

TIMELESS CIRCUS IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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1. Where does circus come from? A deep time perspective

All cultural events, and particularly the performing arts, are grounded not only in popular tradition and historical societal forms, but also in human physiology and psychology as both have evolved over hundreds of millions of years through natural selection. Circus has a remarkable status in this respect because its basis, its building blocks so to speak, is a set of typical actions that can be assumed to have been essential for human survival in the deep time of the species when extreme situations offered constant challenges not yet mediated by cultural artifacts. Such situations are now modeled in the circus ring, mostly in the form of devices (e.g., circus acrobatic apparatuses) and call for the demonstrated capacity of surviving the dangers they imply through appropriate actions. Each one of these actions forms the core of a circus specialty and they are often combined in particular circus acts.

These core actions include (1) balancing and progressing on narrow surfaces; (2) grasping hanging supports that prevent deadly falls; (3) clearing obstacles by jumping or climbing; (4) throwing or catching objects in a way that allows a person to reach targets or keep a number of valuable items intact; (5) controlling animals both to exploit the resources afforded by some and neutralize the aggression of predators; and, (6) no less important for a social species, negotiating social situations. The wire walkers, the aerialists, the jumpers, the climbers, the sharp-shooters, the jugglers, the trainers of domestic and wild animals, and the clowns are true icons of survival in these respective categories. They implement the successful overcoming of extreme versions of the modern challenges with which we are familiar in the constructed environment of our everyday life: keeping our upright balance when we stand or walk, grasping a hand rail fast enough or tight enough to prevent a fall; avoiding collisions with obstacles that lie in our path or clearing gaps; reaching for targets or not letting objects slip through our hands; keeping our dogs, cats or cattle under control; and maintaining good joking relationships with our fellow humans,

sometimes even in testing situations. We take all these common competences for granted until we witness or experience their selective disruption through physical impairments or mental illnesses. We also become acutely aware of them when our usual environment is temporarily changed: the ground is slippery and there is no bar to be gripped; we have to handle too many objects at the same time; we are confronted with an aggressive dog or uncooperative family members or neighbors who lack a sense of humor. In brief, all circus acts are based on the artificial constructions of extreme situations, and on the corresponding acquired skills that are necessary to meet the challenges they offer, but these skills are not alien to those we need to negotiate every step in our physical and social lives.

The point of these remarks is that whatever the circus artists perform in front of us resonates in our own body and mind. This physical and moral empathy has been recently explained by the discovery of mirror neurons in our brains (Stamenov & Gallese 2002, Hurley & Chater 2005). These are visuomotor neurons which fire both when we perform a particular action, such as lifting an arm, and when we see the same action performed by someone else. It can be assumed that such neurons fire with a particular intensity when we witness extreme actions. This, to my knowledge, has not been tested yet on subjects attending circus performances. However, a plausible hypothesis could be that circus is so special and so involving because it reaches out to the deepest part of our body, that is, our brain, and activates an ancestral visuomotor memory which is inscribed in our genome and is at the very basis of our sociality in as much as it sustains dynamic empathy. It has been shown that sounds made by the mouth or hands activate brain regions involved in planning the movements that produce such sounds (Miller 2006).

This is undoubtedly the basis of what is meant when the circus is claimed to be timeless. It displays real actions that are rooted in our deepest evolutionary past, actions that were necessarily vital for the common ancestors of all primates who are generally considered to have been social tree-dwelling mammals (e.g., Beard 2004, Walker & Shipman 2005).

The visuomotor competencies that now constitute the complete repertory of circus specialties were present two hundred millions years ago, and enabled these ancestral

mammals to successfully survive and reproduce in the trees in which they lived and from which they were getting their subsistence. From the analysis of their fossilized anatomy it is possible to infer that these competencies included for instance: keeping their balance and progressing on tree limbs, climbing vertical trunks, hanging from branches and jumping from one branch to the other, catching insects and birds, picking fruit and seeds and carrying them around to a safe place, fending off predators, and maintaining essential social bonds without which individual survival would not be ensured. Some of these competencies became somewhat less vital once these ancestral primates, under some evolutionary pressures which are still debated, started to walk and run upright on the ground, and evolved toward fully bipedal modern humans in a different, mostly terrestrial environment (Stanford 2003, Bramble & Lieberman 2004). However, the human species still carries in itself fossil behaviors and fundamental potentials that a determined training can develop and refine, and which can be relied on whenever some circumstances force human groups to seek refuge in trees.

An example of such a fossil behavior that is often cited is the grasping reflex observed in newborn infants who can support their own weight hanging by their hands from a rod, a precious life-saving behavior when one is born in a tree from a hairy mother (Peiper 1963). Apparently, some individuals preserve this capacity in adulthood and some circus aerialists are credited with the conservation of this fossil ability. It is also well known that grasping feet and opposable toes have survived in some modern humans. There is also other evidence that some genetic lineages have fully conserved atypical biological features that are not any longer commonly found in modern humans. These genetic variations, that are now considered to be pathological in otherwise healthy individuals, may have proved to be adaptive in particular contexts. Interestingly, such a rare phenotype was recently discovered in three consanguineous families from northern Pakistan in which some individuals completely lack the ability to sense pain. These families derive their living from entertaining audiences by performing feats that are beyond the scope of those who possess a fully functional sense of pain. It is undoubtedly a liability not to be selectively informed by neuron paths of specific danger warnings transmitted from

the skin to the brain, such as sharpness or excessive heat, but a marked advantage if one's means of survival consist of impressing other humans by driving nails through one's tongue or walk on live charcoals (Cox et al. 2006, Pearson 2006). These remarks are not meant to lessen the achievements of circus artists, whose exacting training usually starts early and requires constant maintenance and fine-tuning, but to point out that under certain socio-cultural circumstances some genetic variations may prove to be adaptive, which otherwise could be devastating. Circus and associated activities can offer such opportunities.

This perspective casts an interesting light on the possible reasons that explain why the Olympic Games, as originally revived by Pierre de Coubertin, did not include any of the body techniques associated with the circus arts. First, of course, is the ideological principle that excluded professionals from being qualified. One had to be an amateur (a “gentleman sportman”) to be allowed to compete in the games. Secondly, all the Olympic specialties, rooted in Classical Greek traditions that they fancy to perpetuate, concern bipedal competencies, that is, what makes humans what they are as opposed to animals which run on their fours or hang in trees. The Olympics typically display the abilities of a savannah hunter: running (and occasionally swimming), throwing weapons as far and as precisely as possible, lifting heavy weights, wrestling, jumping (from the ground), etc., and horsemanship which, historically, requires most of the above abilities. Of course, there is some degree of overlapping with circus displays, in which case the style of delivery is markedly different so as not to confuse one with the other.

But there may be more to this. The fascination for the circus is ambiguous: the mastery of all these extraordinary physical feats is potentially dangerous if it were taken out of the performance ring and used in the service of criminal goals. This dimension has been very effectively exploited in a 007 thriller directed by John Glen (*Octopussy*, 1983). Set in the context of the Cold War, circus artists demonstrate the military value of their art: walking over walls on a stretched wire, throwing knives accurately, controlling the force of elephants to force fences, and the like. In more general terms, the fitness and charm of the performers exert an irresistible seduction on their audience, sometimes well beyond the appreciation of their artistic skills. This

is why, in spite of its occasional foregrounding of “family values” or “educational purposes”, circus has always been perceived as a threat to the social order because of this subversive attraction. Running away to join the circus is a popular literary *topos* but usually is not the kind of situation that middle-class families dream of for their children. These aspects also belong to the timelessness of the circus as warfare and seduction are rooted in our deep past.

Therefore, the timelessness of circus arts does not refer to a kind of non-temporal status but rather to their firm grounding in the very deep time of evolution as opposed to historical time through which cultures change at a much faster rate.

2. Where is circus going? Challenges and opportunities

Circus always takes place within a particular culture and displays through its own prism ethical values and social norms, historical and political references, esthetic standards, the memory of the circus tradition itself, even sometimes direct allusions to local issues involving social justice or deeper ideological struggles (Carmeli 2003). This can be achieved by the acting and personae of the performers, their symbolic props, and the dialogues of the clowns. The circus of the Soviet Union made massive use of these means of conveying ideology for inner consumption. When the Moscow Circus started traveling to Western countries during the Cold War, it was wont to include discreet propaganda elements in its artistically crafted performances.

Circus can indeed articulate, either unwittingly by conforming to the mood of the time or deliberately in the context of struggles for political awareness, definite contents referring to the body politics and other issues. The alternative circuses of the last three decades of the 20th century were not shy about their activist agenda, at times to the point of self-irony. Alexander Kluge’s 1967 film, *Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: Ratlos* [Artists under the Big Top: Perplexed] which received the 1968 Golden Lion at the Venice Festival, bears witness to this socio-cultural trend. The main character is a woman, Leini Peikert, who attempts to create a new utopian circus in which animals are neither trained nor dressed up, and artists explain the physical laws which rule their acrobatic acts. This film is an interesting symptom of the interface between circus and activism that was brewing during the rebellious 1960s.

This was a time when the perceived marginality of the circus attracted European middle-class youths who saw it as a window of opportunity for expressing their anarchistic utopia. They were also prone to apply their critical stand to the very medium they were using. In 1970, Hilary Westlake founded in London *Circus Lumiere*, “a show for adult audiences”, which performed in England and in some European cities. In this circus the “liberty horses”, for instance, were a group of harnessed men driven through their routine by a dominatrix, and the magician extracted a top hat from a rabbit. Its socio-artistic mission was continued by *Son of Circus Lumiere* in the 1980s. In 1976, Austrian André Heller created with Bernhard Paul *Circus Roncalli* to honor a pope who was seen as a bold mover and shaker of the Catholic Church, and allegedly a circus fan himself. In France, *Cirque Aligre* made light of the traditional pomposity of the circus code and idiom with its rat trainer who was “putting the rat head in his mouth”, a feat which seemingly had more impact on the audience than the worn out “trainer’s head in the lion’s jaws”, and other antics. Later on, *Circus Archaos* went much further in breaking taboos with, for instance, its circus hands miming masturbation in front of the closed-circuit TV screens that were showing the couple engaged in a classical acrobatic act on a pedestal in the center of the ring. This and other extreme features were censored (or self-censored) in certain cities. Obviously, this brief survey is not meant to review the whole movement of the “new” circus but merely to illustrate this trend while pointing out that the core of these spectacles ultimately were traditional acrobatic acts staged in a provocative way.

Many examples of such-short lived circuses appeared in Europe. The extent to which they succeeded in raising socio-political awareness or deeply altering the very essence of the circus remains to be assessed. But there is no doubt that they ushered in an esthetic revolution in the circus. Traditional circuses, whose owners were first flabbergasted by the success of these technically mediocre spectacles, soon started adopting some of their gimmicks. The new wave had been, for the most part, educated in middle-class families, and brought to the circus their literate and musical culture as well as their familiarity with private and public agencies that support the

arts and to which they often had privileged access. They also were media savvy and attuned to the latest technologies.

This esthetic revolution coincidentally happened when animal welfare supporters were gaining some clout with politicians. Campaigns against the use of animals in circuses were well financed and could express themselves in the media as well as summon rather large groups of protesters to harass traditional circuses. The new circus was demonstrating that circus companies could financially prosper without carrying a load of wild animals. These animals were regularly shown in their natural environment on television programs with comments that glossed over the harshness of life in the wild and glamorized freedom in nature with properly euphoric musical scores. The new circus, which of course could have hardly afforded the resources and knowledge demanded by circus animal husbandry and training, appeared as the virtuous harbinger of a new age in “clean” entertainment, and claimed to have reinvented this immemorial art. Many companies found indeed some innovative ways of presenting classical acrobatic specialties and used spectacular technology to the advantage of the performers. Québec’s *Cirque du Soleil*, which early had created its legend as being born from a group of street performers, and had secured comfortable governmental subsidies, soon became a multinational company that practically cornered the “new circus” market on a global scale. With the possible exception of the Australian *Circus OZ*, the subversive circus of the 1970s either vanished with the dispersal of the *ad hoc* groups that had brought it to life, or was absorbed into the new forms of the traditional circus that proved to be extraordinarily resilient. On the one hand, traditional circuses adapted to the expectations of their audiences, and on the other hand new circuses devolved toward brilliantly renewed ancient forms.

However, the impact of the “reinvented” circus has been considerably limited in space and time. It can be only locally and sporadically, rather than globally, construed as a post-modern revolution. The new forms spread in Northern Europe, where wild animals had been already banned in some countries. English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia, more recently India, have joined in this trend. But the traditional circuses in the United States, Mexico, Central and South America, and Southern and Eastern Europe, continue to perform impervious to these changes. Most

German, Russian and French circuses have not altered the substance of their programs, having kept producing wild animal acts or now reintroducing them in the ring. What has changed is the style of presentation, and the conditions in which their wild animals are kept and displayed. Ironically, many of the trainers come from British circus families and seemingly can perform almost anywhere in the world except at home (Carmeli 2003).

It seems that, in the course of the last half century, under a variety of political, socio-economic and cultural pressures, several trends have emerged from the “timeless” circus. They have coexisted with, and influenced each other. Rather than a linear, dialectic development, circus has branched out into at least three genres: the traditional “modern” circus with its complement of acrobats, animal trainers and clowns (e.g. the German circus *Krone*); the purely acrobatic circus with a theatrical and comic component (e.g., *Cirque du Soleil*); and a new genre, the artistic, educational or community circus that takes at times the form of a kind of “studio circus”, oscillating between activism and estheticism, with the usually half-hearted support of various government agencies. These three forms coexist globally as a probe of Internet resources indicates. Indeed, circus fans have created and maintain thorough listings of routes and programs, as well as blogs, that show the robustness of the traditional circus. Most circuses now have their own homepages through which they can communicate effectively with their audiences, and address any issues they may have. There are, of course, regional variations that reflect the political economy of cultural policies and the differential political powers of lobbyists who oppose or support the circus on a diversity of grounds.

3. Conclusion

The later part of the 20th century has experienced the emergence of a new circus culture: ideologies and community standards have changed in many countries; social activism has used the circus as a medium and a field of action; the green morality has inspired repressive laws that have been voted by parliaments or city councils, and enforced by police; the perception of nature and its wilderness, as Carmeli (2003) emphasizes, has been modified by the media and by campaigns organized by animal

defense associations. In some countries, labor legislations have had an impact on the conditions of life of circus artists and put limits on the use of children. Risks inherent in some acrobatic specialties have been legislated out of public entertainments.

As a result, individuals are somewhat better protected and are not forced to risk their lives for the pleasure and excitement of the crowd; children are shielded from early exploitation; physically challenged persons are integrated into social life and cannot be exhibited any longer for the benefit of their caretakers; wild animals are protected and excluded from the circus wherever they are assumed to be mistreated.

At the same time, a new circus culture has emerged that preserves and democratizes the skills which form the core of the timeless circus while adjusting to changing socio-cultural conditions. Some institutions, such as *Cirque du Soleil* have become global icons of the new circus not only because they ostensibly displayed the trappings of the new culture but also because they quickly adjusted to the market economy of globalization by exploiting the means provided by the information age. The case can be made that other groups initiated such a move before the new wave. For instance, the influential *Moscow Circus* had generalized the systematic use of choreography, sophisticated stage direction, classical music, and safety standards for the performers. It was also powerfully marketed as a state-sponsored ideological icon.

For the time being, older generations can be nostalgic about the traditional circus they have known, with its pungent smell of sawdust and wild animals, the social marginality of its performers, their dangerous seduction and their perceived proximity to death, and the ritualistic quality of their ephemeral performances. They may lament the gentrification and industrialization of the new circus, with its army of administrators, accountants, financiers, lawyers and marketers, but they must recognize that new generations have found their timeless circus in which they experience extreme balancing, hanging, jumping, catching, lifting, and subverting through the visual and musical forms of their own cultural and ideological language.

But the essence of cultures is change. Any stasis is relatively short as compared with the scale of deep time. Not all institutions move at the same speed. The traditional circus has undergone some cosmetic transformations while surviving in parallel to the new circus. Its resilience is a most interesting phenomenon. It is

difficult to predict whether it is sustained by the force of inertia or by the robustness of its symbolic functions. It might evolve as a religious form – something it has always been to some extent – as a temple in which animals long extinct in the wild will be worshiped in their tense or harmonious relationship with humans, in the same way as survival behaviors which have become buried in our deep evolutionary past are honored in the forms of preciously preserved circus skills.

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