The Traditional Circus as Trade, Ritual, and Art

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Introduction

The traditional circus is primarily a nomadic trade. It is based, like all trades, on a range of skills used to produce values. Its conditions of existence determine to a large extent its modes of production and operation. Its challenge is to achieve a profitable balance between costs and income. From its immemorial origins it had to adjust to a variety of socio-economic and cultural contexts within which it is by necessity embedded. Although the age of industrialization and urbanization has drastically modified its survival strategies, the traditional circus remains conditioned by its original mode of production. The purpose of this article is to explore the ways in which circus as an art emerged from the practical constraints that determine the conception and implementation of its spectacles. We will examine the semiotics and pragmatics of traditional circus acts and their combination into a self-contained program, notably how meaning is produced through narrative kernels and rhetorical devices. It will be shown that the survival of the traditional circus is ultimately grounded in its ritualistic value and function.

A nomadic institution

Nomadism is not a choice. It is an adaptation to a set of natural or social circumstances. If we consider the mode of life of hunter-gatherers or nomadic pastoralists, it is obvious that the economic motor of human mobility is the distribution of resources within a relatively large area which is nevertheless bounded. Within these areas, settlements are temporary but are periodically reused year after year following the seasonal curves of abundance and scarcity of resources. Since immemorial times, troupes of entertainers have exploited the resources of sedentary populations by providing them with some services not readily available locally. These nomads have long been associated with magic. Mainstream religions have not treated them

kindly as they were competing for the same resources. They nevertheless survived through their hardened resilience and their tightly-knit tribal or familial groups. These troupes belonged to broader ethnic networks which were sharing information, whenever they happened to meet, regarding which rich villages and towns were friendly to their trade, which fairs offered the best opportunities, and which regions should be avoided. Until recently in Western Europe, these small travelling troupes caused a mixture of anxiety and fascination among the mostly sedate villages and districts they were visiting for brief periods of time. They instantly created their own niche in the fabric of urban space and quickly disappeared to ply their goods elsewhere. For information-deprived communities, they created the ephemeral embodiment of wonder. No time was left for the scrutiny of a second look. They left a luminous trace in the memory of those they had actually preyed on in exchange for a dream-like experience.

The trades of these travelling groups were diversified: baskets made of reeds and other freely available materials, horse trading, or even seasonal work. Women would peddle fortune telling, miracle medicines, aphrodisiacs, lifting of curses, and other illusory solutions to insoluble problems of life. These were the hallmarks of their contributions which were feeding human dreams for a modest fee. They were the embodiment of the "other", both feared and cherished. They were also producing performances based on uncommon skills which were staged to capture attention, astonish, provoke sensual excitement, and cause laughter. They were also expert in monkey, bear, dog, and horse husbandry and training, and could demonstrate an unusual control of those animals as well as unusual equestrian expertise.

Such travelling troupes have plied their trade over the whole Eurasian area for millennia. Ancient China offers iconographic evidence of acrobatic and equestrian displays. In the Roman empire, there were nomadic entertainers, referred to as *circulatores* in the literature and abundantly represented in the iconography. Nomads of this sort can still be observed in India in spite of countless restrictions on their trade. In *No Five Fingers are Alike* (1982), Joseph Berland published the results of his ethnographic research among the Qalandar, a nomadic tribe in Pakistan whose members exhibit trained bears and monkeys. He notes that "like the Roms, tinkers, and other nonpastoral nomads of Asia and Europe, the Qalandar maintain themselves as an economic parasitic group within a sedentary society". Lee Siegel, in his *Net of Magic*

(1991), thoroughly documented the techniques and behaviors of troupes of nomadic magicians in India, with which he had established a trusting relationship thanks to his own sleight of hand skills. These two books open revealing windows on the world of nomadic entertainers whose means of existence are constrained by the same circumstances which determined the context within which the traditional circus developed in Europe, mostly driven by the same kind of nomads as those who were documented by Berland and Siegel.

Whether in fairgrounds or on village squares, these travelling troupes were producing spectacles whose purpose was to gather a crowd, keep it together for a length of time, and repeatedly solicit the payment of small amounts of money as a token of appreciation for what had been shown or as an incentive to prompt the performance of what was going to be achieved next. The performers had to cater to a variety of expectations and pleasures among their audience: the wonders of dancing bears and calculating dogs or horses; the exhibition of juvenile contortionists in tight outfits; lightly-clad young females balancing on trapezes; dexterous young men tumbling or juggling balls and clubs; muscular athletes lifting each other and other heavy loads; and clowns cracking crude jokes and doing slapstick comedy. Overbearing force and power were combined with seductive vulnerability to keep an audience captive and enchanted as long as they could be prompted to reach for coins in their pockets. All this was only a part of their activities but one which captivated the imagination of people and created a horizon of expectation as well as the hostility of those who considered their presence to be a threat to civic order and morality. With their horse-drawn living quarters on wheels, they crisscrossed the countryside, looking opportunistically for performing spaces where they could display their unusual, if not uncanny skills. From my childhood memories, their presence was mesmerizing and had a deep influence upon the imaginary realm that feed adolescent dreams to the point of creating in many a fascination for, or even a kind of addiction to, the circus and its icons (Croft-Cooke 1941).

When industrialization and urbanization created large demographic concentrations, the circus trade became an attractive opportunity to generate profit by expanding its audience capacity in enclosed temporary premises. Some traditional circus families successfully adapted to these new conditions and accumulated wealth. Naturally, outside entrepreneurs jumped into

the trade in which they invested heavily with exponential profits, exploiting the symbolic capital that had been created over the centuries if not millennia by traditional nomadic entertainers. The power of the circus on popular imagination was indeed an added value akin to the force of religious rituals.

Circus performances as rituals

The skills that formed the basis of circus performances have long been shrouded in mystery. Children born in these families were trained early, far from the gaze of outsiders, and the techniques were kept strictly secret. The resulting spectacles appeared to be alien to the common world to the point of being credited to truly magical powers. In Christian cultures, circus performers were often suspected of witchcraft and, at times, prosecuted by the Church authorities (Bouissac 2012: 59-62). This aura of unexplainable realities survived to some extent the secularization of modern societies. Until the mid-twentieth century, the media were still mentioning the sixth sense of the wild animal trainers and perpetuated other mythical explanations. The idea that one had to be born in a circus family to be endowed with the capacity of achieving outstanding prowess persisted until specialized schools trivialized and democratized all the acrobatic disciplines. Even though, the traditional circus still carries a load of symbolic values that cause emotions akin to religious experience. While the contemporary circus foregrounds esthetics and explicit narratives, the traditional circus remains grounded in the primal layers of the human psyche and the haunting specter of bloody sacrifice.

The context of circus performances indeed bears strong similarities with religious rituals as both can be characterized by their spatial and temporal structures as well as by their formal and invariable staging. As in the founding of a temple, or the completion of a sacrifice, a distinct space is carved out of the public space. The enacting of circus acts takes place within a well-defined area separated from the secular or profane space that surrounds it. The audience participates emotionally in the one-of-a-kind event happening in the present rather than representing some past or fictitious narrative, and involving a real risk of death or chaos if mistakes are made. Although the risk is often only apparent and the repertory of circus acts is

very limited and redundant, their performance is experienced as open-ended events of which the outcome cannot be predicted with absolute certainty. The circus performers themselves are deeply conscious of the fact that whatever skill they have mastered, catastrophic failure always remains a possibility. There are indeed precedents of which they are aware. Many, who hold a religious faith, discreetly accomplish a symbolic sign or utter a prayer as a mystical prophylaxis before entering the ring. All circus acts, with various degrees of intensity, implement the actual triumph of life over death. However, death occurs with sufficient frequency for making blood a constant virtual part of circus performances. Some spectators can often be observed blinding themselves with their hands or diverting their gaze away from the ring in order to avoid the potential trauma of witnessing an accident when the risks taken by the performers are all too obvious.

The term of “accident” might seem to contradict the idea of “sacrifice” which implies a deliberate, ritualistic killing. But accident may be in this case a misnomer. Indeed, the traditional circus creates an interpretive frame that virtually prepares a fatal outcome whenever an act is publicized as “a death-defying action”. Expressions such as *salto mortale* (deadly leap), *wheel of death* or *wheel of destiny*, and similar metaphors, make this dimension explicit as does the choice of music (or silence) that accompanies the most daring tricks. The chronicle of the traditional circus is rife with documented bloody ends of acrobatic and wild animal acts. Lists of those who died in the ring have been published in the circus literature under the heading of “martyrs”, a term that conveys strong religious connotations. In fact, it could be contended that it is the survival of the circus artists that is “accidental” or, at least, surprising and miraculous while their death should be the natural outcome of the actions they perform. I witnessed once a young Romanian equilibrist who was tilting his head toward the sky at the end of his last trick before acknowledging the intense applause from the audience, thus apparently first crediting his god for having made this latest successful outcome possible.

Could the traditional circus, in the deep time of its origins, have been a kind of religious institution that was forced out into the profane and secular sphere by the official religions of the cultures and societies in which it managed to survive under the guise of a mere popular entertainment? It is symptomatic that a sort of semiotic compatibility persists nowadays

between the circus and various cults. For instance, in India, elephants could be seen until very recently performing religious rituals (*puja)* in the ring as a full-fledged circus act. They had been trained to mimic human devotees accomplishing a set of prescribed actions in a temple. In Europe, Catholic priests now commonly give their blessings and even perform the mass in circus rings on special occasions. They might find it more problematic to do so on a theatrical stage but it appears that a circus ring is already marked as sacred through the very nature of the acts that are performed in it and the deaths which occurred in its midst. The circular arena is a spatial structure loaded with powerful connotations. Every time a circus sets up its tent, it actualizes a marked place which cut out a space that is symbolically discontinuous with its geographical environment.

The fact that the circus is also an art is not incompatible with its ritualistic function. The interface of art and religion can be observed in all traditional cultures from prehistoric rock art to modern visual representations and musical creations. The separation of these two spheres of human symbolic activity is relatively recent. There is no fundamental gap between sacred icons and the idealized images of circus heroes which are worshiped by circus fans. There is also a remarkable formal continuity from the staging of ritualistic ceremonies and sacrifices, to the unfolding of circus acts. The magic quality that originally accounted for the impact of circus acts on the minds and hearts of their audience survives in the form of a metaphor -- the magic of the circus -- but remains deeply effective even if the values that are foregrounded and experienced by the spectators are now purely humanistic. The demanding training for all circus disciplines, though, requires a degree of abnegation and absolute commitment akin to the effort of ascetic saints striving for spiritual perfection.

Circus as art

A circus act is truly a work of art. Like any great painting or musical piece, it can be repeatedly experienced with pleasure, yielding every time new details that were overlooked on the first viewing or listening. Of course, not all circus artists are equally creative and consistent. But all produce a carefully crafted set of actions involving a multi-modal fabric of which every aspect is

the result of an esthetic choice. From the introduction to the final apotheosis (in the best of cases), the spectators' emotions are driven with increasing intensity corresponding to the magnitude of the challenges that determine the genre of the act. The audience experiences a collective empathy that creates a sense of fusion.

But the circus is also an esthetic object. Once the technical basis of an act, such as a set of tricks and the props they require, has been secured, variations can be introduced in the appearance of the props and the style of the performance. In any circus act, gestures, choreography, make-up, skills, acting out, staging, costumes, colors, lighting, music, combine to produce a coherent dynamic object that leads toward a glorious conclusion whose ultimate meaning is a human triumph over extreme challenges.

Let us review the aspects of a circus act that can be transformed by purely esthetic decisions. First, the dramatic composition consists of ordering the succession of tricks so that they create an increase in real or apparent difficulty. This implies clarity of purpose and enhancement of the magnitude of the odds. The latter is often achieved by a deliberate failure that is carefully crafted and which is not without carrying its own risks. The success of this strategy presupposes that the outcome of the "second attempt" is secure. But the acrobats or the trainers do not simply achieve their technical goals. They must at the same time involve their audience in the progress of their act. This is accomplished by acting out toward the public through gestures and facial expressions that may trigger their empathy. This can be implemented by a range of communicative variants from the hieratic and solemn mask of someone confronting death to the extrovert invitation to share in the anxiety and participate in the exuberant joy of the eventually successful outcome. The way in which the array of emotions is played out by artists determines the decoding of their profiles by the audience and the level of sympathy they receive in return.

Moving from the behavioral momentum generated by the demeanor of the artists and its interactional qualities, we can notice that a concern for design is obvious in the choices of patterns and decorations of the props and with the style and matching colors of the well-fitted costumes. Except in the case of purposeful clashes that characterize the outfits of clowns, each act possesses a consistent combination including body movements, visual qualities, and musical

accompaniment. From this point of view, circus acts can be assessed and ranked both in view of the technical skills they demonstrate and with respect to the esthetic effects they produce. Some acts achieve artistic perfection on both grounds.

The esthetic values of circus performances have not gone unnoticed by poets, painters and sculptors. From deep antiquity in Asia and Europe, the archaeological record offers many exquisite representations of traditional circus acts. From the nineteenth century on, the circus provides a rich source of inspiration to the point of becoming a productive *topos* both in literature and in all the visual arts from highbrow painting and sculpture to the popular building of circus models and the industrial production of toys.

In contrast with the traditional circus, the modern and contemporary circus can be characterized by a radical change in the esthetics of the presentation of the acts. Often performed on stage or on special scaffoldings that obliterate the constraints of the ring, this non-traditional form of circus foregrounds esthetic innovations in all aspects: explicit narratives often provide an interpretative framework for the actions performed; well-developed choreographies that make efficient use of acrobatics become an end in themselves; costumes are usually kept to minimal functionality but convey a sense of taste and distinction; popular music is avoided and acoustic compositions are created to enhance the lofty quality of the performance; finally, risk is underplayed and often eliminated through safety lounges and other props so that the formal beauty of the body movements cannot be tainted by the anxiety caused by the anticipation of a possible accident. The absence of animals, of course, removes a supplementary factor of unpredictability. Radical transformations in the presentation and staging of these performances separate, both physically and symbolically, this kind of circus from the realm of popular rituals characteristic of the traditional circus toward the status of a full-fledged highbrow art. The contemporary circus mostly operates not as a trade but as a state- or foundation-sponsored cultural institution that creates new esthetic norms and meets a markedly different set of expectations in its audience.

References

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