

## Circus and Sacrifice

### Introduction

The traditional circus is essentially a nomadic trade whose origins point to India. The ethnographic study of Joseph Berland, *No Five Fingers Are Alike* (Harvard, 1982), documents the life of South Asian nomads, the Qalandar, who make a living by peddling their skills and artefacts along paths which antedate modern transportation networks. They make baskets with reeds, train performing animals, master juggling and acrobatics, do magic, sell medicine, and predict the future to gullible customers. They traditionally trade in (often stolen) horses. They are expert in the art of deception but they are feared because the performances they produce appear to be caused by unnatural powers . Another enlightening work on nomadic trade is Lee Siegel's ethnography of Indian magicians, *Net of Magic* (Chicago 1991). The information gathered in these two books resonates in anybody familiar with European circus culture. Nomadic folks were long treated with suspicion and persecuted by civil and religious authority. However, they persistently fascinated the populations which were exposed to their performing arts and they often accumulated considerable fortunes. Modern traditional circuses are the direct heirs of these travelling groups which adapted their trade to the industrial age, and now fully exploit information technologies. Many circus families who run today's major circuses in Europe can trace back their ancestry to Pakistan and Northern India, notably the Sinti (the Bouglione family in France and Belgium). But before rising to economic and cultural prominence through entrepreneurship in the industrial society, they had lead for centuries if not millennia the precarious life of nomads, periodically offering to sedentary populations the unusual experience of an exotic otherness. One may wonder what is the exact nature of such an ephemeral experience which people are repeatedly eager to enjoy for a fee.

### Circus as ritual

These nomads claimed to possess super-natural powers, as they still do in India, pretending to create miracles such as restoring to its previous integrity a dismembered animal or human body. Still nowadays street magicians appear to cut the tongue of a child and soon the tongue is back and alive in the mouth. The famous rope trick which haunted colonial England through the reports of travellers who had witnessed it involves the gory dismemberment of child high in the air and its miraculously restored bodily integrity. I have witnessed in Mumbai several tricks performed by street magicians, including the uncanny cursing of a pigeon which caused me to experience the "thambos" of the Greeks, the "frisson sacre", a holy shudder, an amazement so strong that it paralyses the witness of such acts. (the man at Nabaneta Dev Sen's) Until rather recently in Europe, these feats were considered to be black magic related to the Devil (Banks and Morocco) . These nomads were construed as a mystical (or mythical) counter power which was both feared and attractive. Until the mid-twentieth century, the printed media were seriously discussing the power of wild animal trainers who were credited with possessing a third eye. Skillful training can indeed convey the impression that fierce animals are controlled by the sheer power of the trainer's mind. A modern version of this belief is the notion of

“whisperer”, the ability of some humans to connect with animals in a direct way and thus to control their behavior.

The context of circus performances bears strong similarities with religious rituals as they can be characterized by their spatial and temporal structures and their staging as well as by their transformative power. Like for a temple or any sacrifice, a distinct space is carved out of the public space, let it be a primal circle or a modern circular arena within a temporary construction, itself distinct from the surrounding secular space. The enacting of circus acts follows traditional liturgies. The audience participates emotionally in the performance as a circus act is one-of-a-kind event happening in the present during which there is a real or apparent risk of death or chaos. Sedentary populations are given periodic opportunities to attend a circus shows. Although the repertory of circus acts is very redundant and limited, their performance is experienced with the same intensity. All trapeze acts are necessarily similar with superficial variations in the movements and the staging. All equestrian and feline displays are constrained by the behavioral range of the animals. However, this repetition of the same always involves a vicarious contact with the unknown at the fragile interface of life and death. Like in a game of chance, the audience is on the brink of time. The staging brings a measure of uncertainty of the outcome but this outcome is meant to implement the triumph of life under the haunting threat of death. Death, however, occurs with a sufficient frequency for making blood a constant virtual part of circus acts. The audience experiences an ambiguous feeling in which the empathetic desire for success is mixed with a repressed desire to witness an accident. At the apex of an acrobatic or wild animal act some people blind themselves with their hand or divert their gaze away from the ring. A circus performance is not a mere representation. It is the enactment of an ontological transformation the successive stages of which are deeply experienced by the audience. (Rene Sperlich).

### **Circus as sacrifice**

Red, the index of blood, is a dominant color in the decorations of the traditional circus. The curtain through which artists and animals enter the ring is often of this color. Countless chromatic variations, of course, exist. But the term “gaudy” which usually characterizes circus ornaments and designs, does not evoke a soft, peaceful, and ethereal atmosphere. Violence is of essence in the circus. The performing circular area is traditionally filled with sawdust. The other places where sawdust was found on the ground were traditional butcher shops and slaughterhouses. Before special fiber mats were used to provide a reusable ground for the ring, sawdust was an index of circus. Its pungent smell mixed with strong animals’ odors was an unmistakable marker of the circus, like incense in a temple or a church. The historiography of the circus over at least the last two centuries provides many well-documented examples of blood being spilled in the sawdust as a result of wild animal attacks on their trainers or following the fall of aerialists who quickly hemorrhage from the nose and mouth. The spilling of blood is implied as a non-negligible risk in knife-throwing, sharp shooting or archery feats. The most dramatic example of virtual stabbing I have witnessed is an act commonly seen in Indian circuses, which probably originated in street performers. A man balances a contraption formed by three sharp blades at the top of a perch high above his head, then

quickly pushes away the perch and throws himself to the ground with his arms stretched out. The blades then penetrate the ground close to his body which lies within the three impacts. Whether contrived or genuine, this skillful or daring act creates a strong expectation that the man may be stabbed and bleed to death in the ring.

From time to time, unpredictably, bloody accidents occur. Lion presenter Gerardhi was killed by his lions during a performance in Paris in 1960... Elephant trainer Elizabeth Bertchold was crushed to death in the ring during her act in 1982 by a male elephant which drove his tusks through her body. This tragic event has been described in details by witnesses in *Dernier tour de piste* (last trick in the ring) by Claude Bordez and Giovanni Iuliani, (2002) . Gordon Howe, the son of a famous British lion trainer was killed in Ireland while rehearsing his act in 1977. Captain Sidney Howe, his father, fainted in the ring in the midst of his act in 1979 but was rescued before the animals could attack him. At the time of the most recent circus festival of Monte Carlo, in January 2015, an acrobat lost his life during the dress rehearsal.

The term “accident” seems to contradict the idea of “sacrifice” which implies a deliberate, ritual killing. But let us remark that “accident” in this case may be a misnomer. Indeed, the circus creates a frame that virtually prepares a fatal outcome. It is surviving from this deadly situation which is accidental or miraculous, so to speak. At least, it appears to be so through the ritualistic staging of the act. The solemnity of the announcement, the rolling of the drum which suggests the execution of a criminal, and the collected posture and facial expression of the artist, make death a plausible outcome of the ultimate action.

### **Circus as religion**

The canonical form of a circus act consists of an initial situation in which an individual confronts himself (or herself) to a deadly physical challenge. The act is composed of a series of tests of increasing difficulty ending with an extreme survival behavior which appears to be due in part to the artist’s skill and courage, in part to chance or divine intervention. It is a process which is consonant with an ordeal in the legal and religious sense of the term. Some artists, either because they are catholic, or as an element of their staging, make the sign of the cross before they “attempt” a daring somersault or entrust their head to the jaws of a lion. In an Irish circus, I witnessed a young Romanian equilibrist who was tilting his head toward the sky at the successful end of his last trick before acknowledging the applause from the audience, thus apparently crediting his god for having made this outcome possible.

Could the traditional circus be primarily a religious institution which has been forced out into the profane and the secular by the official religions of the cultures and countries in which it strives in the margins of society? There are some symptomatic features which suggest that this might be the case. The circus spatial structure which is characterized by strongly marked areas is considered to be compatible with mainstream religious rituals. For instance, a standard act of Indian circuses consists of having elephants performing a puja. In Europe, it has become customary to celebrate Catholic masses in a circus ring on special occasions such as Christmas midnight masses or other liturgical celebrations which are marked as special in the Roman Catholic calendar. The International Circus festival of Monte Carlo always concludes with an oecumenical

ceremony (priests in liturgical costumes). Moreover, archaeology and ethnography can trace back many techniques which form the core of circus specialties to shamanistic performances: the subjugation of wild animals, the ascension toward higher levels of space, a risky contact established at the top of an unsupported ladder with the ultimate danger of another world. These are speculations difficult to validate but supported by consistent circumstantial evidence and by the nature of the reception of circus artists by enthralled, if not hypnotized audiences. It is quite significant that many histories of the circus which attempt to retrace the lives and days of these nomads who are both loved and hated feature lists of those who lost their life in the ring through attacks by wild animals or failure to achieve their daring acrobatics. For instance, Henri Thetard's *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque*, provides the names and circumstances of death of 150 acrobats and trainers between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century under the title: "Martyrology of the circus". He underlines at the same time that this list is far from being exhaustive. The last decades have seen such deaths occur rather regularly.

### **Jodorowsky's bloody circus**

In conclusion, I would like to reflect upon a work of art which forcefully brings forth the ritualistic and bloody nature of the circus and its intimate relation to religion. In *Santa Sangre* (1989), Mexican Alejandro Jodorowsky stages the first half of this film in a travelling circus whose tent is set in front of a church in which a female sect worships a martyr's blood. The circus itself is the locus of violent bloody events, from a knife thrower who carves a tattoo on a child's chest to an elephant hemorrhaging through its trunk. The film stages many gory stabbing with little details left to imagination. The blood of the church is fake blood (a pool of water colored in red) but the blood of the circus is represented as real animal and human blood. Now let us point out that Jodorowsky's circus is a fictional circus but like a dream it expresses a deeper truth: as we have noted earlier, bloody violence is congruent with the circus itself. At least it is a virtual dimension which can be, and is often actualised as an irrefutable sign of authenticity. The power of drawing blood is indeed an absolute sign of commitment in full blown sacrifice and in sacrificial rituals in which blood is an index of sacrifice. Still in Southern India, men pierce their tongues and cheeks, and insert metal hooks in their skin to signal their devotion to a god. In Christian versions of such rituals, men let themselves being crucified in the Philippines and some South American countries. *Santa Sangre*, holy blood, the blood of sacrifice causes a sacred horror, a "thambos" which I would like to claim remains at the core of the circus experience: the ambiguous fear and desire to see blood in the sawdust.