

Danger in circus performance: The case of the 1970s British traveling show

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Willie Cotrelli was an acrobat performing a hand balancing act. He came from a circus family which traveled Europe and the Far East but in the mid 1970s, when I first met him in Gerry Cottle's Circus, his family had long been dispersed (parents had died, sisters married out) and Willie, fifty five years old, was the only one remaining in the circus. His assistant in the balancing act was Joanna- his life partner, fifteen years younger than Willie. Joanna was the daughter of a police officer. She had joined the Robert Brothers Circus as a 'show girl', where she met Willie, already divorced, and gradually also joined his act. The couple moved to the newly established Cottle's circus for a better payment (35 pounds for the act alone. Average weekly salary of an industrial worker in 1975 was 56 pound)(1) Similar to most traveling shows in Britain, so also in Cottle's, performers had to take part in traveling work. Willie was engaged in building up and pulling down of the big top and was in charge of the ushers at the tent doors, while Joanna worked as an usher, a seller of circus merchandize (for 5% of the profit), as well as in cleaning the circus ground during pull downs, before the move to the next town.

Willie's balancing act in Cottle's was the same as the act he had performed for many years in the 'Roberts'.

A table and five chairs are introduced into the ring by the ring boys (amongst them is Willie , a circus uniform covering his performing costume, always checking the table stability). Following a traditional Ring Master's announcement ('Ladies and Gentlemen-The Cotrellis!') Willie and Joanna appear, going around inside the ring, where everything is seen and displayed, waving and displaying themselves. A short mimetic scene follows, which depicts a lady urging a dandy male character to do his (yet unclear) job. This scene set an easy going tone for the whole act, as did the melody of 'Tie a yellow ribbon' played by the band. Willie then leaps onto the table, positioning one of the chairs on top, and performs a handstand - one hand on the chair's platform, the other grasping the upper part of the chair's back. By fully straightening his upside down posture Willie now appeals for the public applause and the band signals accomplishment with the drums and cymbals. The act progresses as Joanna introduces another chair which Willie fixes on top of the first, performing again his posture. As the third chair is introduced, Joanna hardly reaches Willie and, as the public can see, she is helped by a tall ring boy. The pyramid is higher and less stable. On display is not only the handstand and chair-balancing skill, but danger.

Unlike similar balancing routines performed by gymnasts, Willie's routines are not about body control. Typical to circus acrobatics - at least in those days, in Britain - it is about the performer's own self-display, control and loss of control, and his/her body being perceived as an object of this move or of its posture. These shifts, which was anticipated in all acrobatic performances in the circus (e.g., the perception of a performer swinging and being swung on the trapeze, the self-referential twists in the contortionist's posturing, the body being bumped into the air (often as a comedy) by the trampoline performer) were, for the public, a source of epistemological confusion, loss of their own self, but also of thrill and of illusion: for the very same perceptions that engendered their selves the spectators also distanced the self displaying acrobat. Human acrobatic bodies are perceptually de-realized in their

circus display. A genre of modernity, emerging, historically in modernity crisis, the circus encounter is a unique performance of illusory exclusion. By this exclusion, the public would invoke an illusory subjectivity.

Willie is standing on top of the fourth chair of the pyramid. Now the fifth (and, as the public can see, the last) chair is to be put on top. The height is further dramatized as the ring boy uses a metal stick to transfer the chair to Willie. Only slight drumming accompanies this part and the ring master announces the coming feat. Up on top Willie carefully fixes the fifth chair on the pyramid. He 'tests' the pyramid, making for a moment where the whole structure bends to the side (himself nearly out of control) - down below Joanna overstates her momentary fright.

Danger which, in Willie's act, is dramatically amplified with each additional chair, should be understood in the context of the circus objectification. Danger to life is dramatized and perceived in this circus as highlighting the performer's shift between control and loss of control. Through the drama of danger to life, that is, the audience's anticipation of the acrobat's possible loss of life, life itself - (actual, real) human social being - is dramatically crystallized and turned into a sign of itself. In the spectators' experience, the performer's actual life is made a lifeless sign and is thereby de-realized. In the public experience, the spectacle of danger thus magnifies the social and ontological exclusion of the performer, and encapsulates a unique modality of the circus being.

Willie now 'concentrates' and 'finally' accomplishes his last and 'most dangerous' handstand up on top of the pillar of chairs.

The moment of accomplishment is the moment when the performing body is perceived as completely engulfed and objectified by its display and posture - even the gesture of calling for applause is perceived as part of the configuration. It is a moment, constituted through the acrobat's posture and through the public's eye, encapsulating the process of de-subjectification of the spotlighted circus body on top, and its turning into an ephemeral image (sign). For the public this is the moment of illusion and nostalgia, as it emerges through the process of rupture and loss of their every day selves, and the conjuring of a new, illusive subjectivity, conjured through the ontological exclusion of the circus.

It's a short moment. It cannot last in social time. So Willie is in hurry to pass over and drop the chairs down to Joanna and the boys, jumping down from the table and joining Joanna- the Cotrellis bow, receive their applause, and later leave the ring.

Thomas and Matheas Kluger were presented in Cottle's as 'The Cimmaro Brothers'. In Cottle's 1975 they performed a high wire act. Like some other 'artists' in Cottle's (and other traveling shows in Britain) the agreement between owner and performer included the performance of more than one act. So in another part of the show, Thomas performed a comedy acrobatic, and in 1977 the Cimmaro performed three times in the course of the show.

Thomas and Matheas started their career in a highwire act initiated by their German step-father. At its height the act included the stepfather, three brothers and a partner, and had been performed in the biggest circuses in Europe. The retirement of the step-father, several accidents, and the quitting of one of the brothers nearly forced Thomas and Matheas out of the business. It was at that moment that they were recruited by

Cottle. Compared to other family and 'house' performers in the circus they, as aerialists, earned top salary, and except for the responsibility of dealing with their own props (the erection and pulling down of the wire poles, the daily care for the wire tension), were freed from any additional circus work. Still, their pay did not exceed that of an average industrial worker in Britain. Thomas was already divorced, and during the late 1970s he re-married and again divorced. Matheas' wife - once a circus show girl - lived apart and was independent, and Matheas himself did not like performing. Though they benefited from Cottle's ambitions, the Cimmaros, in their early thirties, felt insecure when he came during the 1976, and 1977 seasons with demands to renew and to add one more act to the ones they have already performed.

The high wire act is the leading and final act of the show. It begins with the Ring Master's special announcement and Matheas and Thomas stepping onto diagonal wires, striding from opposite sides of the tent towards the top platforms between which the wire is stretched. The act proceeds as Matheas and Thomas, balancing bars in their hands, spot lights on each of them, walk from the opposite platforms towards each other, to the wire middle point and backward. This routine is followed by one in which Matheas is seated at the middle point bending his body, and Thomas passes over him stepping to the other side. The next routine to follow includes Thomas riding a bicycle back and forth on the wire, the different 'tricks' being punctuated by posturing of accomplishments and band's drumming and cymbals. The act approaches its closure as the ring master dramatically announces the forthcoming most dangerous performance of the two men up high with the bottom man being blindfold and hooded.

Thomas now dramatizes his 'hesitant' stepping onto the wire. The balancing bar is in hand, Matheas behind with his hands holding Thomas' shoulders. The band is drumming. When the Cimmaros reach the middle point Thomas stops, slightly bending his knees creating a 'step' for Matheas who slowly ascends onto Thomas' shoulders. With Thomas straightening up again, the public witnesses the accomplishment of the routine. Matheas stretches his arms to the sides, helping his balance on Thomas' shoulders. It is also a sign of accomplishment and a claim for public applause. There is a spot light on the human pyramid up high. It is a climax in the Cimmaro's performance. It is also a moment visualizing the destructive course of a social being, totally alienated and de-realized, lost in its own display, becoming its own sign and image.

The band now starts with a full blown rendition of Jesus Christ Superstar. The crucified with the body in peril, the symbolic with the iconic, the current music with circus nostalgia.

Thomas and Matheas, still have to cross half the wire length. The distance is measured and known in their bodies. The timing is crucial as they have to reach the end before suspension is lost. To keep the drama of danger Thomas, as if out of control, fakes a stumble. Matheas has his reservations concerning the fake. He thinks Thomas is 'overdoing' it. Yet, Thomas performs the fake stumble twice a day. One day in March 1975 he collapsed. While Thomas got away, Matheas, the top man, did not manage to hang on to the wire. He fell down and ended up with his wrist broken in eighteen places. The press was soon to come.

It is common knowledge among circus lovers that circus - unlike theatre, unlike cinema - is 'real'. Circus is real in the sense that real things happen in circus (as, for instance, Hippisley-Cox would have it (-)). But it is not only the accomplishment of

real things that attracts the public in the 1970s circuses (some of the displays in these circuses were very modest). The realness of circus is not only in the ring but in the spectators' experience of their own selves - in their illusory experience of their own 'really real' selves invented and searched for in modernity, conjured, as we argue, through the circus' distanciation. The circus performance (including the public's own dissolution of self and anxieties) is wholly constructed towards the reification of the social and ontological apartness by which the public's illusory 'realness' is invoked. The role of danger here (in this dramatization of reification) is central. Danger is there (at least in the 1970s British traveling show) not only as a display of the death-defying, heroic overcoming of real difficulties (as in Hippiusley -Cox understanding, and see also Bouissac(-), Assael(-), Tait(-)). Danger is rather a tool in dramatizing de-realization (turning the real into a sign of the real, the subject into a sign of the subject)- as interpreted above. But danger, and the display of more and more danger, also energizes and charges the very production, augmentation and authentication of the 'real' (which is, at the same time de-realized) in the process of disclosing and reifying the circus' ontological status. Danger to life is a master trope in a rhetoric of presence and of authenticity, part of the fetish aura of a reified real, making the circus both a comment on alienation and crisis as well as a dream of its overcoming.

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Thomas and other performers fake parts of their acts (sometime against their own will) 'because the public might think it's [the act] not dangerous enough'. But faking danger may be itself problematic. As we saw, the performance of the fake, the production of the real, might in itself be truly dangerous. Also, (as quoted) the public, always suspecting, shifting between play and display (which is part of the performance) may notice the 'overdoing'. I will shortly come back to the issue. In any case it is significant for the present stage in my analysis that while the public is interested, and actively takes part in the display of danger in circus, no one was interested, or shared in any responsibility for the real people who perform danger. In the heavily unionized Britain, Equity, the artists union, did not deal with circus at all, and people in the circus could not afford any insurance arrangement. Inside the circus, families constituted an encouragement for survival. Also, owners like Cottle provided some patronage, following their interests and a long-time tradition of 'benevolence'. (After the fall, Thomas and Matheas kept traveling with Cottle, Thomas performing the act alone for many months, and Cottle continued to pay the act's full money which the brothers still shared equally between them. The circus kept traveling with the image of the two men high Cimmaro Brothers on its posters, but no one amongst the public took this as a 'false presentation' of the circus. Though Cottle has already made a name the circus was, for its public, first of all a circus-just another circus with its repeating acts, all repeating the play and display of the real.)

Sidney Howes had for many years trained and presented the 'Robert Brothers' lions and lionesses. When I met him in Cottle's 1975 he was sixty six years old and lived in the circus with his wife Tess. Their son, Gordon, already married, traveled and trained the lions for an Irish circus, their daughter Barbara was married to a German circus person and traveled with her husband. (In 1977 Gordon was killed in a training session in Ireland)

The Big Cats act was the only act that Sid performed for which he earned more than he did in the Roberts. In addition to that Sid was the one inviting the public, at the end of the show, to 'visit our Zoo and stables', standing at the passage to the tent rear exit,

charging the visitors one shilling, part of which was his profit. 'Aunty' Tess worked as a Candy Floss seller. She received 5% of the profit.

The Big Cats act starts after the cage has been erected, and the lion pedestals are introduced into the cage. Following the Ring Master's announcement ('..for fifty years in the circus, Britain's oldest wild animal trainer... Captain Sidney Howes!'), Sidney Howes walks into the ring dressed in a colonial (hunter; soldier) uniform, a baton and a long whip in his hand. His style of presentation comprises of a small cage, close contact with the animals, dramatizing struggle and danger. Sid's presentation involved a basic structure of a hero overcoming a hostile force (see Bouissac(-) surfaced here through the narratives of the domination of 'Nature', of masculinity, and of the British Empire (the latter invoked through the 'Captain', as well as the Lion - the Empire's icon). However, in mid 1970s the Empire has long been lost, the colonial character already a past memory and part of folklore, and nature long conquered and commercialized (lions were already seen in the Zoos and on TV, and the circus lions were mostly bred in circuses - as circus programs of the age had clearly stated). If lions were still there, in circuses, it was because they (and other components of the act) had become 'textualized' as part of circus repertoire, and the circus itself, throughout its history and still in the 1970s, as an epitome of 'tradition' and nostalgia.

Circus has historically developed including both humans and animal performances. In the context of the experience of Modernity, the old Western oppositions of Culture-Nature, human identity as nature opposed, takes a unique significance as nature is re-invented as an embodiment of the real and authentic, cultural destruction of nature as a source of loss and nostalgia (see Little (2006)).

Like human performers, circus animals are displayed and de-realized as they are shown and led around in the ring. The animals perform human controlled routines. Many of the routines are anthropomorphic, de-contextualizing, de-realizing the animals and their 'nature' through the culturally opposed human postures and configurations.

Sid's act progresses as six lionesses and a lion are positioned in a circle, perform on a beam, and are positioned in a pyramid. The performance evolves through provocations. Sid provokes his animals, Nature is thereby, dramatically, invoked. However, Nature which is invoked through the lions' presence is experienced by the public as deconstructed and abjected in its display, and the spectators thereby experience their own nature-mirrored human identity (self) as endangered and ruptured (2). However, for the public in 1970s circus tent, this experience and anxiety of their every day selves being threatened, was a part of a process of transcending 'nature' and of conjuring the circus illusion. Against the lions and Nature, Sid is human, thus a sign of the Human and of Culture. He, as an actual living person, (like his actual lions) is de-realized through his display of a human and by his display of the animals' nature. Indeed, the moment of applause is the moment the animals are iconized and the actual trainer is posing and iconized alongside the animal pyramid. This is the moment Nature has been not only abjected but transcended, and the opposition of Culture/Nature is itself transcended circus humans and animals are, ontologically, similar).

Many 'real' and 'authentic' eruptions of 'Nature' were provoked (i.e., dramatized, even faked) in Sid's performances, and the public was excited. However, in July 1979 at Bornmouth, the nearly seventy years old Sid, getting too close to one of the lionesses,

lost power and nearly fainted in the ring. He was lucky to be carried out of the ring on time, and gradually recovered out the back of the performers' 'ring doors'.

Though accidents in the den, like falls from the wire, did occur in traveling circuses, they were not that frequent. Neither were actual falls, or scenes of the trainer being savaged in the ring expected to literally take place in every circus show. Had they been, the danger and the whole uniqueness of circus would have become suspect, or its dramatic authenticity deflated and trivialized (as Matheas once put it - "anyone can fall from the wire"). But the possibility of a fall, the danger, was, dramatically, a constitutive dimension of the show's realness, and an actual accident, or the legacy of it, had confirmed and recharged the danger.

A famous story runs amongst circus people telling about a lady who witnessed in the circus a trainer being dragged by the big cats into the tunnel, later approaching the Ring Master and inquiring whether that was a part of the show. In Bornmouth this happened again. Through what seemed less as an unsuccessful 'fake' or an 'accident' and more as a potentially torturous corruption of a human 'every day' body, circus life has turned into a (circus) text. The day after Sid has been saved the tent in Bornmouth was packed. Sid did not perform and the lion act was missing but the public accepted with cheers the Ring Master's apologies. The local newspapers put the story in the early pages, describing the part of local people in the first aid given to the circus trainer. The local TV made its report, the commentator beginning with an ironic 'if there is something you would not like to be, it is a circus lion trainer'. Sid himself was interviewed making Gordon's death part of his story.

The turning of a circus accident into a story, every day life textualized and sacrificed in the reification of circus realness, has been performed again in the discourse of Sid's misfortune, and the public and the press took their part.

Again, in spite of the momentary sensation (which framed the event as 'circus'), and although the performances of the real were actually witnessed by hundreds of thousands every season, no one cared, in fact no one socially perceived the real people like Willie and the Cimmaros and Sid (who since never returned into the den). But this social non-visibility, or (mis)-perception, was at least in part a dimension in a discourse of exclusion and margins, wherein distanciation, alienation, objectification, even actual injuries and (spectacularized) death, were combined in the reification of circus, reification of an illusory totality of which the circus is apart.

The totalization of the display, the emergence of the circus as an embodiment of illusory margins and thereby of an illusory totality, make the circus an epitome of the modernity crisis. In a fragmented world, circus transcends and erases categories, equalizing its elements through their repetition and display. In a world of alienation and commodification the circus embodies total commodification - of the circus body high up on the pyramid, or the wire, or on the verge of being torn apart in the den - as a source of subjectification or an imagined alterity(3).

But our circus ethnography and our concern with danger lead us to further observation.

In 1970s Britain, most of the circus performances were traveling(4). Traveling was not only a way for the circus to reach its public. With the exhibition of its caravans and big lorries on the ground, with its parade in town, with its hundreds of posters and constant publicity (the circus is 'coming to town'), traveling and traveling life lent a sense of totality to the circus in both everyday life and the performing ring. This was

not only for the circus entourage, but also for the townsfolk themselves as part of the circus display. They were part of the display through which the circus creates its public, and creates its own context - its own particular outsideness. Indeed, the reified circus, and the nostalgic totality conjured in its reification, exists only as long as the circus is constantly totalized and as long as the circus is traveling - constantly distanced, constantly objectified, out of social time, out of relations ('for a few days only').

Emerging within the public's nostalgic longing, reifying a wholeness (which through its very invention is invented already as lost), the whole circus dream, the whole dangerous and spectacular 'realness' of the circus display, depends on its performing and encapsulating movement. The display is precarious; the being of circus is precarious. 'The show must go on', because every bit of traveling life is embedded with this sense of precarious being, which the townsfolk, in their dreaming circus, enjoy challenging, teasing, invading, and being invaded by.

Not only is the whole display so precarious, it is also that circus' precarious 'realness' is accomplished through the public anticipation of its disappearance, through its being 'kicked' out of town (circus people do not like long stands, and townsfolk get irritated. If the circus stays too long, it loses its relevance). Like the ephemeral bodies of the performers in moments of accomplishment, so also the displayed presence of the whole circus in town is to be reduced to the pale spot on the grass, where the circus ring was yesterday, leaving the 'town' which it had conjured (Yes, it is expected to come again, one day - as repetition, as 'circus'). Like the public who precariously carry into the circus their nostalgia, their never to be recovered sense of loss, so circus too is doomed to its movement.

Not only part of the dream, major constituent of the circus reification, the endangered bodies in the circus encapsulated the fragility of the circus dream and the public own predicament.

Gerry Cottle experimented with circus a lot. Experiments have been there since the early seventies, when the circus first hit the road, and some of them (for instance putting a whole circus on ice) turned into very costly failures. Among other initiatives I witnessed were the introduction of wrestling and singing, the closure of a circus show with the performers dancing with the public in the ring, the hosting of the 'world championship', the introduction of school and circus students, the withdrawal of animals from the ring and, later on, cooperation with the revolutionary Archaos.

During sporadic visits to Britain I have tried to follow Cottle's and other circus performances. But in 2002-2003, through a more systematic follow up, it was clear that circus world as a whole was different.

There still were some traveling circuses presenting 'traditional shows', trying to make a living through a reference to circus nostalgia. The traveling scene was however dominated by a few 'commercial circuses' which combined circus and variety, with others capitalizing on foreign productions that worked well commercially (The Moscow State, The Chinese State, The Netherland National Circus). At festivals and in (sometimes prestigious) city halls, 'new circus' performances, close to physical theatre and modern dance, attracted new publics. Several circus schools and many community circuses operated in Britain and the circus performing world as a whole was accompanied by the Circus Arts Forum, involved mainly with 'new circus'

problems but also with general initiatives such as a National Circus Day and circus conferences.

This structural transformation, a move from the margins to the center, had to do with wider social and cultural transformations which touched upon the basic foundations of the traditional circus, upon its drama, and, as such, upon the place and significance of danger in circus drama. Having the 1970s' performances, as well as their historical context in mind, I will mention some of the recent transformations

One can start with the changes in attitude towards the environment and nature. No more a territory to be occupied and dominated, Nature cannot be caged or trained. The binary opposition of Culture/ Nature, which is at the root of the traditional circus and of the 'cruelty' and danger in animal acts, is no longer manipulable dramatically.

Further, Nature lost its dramatic role as the site of authenticity (and nostalgia). This is partly because Nature - despite its new mutual relationship with Culture - has already in itself been thoroughly objectified and commodified. More generally, the search for the 'really real', the longing for totality - no longer constitutes a major experience in the performance of circus. In a world of simulations, the display of the real, the reification of the circus, is no longer relevant. Rather than a nostalgia for totality and for the real - which are conjured through the total play of the traveler - it is a world of play. This play is risky but a world prevailed by play and risk hardly constitutes a context for the old circus drama of danger and accident. Death itself is no longer a metaphor of traditional circus ontology. The very concept of death has changed and its history constitutes a new cosmology within which circus is transformed. The history of this transformation is longer, of course, than the three decades which have elapsed between my two fieldwork periods. But we can say that since the 18th century onwards, and more intensively with the post-modern period, Death lost much of its power as a threatening and unknown dimension of life, thought of in eschatological terms. Death is now marginalized, fragmented, individualized and pushed aside by a life approving cosmology. It is towards the expression of these directions and experiences that the 'new circus' - and its various experiments with danger- develop.

Notes

1. Circus wages were particularly low. This was due to lack of alternatives of employment and also to the particular regime which has emerged in the circus isolation. In exchange to total commitment of their, and their family labour, performers received various benefits such as accommodation (caravan), often pulled by a circus vehicle when the circus made its 'moves'. In addition they negotiated with the owner the 'selling' concessions (circus sweets, circus paraphernalia) by which they earned some more cash.

2. To my mind, these perceptions of nature being displayed and the experience of their own human identity in danger (rather than evidences of circus actually torturing animals) are at the roots of the accusations of 'cruelty to animals' which were brought up by Animal Rights organizations and became more and more disturbing towards the end of the decade)

3. One should theorize here (starting with Marx, or the Lacanian image, or Winnicott's transitional object, Handelman's symbolic types, Csordas' theory of religion, Girard's theory of sacrifice)

4. In 1970s Britain, circus shows were presented also in stationary contexts- in halls - during Xmas period, and in the event of traveling shows staying for longer stands of several weeks in holiday towns during the summer. One small stationary circus was operated in a complex which also included a playground and zoo. These examples provided some liminal contexts for circus performance.