

Performing Reality

Essay by Magdalena Glotzer

Although full of characters and movement, Toulouse-Lautrec's posters reveal scenes devoid of authentic human connection. At first glance, the posters show people openly interacting with each other; however, these relationships quickly dissolve into disharmony. There is no communication, fellowship, or congruity between the subjects in his prints. Toulouse-Lautrec depicts social performances rather than personal engagement, revealing that physical proximity creates an illusion of connection. Consider, for example, how a theater stage confines actors while simultaneously holding them at an emotional distance; actors must maintain their respective characters rather than relate to each other in reality. Similarly, the arrangements of subjects in Toulouse-Lautrec's prints present superficial simulations of reality, revealing social settings that lack authenticity and connection.

Toulouse-Lautrec was likely drawing from the urban environment in which he resided while creating his posters. He lived in Montmartre, a district of Paris brimming with nightclubs, brothels, and cabarets. Toulouse-Lautrec was fascinated by performance and was acquainted with many dancers and actors. The business of performance certainly prospered at night, but theatrics probably infiltrated all aspects of life in Montmartre. Toulouse-Lautrec also explored the greater Parisian landscape and its urbanization. He implicates modernity's impact on social life and interpersonal relations, exposing how the public spectacle masks isolation and alienation felt by many in the new, urban world.¹

In Toulouse-Lautrec's print titled *Skating*, which was published in a journal called *Le Rire* in 1896, the viewer approaches subjects in a skating rink. Though the white space at the bottom of the print acts as a barrier to entry – much like an orchestra pit in a theater prohibits the audience from jumping on stage – we are situated across the table from a well-dressed, red-bearded man. His shoulders are oriented towards us – a sign of open body language – but there is no engagement with us, and we are left to observe the rink. The figures are clustered, which seems to imply some relationship between them. However, following the body language from one person to another, we notice that each subject is alone, disconnected. Eventually, our gaze falls on the small, central figure in the distance. Her eyes are hidden by dark glasses, but we can feel her watching us. Standing opposite her concealed gaze, we become aware of the implications of watching, as both, the audience and the observer restrained to the sidelines.

L'Artisan Moderne, an advertisement for an interior designer from 1895, depicts a woman in a frilly gown sitting in bed with her dog. A man has just entered the room. His white frock suggests that he is a doctor, though the title of the print identifies him as an interior designer. He holds a hammer and toolbox. The lady looks at him as he directs his scrutinizing, smirking gaze at the maid. She stands sheepishly in the corner, eyebrows raised. Her mouth is poised in a small "o," signaling fear or surprise. This poster depicts a farcical take on the theme of a lascivious doctor visiting a love-sick young lady.² The man will treat her illness through necessary (though unconventional) means. By using this scene to advertise a business, Toulouse-Lautrec replaces reality with fantasy, like a theater performance might.

¹ Eyerman, Ron. "Modernity and Social Movements" in *Social Change and Modernity*. Edited by Haferkamp, Hans, and Neil J. Smelser. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 37-42.

² Nora Desloge, *Toulouse-Lautrec, The Baldwin M. Baldwin Collection, San Diego Museum of Art*, 1988, p. 246

The way that the viewer is entangled in this scene also warrants attention. There is a zigzag of sight lines. From dog to woman, to man to maid, back to man, the narrative is confined among the characters and the viewer is ignored. However, the vantage point of the print situates the viewer on the edge of the lady's bed; the viewer is in the space. The implication is that we can watch, but not partake. This framework is reminiscent of a stage setting. However, another intention is suggested by our vantage point: The sensual nature of the unfolding scene in tandem with our invisibility to the characters conjures a sense of voyeurism, an accusation with which we must grapple.

La Goulue, 1894, also portrays a scene of seduction and voyeurism. Two well-known and recognizable Montmartre performers dance, their bodies close and closed off from us. The dancers, La Goulue and "No Bones" Valentin, sway, absorbed in themselves, perhaps even locking eyes. La Goulue's back is exposed, lengthening her bare neck up to the *chignon* piled on the crown of her head. On the left, a small, faintly drawn figure emerges out of the background. His eyes droop; he looks old and tired. As he watches the pair dance, we eventually recognize ourselves reflected in him. Toulouse-Lautrec thus defines the old man and the viewer as voyeuristic observers, because neither is part of the sensual interaction. By adding an audience, Toulouse-Lautrec defines the dance as a performance, thereby stripping the sensuality of intimacy, and illuminating our foolishness in believing the farce. His posters thus highlight the limits of performance: One cannot become a part of it, but only watch from afar, seeking connections that are not even authentic on the stage.

The relationships in Toulouse-Lautrec's posters are defined by the physical closeness of the figures, rather than communication or interaction, suggesting their superficiality. Additionally, Toulouse-Lautrec holds his viewers near, yet separate from the scene. The viewer is restrained by the emotional distance between characters. By presenting each image from the vantage point of observer, Toulouse-Lautrec establishes his posters as performances themselves, and the viewers as the audience.