

What Areas of Spectatorship Need to Be Studied in Contemporary Contexts?

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Although I have carried out extensive as well as minor projects in the field of audience and reception research for more than thirty years, there are still some desiderata on my list. Of course, we would like to know more about theatre audiences in various geographical areas, their habits, preferences and social data. Furthermore, audiences in the same place shift over time, so there is always a need to repeat or continue earlier surveys in order to update our knowledge. However, there are other and more urgent aspects of spectatorship that have hardly been dealt with so far. I will present three trajectories that I find especially important.

First of all, I would like to point to the collectivity of theatrical experiences. Performances with a single spectator happen once in a while and are described and analyzed. In these instances, it becomes obvious that the spectator must engage in playing as much as the performer; otherwise, the theatrical communication breaks down. It does not seem too far-fetched that the spectator's participation is also at work in a regular, multi-headed theatre audience. In addition, the spectators in an auditorium affect each other. That much we know, but what kind of affects come into play? Does the number of spectators have any significance for the actual experience? We can assume that there is a difference between an audience of a dozen people and a crowd of one thousand. These differences are even more obvious when we think of rock concerts in sports arenas compared to a group performing in an intimate club. What exactly are the various parameters that affect the spectators in small and big auditoriums? It might very well be possible that some experiential features always are present in collectives, irrespective of the size of audience. The sharing of an experience as a positive amplification can be observed in all kinds of situations, and is certainly influencing artistic encounters, but is it of a special type?

Many more questions can be raised concerning the significance of collective experiences, but what is urgently needed are some theoretical concepts from which a stable research strategy can be developed. This would be the first task of such projects. Depending on one's preferences, theories might be derived from psychology or sociology, from media studies or communication theories within performance and theatre studies. They can serve as stepping-stones toward concepts of collective, aesthetic experiences. Personally, I would prefer to expand concepts of immersion—cognitive, sensitive and reflective immersion—to include not only the relation between A(gent) and B(eholder) but also the connection between B and B. Probably, this would imply that B becomes an A in relation to other Bs. These double A(gents) have to be clarified theoretically to be proven empirically.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as the saying goes. At times, there are too many and too sophisticated theories which lack empirical support. It has always been my conviction that audience and reception studies are practical fields of enquiry. The study of large audiences needs large projects. No matter which methodologies are applied, the surveying of the many requires many

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hands and heads. Maybe this is one of the reasons why such large-scale projects are rare. Nobody can do this on their own. Generous funding will be needed, but the results might be rewarding, even overwhelming, for scholars, for artists, as well as for producers and sponsors.

Why would such projects be of interest in the present context of the performing arts? The scene of popular music provides a convincing example: While listening to music has become an increasingly individual matter—earphones are all over town—live concerts continue to attract huge crowds globally. The same can be said about movies: accessible to individuals on personal mobile phones and yet cinemas are still able to attract audience numbers. Small theatres attract their own (elitist) audiences, while experimental festivals and open-air popular theatre spectacles count their spectators in the thousands. There seems to be something—but what?—that brings people together to share artistic experiences despite the option to watch the same event individually on some screen. Therefore, I maintain that the study of collective experiences is worthwhile.

As a second suggestion, I want to emphasize that the investigation of the individual experience of performative events is far from exhausted. There are certainly many studies of the spectators of particular performances. Sometimes the results are astonishing; sometimes, they confirm what we already expected. Theatre audiences are prone to appreciate what they have seen, and we are far too willing to take their enthusiasm as signs of their intellectual capacity to interpret the meaning of the performance. Empirical studies have shown that this is not always the case. In a play about the group rape of a young woman, the youth in the audience concluded that the woman was herself to blame, contrary to the intentions of the producer (Gesser-Edelsburg 2005). Performances of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* increased anti-Semitic sentiments despite the director's assurance that the production was meant to fight exactly these prejudices (Sauter 2010). These results were obtained with sophisticated survey methods. When we researched reception patterns of theatre audiences in the 1980s, it was difficult to show that women would experience performances differently from men. Most probably, our analytical instruments were not advanced enough to bring gendered responses to the fore. Do we have better methods today?

This brings me to my third point: the diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches to reception research. Over the years, many theoretical stances have been presented, and numerous methods have been applied. There were ordinary questionnaires asking for demographic details, preferences, and habits of existing theatre audiences, i.e., those who attended a performance. Other surveys were aiming at the total population of a city, a region or a country. The actual experiences of a particular play have been investigated by means of questionnaires, reference groups, Theatre Talks, participant observations, interviews, post-performance meetings, and so forth. Today there is a risk that these methods will be or are being invented again and again without reference to earlier results. "Do we really need to reinvent the wheel every time we administer a new survey?" Instead, I would plead for an initiative to compile all of today's relevant methodologies into a book (of course in Open Access) in which the most successful methods of audience and reception research are collected and made available to scholars interested in this field. Not only would such a project provide a helpful collection of empirically proven methods, but it might also inspire a young generation to engage with B—the indispensable partner of all kinds of performances. Such a book might contribute to obtaining equilibrium between the ever privileged A and the ever neglected B.

Spectatorship, understood as the range from an individual's attendance of a performance to the participation in large crowds generating collective experiences, deserves to be pointed out as the most desirable study field in all aesthetic disciplines. The coordination of achievements of earlier

periods, the expansion of theoretical approaches and the development of empirically oriented methodologies should be seen as the most promising area of theatre and performance studies. Academics as well as artists would profit from such insights into spectatorship.

References

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