from fake, reception-oriented from neutral behaviour.

The most obvious, and funniest illustration of how the film turns this topic into an integral part of its own apparatus is the “life-in-the-jungle” performance by Oleg Rogozjin during the opening party of the new “*The Square*” exhibition, which the people attending are required to take part in with “utmost caution”. Oleg performs as a state-of-nature beast of a man who climbs on dinner tables and draws a lady by the hair with obvious sexual intentions, fostering a state of confusion among the guests: has the performance ended, or is this provocatively violent behaviour part of the artistic experience? Their reception of the performance thus becomes unsettled: should they trust the organisers of the exhibition to the end and believe that this is (still) just art, or should they consider the performance has gone off limits, that this is now for real, and consequently escape or seek protection?

At the other end of the reception spectrum, the film includes a plotline about how to make a successful Youtube video. When the advertisers hired to promote the new artwork (“*The Square*”) pitch their project to the people who run the museum, they praise the assets of promoting the work on Youtube, claiming that “people have a very short attention span”, and that “if the viewer isn’t hooked in two seconds, they’ll move on”. As a consequence, they offer to shoot a promotional video that will supposedly keep viewer reception totally under control, by creating controversy so the YouTube video goes viral. From their perspective, the video, which features a poor white girl being blown up in *The Square*, is a success, garnering 300,000 clicks. From the perspective of the owners of the museum and from that of the film’s viewers, however, the video blatantly contradicts the utopian principle that “*The Square* is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within its boundaries, we all share equal rights and obligations.”

Through the analysis of those key sequences in the film and more generally of *The Square*’s unique way of including various media, this paper argues that the film purports to place its viewers in a state of confused reception, resulting from the overlapping areas between multiple forms of mediation. It proposes that *The Square* cleverly ascribes the current inability to identify the boundaries between performance and reality, fiction and non-fiction, etc., to an intermedial type of viewership born from overexposure to different yet similar media forms, including the Internet, YouTube, the global surveillance apparatus, direct viewing, voyeurism, television, and of course, ultimately, the art of film itself.

Keywords: Intermedial reception, attention span, boundaries of performance, art installations, YouTube advertising.

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