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DEI and Missing Social Protections

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DEI and Missing Social Protections: The Case of Borealis - A Festival for Experimental Music in Bergen, Norway

Note: This presentation includes extracts from interviews conducted by the researcher. Codes corresponding to pseudonyms have been included, and the code sheet has been stored in a secure location. Aspects of quotations may have also been altered by the researcher to preserve anonymity.

Borealis - A Festival for Experimental Music is a yearly 5-day music festival taking place in Bergen, Norway, every year.

The festival has been run from 2014 until now by artistic director Peter Meanwell, the period I want to focus on today.

What's unique about this festival is that over the past ten years it has continually addressed fundamental issues of diversity, equality, and inclusion in its programming, but also in its staffing, communication, even in its understanding of experimental music itself.

Part of my postdoctoral work at Lund University in Sweden has been to study this festival from an institutional ethnographic perspective. What drew me to choosing this case study was first of all how much diversity work it was doing (that I was not seeing absolutely anywhere else in the music field at least), but also I was quite interested in understanding how it was negotiating its commitments to diversifying with maintaining some understanding of a tradition of experimental music. Because I was doing an ethnography, I wanted to understand how these issues were being worked out in practice, understanding how things like grant applications and local characteristics were also contributing to this transformation.

For this conference, I wanted to focus on one specific aspect of this larger project in order to talk specifically about the people who work at the festival, and what these transformations have been like from their perspective.

Its connection to the topic of women in music is actually two-fold. First, the policies of this super progressive organisation benefit women directly, with the festival being perhaps the first to insist on gender equal programming already in 2017. Second, and my actual connection to the topic of the conference, was my realisation during fieldwork that most people organising the festival were female, with the majority having also immigration backgrounds.

While I have also been looking at how concepts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion circulate in wider institutional ecosystems, in this presentation I want to focus specifically on the connection between experimental music and diversity innovations before examining how the realisation of these goals currently cannot be imagined or disentangled from the case study's challenging working conditions, which mirror challenges in other creative industries. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed, as well as cultural labour scholars McRobbie and Lazzarato, and feminist scholar Nancy Fraser, I first want to argue how concepts of experimental music and diversity work are intersecting at the case study, then summarize in part two some of my findings on the attitudes and approaches to work at the case study, before arguing in summary that while this alliance between emancipatory reforms and neoliberal welfare state reforms has been extraordinarily productive, a new and non-patriarchal alliance between intersectional feminist work and social security is necessary to address observed challenges.

Part One

Part one looks at how ideas about experimental music and diversity work have converged at the case study.

Summarising accounts from my field work, the approach to experimental music here is broadly connected to an understanding of avantgardism as a set of instructions rather than a specific historical lineage, said differently a generalised, process of breaking with tradition and convention that foregrounds its utopic intentionality over the realisation of concrete claims. This generalism allows for new music history and minority struggles to find common cause in a critique of traditional authority. A related and continued expansion of experimental music's music theatrical and related curatorial turns has also expanded the possible sites of artistic intervention, going beyond questions of staging to also include institutional concerns. This allows it to address broader issues of how to contextualise other critical experimental practices such as its current focus on Samí experimentalism, but also to emphasise that all aspects of the institution impact the music that is produced, as illustrated by the following excerpt from one of my interviews:

art does not exist in a vacuum, nor has it ever, so **to make any curatorial or organizational decisions, means that we are impacting access, resources, sustainability. We have to be intentional about how we produce the festival.** That has led to thinking about gender equity in programming, but also staffing, how we use our money, the environmental impact of the festival, our impact on the local scene in

Bergen, who we give a platform to, who do we support through employment, how does our commissioning money get spent, etc. It is a multi-faceted thing. [LFnA2W]

The festival is not trying to develop the new fixed model, but rather as with experimental music practice, aims to be a constant source of new ideas, searching for the next ‘thing’. This is perceivable in the next excerpt:

we're in a constant state of change. [...] we are questioning how we do things, and who for, and why. [...] instead of it being this linear process of change, it's constant churn. **Because if we're not constantly questioning our assumptions, we're not doing the work.** We don't like set something and decide, okay, that's it now. It's that constant questioning, [and] thinking of the festival as **something that is in constant flux**, as a positive, and not as changing from one point of stasis to another.

[dMY4mx]

In this talk of constant flux, we can glimpse at another convenient ideological alignment that has taken place at the case study. Avantgardist institutional critique and emancipatory struggles for minority recognition shares a critique of traditional authority with neoliberalism in the prioritisation of temporary, project-based creative work in flexible combinations.

This approach is conveniently highly compatible with the aims of Norwegian cultural funding, which currently emphasises that diversity is achieved only through necessary structural changes, and that this is needed to make cultural life more representative of society (Arts Council Norway 2020, 4). As the majority of Norwegian culture funding still goes to more rigid high art institutions that are not able to quickly adapt, the combination of experimental music with delivering on innovation around inclusion is a unique strategic positioning for the case study, and has resulted in its rapid growth (Berge 2022). [show slide on growth]

Summarising this first section, the point has been to demonstrate how the case study has, through a definition of avantgardism as a generalised breaking with tradition and convention, connected experimental music with institutional critique in the name of diversity, and made a strategy of promoting both minority representation and a flexible, project-based institutional structure attractive for neoliberalist cultural policy. This has resulted in the festival's significant growth in the past decade in both monetary and reputational terms, such as it being mentioned as an innovative model in Bergen's municipal art and culture plan (Johnson 2021, 4).

Part Two

With Part Two, we will examine this alliance between diversity work and neoliberalism from a worker perspective, returning to institutional ethnography. IE focusses on gathering data from people about their working lives, and assembling these accounts together, with the goal of finding the ‘disjunctures between people’s everyday knowledge and ruling concepts’ (paraphrasing DeVault 2021, 15). This also follows with Sarah Ahmed’s argument that studying how concepts are put into practice can reveal ongoing processes of in- and exclusion (2012, 182).

In the sixteen interviews I undertook with various festival workers in different positions, what became overwhelmingly clear was the extent to which stereotypically postfeminist traits such as attentiveness, self-discipline, and emotional labour could be pretty directly mapped onto the tendencies I perceived across working experiences at the festival (Gill 2007). It should thus also come as no surprise that issue of stress, stress management, and even burnout have also proven highly prevalent, resulting in workers leaving and even challenges hiring and finding new volunteers. This contrasted with ruling discourses emphasising staff retention and training, and leaders’ best attempts to make the working environment agreeable.

Next I want to get into some of the findings in order to show precisely how these postfeminist dynamics emerged at the case study, negotiated together with an avantgardist institutional critique as well.

Personal Connection to Festival Mission

While workers’ backgrounds varied when it came to educational background, professional experiences, and the amount they worked for the festival, they all share a deep *personal* commitment to the values that the festival works towards spreading and realising. Its commitment to diversifying attracted workers who themselves believed in the importance of DEI work generally, and because of their own diverse backgrounds, they feel also personally invested in this goal.

In the words of one worker discussing why they wanted to work with the case study: I felt like they did important work and **I wanted to be part of a group where I didn't feel like I was the outsider thinking about [diversity...]** It feels like a better starting point that we all agree that this is something that we need to think about and then [figure out how] to go in this direction.[wae8Ug]

Being employed at the festival is becoming part of a work family who also shares your values, seeing themselves as joining with others to realise the progressive, emancipatory work that the festival was doing.

Connected to this, many workers mentioned that a highlight of their job were workshops and activities organised for them specifically by artists in residence, like a reading group on Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening*. These were seen as moments of 'what we're doing this for', personal enrichment resonating with deeply-held values, and where artists' ideas were directly informing how festival staff approach their jobs.

Doing Something Crazy

The festival lasts for five days per year, but many workers are engaged with it in some capacity year-round. This means they spend a lot of time working out how their personal visions of an artistic, diverse society can be realised for those few brief, heterotopic days. In a work culture of constantly experimenting, this leads to a desire to realise something new and totally 'crazy', creating an experiment, pushing the limits of the possible to carve out a space embodying their values, but also necessitating long and intense hours in the build up to the yearly festival. (This is also where the aspect of craft and excellence comes in that the festival has pretty clearly inherited from Western Art Music).

As we see in the next quote:

Because we don't want to just solve the problem, we want to solve it in a specific way. I think maybe someone would say that we make the problem. We don't want to limit people. Right? And this is maybe also a bit of a pride thing. We are the people who make it happen. And **there is a trademark almost to Borealis with the crazy productions**. We're going to have 30 tons of sand in this house, and we're going to do a crane dancing thing. **And it balances on the edge of cool and fun, and absolutely unhealthy.** [XP6qcQ]

Note here too how the interviewee mixes the festival's 'trademark' with their own pride and desire in solving challenging production problems. This underscores the internalisation and personal commitment that are important criteria for success at the organisation. Note also how they seem to heroise the unhealthiness of this tough work, downplaying it.

A Project-based Organisation, High Uncertainty and Self-Responsibility

To realise these projects ‘on the edge’, the institution has adopted fluid, non-hierarchical working practices that contrast with the traditionally stricter divisions of labour in classical music, and by way of shared institutional links (think education), much of experimental music as well. It can be described as a *project-based organisation*, consisting of many “temporary pockets of accumulation“ creating a “multiplicity of projects associating a variety of people, some of whom participate in several projects” (Boltanski Chiapello 2018, 105), scrambling hierarchies and rewarding self-directed, self-motivated work.

The strong employee protections of the Norwegian welfare system are generally still in place here but are transformed as well. The festival is a spike of activity every year, and so employees have developed a system for banking and cashing in overtime hours when there is less work. However, most workers at the festival are on *temporary* contracts, and thus *cannot* have this level of security. Considering that everyone working for the case study balances multiple jobs, this employee security seems to also produce a *gradient* of working conditions down to volunteers working in the spirit of the Norwegian tradition known as *dugnad*. This illustrates a dynamic of fracturing worker solidarity mirroring developments elsewhere in the changing face of work in the creative industries (see Lazzarato).

What I found was that those best able to stay on were not just the ones attracted to the festival’s emancipatory values, but those most willing to personally invest in them, rewarded in the best cases with improved stability through becoming an employee, getting a place in the festival office, and thus being closer to the nexus of information relay, the real source of stability.

The downside of this investment is however a corresponding willingness to be personally invested in the organisation’s financial challenges, themselves often stemming from this flexible system, leading to workers accepting working hours cuts to help solve budget deficits, themselves the result of this just-in-time model of precarious working conditions (Jackson 2012, 13). This reflects the typically neoliberalist inversion wherein “it is the wage earner who is exposed to the risks of industry and it is the entrepreneur [...] who is protected from them” (Lazzarato 2016, 26; translated version of Cohen 2006).

Part 3, Conclusion

Assembling this together, the goal has been to demonstrate how the *kind* of subjects the case study elicits both align with a postfeminist sensibility, as well as with the ethos of experimental music, in order to realise the institution’s diversity-related innovations. These are people who have a personal connection to the festival’s goals, want to do something

creative, crazy, disruptive, and non-traditional, and are able to creatively problem solve to ensure both their job security and the financial survival of the organisation.

Stepping back, my attempt in this presentation has been to try to carve out a second plane on which the case study is operating. It does a fantastic job creating innovative and critical solutions for realising more diverse society, doing this by tapping into the capabilities of flexible, creative workers. However, as I have tried to demonstrate there is a *second* level that reveals itself in the ethnographic process, where young diverse creative workers are experiencing truly challenging working conditions.

What is concerning are the indications that these dynamics are both systemic and gendered, as reflected both the literature on creative work and in my ethnographic results which show how the Borealis festival is held up as a model to be copied and as a testbed of innovation for Norwegian diversity policy.

Having had a brief window into the case study workers' professional challenges, all of which seem to relate not to job fulfilment or even impact, but to job security, stress, and pay, I want to close by arguing together with creative labour scholar Angela McRobbie that this passionate, experimental, critical work that we've just looked at is being “‘systematically [both] promoted and put to work’” to created value, while also acting as a force of gender re-traditionalisation.

Thus “creativity [becomes] both a passport into desirable or even passionate work, and an instrument of capture, the cost of which is the removal of historical forms of protection and security” (110).

This produces a class of creative, gendered, precarious workers invested personally in their jobs, less reliant on welfare services (while of course still profiting in a global sense from their relative wealth, *ibid.*, 153), caught in a career lacking in the promised upwards *financial* mobility, and who are subjected to a high-stress job environment.

So what to do?

In the last minute of this presentation, I want to sketch out a way forward.

What the Borealis festival case study has revealed, for better or for worse, is the *productivity* of an approach aligning neoliberal reforms with emancipatory ones, a coalition that has been massively productive at disrupting the existing order (emancipatory being a shorthand here for all forms of identity-based or sociological struggles for equality, Hall 2018; Fraser 2020).

However, the difficult working conditions revealed by institutional ethnography's phenomenological approach make it clear that a return of 2nd wave feminism's demands for redistribution *alongside* demands for recognition are long overdue. To do this, I want to return to Nancy Fraser and argue for what she calls a

“principled new alliance [between emancipation and] social protection [...] integrating our longstanding interest in non-domination with legitimate interests in solidarity and social security” (2020, 328).

Fraser concludes the essay by asking:

“Will the emancipatory struggles of the twenty-first century serve to advance the disembedding and deregulation of markets? Or will they serve to extend and democratize social protections and to make them more just? (Fraser 2020, 328)

To briefly answer, I want to return to the beginning, and the goal of the institutionally-critical experimentation that is being undertaken by the case study. Borealis festival is *already* involved in the realm of critical knowledge production, activist curatorial practices, etc. So, expanding this radically to a renewed focus on the (radical) democratisation of social protections in a way that includes its own workers could constitute a rich future area of experimentation. If any festival is creative, capable, and critical enough to succeed in such a task, it's them.

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