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Aesthetic experience and performing arts in the Arab region: towards an audience-centred perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I engage with aesthetic experience as a central hermeneutic endeavour for theorising performing arts audiences in the Arab region. I argue that a critical engagement with Arab performing arts audiences' aesthetic experiences necessitates both an archaeological manoeuver and a re-articulation of two keywords: 'experience' and 'everyday'. The article advances, using evidence from research, that allowing the audiences of performing arts in the Arab region to speak may be a step towards democratising the triangular meaning making process among the performer, the audience, and the art institution, and a means towards dislocating, if not liberating, the categories' Arab culture, art, performance, and experience, from their teleological articulations.

To have great poets there must be great audiences too. (Walt Whitman in Conner, 2013, p. 1)

Playing to no audiences is like listening for an echo in a place without resonance. (Stanislavsky in Blau, 1990, p. 255)

In performance . . . ecstatic transpositions are extended to the listener as well, who becomes matrub, or 'ecstatic', who feels the music. (Racy, 2003, p. 217)

There are no studies as yet that address the participatory role of visitors of Arab art institutions or their interest in contemporary art. (Mikdadi, 2008, p. 55)

A few months ago, I was invited to a theatre performance in London which celebrated the life and artistic contribution of Bob Marley. The mainstream theatre was in the West End of London, Piccadilly Circus, to be precise. The musical concert was terrific and the performer impersonating Bob Marley was nothing short of marvellous. My experience of the event, the performance, and being there in the theatre, had caught me off guard. With hindsight, my experience is best described as being mnemonic and affectively multisensorial. In what I can only describe as an A*ugenblick* moment, the live performance had transported me mnemonically to 1980s Morocco, where I grew up. As I joined the Reggae band in singing, I recalled my teenage years in Casablanca. Back then, I used to frequent the *medina*, a working-class quarter of Casablanca, where most of my lycée friends lived. We

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would all chip in with a few dirhams each, buy some fresh sardines that Knadi, who never tired of claiming that Bob Marley was a prophet, usually took to the local Baker's to barbecue. Another member of the group would bring some 'special' Moroccan cake called *mrawen*, and we'd head for *mriziga*, a swimming spot near the port where working class youth congregated at the weekends, and over which the Hassan II Mosque was built in the early 1990s. Bob Marley's music was always in the background. 'The Bob', or 'le Bob', uttered in *Darija* (Moroccan colloquial) as *LBob*, was one of us, the one who gave a voice to the trodden, the disenfranchised, who yearned for emancipation from the makhzen's authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy, and cannibalistic capitalism. We spoke only in *Darija* and English. French was frowned upon as the fake language of middle-class pomp. Speaking English was our semiotic way of transgressing the violence of the postcolonial sign. The theatre performance transported me mnemonically into an affective, multisensorial place where different and contradictory emotions were felt at the same time. As I raised my arms and voice to sing along with the band at the London theatre, I was approached by an attendant to warn me (politely) that I, in singing along with the band, had transgressed theatre protocol. My *Augenblick* experience, and the emotions it had triggered in me, had transgressed the theatre *qua* institution and its archaeology of bourgeois docility. My *Augenblick* moment gave way to a heterotopic-dysmorphic experience, a tension between ecstatic corporality and what I can only describe as bio-power asphyxia. As my body resisted the theatre attendant's disciplining, two British Jamaican women, who sat to my left, joined me in my transgression. They stood up (*Get up, stand up!*) and danced to the iconic revolutionary song: *I shot the Sherriff!* The telos of recounting this autobiographic moment/trace of memory speaks to a double absence. The first absence is inherent to the act of 'absenting' (making absent) affective, multisensorial, aesthetic bodies, which are instead replaced, thanks to technologies of institutional discipline (Foucault, 1977), by the act of '*presenting*' (making present) docile bodies. This, in turn, confines aesthetic experience to a choreographed regimentation, which denies it its aliveness in the world. The second absence lies in the field of Arab cultural studies. The question of aesthetic experience remains at the margins of scholarship in the nascent field of Arab cultural studies, and in the compendium of research on the performing arts in the Arab region. This, I argue, is largely due to a detrimental lack of engagement with the question of audiences in the Arab region, both in academic scholarship and in cultural policy circles, where performance art audiences remain largely under-valued. When performance arts audiences are researched, it is mostly through the lens of quantitative methods, the survey being a key example. While quantitative methods have their merits, they are not equipped to examine audiences' aesthetic experiences. Audience research, in this context, emerges as a power game that is governed by the rules of cultural capital, in which 'powerful cultural gate keepers have a vested interest in silencing audiences' and therefore in undermining audience research' (Walmsley, 2019, p. 18).

The above critique notwithstanding, there is a growing and significant body of work on Arab music, art and performance that does not attach itself to Arab cultural studies (Sabry 2012) as a theoretical 'plane' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), but which holds a solemn epistemic promise to gage qualitatively with the question of aesthetic experience in the Arab region. The published repertoire on 'tarab' as a musical Arab art form (see Danielson, 1997; Issa, 2023; Wenz, 2023; Racy, 2003; Shannon, 2003; Silverstein, 2023) already offers

a solid theoretical basis and a methodological rationale for a critical qualitative engagement with the question of art audiences in the Arab region. Tarab is a 'musically induced state of ecstasy' that implies affective experiences of emotional excitement (Racy, 2003, p. 6). Experiencing tarab as an art form presupposes an affective intersectionality between the performer and the listener. This ecstatic experience is inherently relational. Umm Kulthum, the famous Egyptian singer, appreciated her connoisseur listeners' responses (Danielson, 1997, p. 134). Ecstasy is attained, according to Umm Kulthum, when the listener feels the meaning of the words (Danielson, 1997, p. 139). Her audiences, their attention, and their talk, created the public everyday spaces in which she became 'the voice of Egypt' (Danielson, 1997, p. 138). Shannon argued that focusing on the music alone 'means missing the significant performative and presentational dimensions of the processes by which artists and audiences experience and communicate tarab' (Shannon, 2003, p. 83).

Issa's ethnographic study of Fairuz's Arab diasporic audiences (Issa, 2023) showed how listening to Fairuz evoked critical discussions about Arabness, authenticity, citizenship, *Iltizam* (commitment) and gender politics. A recent study by Wenz (2023) focusing on electro-tarab[1] coming out of Syria and concentrating on the Syrian artist Samer Saem Eldahr shows how electro-tarab does not only recontextualize historic tarab recordings but also composes musical diasporic memory (Wenz, 2023, p. 3). Moving from tarab to dance, Shayna Silverstein (2023) provides a critical interpretation of Syrian choreographer Mithkal Alzghair's performance: *Displacement*, which, she argues, disrupts the postcolonial imaginaries of Syrian national identity. Silverstein demonstrates how *Displacement* performs 'perpetual, repetitive, live, and embodied motion in ways that open a space for artists and audiences to collectively engage with a fractious period and reconfigure the complex relations of power and representation situated between Syria and Europe' (See Belghiti & Sabry, 2023, p. 266). El Maarouf et al. (2023) use the trope of *Nashat*[2] to explore how *shikhat*[3] dance in Morocco conceptualises a notion of desire where the body reverses the orientalist theoretical gaze. Shikhat, we learn from the authors, are not mere performers-dancers; they are potential theory-makers and proto-philosophers. Through a socio-cultural excavation, Leila Tayeb (2023) demonstrates how the *Bousaadiya dance* performance produces an embodied social ground upon which Libyans have enacted and contested racialised practices of belonging. For Tayeb, following *Bousaadiya* is a way of grappling with 'unresolvedness and a gesture towards the possibility of repair within Libyan cultural politics' (Tayeb, 2023, p. 313).

Through a political ethnography of live performances of Arab rap by *Katibeh 5*, a group of five emcees based in the Palestinian camp of *Bourj Al Barajneh*, and another of a concert by the emcees Shadia Mansour and DAM at the Shrine, a world music venue in Harlem, New York, El Zein (2017) argues for an affective study of the dynamics of exchange between audiences and performers at rap concerts. She advances that political feeling opens critical spaces for considering the marginalised processes of political engagement. El Zein also warned against reifying *affect* into a mould in which successful subjective interactions occur. She enunciates politics through *affect* that accounts for the possibility, the chance, and the ability to explain mood and feelings as they unfold.[4]

The few examples I have given here from tarab, music and dance are part of a much varied and richer repertoire. Each of the examples cited constitutes a cogent rationalisation for engagement with the question of the audience in the context of Arab performing

arts. In this article, however, I am more concerned with a methodological line of questioning than I am with creating a creative theoretical connection with the above repertoire (though this would make for an important and in fact an urgent epistemic task). Here, I engage with aesthetic experience as a central hermeneutic endeavour and argue that a critical engagement with Arab performing arts audiences' aesthetic experiences necessitates an archaeological manoeuver and re-articulating two keywords: 'experience' and 'every day'. I also advance the notion that allowing the audiences for performing arts in the Arab region to speak may be a step towards democratising the triangular meaning making process among the performer, the audience, and the art institution, and a means towards dislocating, if not liberating, the categories culture, art, performance, and experience, from their teleological articulations. This article rehearses the following questions: How do we redefine aesthetic experience in ways that transcend the totalising discourses of the 'everyday' and 'experience' as specific ways of being in the world that fuse human subjects with aesthetic objects? What methods must we use to examine Arab performing arts audiences?

Centering the performing arts audiences

How do we make sure the future of performing arts in the Arab region includes the audience as a central focus? (See Walmsley, 2019, p. 18). This question invites a rearticulation of theoretical notions that have long reached transcendence as explanatory tools, but which need subverting and reenergizing, lest we merely reproduce older discourse and language. To think systematically about the notion of the audience, in the context of performing arts in the Arab region, requires a rearticulation of the notions of the everyday and experience in a conjunctional way, especially since the two notions form a relational logical whole. The everyday, Lefebvre argued, is 'not only a concept, but one that may be used as a guide-line for an understanding of society' (Lefebvre, [1984], Lefebvre, 1991, p. 28). There are different interpretations of the everyday, some see it as a site of control and ideology, others champion it as a site of participation, co-creation, resistance, and audience reflexivity. The iron cage of a false rationality, advanced Adorno and Horkheimer, 'leaches all originality from everyday life, leaving an empty husk of false gods, false goods, and false desires . . . Even during their leisure time, . . . consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production' (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Adorno & Horkheimer*, 1947/1973, p.98). In Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, everyday life is a mere 'negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself' (Debord, 1994, p. 14). The spectacle, observes Debord, is Not a collection of images, but a social relation among persons, mediated by images . . . the spectacle understood in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production . . . it is not a supplement to the real world . . . It is the heart of unrealism of the real society. (ibid.). However, to limit articulations of the everyday to discourses of inauthenticity, 'false consciousness' and the 'hyper-real' (if we factor in the work of Baudrillard), is to narrow our understanding of the everyday to an ideological positioning. Totalising accounts of the everyday, which one can easily trace to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, drew much from French structuralism: to be precise, from Althusser, whom Paddy Scannell describes as the 'Pope of structuralist Marxism'. For Althusser, 'lived experience cannot be taken as the ground for anything because it is unconscious in a double sense: it

is unreflective … And it is also unconscious in psychoanalytical terms, and therefore cannot account for itself' (Scannell in Sabry, 2007, p. 12). Positioning the everyday and 'lived experience' along this line of hermeneutics clearly limits what can be said about the everyday, about performing arts, and certainly has serious implications for the ways in which we interpret aesthetic experience. Michel de Certeau (1984) objects to totalising theories of the everyday and argues that there is always a potential for resistance within 'the *tactical times* of everyday life'.[5] A more nuanced critique of everyday life, summed up lucidly here by Gardiner, comes from Lefebvre who argued against

> Denouncing the habitualized illusions and foibles of daily life as a form of 'false conscious-ness', so as to proffer an unequivocal and universal truth through some definitive flash of insight. The 'bad' everyday is, after all, always bound up with the 'good' everyday – which is not to say that we cannot exercise analytical and value judgements about the differences between them. Rather, critique as Lefebvre understands it is about opening ourselves up to multiple possibilities, in order to embrace a myriad of alternative ways of thinking and living. (Gardiner, 2004, p. 247)

Another nuanced critique of the everyday – one that combines an ideology critique with a culturalist positioning – is advocated by Williams (1961, 1987), who takes lived experi-ence as the ground for a conscious and reflective analysis of culture. (See also the work of F.R. Leavis and Richard Hoggart (1930s-1950s)). Other scholars who champion the para-digm of audience 'participation' modestly define it as an unfinished event, but acknowl-edge, nonetheless, its democratic potential. In this article, I subscribe to neither the totalising nor the participatory paradigms of audience research. Instead, I take my cue from Silverstone (1994), for whom the everyday is best articulated through paradoxical categories and meanings. These, Silverstone advances, 'are in constant conflict, and they can be observed in both everyday behaviour and in "the forces of structure" (i.e.) those of domination and those of resistance' (Silverstone, 1994, p. 164). Silverstone gets to the crux of the matter by arguing that we are in fact confronted with a different kind of empirical problem, 'which is not to discover presence or absence, activity or passivity, but on the contrary to understand engagement' (Silverstone, 1994, pp. 169–70). Those who speak for and about the performing arts in the Arab region, be it the art institution, the funding body, the academic, or the initiator of cultural policy, tend to define the audiences of the arts without much care for studying or researching these audiences (Mikdadi, 2008). Performing arts audiences and their positions/aesthetic experiences are often assumed. As Blau candidly put it: 'We simply do not know, in any reliable – no less ideal or accountable – sense *who is there* nor, in the absence of the classical subject, *where to look*. We are, despite this, still likely to generalize … about what the audience, with its disparate, cross-purposed, alienated, and incalculable perceptions, feels and felt'.[6] When we assume that the position of the audience prevails as a strategy, definitions of the audience tend to succumb to a transcendent and quiet metaphysical discourse about art, culture and society that is rarely disturbed or questioned. Allowing the audiences of the performing arts in the Arab region to speak, as I have advanced at the start of this article, has the potential to democratise the triangular meaning making process among the performer, the audience, and the art institution, helping, in the meantime, to dismantle the categories: culture, art, the everyday and experience, from their metaphysical articu-lations. Here, I am arguing for the empirical study of performing arts audiences in the Arab

region as a precursor to an epistemic manoeuver that will allow us to rearticulate, in a much more critical way, key words such as art, aesthetics, culture and audiences, in the Arab region context. I also make this argument because audiences' responses and aesthetic experiences are creative acts in themselves (Sedgman, 2016).

Rehearsing the question of performing arts audiences in the Arab region is predicated on liberating the notions of Arab audiences, Arab art, and culture from the discursive languages, through use of which they have been defined and interpreted. This hermeneutic endeavour can only materialise if, and when, we subscribe to the democratisation of the interpretive process by acknowledging audiences' role in the creative process. Allowing for an 'aesthetics of invitation (see White, 2013 in Walmsley, 2019, p. 84), and by inviting audiences to participate in meaning making processes, democratises the creative and meaning-making process and liberates the aesthetic experience to allow it to feel and think affectively about the world. The audience-centred approach is now even more timely as Arab performing arts audiences in the digital age, as a recent Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) survey (Azdem et al., 2023) shows, seek more dialogical forms of communication with the performing artists. As we learn from Machon (2013), performing arts audiences, in the age of the Internet, are hungry for 'visceral experiences' and for spaces that re-invigorate human interaction and exchange.[7]

Performing arts and spaces of heterotopy

As we democratise the co-creative artistic process by making Arab performing audiences central to the hermeneutic endeavour and to the complex temporality to which this approach gives birth, and while we remain conscious of the need to separate interpretations of art, performance, experience, and audiences from their metaphysical discourses, we also cannot ignore 'the place' of performance, as a contentious and 'geometric' category (Augé, 1995). In his famous ethnographic analysis of cultural taste in France, Bourdieu (1991) demonstrated how 'arts venues act as physical manifestations of cultural capital and habitus and can [therefore] elicit profound feelings of unworthiness and incompetence'.[8] As Alan Brown observed: 'inviting audiences to spaces they do not want to visit is a losing proposition, especially when they do show up and feel out of place.'[9] Heim's research highlights the communitarian value of arts venues, and it reinforces the inherently relational nature of the performing arts: 'arts venues have the potential to become community spaces' (See Heim in Walmsley, 2019, p. 102). The spectator, we also learn from Bennett (1997), 'cannot experience pleasure without experiencing its limits'.[10] According to a recent empirical study by Azdem, Kamili and Ksikes (2021), which focuses on changes in cultural production in Morocco, only a very small number from the potential audiences attend performing arts venues, of which 10, 2 % attend theatre, 10 % attend the circus, 7, 2% attend dance events, 6.1 % attend stand-up comedy shows and 17,4 per cent attend street shows. Whilst the numbers do not tell us much, either about the demographics or the habitus of these audiences, they clearly demonstrate, however, the Moroccan audiences' preference for open performance spaces. The study also shows how a considerable number of performing arts events in Morocco are hosted by French and other European cultural centres. These heterotopic spaces, however, tend to impose on the audience a neo-colonial politesse, language, and etiquette that are only accessible at the level of habitus to the intelligentsia (who are

mainly French speakers); the 'well-behaved' middle and upper middle classes. Rather than democratising the arts, these heterotopic spaces tend to police the boundaries of the arts and to impoverish thereafter the potentialities of aesthetic performance/experience as a communal space (See Heim 2016). In this instance, the art institution denies audiences who may feel alienated in these spaces the numinous hypertrophic behaviours and affective aesthetic experiences that de-sacralise society and transform audiences' experiences in the world.[11] In a report on art and public spaces in the Arab region, Dussollier (2017) demonstrates, using different examples from the Arab region,[12] how a good number of Arab civil society initiatives and actors have, since 2000, been encouraging the urbanisation of performing arts in the Arab region in order to create new spaces of citizenship. While this is a very interesting development, and while other commentators warn of authoritarianism's suppression of civil society groups and the subservience of Arab art and cultural organisations to neo-liberal models,[13] the question of who benefits from the arts in the Arab region remains unanswered without qualitative audience research. A failure to make the performing arts audiences central is likely to further camouflage the workings of the neo-liberal market structures to which the arts are subservient, and to the 'governmentality' strategies deployed by the Arab states to discipline aesthetic creativity and experience. As things stand, the Arab performing arts audience in the Arab region seems to represent a mere 'hypothetical construct and is simply part of a theoretical metalanguage'.[14] Taking my cue, yet again, from Silverstone (1994), p. I argue that what we are confronted with here is a qualitative, empirical task: to critically examine how audiences in the Arab region engage with performing arts.

Aesthetic experience: a phenomenological positioning

Meaning, argued De Marinis, 'does not exist in the arts event/object itself, or in the intensions of the artist, but rather in the perceiver's historically and culturally constituted horizons of understanding'.[15] A policy shift in the arts in the Arab region towards an audience-centred model has to go hand in hand with a paradigmatic shift at the level of research methods, moving away from a reliance on big data and the quantification of arts audiences to engaging in qualitative ethnographic methodologies including 'anecdotal exchanges between team members and audience participants collected in a casual, interpersonal way'.[16] 'If we cannot "measure" an audience member's engagement through the depth, creativity, and passion of her interpretation of our work', argues Conner, "we are misunderstanding the very function of art in society'.[17] So, what methods should we use to study the 'magical potency'; the embodied and enactive spectatorship that brings aesthetic experience to the fore?

Before I rehearse this methodological question, I'd like to turn to the notion of aesthetic experience and rehearse ways of taking it out of its discourse. This is important, because the methodological question, in this context, cannot be detached from an *apriori* rationalisation, if not, from a complexification of experience as a category. What kind of hermeneutics will Arab performing arts institutions and scholars utilise in studying Arab audiences' aesthetic experiences? Will the dominant paradigms in the critique of ideology, and their totalising accounts of everyday life and experience, do? Must we not submit such hermeneutics to a phenomenological distanciation, as a default position for thinking about the world? Here, I take my cue from the media phenomenologist, Paddy Scannell,

who defines phenomenology in his book, *Television and the Meaning of Live* (Scannell, 2014), as being: 'firmly committed to a view that thinking begins by looking outwards not inwards. In an originary sense we are moved (are summoned) to thinking by looking at the world … where thinking begins and ends'.[18] Opting for a dialectical phenomenological method (as a way of philosophising about Arab performing arts audiences), unhinged by teleology or any mad discourse of identity, I argue, can let us not only into the materiality of aesthetic experience, but also, as a default position, into the hidden structures and interior intensions that underpin the performing arts in the Arab region. Anyone who has had attempted to undertake audience research for a lengthy period will be able to tell you that the real, as Levinas lucidly observed, 'must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intensions, from the secrecy that interrupts the continuity of the historical time' (Levinas, Totality and Infinity, in Gaston, 2006, p. 5). Thinking about the audience and aesthetic experience through a dialectical, rather than a reductionist, phenomenology, allows us to think outside the ideology critique and its hermeneutics of suspicion, and outside also of agential discourses of participation. This would also mean the ability to think about aesthetic experience outside the teleologies of becoming and of mad identity, as Khatibi put it in his *double critique* (Khatibi, 2019). Equally important, it also allows us to think outside the 'proper boundary of phenomenology' (Smith, 2016, p. 13) and its privileging of presence. Our default position for thinking about experience must be filtered through an 'interrupted phenomenology' (Derrida, 1999: 8), lest we glibly give in to dogmatic thinking about the relationship between art and its audiences. In his article, 'Cultural Studies: Which paradigm?' Paddy Scannell (2015) provides a phenomenological interpretation of the category experience:

> The content of lived experience is *life* (what else?). But what does that mean if not the experience of *being alive and living in the world*? Experience is *the* word for the immediate encounter with existence (with being alive and living in the world) that is common to every individual human being—it is the term that captures *how* we (human beings) encounter life; our own life and the life of the world (the *living* world) as a whole. We encounter the world in, through and as our experience of it. Experience (as lived) is the irreducible, primary, fundamental, and immediate encounter with *reality*, if by that is meant something like the *real* experience of what it is to be alive and living in the *real* world in *real* time and in a *real* place with other *real* people (like, in each case, *me)*. (Scannell, 2015, p: 651)

In delineating this phenomenological interpretation, Scannell positions experience, in the first place, as an existential, rather than as a scientific, social, or cultural category. Experience, in this context, is common to all humanity. It is also, unlike knowledge, non-transferable. 'Experience', observes Paddy Scannell, 'is not in the first place a scientific or sociological fact but an *existential* fact' (Scannell, 2015, p. 651). To take my cue from this phenomenological interpretation, I'd like to argue that aesthetic experience is not a theoretical category, but a multi-sensorial lived experience; the result of an encounter with the artistic object *qua* performance/moment, just as I did in my mnemonic experience, which was triggered by Bob Marley's revolutionary music. My *Augenblick* moment had nothing to do with theory, nor can I say it was cultural or social. It was an existential moment, perhaps a transcendental moment, a feeling, and an emotion that language and writing are incapable of describing. My *Augenblick* moment is, in the first place and before anything else, a phenomenological moment. The music or performance that really gets to us is always inexpressible. It is the moment in which life comes to life, fully, totally, and all at once, in that little moment. That is

what an aesthetic experience must *feel*. The *Augenblick* is the way in which we, as humans, escape from ordinary, everyday humdrum existence; one of Heidegger's most difficult notions. My *Augenblick* moment (which I can only describe as an aesthetic phenomenological experience) is a way out of ordinary existence, and ordinary time. Also, like any lived experience, aesthetic experience is non-transferable as it is affectively lived and experienced by us doing the encountering. However, this is not to say that aesthetic experience is entirely unique to me. Aesthetic experience is also shared and shareable, even when we do not always have similar aesthetic experiences or *Augenblicken* (See Scannell, 2015).

Conner (2013) calls for a re-conceptualisation of the arts appreciation model of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the audience is conceived as a learning community where it is 'providing the resources for arts workers *and* audiences to connect through a rich and complex conversation about the meaning and value of the arts in their lives' (Conner, 2013, p. 137). Conner (2013, pp. 156–158) recommended five values to instil an audience-centred model based on discussion and 'arts talk'. a) We need to make [the] environment hospitable by deliberately desacralising the normative etiquette and participatory boundaries of an existing space. b) We need to acknowledge the audiences' main concerns, or what Freire (2017) termed *themes*. c) We need to honour emotion and the affective experience of the audience, and d) embrace the inherent subjectivity of the arts by encouraging open, rather than closed, texts. Finally, e) we need to work towards building community partnerships by letting go of institutional control. For these values to be operationalised in our pursuit of an audience-centred approach, Conner proposes values that encourage 'the citizen-audience to start talking about the arts' (Conner, 2013, p. 138). This process ought to be followed up by opportunities for audiences to express their opinions respectfully and democratically regarding what they've seen, heard, and felt. 'The more arts workers accept and encourage this idea', argued Conner, 'the healthier the arts industry will be' (Conner, 2013, p. 138)

Marketing Arab performing arts

How do we market Arab performing arts to audiences in the Arab region? There is certainly a need for an audience-centred paradigm for performance arts' marketing that is fit for the contemporary arts in the Arab region. Performing arts scholars and organisations continue to reject outmoded principles of marketing and adopt a more engagement-based approach (Walmsley, 2019, p. 363). Traditionally, the focus has tended to fall on the marketing, rather than on the arts. Arts marketing, Walmsley argues, has passed its sell-by date: 'having alienated art and audiences for decades, it is now finally being supplanted by the advent of socio-cultural phenomena such as co-creation and by the technological advancements that facilitate these developments' (ibid). According to both Walmsley and Conner, we are witnessing a paradigm shift in arts marketing, in which, in the second decade of the Twenty-first century, consumers 'are demanding an increasingly participatory role in both production and meaning-making processes (ibid, 365). Marketing, adds Walmsley, 'has become more about people than data; it is increasingly relational in that it takes place through various forms of dialogue with audiences ... it involves more than "anticipating customers' needs": it requires the inspiration to delight audiences by communicating the potential for lasting and meaningful experiences' (Ibid, p, 369). So, what we are witnessing, in the performing arts industries in Europe and North

America, is a shift from consumption to enrichment. To put this within an historical context, I go back to Ruth Rentschler's arts marketing historical framework[19] (Rentschler, 1998), starting with the foundational period (1975–1984) when the arts sector led by North America started to diversify its offer, engage with audience analysis, and think about the potential benefits of marketing. In the professionalisation period (1985--1994), arts organisations started recruiting dedicated marketing staff and established whole marketing departments, thus responding to funders' increasing demands for stronger management and greater accountability. Here, arts marketing started to come of age as an academic field. The rediscovery period (from 1995), according to Rentschler's historical framework, was a time when performing artists and organisations started to collaborate, to co-produce and to co-create with their audiences and the wider communities. In an earlier article, Conner (2004) delineates an ethical audience enrichment programme that relocates power dynamics from the traditional producers of art to the audiences. As Conner observed: 'A viable philosophy and practice of audience enrichment is centered on the assumption that what an audience really wants is the opportunity to co-author the arts experience. They do not want to be told what the art means. They want the opportunity to participate – in an intelligent and responsible way – in *telling* its meaning'. Below, I describe, and quote in full, Conner's proposed set of values for building audience enrichment programming.[20]

- **A Golden Rule**: people want to talk through their reactions (i.e. feelings, confusion, passion, disinterest, disgust, pleasure). Talking is a way of processing an opinion. If there is no opportunity to talk, there is likely to be no 'opinion' other than a vaguely expressed sense of disengagement.
- **Leave the arts programming alone**. Cultural participation should not interfere with the need and desire amongst arts producers to programme challenging work (whether 'challenging' means something with a new form, or something from another culture or time). True audience enrichment does not mean choosing art objects that are easy to understand, or that stand lower on the highbrow lowbrow ladder. True audience enrichment means providing the tools and venues for including the audience more effectively in the total arts experience – whatever its nature.
- **Leave the art object alone**. Nobody, including the artist, should be put in the position of dictating what a work of art 'means.' Instead, validate the arts experience by acknowledging the role the audience plays in co-authoring its meaning.
- **Learning really is a life-long enjoyment**. A great deal of attention, money and human resources has been poured into 'arts education' programming for children. It's important to acknowledge that adult audiences also seek to learn 'in and through' the arts. Knowledge equals enjoyment because it equals power.
- **True audience enrichment is not 'audience development.'** Marketing strategies for 'developing' (that is, increasing in numbers) an audience for a given organisation may be valuable, but they are not the same as enrichment. In traditional audience development strategies, the audience member has been objectified, and remains objectified, throughout the 'development' process. True enrichment programmes individualise the people who make up the audience.
- **Enrichment is not just a word – it's a value**. An arts organisation interested in building participation in a meaningful way will have to commit serious resources to

the notion of audience enrichment. Audience enrichment is like walking a tight rope. If you pretend, you fall.

- **Effective audience enrichment practices** will dismantle the notion of art object and art maker as being an 'enlightener,' and will replace it with the ideal of the art object and the art maker as participants in a civic dialogue. This implies a redistribution of power. Some artists and some arts executives will resist this.

Coda

I return to the question of method as a means by which to emphasise, in this modest intervention (a rehearsal), the urgent need for systematic thinking about the performing arts in the Arab region that constitutes, and is constituted through, the logic of a relational logic. Here, I borrow the Heideggerian category 'involvement-whole', to allude to the complex ontic relations that exist between art, affect, experience, structures of feeling, the sensorial, everyday life, being-with, institutions, culture and performance, and the everyday contexts in which these relations come into being as an ontological totality. Silencing the performing arts audiences (rendering them either docile or invisible) suits the authoritarian Arab states and their neo-liberal apparatuses. It is only through engagement with this ontological totality that we can begin to critically engage with the question of art in the context of the Arab region today. Allowing audiences to speak, I have argued in this article, will not only allow for the democratisation of the triangular meaning making process between the performer, the audience, and the art institution, it is also a strategy for dislocating, if not liberating the categories: culture, art, performance and aesthetic experience, from the shackles of governmentality and the neo-liberal marketing structures that remain more concerned with the datafication of audiences and never with creating spaces in which they can speak about or recount their *Augenblick* moments.

Notes

1. 'electro-tarab': an eclectic and experimental music style that combines global electronic dance music such as dub dubstep, drum and bass, trap, and trip-hop with digital Arab musical aesthetics (See Weiz's study: *Music from Aleppo during the Syrian War* 2023: 1).
2. 'Nashat in Moroccan Darija is a polysemous notion as far as the discourse of social conviviality is concerned. In Darija, nashat refers to a range of characteristics that a person may have either temporarily in the context of pleasurable and fun moments or possess permanently as a character trait' (See El Maarouf et al., 2023, p. 295).
3. Shikhat is the plural name for shikha, a name given in Moroccan popular culture to performers who sing and dance to shaabi music.
4. See Sabry and Ftouni (2017) 'Arab Subcultures and the Paradox of Cultural Translation' in Sabry and Ftouni (2017) (eds.) *Arab Subcultures: Transformations in Theory and Practice*, IB Tauris: London (2017, pp. 1–17).
5. *The Practice of Everyday life* (de Certeau, 1984).
6. Blau (1990), pp. 355–356.
7. Josephine Machon (2013), p: 72 in Walmsley (2019): 87.
8. Walmsley (2019): 93.
9. Brown 2013: 53 in Walmsley (2019): 83.
10. Bennett 1997: 73 in Walmsley (2019): 195.
11. See Turner (1982), p: 10.

12. Examples from this report include SHAMS and Bayreuth Art Centre, Le Garage Gudran, El-Medina Theatre in Alexandria, Emad El-Din Studio and Mahatat in Cairo, Dream City in Tunis and Racine, and La Fabrique Culturelle des Anciens Abattoirs de Casablanca.
13. See Gana, Zidane, Morin and Gabsi (2017) in Downey, Anthony (ed.) 2017, *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*.
14. See Marco De Marinis 1987, p: 102 in Walmsley (2019), p: 110.
15. Gadamar in Conner (2013), p: 1.
16. Conner (2013), p: 142.
17. Ibid.
18. Scannell, Scannell (2014): 5.
19. See Ruth Rentschler's Arts marketing historical framework (1998): Rentschler, R. (1998) 'Museums and Performing Arts Marketing: A Climate of Change'. Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society 28(1), pp.83–96.
20. https://www.giarts.org/article/who-gets-tell-meaning

Disclosure statement

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