

## ARTICLES

### What a Beard Can Do: Performative Frames and Public Tastes

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The demographics of theatre audiences are a frequent object of study; imperatives related to the democratization of culture require cultural establishments that receive public funding to keep records of their audiences (sex, age, income and qualification levels, place of residence). It is to this end that we (Roland, de Vrièse, and Sizorn 2009) conducted a study in 2008 on the attendance of the Automne en Normandie festival which, between 1991 and 2014, offered, in the entire region of upper Normandy, a multidisciplinary program that included companies of international renown. The festival also distinguishes itself by mounting shows in different kinds of spaces: the Rouen Opera House, patrimonial monuments, small-town community halls, and so forth. When in 2008 we were charged with the task of researching the festival's demographics, the artistic orientations of the event had changed: a new openness to the circus was notable, and very high expectations had been set (notably by public financiers) with regards to the diversification of the festival's audience, as many considered the festival to be elitist.

The study included a quantitative component (with 1389 questionnaires retrieved). We learned that festival audiences were well versed in cultural and artistic offerings, and had relatively diverse tastes in classic repertoires and popular registers alike (interests which were met by the Festival's diverse programming). The average age of festival attendees was higher than that of the French population (45 years old, compared to 38.7 years old), and the professional categories most highly represented amongst festival-goers were teachers and those working in the sciences (43.8%). Half of the attendees had received a level of education equivalent to or higher than an undergraduate degree (bac +3 in France), and almost one quarter had received a master's degree (bac +5). The average income per household was also relatively high, and even higher than that of the audience members of other festivals studied in the same year (Négrier 2008–2009). Thus, significant social, economic, and cultural disparities between the festival audience and the general population persisted, and the effects of the festival's diversification efforts were only marginally perceptible.

It is with this small margin of improvement in diversification in mind as well as with the way in which members of the public perceived the festival that the qualitative component of the study was conceived. Twenty-four interviews with spectators were conducted. Our analysis of these interviews shows that spectators describe the festival along opposing poles: high culture vs. popular culture; selective programming vs. diversification; reflection vs. entertainment; classic vs. contemporary. Virgil, a high school student, found that the spectators were "rather bourgeois," and he felt "alien" in relation to them. The festival conveys the image of a "reserved" event, and its spectators confirm this reputation: "it's true that there are many people who think it's not for them. It's expensive, it's reserved for certain people, intellectuals, as if we couldn't appreciate it" (Rose).<sup>1</sup> The festival programs and other communication tools actually reflect, according to one spectator, the difficult

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reconciliation between a discourse of openness toward the broad public (the project of the festival's new leadership) and the observation of a certain in-groupness with shows addressed to "people of the theatre world" (Etienne).

An openness to new audiences was accompanied by a diversification of aesthetics and artistic disciplines (to music and dance performances were added theatre and circus shows). While certain spectators applauded efforts to democratize the access to culture in a festival "that had become very elitist" (Ludivine; Roselyne; François) by addressing a "larger public" (Alice), others thought that the festival programming had "lost its lustre" (Etienne) due to an overabundance of choices. Asserting that the festival presented an "elitist vision of things," one spectator named Lucien said he preferred the performances that "sought to be the least demagogic possible without trying to attract the biggest crowds."



*Blanche Neige* by Angelin Preljocaj. Photo by Jean-Claude Carbonne.

Two shows often cited in the interviews brought out these oppositions, as well as expectations regarding what Automne en Normandie should be: *Blanche Neige* (*Snow White*), by Angelin Preljocaj, and *L'Éloge du Poil* (*In Praise of Hair*) by the BAL/Jeanne Mordoï company. *Blanche Neige*, a ballet of twenty-six dancers with neoclassical gestures set to the music of Gustav Mahler, with costumes designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier, was mounted in a prestigious establishment (the Rouen Opera House). *L'Éloge du Poil*, a more modest production, revived old-time fairground performances with a scenography centred on a bearded woman. It was mounted in a community hall in Gisors (a small city east of Rouen) and at the National Choreographic Centre in Havre, which hosted the show in the context of *La Grande Veillée*—an all-night event with performances, shows, and conferences. The marketing logic, here, was that this format would potentially be more attractive to new and different audiences instead of just to the festival's usual spectators.

“I went to see *L’Éloge du Poil*,” recounts Stella.

I loved it, it was the most beautiful show so far . . . and on top of that I saw it as part of *La Grande Veillé* at the Havre, and it was one or two days after Preljocaj. And Preljocaj, it was, you could feel there was an enormous amount of money, it had big names . . . a big thing, you know! Which I didn’t like at all, I think that, well, I’m not at all qualified to say this, but as a spectator, I said to myself, “Okay, okay, that’s a big name, it’s with Gaultier, there’s a ton of money, and voilà.” It lost the thing that makes the spectator dream a bit. Whereas *L’Éloge du Poil*, it had fuck-all: there was a girl, a guy, some skeletons. And it was great. An egg! (Stella).

Stella contrasts the modesty of the circus show to the grandiosity of the Preljocaj piece. She distances herself from “legitimate” culture and its signs, even though she enjoys the privilege of significant cultural capital, and even though she is a loyal festival attendee. Others, on the contrary, value the beauty of the ballet dancers and criticize a mixing of arts that contaminates the specificity (the “purity”) of texts, techniques, forms, and bodies. What the spectators say of works of art and of corporealities serves as a useful entry into an analysis of their value systems. They are in this way constitutive elements of the frame that structures and organizes the activity of reception, the appreciation of works, and, more generally, of going to the theatre. This activity of “going out” constitutes a form of social participation and the aestheticization of social life.

*L’Éloge du poil*, created in 2007, was conceived for a small audience—the spectators were seated in a half-circle on wooden bleachers facing the stage. Jeanne Mordoï appears in a yellow skirt suit and a negligee of green silk. She has a feminine and coquettish silhouette and high heels. When she finally lifts the veil that had been hiding her face, she reveals a beard. If the circuses and fairs of the nineteenth century exhibited alterity for its “exoticism,” or its “monstrous” difference, the difference presented by Jeanne Mordoï is other: through her beard, she introduces a play with the real; she performs the gap between the appearance and the meaning by introducing an oddity into an image that in every other way conforms to the codes of femininity. She subverts the feminine to question it, thanks to an artifact: her beard. Strong, mobile, and served by a male assistant, this bearded lady reverses the stigma (or rather, the stigmas imbricated in an intersectionality: to be a woman and a bearded woman). By what is here performed in drag (In French, *en travestie*), she confronts today’s spectator with what once was presented as a monstrosity. But she does it in the frame of a live performance and not in the frame of everyday life (her beard is artificial). Positioning herself non-normatively, she juggles with eggs, smooth egg yolks that slide along her skin in an absurd sensuality; she ventriloquizes skeletons; she manipulates snail shells like contortionists.

As a figure of strangeness, Jeanne Mordoï ultimately prompts a sort of excavation of our imaginaries. The circus, through its particular contemporary aesthetics, often functions in a reflexive mode, turning back to its own history, its images, and imaginaries, to valorize them, revisit them, place them at a distance, and to transform their meanings and effects. Jeanne Mordoï thus performs a history of fairground exhibitions, and of the transformation of a gaze that is fixed on the other, from the spectacularization of difference to the use of devices that reflexively engage the spectators. By the same token, the spectators are engaged in the work of turning toward the past and to what used to be a spectacle, but also toward an image of female difference produced in a contemporary context. Beyond the question of gender is the question of the perception of differences and the effects of this perception (stigmatization, domination), which is at the centre of Mordoï’s project. In spectator responses, we see that performance venues, as well as stagings and artistic disciplines,

affected perceptions of the festival and its attendees. In contrast with audiences of historical entertainments, in which a homogeneous “us” was created through the spectacle of exoticism (Loux 1979), here, it is the perception of differences, including differences in the audience, with which the performance engages. In the responses we collected, we were able to identify two different relationships between the spectators and the artwork. While some spectators valued the artwork’s elite status, others were more interested in the aesthetics of popular performance (wooden benches, DIY decor). The valorization of these latter aesthetics (used in more modest venues such as big tops and public spaces) point to a desire for cultural democratization. The selection of shows on offer, as well as the spaces in which the performances took place, formed an important part of the spectator experience. Especially significant for spectators seeking nonexclusive cultural experiences was the physical intimacy created between the members of the audience and between the audience and the performers (Bourdieu 1979). Anne-Claude describes her entrance into the space that hosted *L’Éloge du poil* as follows: “It’s a little bit magical because we enter into this sort of storage space, a large box, empty, and then, all of a sudden, we go behind the bleachers and find ourselves in this small little intimate universe; this created a sense of closeness with the rest of the audience.” Interestingly (and connected to this desire for closeness), while the quantitative data collected on festival audiences suggested that they were far from demographically diverse, certain spectators had the perception that the publics in fact were diverse. It is as if these spectators projected onto their experience of the festival wishful thinking about more diverse artistic publics, and perhaps, about a more diverse society (Lefevre, Roland, and Femenias 2008). The festival attendees thus invited themselves into the debate about elitism and democratization, or, to put it differently, about access to art.

We know that the development of festival programming responds to a variety of injunctions and constraints (material, political, territorial, artistic . . .). In the context of the Automne en Normandie festival, the goal of broadening the pool of attendees through a diversification of audiences (the festival otherwise has no problem filling its performance spaces) responds to the expectations of sponsors and is part of the political project of the new board of directors. But the diversification strategy adopted by the festival directors reinvests in (and reifies) the opposition between elite and popular culture. The position of “popular” is here occupied by the performance of Jeanne Mordoj, a contemporary circus show that brings into relief views of otherness and its spectacularization in different festival contexts over time. If the data collected in the quantitative survey render particularly visible the difficulty of reaching a so-called broad public, in the values that they mobilize in their survey responses, the festival attendees remind us of the difficult conciliation between artistic excellence (experienced as using an elitist, even aristocratic logic) and cultural objects of general interest (experienced as possessing a more inclusive address and using a democratic logic) (Heinich 2005).

Our study contributes to a sociology of art that begins with the works themselves, and also to a sociology dedicated to a “pragmatics of taste” (Hennion 2004). To take public tastes seriously, one must interrogate what makes spectators like one work as opposed to another, as well as the modalities of their attachments: dramaturgical devices, objects, corporealities, and contexts.

## Note

1. Excerpts from interviews with Virgil and Rose, spectators whose names were changed to preserve their anonymity (in Roland, De Vrièse, and Sizorn 2009), as were those of the other spectators quoted here.

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