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Circus for All ? : The Stakes of Event Programming in the Context of a European Capital of Culture

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- 1 Audiences are a central subject of study for the sociology of culture, prompting numerous research projects, particularly with a focus on the reception of different art forms and on mediation. Some research has studied audiences of large-scale cultural events, such as festivals, to draw a portrait of spectators (Ethis 2002; Malinas 2008) or understand their contribution to the process of democratizing culture (Fabiani 2008; Fabiani, Ethis, Malinas 2008). This article is the result of a research programme which, like these studies, aimed to analyse the practices and the audience of a major event, Marseille-Provence 2013 European Capital of Culture (Girel 2015). However, focusing on the subject of the circus, our study was less concerned with documenting the characteristics of spectators than with questioning the role of cultural actors in the construction of the line-up, while capturing their perceptions of the event and its audience, following the approach adopted in research into the international circulation of contemporary circus arts (Spinelli 2015). Concerns about the audience are present in artistic work as well as in the activity of cultural intermediaries (Lizé, Naudier, Sofio 2016) who participate in the selection and promotion of shows. In addition to the aesthetic quality or cost of works, consideration of the characteristics of the audience plays a central role in putting together an event schedule (Dutheil-Pessin & Ribac 2017), in particular for subsidized cultural institutions whose activity is guided by public policies which are founded, in France, on the objective of democratizing culture (Dubois 1999).
- 2 Attendance expectations are particularly high in the case of large cultural events, which many cities are now pursuing to boost the location and provide it with added symbolic value in terms of image and influence (Broclain 2012; Lucchini 2002). In the case of Marseille-Provence 2013, the aim was to engage the city in several

transformations (the construction of facilities, redevelopment projects, etc.), while targeting economic benefits and the improvement of the city's image. Within its extensive scheduling, a highlight event, *Circus in Capitals* (*Cirque en capitales*), showcased the circus with more than 250 performances of 60 shows put on over a month throughout the area covered by the Culture Capital¹. The large audience which this highlight attracted was hailed as one of the attendance success stories of 2013, sparking the creation of a biennial event centred on the circus, of which four editions have been held to date. The commitment to putting circus at the heart of a European capital of culture programme was relatively new². It appears indicative of the expectations of cultural actors with regard to this art form in connection with its recent transformations.

- 3 Following the emergence of “new circus,” in reference to a characteristically creative approach (Maleval 2010), public policies implemented in France since the late 1970s have contributed to the legitimization of this art form (Cordier 2018; Salaméro 2018) and promoted the growth, alongside traditional circus troupes such as Gruss and Bouglione, of many companies tagged as “contemporary circus”. Mixing circus techniques with other artistic influences (notably theatrical), their shows are performed most often in theatres, and sometimes in circus tents or public spaces, and attract growing numbers (Donnat 2009). This diversification of aesthetics and stage formats has led to the proliferation of these shows in specialized scenes as well as in traditional performance spaces, with a social segmentation of the audience (Guy 1993; Lévy 2001). This integration of the circus into cultural institutions' schedules is based on knowledge and representations shared by critics and professionals in the sector (Rosemberg 2004) who consider this art to be more easily accessible than others.
- 4 This idea proved integral to the development of the *Circus in Capitals* project, especially since Marseille-Provence 2013 aimed to bring together a very broad audience. Thus, as with the construction of cultural installations, the event organizers backed up their approach with references to an audience which was “more often invoked than actually mobilized or represented” (Hélie & Champy 2003: 238). On the basis of a study of these cultural actors, we aim to analyse event schedulers' representations of the circus and its audiences. In particular, we will show how references to the intended audience, which are ubiquitous in these actors' utterances, justify scheduling choices, helping to legitimize emphasis on this art form in the context of a cultural capital.
- 5 The analysis is based on a collective field study carried out within the framework of the *Publics et pratiques culturelles de Marseille-Provence 2013, capitale européenne de la culture* research programme (Girel 2015). We studied the implementation of circus scheduling over the course of 2013, paying particular attention to the *Circus in Capitals* event. Twelve semi-directive interviews were conducted with members of the main cultural institutions involved in the project; most of the interviewees worked in arts management and/or event scheduling, and one was in charge of audiences. These institutions (seven performance spaces, one circus company, and the Marseille-Provence 2013 organization), which were all located in Marseille except one, received public service grants, but fell under various statutes, some being labelled by the Ministry of Culture (as “national scene,” for example, while others were referred to as “company,” “organization,” and so on). Most venues usually put on multidisciplinary cultural events, which were predominantly theatrical, but included circus from time to time. Only two institutions specialized in circus: one in contemporary circus and the

other in clowning. These data were complemented by observations made during performances and by collecting and analysing various documentary sources (press articles, presentation and evaluation documents for the event, and the Marseille-Provence 2013 archives) which helped to trace the development of *Circus in Capitals* and its coverage in the media from the application phase to the evaluation carried out at the end of 2013.

- 6 Once we have looked back at the origins of Marseille-Provence 2013 and presented its context and the actors who initiated the *Circus in Capitals* project, we will show how these actors conjured the ideal image of an audience brought together to give form to an event which was presented as “unifying,” despite being uniquely devoted to contemporary circus aesthetics. In their practice, professionals rely on various types of audience categorization, and while their scheduling choices share the same goal of audience diversification, the audience will take a different form depending on the institutions concerned.

1. History of a Circus Event in a Capital of Culture

1.1. A Project to Help Transform a Region

- 7 Awarded every year since 1985 by the European Union³, the title “European Capital of Culture” allows the winning city to benefit from European funding through various programmes such as “Culture 2007-2013,” with a view to promoting the heritage and cultural practices of an area. The candidate cities for this title are invited to follow a framework of cultural policy territorialization, which involves “adapting a cultural project to the local situation and characteristics” (Denizot 2008: 71). In the case of Marseille, the project was initiated by the business community and supported by local political actors, who saw the event as a catalyst to change the city’s image by developing its cultural influence (Grésillon 2013).
- 8 In its 2008 application package, Marseille-Provence 2013 was indeed presented as part of the “revival of the city,” which was described as a “struggling metropolis going through a process of recovery”. Following the decline in port activity from the 1970s onwards, the city experienced a period of economic hardship and demographic decline, before a certain increase in attractiveness since 2000. In 2012, Marseille had about 860,000 inhabitants, a large proportion of whom were living below the poverty line (26 per cent in 2010). Its socio-spatial inequalities are particularly stark: the northern districts (13-16th) and the city centre (1st-3rd) have the highest concentrations of poverty (Peraldi, Dupont, & Samson 2015); the most affluent Marseillais live in the 8th and 9th districts in the south of the city. This is accompanied by a particularly high concentration of cultural facilities in the centre of the city.
- 9 In this context, Marseille-Provence 2013 was built around the objective of combining a “strong artistic requirement” with the desire to reach “disadvantaged communities” (*application documents*, 2008: 72, 135). It included the construction of new cultural institutions such as the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations (Mucem). The wish to propose a project at the wider regional level was similarly part of a strategy to reinvigorate the Marseille metropolis aimed at reinforcing its attractiveness by undertaking a “symbolic reconquest” (Fabiani 2013), as cities such as Lille had done, which was capital of culture in 2004 (Liefoghe 2010). The project, which aimed to catch

up with a certain degree of cultural lag, was seen as “innovative” by the European jury (jury report 2008), and ultimately led to Marseille beating better-equipped competitors such as Lyon and Bordeaux.

Fig. 1.

Attendance at circus shows in 2013 by venue. In Marseille, the Parc Chanot hosted shows programmed by the CREAC and the Théâtre du Gymnase.

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1.2. A Circus Highlight for a City in Search of Big Events

- 10 To understand the role of the circus in Marseille’s application we must take into account local characteristics and the expectations of different actors of the project. From 2007, the Marseille-Provence 2013 organization (MP2013), which was responsible for developing the application and coming up with a broad outline of events⁴, began identifying local cultural organizations. The circus was an artistic form that was already anchored in the locality since several companies had been established in Marseille and its surroundings in the 2000s. Among them, Archaos, a pioneer ‘new circus’ troupe which was created in 1986, enjoyed considerable recognition and local government support. Housed since 2001 in the fifteenth district of the city, its leaders had created the *Centre de recherche européen des arts du cirque* (Centre for European Research of Circus Arts) there, which was subsidized for production and performance purposes. The co-director of this centre, Guy Carrara, was approached in 2007 by the Marseille-Provence 2013 organization, which was responsible for investigating local cultural institutions as part of the application process. On the back of his experience and knowledge of the scene, he proposed the creation of the *Biennale internationale des arts du cirque*. This project, which Carrara undertook over several years, aimed to make Marseille an international reference for contemporary circus. In the application, this idea is presented as an opportunity for the city “to position itself in a growing cultural sector that is both innovative and popular” by becoming the “European circus capital⁵.”

- 11 From this early stage of the project development, the goal of achieving “social diversity in audiences facilitated by the circus” was also emphasized. The plan to launch a regular event dedicated to circus resonated with the MP2013 organization and its director Bernard Latarjet – a lover of contemporary circus⁶ – especially since this would help compensate for the “inadequacy of international art events⁷,” which had been highlighted in Marseille. The project thus features in the application documents as a “major European event that will contribute in the long term to European cultural policy objectives⁸.” The recognition given to the circus also reflected the desire to value “the quality of the union between highbrow and popular culture” (*application documents* 2008: 27). Indeed, the artistic line-up in 2013 appeared eclectic, reflecting the mission to combine so-called highbrow forms (contemporary art exhibitions, classical music, etc.) with more recently recognized practices, such as street art or contemporary circus. Regularly presented as a “popular art” (Sizorn & Roland 2016), circus was seen by the event promoters as a means of “proposing ‘crowd-pleaser’ events without sacrificing artistic quality⁹.” The scheduling criteria chosen by the MP2013 organization took account of these two objectives, while contending with the expectations of the local authorities, which were heavily invested in financing the capital of culture. Representatives of these authorities, who were also members of the organization’s board of directors, were concerned about the economic benefits for their region. Worrying that the line-up would be perceived as too elitist, some local officials expressed a desire to see events which would attract a wide audience, as this member of the MP2013 organization states:

“This is what the city [of Marseille] is asking for; local representatives held a meeting, and they said somewhat controversially: ‘Give us a few big parties, big popular events, the rest we’ll take care of.’”

- 12 This concern is part of a general trend towards the promotion by the local authorities of an “event culture” (Appel 2008), for which the success of an event is measured above all by its attendance and the economic benefits it generates (Bouquerel 2019). The weight of these audience expectations was thus central to the development of the 2013 project and scheduling.

2. Programming Circus Events to Attract the General Public

- 13 Once Marseille had been designated as Capital of Culture in 2009, the initial idea of a biennial programme was adjusted¹⁰, leading to the creation of a ‘highlight event’ entitled *Circus in Capitals*. CREAC, the initiator of the project, continued to play a central role through the organization of a festival called *Cirque en corps*, which was part of a vast programme supported by a dozen cultural institutions, most of them theatres or general-purpose performance venues. Despite the variety of these places in terms of status and role within the local cultural landscape¹¹, interviews carried out with their representatives show that they share similar representations about the circus and the characteristics of its audience. It is often referred to as an art form that has the potential to attract a broad audience and bring people together. For example, the Merlan, a national theatre situated in one of the working-class neighbourhoods of northern Marseille, frequently hosts magic shows (tagged as “new”) and contemporary

circus – a choice that appears to be driven as much by their aesthetic qualities as by their supposed popularity, as one member of the management team points out:

“The [aesthetic] forms were really interesting. And then in addition, it was a plus that the audience was obviously very receptive to them. After all, you shouldn’t necessarily do what’s easiest. It’s important to maintain standards in terms of what we put on. But it’s true that circus is a way in... it brings people together.”

- 14 Circus’s ability to “bring people together” is generally presented as proven; and so its attendance is not seen as a particular challenge, unlike other forms of entertainment. “People tend to trust circus shows,” says a member of the Massalia theatre, and this is a view shared by other professionals:

“There is also a bigger response from the audience because the circus is more immediate, more than a theatre show. Even with an unknown circus [company], people are more likely to go to the circus than to the theatre,” (manager of the Gymnase theatre).

- 15 This comparison between the two arts, which was commonly made by the events schedulers interviewed, seeks to highlight the virtues of the circus: by bringing together spectators from different backgrounds, it has the potential to overcome social divisions. Such discourse tends to create an image of the “circus audience” as a relatively unified entity, while being characterized by a certain internal diversity. These representations are based in part on these professionals’ knowledge – which varies in degree of accuracy – of studies on the cultural practices of the French. At first glance, these studies confirm the idea that the circus is a more accessible form of entertainment than others, especially for the working class. It attracts relatively high attendance by blue- and white-collar workers: 13% of blue-collar and 12% of white-collar workers attended a performance in 2008, compared with 14% for the French as a whole (2009 data) – attendance rates are 9% and 13% respectively for theatre and 4% and 6% for dance¹². However, the few studies which take into account the diversity of circus aesthetics reveal the coexistence of two distinct patterns of attendance, according to a homology consistent with the distinction model (Bourdieu 1984): while traditional circus attracts a socially diverse, family audience, contemporary aesthetics attract mainly spectators with university degrees from the middle and upper social classes (Guy 1993; Lévy 2001).
- 16 Such results invite us to qualify the somewhat enchanted image of an art form that is deemed inherently accessible to audiences from all walks of life, whatever its style may be. Indeed, the ideal of the democratization of culture, which formed part of the original utopian dreams defended by the pioneers of new circus in the 1970s, is still shared by many companies as well as by cultural actors invested in the spread and promotion of contemporary circus (Cordier 2014). While progress on the social diversification of audiences has proved limited, these cultural actors nevertheless remain committed to this goal. In this context, favouring a general discourse on “the” circus and “its” audience maintains a certain blurring of the different aesthetics and the social divisions they cover up, so as to emphasize circus’s ability to bring people together.
- 17 It is thus regularly referred to as a “popular art” by both artists and those working in the culture sector. At the Massalia theatre, whose scheduling particularly targets a “young audience,” circus is linked to the fairground tradition, as one employee responsible for audiences puts it: “Circus is very close to puppet theatre. There’s the popular side... with its roots in the fair, then the family side that comes with that.” For

a member of the Merlan theatre, the discipline is seen as “for everyone; an art form that is popular, but at the same time has contemporary incarnations that develop.” Usage of the term “popular” can also be strategic; it is regularly employed by professional organizations to justify government support for the sector:

“Reference to [the term] ‘popular’ emphasizes the fact that circus (its genres are rarely defined in such statements) has the potential to appeal to all. The semantic blurring fostered by use of the word circus without epithetic precision is indeed exploited by actors of the circus (especially relating to contemporary circus)” (Sizorn & Roland 2016: 39).

- 18 The position of the professionals interviewed thus seems to display a degree of ambivalence: the virtues extolled are especially true of “traditional” circus, while their scheduling choices¹³ promote contemporary aesthetics, which they know to be more socially exclusive. Like librarians (Rabot 2011) who direct readers towards works they consider to be of recognized value, event schedulers seek out the contemporary shows most likely to please the greatest number of people¹⁴ – this informal valuation of works is based less on explicit criteria than on practical knowledge of what is available and the supposed preferences of spectators (Dutheil-Pessin & Ribac 2017). Most organizations thus favoured circus types that they thought would be easily accessible, such as two that specialize in magic and clowns. These disciplines, which are also undergoing an aesthetic overhaul, are, according to respondents, particularly attractive because they are deemed to be fun and entertaining. The director of the Daki Ling theatre, a venue dedicated to promoting the clown art form, recognizes that the choice to promote this form is not unrelated to its seductive potential:

“We try to work on what a clown is, what it has become; but communicating via clowns is a ‘seller,’ in quote marks – a seller in a positive sense of the term. It’s not touting, but clowns perhaps bring people together more than experimental theatre, for example.”

- 19 The emphasis on certain emblematic disciplines also reflects the communication strategies deployed by cultural institutions to address potential audiences and inspire a desire to discover new forms of circus, which are not a given for newcomers. The materials developed to present the shows often draw from the imagery of traditional circus, whose symbols remain deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. Some iconic figures that are easily identifiable – clowns, trapeze artists, tightrope walkers, etc. – thus appear on a recurring basis, including when it comes to directing the audience towards particularly innovative aesthetics. These methods of reappropriating traditional symbols, also observed in the case of folk dancing (Pamart 2014), contribute to the “construction of an event scheduling image” (Pasquier 2012: 25) which is intended to be understandable and reassuring for potential spectators, signifying to them that it is definitely circus, even if the show is performed on a theatre stage and includes neither animals nor ringmaster.

3. A “Popular art” Which Evokes a Festivity

- 20 Frequently viewed by professionals as a lever to attract audiences, circus was fully consistent with the broader aims of the capital of culture, the effectiveness of which lies in its capacity to bring people together. Marseille-Provence 2013 indeed follows the same logic as other events such as France’s annual *Fêtes de la musique* (Music Day) or the *Nuits blanches* night-time arts festivals. Organized by municipalities to bring the local

population together around a cultural programme, such events foster “transient groups” to form (Lallement 2007, 2016), bring festivity back to the city, and require “a specific, always unique and transient space-time plan, where experiences are lived and shared by a certain group of people outside the framework of the [usual] routine” (Spinelli 2018: 25). This form of entertainment is often described as “popular”, the term referring in this case to the free and accessible nature of these shows, which opens them up to a large audience. Widely used by the organizers as part of their marketing (MP2013 website, press kits), the reference to the *fête populaire* (popular festival or street party) permeated the narrative of several events in the program, including that of circus. The choice to run *Circus in Capitals* from the end of January – made partly owing to internal constraints on the organization¹⁵ – appeared relatively risky. While audience expectations were particularly high for this first big event of the year, organizers wondered about the capacity to attract wide attendance ahead of the main dynamic of visits to the cultural capital had taken hold. At the same time, beginning with circus was a move intended to begin the festival atmosphere from early 2013 and gain the support of a local audience, which was said to be lacking in advance:

“After the opening ceremony, we had to start the Capital year with an emblematic project likely to please the general public. So we chose to create a highlight circus event. This was a strategy to spark the curiosity of the Marseillais, to make them want to discover the rest ... because we knew that they’d be sceptical at first. And circus, I promise you that that works well!¹⁶”

- 21 From the opening, the organizers wished to deliver a “festive message,” indicating their desire to attract a large audience and generate excitement about the event: “Immediately after the Capital’s opening weekend of 12-13 January 2013, *Circus in Capitals* was the event which brought together the public and all generations – an excellent prelude to the year ahead¹⁷.” Such a message contained a prescriptive dimension calling on the population to take ownership of the event. Starting the schedule with an event depicted as eminently popular was a way of fuelling the participatory dimension emphasized in the Marseille project and making visible the incipient enthusiasm for the line-up to come. The collective momentum generated by the carefully orchestrated opening weekend (Girel 2013) – 450,000 people came to the Old Port to watch the most attractive elements of street and circus arts (parades, acrobats, tightrope walkers, etc.) – extended throughout the year by means of other large gatherings. Media coverage mostly helped fuel this positive image:

“Marseille is eager for popular gatherings, and is sorely lacking in festivals. As a result, the opening ceremony was a victim of its success ... nobody expected Marseille to succeed in outdoing Lille 2004 and the almost 300,000 revellers of the northern capital¹⁸.”

- 22 The desire to embody this festival atmosphere also explains the importance given to shows in tents in the scheduling. Although most contemporary companies are adopting other performance modes (David-Gibert 2006), travelling remains an emblem with a strong symbolic power. For *Circus in Capitals*, a “village of circus tents” was set up for a month at Parc Chanot, not far from the Stade Vélodrome. Although this place, dedicated to hosting conferences and exhibitions, was not somewhere often frequented by the Marseillais, the grouping of three tents was intended to improve the visibility of the event and generate the desire to discover the different companies present. Use of the term “village¹⁹” also evoked a form of conviviality, or even a bid for authenticity – values to attract the support of contemporary circus lovers (Lévy 2001). And the circus

tent is a form that “communicates” by itself, as the Massalia theatre’s audience manager suggests. For the professionals interviewed, the festive and convivial dimension is thus inherent in circus tent shows. The head of the Gymnase theatre, who had chosen to schedule a travelling company to perform outside its walls, said: “Just stepping in to a tent is a party, it’s a joy, a discovery... It is less overwhelming stepping into a tent, for some, than stepping into a theatre.” By establishing proximity between artists and spectators, the circus tent runs “counter to elitist representations of performance²⁰” by setting a specific framework for the reception of works. Thus, the evocation of the circus in its most representative forms in the collective imagination, particularly those of the festival and the tent, presented *Circus in Capitals* as a “popular” event, while helping to reinforce the image of a festive and unifying capital of culture.

Fig. 2.

Marquee village at Parc Chanot, Marseille, February 2013.

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4. Cultural Spaces for New Spectators

- 23 The desire to reach a broad audience is emphasized, in different ways, by a large proportion of respondents. The means used to attract new audiences, especially those from more working-class backgrounds, vary according to the status and context of the establishment of cultural facilities. This is linked to the rise of an “imperative of proximity” (Hélie 2005), which calls for local populations to be taken into consideration. Three of the institutions surveyed, located in working-class neighbourhoods in central and northern Marseille, were particularly concerned with ensuring close ties in the area in which they are based, and relied, in particular, on local groups and associations to do so. In order to target social groups considered to be

largely “distanced from culture,” their managers mentioned the implementation of various public outreach activities, including circus, magic, and clown skills workshops.

- 24 In the context of *Circus in Capitals*, these places put on performances in different neighbourhoods of the city, in tents or public areas. The use of scheduling outside of conventional performance spaces may indeed be conducive to a degree of audience renewal for cultural institutions (Djakouane 2014) which aim to reach sections of the public who usually feel alienated – both geographically and symbolically – from their events. The *Tendance clown* festival was chosen – organized by the Daki Ling company and comprising both ticketed shows in performance spaces and free shows – in a park in the city’s ninth district with the aim of “bringing performances to parts of Marseille that do not usually have them.” According to the festival director, there were few “regulars”:

“At a rough estimate there were no more than 10-15 per cent of the people we usually see... What was very interesting was seeing a show like *Vu*, which is not on the face of it the most accessible, and seeing it work on an audience which was in no way ‘educated,’ and was not used to seeing street theatre, let alone shows that were silent, minimalistic, and so on... This also creates a lot of play with this type of audience – which he [the show’s performer] had sometimes felt less at street theatre festivals where the audience is much more... has the codes. There, in the ninth district, they do not have the codes, that’s for sure.”

- 25 We see here how the festival director focuses on the presence of these unsophisticated spectators, whose embarrassing reactions reflect a lack of mastery of the codes of street theatre, in contrast to the more disciplined behaviour of regular theatregoers (Lahire 2009). This lack of familiarity is viewed positively as evidence of the presence of the newcomers targeted by this action. According to our observations, much of the audience in fact consisted of passers-by – parents with young children and the elderly in particular – who had not come to see the show, but who discovered it on visiting the park. Offering a free show in the public space rather than at a theatre can transform simple passers-by into transient spectators. Although a more systematic assessment of the effects of “without-walls” performances proves complex for cultural institutions (Langeard, Liot, Rui 2012), performing in the public space may, in some contexts, foster social mingling by blurring the line between “audience” and “non-audience” (Sapiro & Picaud 2015), particularly when what is on offer is free of charge.

- 26 “Without-walls” performances were also offered by the Merlan theatre. These involved around forty amateur magicians walking through the city, thanks to workshops which had run since 2010 focusing on “close-up” magic. Amateur activities are often conceived as a lever to encourage the participation of people living near a cultural institution, in order to familiarize them with its programme. Since its establishment in the fifteenth district of Marseille, the Archaos company also regularly organizes introductory workshops for children and adults for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. This gradual familiarization with circus arts and with this place will have prompted some of them to come and discover the shows of the *Cirque en Corps* festival. For the director of CREAC, it was the mixing of these “local” spectators with those from other parts of the city that helped to ensure a certain social mix during the festival:

“The interesting thing is that there was an audience from the northern districts, naturally, since this is a northern district; but there were many from the southern districts who came especially. So there was a mix of audiences, and what is more

this guaranteed it would work... The location meant that the audience was very mixed and, of course, Sunday afternoon was family orientated.”

- 27 Although geographical proximity does not automatically lead to attendance at cultural venues, the presence of spectators from “northern neighbourhoods” is perceived here as a self-evident result of the company’s extensive awareness-raising work since 2001. At the same time, the challenge for CREAC was, above all, to broaden its audience beyond the local population, in order to ensure sufficient attendance for the first edition of the festival. Indeed, since its activity had long been focused on production rather than performance, it had no prior audience of regulars to rely on to attend the shows, unlike other institutions surveyed. One of the director’s concerns was the potential to attract spectators from other parts of Marseille (especially the centre and the south), who might be reluctant to venture to a working-class neighbourhood, away from the centre that they were unfamiliar with:

“This was also the big question: would the public come here [to the fifteenth district]? Because at Parc Chanot [in the eighth district, where the shows were held in tents] we weren’t worried... we knew we would fill them. And, indeed, tickets sold very quickly there. Here we were worried right till the end [until the beginning of the festival].”

- 28 Beyond the economic consequences, the desire to “fill²¹” venues also refers to symbolic challenges, particularly for places seeking institutional recognition. In the case of CREAC, ensuring the success of the *Cirque en corps* festival through high attendance was even more important as confirmation of its status, which it had just acquired, as a national beacon of circus arts²², and for its assertion as a major player in contemporary circus on a local as well as a national scale.
- 29 Although it is not always accompanied – as in the previous cases – by specific cultural mediation activity, the scheduling of circus shows is part of an audience expansion strategy for the institutions studied. Over the course of the *Circus in Capitals* shows, the actors interviewed tried to assess the effects by appreciating the characteristics of their viewers through various forms of categorization.

5. Audience Diversification: A Situated Perception

- 30 While “knowledge of the audience, its judgements, behaviours, and reactions is indispensable” (Souchon 1990: 96) to event schedulers’ actions, this knowledge does not necessarily rely on objectivization initiatives such as carrying out studies. While they are aware of the role audience surveys can play, managers of cultural institutions do not regularly resort to them (Romanello 2012). Thus there was no particular scheme implemented by the organizers of *Circus in Capitals* to find out the precise composition of the event’s audiences. It is generally in an empirical fashion, based on box office data and their observations of performances made from the wings that professionals forge their own perceptions of spectators and try to identify their characteristics. Questioned *a posteriori* on their perception of the effects of the event, all welcomed the good audiences to the shows, especially for venues with multidisciplinary scheduling that may have managed to reach a “different” audience. One of the members of the Criée theatre noted regarding 2013: “It’s felt as though attendance at circus shows has not quite been that of ‘our’ audience.” But such an outcome did not come as a surprise to them, because most of these places already associated circus with ambitions of

audience renewal, as the manager of the Massalia theatre states: “Circus performances are after all an opportunity to broaden audiences.”

- 31 For mainstream cultural institutions, whose scheduling is largely based on theatre or classical music, putting on other disciplines, such as circus, indeed aims to attract a “new” audience. For example, at the Criée theatre, a manager describes the usual audience as being “generally female, older, not generally working class, and with a fairly high level of education.” This audience, also described as “ageing,” appears socially homogeneous and far from the ideal of diversity targeted by this national theatre. A change of management in 2011 resulted in a drive to “open up the disciplines” by proposing other forms of performance – music and dance, as well as circus. Participation in *Circus in Capitals* was an opportunity to strengthen this orientation by giving circus a more prominent place in the hope of attracting new audiences: “A more eclectic programme attracts a more eclectic audience, that’s for sure” (manager, Criée theatre). Arts events that are presented as more “eclectic” are thus conceived as a lever to attract a socially diverse audience, since they include disciplines that do not fall within “highbrow” culture. This approach recalls the strategy adopted by some opera houses which choose to schedule hip-hop dance companies – a genre in the process of legitimization – with a view to opening up to a younger, more working-class audience (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2003). These choices more broadly demonstrate the relatively eclectic tastes of managers of cultural venues, which allows them to temper practices that are generally legitimized (Dubois 2015).
- 32 A similar approach was adopted by the Gymnase theatre, which schedules circus shows from time to time. According to the manager interviewed, the company that was scheduled in 2013, which performed in a tent, attracted “a big outside audience” for two weeks. Indeed, box-office data show that regular ticket holders accounted for only 24% of spectators, compared with three quarters on average for other performances. The distinction between, on the one hand, the “usual” audience – primarily made up of season ticket holders – and, on the other, more ad-hoc spectators who are perceived as being from “outside,” appears to be a central feature of perceptions of audience by managers of cultural institutions. They thus make informal categorizations among users of the venue by identifying first of all those who regularly frequent it. The perceptions they form of their “regulars” and of their social characteristics (age, gender, place of residence, even social background – information sometimes requested from subscribers) are central and have reference value (Urrutiaguer 2014). It is on the basis of this framework that an alternative audience (or audiences) can be defined – implicitly and in a relational capacity – according to often loose categories, which may be described as “new,” “other,” “outside,” etc., as the case may be.
- 33 Within this framework, the notion of audience expansion shifts from institution to institution – its scope varying according to the local context. Thus the Criée theatre wished in 2013 to schedule clown shows by a company which had been established in Marseille for several years. This choice would appear to be an opportunity to attract a portion of the loyal audience of the troop, which usually performed at another venue:

“[François] Cervantes [the director of the company] has a real following in Marseille, and it was this audience that we were able to attract, much more than our audience... I think Cervantes’ audience is quite a mixed audience – younger, more male, too... with a lot of children, in other words families; whereas ours is really not as much of a family audience.”

- 34 Here we see how a local company is welcomed not only for its artistic quality, but also, in a pragmatic way, to capture a ready-formed audience whose characteristics should compensate for some of the shortcomings of the usual audience. The clowning element made these shows more accessible to families, with parents and children coming together²³, which is seen less often in theatre scheduling (Donnat 2011). By contrast, when they are performed at the Massalia theatre, a place dedicated to a young audience, it is the same shows' ability to attract a high number of adults and students that is emphasized, with families in this case being the regulars among audience members. Thus, depending on the context, the same work could sometimes help to "rejuvenate" the audience of the Criée, and "age" that of the Massalia, performing a rebalancing act in the two cases. In general, circus (and clowns in particular) is seen as an intergenerational form of entertainment that is accessible to all ages, including in its contemporary forms. At the same time, event schedulers often target certain age groups by using various labels according to the work – a show "for the family" or "for 10 years and above" – in a similar way to forms of demand segmentation in force in cultural industries such as television.
- 35 Confronted with the mismatch between the ideal of a social diversity and the socio-demographic characteristics of their audience, which is often perceived as a (too) homogeneous entity in terms of social background, age, and even gender, schedulers thus gamble on circus to try to narrow this gap, even if only slightly. In their view, these shows help to correct the shortcomings associated with established disciplines such as theatre by introducing a form of social diversity, albeit relative and difficult to assess precisely in the absence of specific studies. In particular, without information on the characteristics of the spectators who attended these venues as part of *Circus in Capitals*, it is difficult to tell whether the apparent renewal emphasized by the professionals interviewed was a genuine diversification of the audience. In other words, we do not know whether there were newcomers largely "from previously little – or unrepresented categories" (Donnat 2007: 20), or more likely a trend of "widening audiences," with newcomers mostly from the already over-represented categories²⁴ such as the middle and upper classes (based on studies of contemporary circus audiences). From this point of view, the "diversity" emphasized by the professionals interviewed may also refer to their experience of the variety of patterns of attendance and of the reception of contemporary circus shows. A recent study confirms that – as well as an audience of connoisseurs made up of adults who have been sensitized in some cases for many years to evolutions of the art form – these works attract a considerable proportion of casual spectators, many of whom are parents and their young children who see it as a family outing to encourage a sense of "wonder" (Salaméro & Julhe 2017).

6. The Attendance and Construction of a "Contemporary Circus Audience"

- 36 While other studies have documented the multiplicity of modes of reception and appropriation of artistic forms billed in 2013 (Girel 2015), the assessment of cultural events generally favours quantitative indicators (attendance, economic benefits, and so on) over more detailed analysis of the social structure of the audience. Often noted in the evaluation reports of European Capitals of Culture, such shortcomings were also

lamented in the case of Marseille-Provence 2013 (Maisetti 2015). The official evaluation report of the event, while touting the success of the operation with an estimated total attendance of 11 million, regretted the absence of a specific study that would have identified the characteristics of the different audiences concerned.

- 37 As for *Circus in Capitals*, the 250 or so performances brought a total 56,000 entries: this figure, interpreted as a high level of attendance, was welcomed by all actors concerned. The “fill rate” of the premises, which averaged 85%, was also highlighted to emphasize that this form of entertainment had “filled [venues].” The success of the event, translated into quantitative terms, could serve as a sign of real local demand for the art form, including in the eyes of the organizers for whom the circus audience was still to be built, as the director of CREAC points out:

“We said to ourselves, ‘We need to build an audience.’ ... Here [in Marseille before 2013] there is no contemporary circus audience. Sometimes the Merlan theatre does something, or the Gymnase ... So there were many questions around that ... And in fact we were impressed [during *Circus in Capitals*] because there was a keen audience, which came and which was there and which was present, so we were full.”

- 38 While the circus shows scheduled on an ad-hoc basis already engaged some audiences prior to 2013, the high number put on during Marseille-Provence 2013 provided a context whereby fans of circus could go more frequently, and newcomers could learn about its contemporary forms. This situation serves to illustrate how cultural intermediaries, and event schedulers in particular, actively contribute, on their level, to the process of the production of taste for an art form (Lizé & Roueff 2010). By choosing works deemed to be “accessible” and by offering these works via a range of modes of reception (in theatres, in circus tents, and in the public space), the event organizers strived to consolidate and widen a circle of contemporary circus-goers willing to become regular consumers of events that were destined to expand at the local level.
- 39 The success of the event and the demonstration of a “contemporary circus audience,” which was now quantified, enabled CREAC to convince local and regional authorities – which had initially refused to commit to permanent funding – to subsidize the creation of the *Biennale internationale des arts du cirque* (BIAC). Supported by around thirty cultural institutions located in the Provence Alpes Cote d’Azur region, the first edition of BIAC was successfully held in early 2015. On that occasion, the image of the people of Marseille unanimously enthused by the circus was conveniently taken up by the mayor of the city, who presented the biennial as a “great gift to all the Marseillais and all the inhabitants of the region, who had endorsed contemporary circus in 2013²⁵.” This enthusiasm has been confirmed throughout the editions of the biennial, with the 2019 report stating visitor numbers at more than 110,000, including 77,500 in Marseille, enabling its organizers to showcase it as “the world’s largest circus festival.” The European Capital of Culture has thus taken contemporary circus beyond its transient nature, anchoring it long term within local cultural institutions and in public practices, and making Marseille and its region a new reference point in this field.

Conclusion

- 40 Once it had been objectified by the numbers, the consensual figure of the “general public,” which had been pursued since Marseille’s capital of culture application phase, became an argument for the continuation of an event dedicated to circus and for the pursuit of a certain form of cultural policy. The benefits associated with the high attendance recorded during 2013 for the economy and tourism indeed prompted local leaders to bank on an event-based rationale to continue the transformation of Marseille’s image. The first French city to win the title of European Capital of Sport in 2017 – a year that was presented as “sporty and festive,” Marseille organized a follow-up to the capital of culture with the event “Marseille Provence 2018, mon amour,” which brought more than 1.2 million visitors. As in other metropolises, these projects are part of a form of using culture and entertainment by urban planning policies, which was a phenomenon observed in the case of Lille after 2004 (Gravari-Barbas & Jacquot 2007). While they undoubtedly contribute to the development of a region’s cultural resources and practices, these projects are integrated into processes of urban redevelopment, often accompanied by the gentrification of neighbourhoods (Peraldi *et al.* 2015; Vivant 2008), which has not failed to elicit criticism from certain actors in Marseille (Maisetti 2014).
- 41 Artistic events thus constitute a privileged frame of observation to highlight the way in which the managers of cultural institutions link different aims and levels of action, whether this is to respond to the demands of local or national cultural policies, or translate their aspirations to a mix of audiences, or else to access a form of recognition. In general, event schedulers plan based on their representations of art forms and the various properties associated with them, as well as on their perceptions of the target audiences. This presence of characteristics common to the practice of schedulers has been highlighted elsewhere in the context of a broader analysis of the organization of contemporary circus festivals in France and Brazil (Spinelli 2015). In the Brazilian context, the qualities of “an” audience (conceived uniformly despite its diversity) and its supposed tastes influenced the choice of shows at festivals. In turn, the recognition of “local taste” as perceived by professionals shaped viewers’ perceptions of the circus. The creation of cultural program is thus inherently associated with the creation of new audiences, some of whom may become amateurs of contemporary circus (Spinelli 2019: 115, 123).
- 42 In the case of Marseille, circus was presented, by way of its aesthetic properties and its multiple attendance patterns, as a form particularly favourable to attracting the “general public” – even more so since the symbols borrowed from traditional circus imagery reinforced the festive dimension of the event. Respondents’ insistence on the “unifying” nature of this art form reflects their adherence to the founding values of cultural policy, which is manifested in a commitment to the quest for “new” audiences. For most of the institutions surveyed, participation in *Circus in Capitals* is an extension of a strategy of cultural diversification and audience expansion beyond the circle of regular attendees. For a specialized venue such as CREAC, the stakes in terms of audience are even bigger since it is a matter of consolidating its status as a major player in contemporary circus, both at the local and the national level. At the same time, discourse analysis shows how certain representations of the target audience can be mobilized for strategic purposes to justify the use of public intervention or in the

interests of recognition – the rhetorical use of terms such as “popular” or “diversity” being part of a lexical register favoured in cultural policy. In this context, the professionals interviewed sometimes make do with a semantic blurring that confuses both the aesthetics involved and the social categories actually affected by contemporary circus.

- 43 Particularly visible in the case of the circus, this ambivalent perception of the audience was widely shared by the cultural actors involved in the implementation of Marseille-Provence 2013. Tellingly, the evaluation report observed that ‘while managers and representatives of the intellectual professions had a strong presence at the events, half of the operators believe that their audiences were more socially diverse than usual’ (Association MP2013 & Euréval 2014: 94). This propensity to overestimate the social diversity of the audience evokes a form of collective belief that can also be a way of avoiding the “discourse of failed democratization” (Fleury 2007), and of limiting disillusionment generated by observing the persistence of inequalities in accessing culture.
- 44 Studying the issue of audiences from the point of view of cultural actors helps take account of “functional interdependence” (Lizé & Roueff 2010: 11) between production activities (understood here in the broad sense, including event scheduling functions) and of the reception of works, which generally give rise to distinct sociological approaches. Insofar as the very definition of audience is the subject of different conceptions depending on the actors (Hélie & Champy 2003; Picaud 2017), this type of approach also invites us to look at the way in which studies of audience give rise to multiple forms of appropriation and usages by managers of cultural institutions (Romanello 2015). Such an inquiry would, finally, allow us to investigate more broadly the methods these professionals use to develop their knowledge and representations of spectators.

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NOTES

1. This geographical area comprised 97 towns around Marseille and other cities in the department of Bouches-du-Rhône, including Arles and Aix-en-Provence, where a circus festival was also proposed in September by the *Centre international des arts en mouvement*.
2. While other capitals of culture had included circus events, such as Lille in 2004, these had been rather modest in terms of number of performances.
3. Initially called the "European City of Culture," the mechanism was renamed in 1999 by Melina Mercouri and Jack Lang, the respective Greek and French culture ministers. Since 2009, at least two cities have been designated "capitals" each year from a list of candidates from European Union member states.
4. MP2013 also contributed up to €1.2mn to the funding of *Circus in Capitals* out of an overall budget of nearly €4mn, which was covered by local and regional authorities.
5. Guy Carrara, "Presentation of the *Biennale des arts du cirque* project," Marseille-Provence 2013 organization archives, 2007.
6. Former member of the cabinet of the minister of culture Jack Lang (1991-1992), Bernard Latarjet managed the La Villette park and *Grande halle* in Paris for ten years, where he nurtured contemporary circus.
7. Marseille European Capital of Culture application documents, 2008: 97.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Jean-François Chougnet, director general of Marseille-Provence 2013, introduction to the "Circus in Capitals" press kit, 2013.
10. Approached in 2009 about this project, the regional authorities had not wanted to commit to the continued funding required for a biennial.
11. Similar to Parisian music venues (Picaud 2015), these places differed in degree of fame and "symbolic capital," partly linked to their age, their establishment in socially different neighbourhoods (central or suburban), and the level of institutional recognition they benefited from.
12. The circus also has a very low "no-audience" rate, with only 22% of French people over the age of 15 having never attended a circus event in their lifetime (Donnat 2009).
13. The Gymnase theatre had planned to host a company that was emblematic of "traditional" circus (the Cirque Arlette Gruss), but the project could not go ahead. A contemporary company (performing in a tent) was scheduled instead.
14. For example, circus shows with a comic and/or very spectacular dimension are generally considered more accessible than works that foreground a textual/acting dimension.

15. The main idea involved including *January in the Stars* in the circus festival scheduling, which had been organized for several years at the Seyne-sur-Mer by Théâtre Europe.
 16. Interview with Ulrich Fuchs, deputy director general of MP2013, *8e art magazine*, No. 22, Nov-Dec 2012: 31.
 17. Jean-François Chougnet, director general of Marseille-Provence 2013, introduction to the 'Circus in Capitals' press kit.
 18. Freschel Agnes, *Cahier Zibeline* "Special MP2013. Un mois d'année capitale," February 2013.
 19. Lille 2004 had also set up a village of circus tents, the "Barnum des Postes," located near the working-class neighbourhoods of the south of the city.
 20. See "Cirque en campagne. 10 propositions pour mai 2012, une nouvelle politique du cirque en France," May 2012: 4.
 21. The very high rate of filling venues (95% on average) for the *Cirque en corps* shows was a tangible sign of its success in terms of attendance.
 22. CREAC's involvement in Marseille-Provence 2013 favoured it obtaining the label of national circus hub in 2012. With financial support from the Ministry of Culture and local authorities, the mission of these institutions (currently 14) is to help to create and perform contemporary circus.
 23. This family audience is present even if the company presents its work as being "theatre" clowning, which does not specifically target children.
 24. More broadly, in a context of increasingly eclectic cultural tastes (Coulangeon 2003), putting on "popular" art forms can also be seen as a way of satisfying the expectations of "omnivorous" spectators (Peterson 1992), who can thus add circus to their agenda of cultural outings.
 25. Jean-Claude Gaudin, editorial of the mayor of Marseille, BIAC programme, January 2015: 6.
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ABSTRACTS

Focusing on the case of Marseille-Provence 2013, European Capital of Culture, this article investigates the importance placed on the audience in the scheduling of circus events. Based on a field study combining interviews, observations, and documentary analysis, its central theme is cultural actors' representations of the circus and circus audiences, and the ways in which these actors justify the scheduling of events. A study of the speech of circus professionals shows that, while sharing an idealized vision that circus attracts a wide audience, they draw on references to this "popular art" strategically to give substance to an event that is intended to be fun and to bring people together. Contemporary circus is thus seen as a means of broadening the audience, which takes various forms depending on the context. While the real impact in terms of social diversification of audiences remains difficult to assess, high attendance at the event has made the existence of a contemporary circus audience visible at the local level.

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