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Rae Beth Gordon, *Dances with Darwin, 1875-1910. Vernacular Modernity in France*. Surrey: Ashgate Press, 2009. xiv + 276 pp. Illustrations and bibliography. \$89.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0754652432; ISBN-13: 978-0754652434.

Review by Vanessa R. Schwartz, University of Southern California.

Rae Beth Gordon, one of the premier interpreters of the role of physical gesture in French history, has written another excellent study that illuminates why and how bodily performance is culturally specific and historically meaningful. Not just a history of the body, this book is a history of the body in motion and brings powerful insights to study of the role of performance and the relation between audience and performer to the foreground as few books have. In her last book, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis, From Cabaret to Early Cinema*, she illuminated the tradition of comic gestures in music hall culture in France and identified the centrality of the bodily culture associated with hysteria in the late nineteenth century as a key underlying frame for interpreting the culture of ticks, grimaces and frenzied automatic movements that permeated the nightly pleasures on offer at such well-known places as the Moulin Rouge and that eventually also became a staple of the movies.^[1] In this book, she builds on that research with the keen observation that so many of the behaviors of mental patients were known as “dances.” Performers such as Jane Avril were not just acting like hysterics, they were hysterics themselves, as Avril’s own time under watch at the Salpêtrière makes clear. Pathology was thus transformed into performance. It is impossible not to think about the likes of Serge Gainsbourg or Lady Gaga in this light.

In this study, Gordon builds on her deep knowledge of performance culture to consider the links between the “epileptic singers” as they were known and the popular acceptance of Darwinism in France, as well as the simultaneous expansion of colonialism and its concomitant spectacularization into performance culture in the metropole. This history of motor habits is insightful and original. Just when you thought enough had been said about Josephine Baker, Gordon steps in to show that in order to understand her popularity in France, we must not simply consider the 1920s, but rather we must see her very success as the epitome of a much longer tradition in entertainment in France going back to the 1870s. As she shows, Europeans did not differentiate between Africans and African Americans as they linked racialized body culture to new evolutionary themes. Baker was performing something that had been played nightly for more than a generation. At the same time, the author argues that France was not the only place where such performances transpired and yet France stood out for its ribald and lascivious entertainment culture around the world. In fact, she contends that the French were particularly drawn to such performances since, through them, they were able to hold up an only slightly distorted mirror to themselves as an audience, since the terms used to describe the bodily movements of Africans were also often marshaled to describe the French themselves by other Europeans: lustful, carnal, filled with gestural histrionics. Gordon also deftly traces the way that white performers imitated and appropriated the rhythms and movements of the African dancers and thus provides a historically rich genealogy of the hybridization associated with popular culture today.

For those familiar with Gordon's previous work, the initial chapter on the epileptic singers provides a sort of recapitulation of her earlier study. This is essential, however, since here she connects the hysterical aspects of performance to Darwinism in France and to the most prevalent of concerns about the new science regarding the human's descent from apes which was expressed in a genuine fear of regression, rather than in a confidence about evolution. In a series of interconnected chapters, she creates a rich catalogue of pathologies and oddities of the human zoo variety but then hones in on the aesthetic of the ugly, the grotesque nature of dances such as the cancan and the mysterious gyrations of the cakewalk and its popularity as a dance craze in France. Only a last chapter on Alfred Jarry and Père Ubu feels somewhat out of place in the book since the chapter is more explicitly about avant-garde culture than the popular theatrical culture of, say, the *grand guignol* to which she makes reference, but which she does not illuminate.

The book, which operates as an analytical description of entertainment culture, is particularly astute about two things. The first is that all live entertainment is as much about the audience as the performer, and Gordon is extremely sensitive as to why and how audiences might revel in regressive fantasies, how some feared the power of the performance to create imitation in its audiences, and how, for others, the release provided by these exaggerated carnal invocations provided a road to pleasure. To this almost psychologically-driven mode of explanation, Gordon also adds the contextual specificity of scientific and social scientific knowledge about mind and body at the time in France and the key role race played in creating the contours of identification and disidentification both within scientific discourse and popular culture. She also understands that these performances exploited excessive and bizarre movements and unfamiliar rhythms and this is what excited the public, whether they originated in the mental hospital or came from Africa or American minstrel shows.

The author has clearly mined the popular illustrated press of the late nineteenth century to provide so thick a description of the overlaps between the application of popular scientific thought and entertainment. Like every historian of gesture, Gordon comes up against the ephemerality of the movements she seeks to illuminate. The study uses many illustrations and some early films as both reflections of and commentaries upon the performances she considers. Yet despite her sensitivity to and awareness of the finer points of the cakewalk in all its forms, she does not so thoughtfully distinguish among her visual sources. Advertising posters and press caricatures, paintings and films; they all had different formal investments and relations to the world of dance, entertainment culture, and the racial stereotypes she describes. Her work does share some overlap with Jody Blake's *Le Tumulte Noir* whose orientation is more towards the formal aspects of the images in question.^[2] In particular, caricature is itself a form based in exaggeration and thus may share the same role as these performances by shocking through excess. Further, much work has been done on racial stereotyping in and through images. Considering images as representations of performances as opposed to representations of race itself may be a subtle, but nevertheless worthy nuance to consider. In passing, she explains that the posters of Chéret often tamed the out-of-control performances. If that is the case, why did the ad need to be tame, but the performance could be out of control? She mentions several films that depict the cakewalk, including the comically diabolical Méliès film, "Le Cake-Walk infernal."

Although so many early films were adaptations of stage culture as Gordon contends in this book, as well as in her previous one, Méliès, of all early film pioneers, created a purely cinematic universe relying on the "tricks" rendered possible with the movie camera. His experience as a performer of magic tricks no doubt oriented his sense that film could be magical, but he went well beyond the stage in his films. Work about the Dreyfus Affair and its press representation might also have served as further contextualization for thinking through the formal dimension

of such visual representations. In other words, given the large source base of images used in this study and given her attention to matters of form in performance, the reader wonders what light she might shed on the subject were she to have taken on questions of visual representation in relation to performance as opposed to simply using images to study past performances.

Aside from the rich interpretation of popular visual culture itself, there is another major implication of this research, which has to do with the fact that this study is also about the popular cultural origins of high Modernism, from Fauvism's interest in primitivism to Dada's preoccupations with automatic response and Surrealism's attraction to incoherence. This subject is a vast area of research in art history and literary studies, where popular culture is mostly only considered insofar as writers like Breton comment on the uncanny world of the wax museum or artists such as Picasso are inspired by African masks. Gordon's study not only makes explicit the relation between what we might consider high and low culture or the mainstream and avant-garde. In her attention to the body in motion, she also reminds us that gesture is an important part of human culture and that modernity is fundamentally engaged with mobility in a way that puts such topics as dance at the heart of how Paris became the capital of the nineteenth century. Although the café-concert is dead, and its heir, the Crazy Horse, on its last legs, among the most successful institutions of dance culture, the ballet at the Opéra still remains as popular as ever. Maybe the audience preferred beauty after all.

NOTES

[1] Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis, From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[2] Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999).

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