Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

CIRCUS AND THE AVANT-GARDES

HISTORY, IMAGINARY, INNOVATION

Edited by
Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand

ROUTLEDGE

Circus embodies the excitement of experimentation. But possibly because circus lacked too much of an image that the avant-garde artists wanted to convey, the way it was formative for the avant-gardes has hardly been explored. Until this book.

Andreas Kotte, Professor of Theatre Studies, University of Bern, Switzerland, Author of *Studying Theatre: Phenomena, Structures and Functions* and editor of the *Swiss Theatre Encyclopedia*

Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand have marshaled an international troupe of scholars and artist practitioners from technology, cultural studies and the circus itself, a virtual high wire act of scholarship, audacious yet well grounded. The exploitation of electricity, its mechanics and its light, in circus and film exemplifies the potion of materiality and magic that redefined the cultural imaginary of popular modernity so well deciphered here.

Peter Bailey, Indiana University, Author of *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*

Excitingly elaborating the historical interplay of the circus with avant-garde thinkers and practitioners, this volume shows how the spectacular cacophony of radical hum/animal body acts and mechanics under the Big Top inspired manifold breaks from tradition into new forms and technologies across the arts, including emergent cinema, and other popular cultural expressions. Essays by a wide range of interdisciplinary international contributors expand understandings of modernism and its material and ideological reverberations into later eras.

Kim Marra, Professor Emeritus of Theatre Arts and American Studies, University of Iowa.

Taking as its starting point the interest that some avant-garde practitioners took in forms of popular culture, this interdisciplinary collection focuses specifically on circus, addressing not only theatre, fine art, and visual culture but also what was happening contemporaneous in the circus itself. Taking examples from the early twentieth century and the 1970s and 1980s, it draws on queer scholarship and new ideas about the body and modernity to investigate relations between popular physical spectacle and experimental artistic practices.

Ramsay Burt, Professor Emeritus of Dance History, Drama and Performance Studies Research Institute, De Montfort University

This adventurous volume breaks new ground by revealing the complexity of the historical relationship between circus and the avant-garde. While other scholarship illuminates connecting threads between particular avant-garde artists or art forms and circus, this volume teases out many strands of influence, not just of circus upon avant-garde artists and art forms, but also of the avant-garde upon circus. The international selection of contributors ranges from creative artists working in circus, circus training, and affiliated popular entertainments such as cabaret, to scholars of art, literature, media, film, theatre, and popular entertainment. Modernist discourses pertaining to the expressive limits and capacities of space and the body and the boundaries between performance and reality are seen as evolving through two-way exchanges between circus and dance, the visual arts, theatre, and film. The early parts of the book are devoted to historical circus and the emergence of the avant-garde around 1900. Later parts trace enduring two-way influences into the era of film and through to the 'new circus' from 1968 onward, exploring not only avant-garde aesthetics of theatre but its mobilisation in mid-century political movements. These exciting discoveries about circus and the avant-garde lead to a new model for the growth modernism: not a phenomenon rippling out from a cultural centre but rather, 'many small eruptions' transmitted across transnational, transhistorical and transmedial networks of creative practice.

Kate Flaherty, Senior Lecturer in English and Drama,
Australian National University

Circus and the Avant-Gardes brings together leading experts from a range of academic disciplines, from film studies and art history to the burgeoning field of circus studies. Equally well researched and well written, the individual chapters add up to a rich kaleidoscopic history of modernism with its relentless drive for renewal, be it artistic, social or technological. Viewing the circus *and* the avant-garde as an embodiment of modernism's conflicting sensibilities, its utopian hopes and its failures, proves to be an astute and far-reaching approach.

Matthias Christen, Media Studies, University of Bayreuth,
Author of *Der Zirkusfilm*

Circus and the Avant-Gardes

This book examines how circus and circus imaginary have shaped the historical avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century and the cultures they help constitute, to what extent this is a mutual shaping, and why this is still relevant today.

This book aims to produce a better sense of the artistic work and cultural achievements that have emerged from the interplay of circus and avant-garde artists and projects and to clarify both their trans-historical and trans-medial presence and their scope for interdisciplinary expansion. Across 14 chapters written by leading scholars – from fields as varied as circus, theatre and performance studies, art, media studies, film and cultural history – some of which are written together with performers and circus practitioners, the book examines to what extent circus and avant-garde connections contribute to a better understanding of early twentieth-century artistic movements and their enduring legacy of the history of popular entertainment and the cultural relevance of circus arts. *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* elucidates how the realm of the circus as a model, or rather a blueprint for modernist experiment, innovation and (re)negotiation of bodies, has become fully integrated into our ways of perceiving avant-gardes today.

The book does not only map the significance of circus/avant-garde phenomena for the past, but, through an exploration of their contemporary actualisations (in different media), also carves out their achievements, relevance, and impact, both cultural and aesthetic, on the present time.

Anna-Sophie Jürgens is Assistant Professor in Popular Entertainment Studies at the Australian National University (ANU), Australia. She is part of the network of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Her research explores the intersections between circus/comic performance, science and technology, and the cultural meanings of science.

Mirjam Hildbrand is a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Her research explores historical circus practice, the intersections between circus/theatre and the discourse of "high/low" culture. She also works as a freelance dramaturge and a programmer in the field of contemporary circus.

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Circus and the Avant-Gardes

History, Imaginary, Innovation

Edited by Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Jürgens, Anna-Sophie, editor. | Hildbrand, Mirjam, editor.
Title: Circus and the avant-gardes: history, imaginary, innovation/ edited by Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand.
Description: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022. | Series: Routledge advances in the theatre & performance studies | Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2021047565 (print) | LCCN 2021047566 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367757281 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367757304 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003163749 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Circus–History–20th century. | Avant-garde (Aesthetics)–History–20th century.
Classification: LCC GV1801 .C54 2022 (print) | LCC GV1801 (ebook) | DDC 791.309–dc23/eng/20211026
LC record available at https://lccn loc.gov/2021047565
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021047566

ISBN: 9780367757281 (hbk)
ISBN: 9780367757304 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003163749 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749

Typeset in Bembo
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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Preface

At first glance, the bustling circus arenas and the experimental avant-garde movements of the twentieth century have little in common. The attractions of the circus, awe-inspiring and hilarious in turns, seduce the audience into distraction and restlessly shift its gaze. In contrast, the progressive and rigidly determined avant-garde, with its eyes firmly fixed on the future, seems to belong to another cultural sphere. Often equated with literary modernity *tout court*, the avant-garde appears to be at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum occupied by the popular, supposedly low-brow world of the arena.

And yet, both the circus and the avant-garde were, in their own ways, the "other" of bourgeois art, challenging and effectively changing aesthetic experience and cultural production. Indeed, to a degree that has not been duly acknowledged in the literature, there is a dense web of affinities and affiliations between the circus and the historical avant-gardes that still awaits exploration. For while the avant-garde has been the subject of intense critical attention, the field of circus studies has only begun to emerge in the last few decades. In this volume, they are subject to a common analysis for the first time.

As a first step in the direction of a broader dialogue, the editors of this volume have brought together a range of scholars and perspectives in order to shed light on the complex relations between the circus and the avant-garde. They demonstrate that the fascination and inspiration was mutual and stretched across arts and media, from the early narrative pantomimes and their appropriation of Wagner's operas to the "typocircus" of the Czech avant-garde that drew on characteristic design features of the circus, ranging from the circularity of the arena to the striking designs of the wheatpaste posters.

The editors have done an excellent job in assembling a series of analyses and perspectives that highlight the innovative force of the circus and associated formats such as clowning and wrestling. As the contributions demonstrate, the bustling entertainment styles introduced and promoted by the circus, with its reliance on cutting-edge technology, its division of labour, its new readings of the body, and its flickering regimes of attention, not only resonated with the proponents of the avant-garde, but also readily translated into their programmatic efforts at challenging the orthodox and the conventional. Moreover, by offering an archaeology of the circus on the one hand and studies of avant-garde

movements on the other, the contributions provide a fresh perspective on some cultural entanglements that have long been sidelined in academic critical discourse. Beyond the postmodern concern with collapsing the divide between high and low, the assembled chapters excavate historical patterns of engagement that, while obvious at the time, have not yet received due critical attention in the myriad studies that have sought to describe and define what has been termed the century of the avant-gardes.[1]

The affinities and affiliations illuminated here for the first time point to a bigger picture. They highlight a fundamental connectivity of the arts through time, space and cultural registers that is integral to literature and the arts in the broadest sense. This correspondence, among other things, is what the juxtaposition of the circus and the avant-garde reveals: while supposedly belonging to discordant or even competing communities, they formed an improbable alliance at the interface of apparently diametrically opposed forms of cultural production. The editors and the contributors have approached this topic with exemplary theoretical ambition and methodological rigour. The end result is a work that sheds new light on established themes and cultural predispositions, cutting across disciplines, challenging orthodoxies and investing core questions with an entirely new dynamic.

Anita Traninger
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Note

1 Cornelia Klinger and Wolfgang Müller-Funk (Eds.). *Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarden*. Munich: Fink, 2004.

Acknowledgements

This book emerged from a basement. Or, should we say, from the circus collection of a university library, hidden in dusty boxes and envelopes? Or, possibly from historical newspaper clippings collected by a clown aficionado throughout the twentieth century, carefully preserved by a librarian-archivist with a sense of the collection's value for twenty-first-century research? Or, did it emerge from those sometimes hard-to-decipher circus playbills from around 1900 that show what was then a sensational, cutting-edge and indeed "avant-garde" phenomenon: opulent pantomimes, technology-driven clowning, spectacular, internationally travelling entertainment institutions. In short: circus. Actually, this book began with an archivist noticing that he was carrying the same clown boxes on the same day to two different tables and eventually moved these tables together, thus introducing two curious researchers. *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* thus created itself through the spellbinding power of its historical material, which, it seems, wanted to be studied, mapped, traced back (and forward), analysed and interpreted.

We would like to thank all our wonderful authors, who joined us on our voyage of discovery not only back to the nineteenth century but also criss-crossing the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Our authors built bridges between stages (of aesthetics, performances, costumes, narratives and genders), they built antennas and radio towers to talk to the past (about conventions and revolutions), they laid underwater cables to better connect with other continents (e.g. to discuss colonial modernities) – but, most importantly, they did a fantastic job in preparing their chapters for our book (which was sometimes a challenge in a world of spreading instability and pandemic uncertainty).

This book also draws inspiration from two conferences that we organised in 2020 on "Circus and the Avant-Gardes", which were co-funded and supported by the Fund for the Promotion of Young Researchers and the Institute of Theatre Studies of the University of Bern, Switzerland, as well as the Cluster of Excellence 2020 "Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective" of the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany (Project ID 390608380). We are very grateful for their (ongoing) support and invaluable assistance in organising these multi-day events. And we would also like to express our gratitude to our supporters and friends from the Swiss National

Science Foundation and the Janggen-Pöhn Foundation (supporting Mirjam Hildbrand with a PhD scholarship), the Dahlem Humanities Centre of the Freie Universität Berlin (where Anna-Sophie Jürgens was a Fellow in 2019/2020), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (supporting Anna-Sophie with a Feodor Lynen Postdoctoral Fellowship, 2017–2020), the Institute of Theatre Studies of the University of Bern (supporting Mirjam in creating this book in parallel to her PhD thesis) and the Australian National University (supporting Anna-Sophie in finalising this project in her new role as Assistant Professor in Popular Entertainment Studies). This book benefited enormously from the critical comments and editorial support of Dr Rebecca Hendershott and Dr Bert Peeters, as well as the intellectual contribution of our brilliant Research Assistant, PhD candidate Aiden Essery.

Finally, we would like to say two words to Dr Peter Jammerthal, the archivist of the Theatre History Collections of the Institute of Theatre Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, who showed us his circus material and unleashed the clowns who lured us into the ring of "Circus and Avant-gardes" – of course with the exclamation "Today for the last time!" (see Chapter 4) – and bestowed on us a wonderful collaboration and friendship: Thank you.

Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand
Canberra and Basel, 22 September 2021

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1 Arts for all senses

Circus and the avant-gardes – introduction

Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Mirjam Hildbrand

> La-d-ie-s and gentlemen, step closer, please, a little closer. Before visiting the palatial palaces of sculpture and art in other portions of this famous institute see the cubist sideshow – the show they are all talking about. Here, here, here we have the famous one-eyed lady, brought from the wilds of France; the human skeleton carrying a heliotrope owl and leading a camel with elephant ears; the horse with legs like a bullfrog; the greatest galaxy of normal and abnormal nudes ever assembled on this or any other continent.[1]

This article from an American newspaper – entitled "Step In! No Danger! Cubist Show Now On" (1913) – embodies a parodistic approach to cubism as an early twentieth-century avant-garde art movement (and thus to modernism). It also reminds us of how sensational circus shows and related cultural spheres – such as sideshows (evoked in the quote), vaudeville, variety theatre and other forms of popular theatre – turned novelty into cultural value and entertainment style, thus rewiring popular amusement and changing visual habits. In fact, around 1900, circuses were one of the – if not *the* – major cultural institution travelling the world with monumental productions, huge menageries and myriads of human and animal performers. Before novel technologies gave rise to the cinema industry, internationally touring circuses did not merely use and showcase brand-new technologies (trains, automobiles), but also offered exciting new opportunities for experiencing reality through visual turmoil and displays of extravagant aesthetics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, avant-garde artists – including Futurists and Dadaists, Bauhaus protagonists but also Russian theatre reformers and Czech graphic designers – discovered circus and its aesthetics as a treasure trove and creative goldmine for both ideas about the recasting of the existing artistic practices and the art of the future. Whether in Russia, Germany or France (and many other countries), avant-garde artists drew inspiration from the depiction and exploration of performing bodies and body techniques seen in the circus; from hyperbolic rhetorical pyrotechnics of the circus; its anti-Aristotelian dramaturgy; and its entertaining, non-conventional protagonists who contrasted the prevalent realist and naturalist – or simply conventionalist

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-1

– views of art. The experimental, unorthodox and radical projects of avant-garde innovators also drew on the circus's concept of space, which allowed and forced interaction with and among the audience; and on the idea of playing for and with a heterogeneous community. Circus invigorated modernist artists and thinkers breaking away from tradition and pushing the boundaries of what was accepted (as the norm, as beautiful, as culturally important, as the bourgeois understanding of culture).

What did the circus enthusiasm of avant-gardists look like? For instance, the excitement of Russian artists – including Grigori Kozintsev, Leonid Trauberg and Sergei Yutkevich – for circus coincided with their efforts to reform the medium of communication in theatre, and its stage. Bauhaus artists like László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer were interested in the geometry of the movement of a human body in abstract space. Intensely inspired by circus and dance, and following their vision of freeing man from the manifold bondages of physical limitations, Schlemmer and his team created elaborate hyper-sculptural costumes in the 1920s – personifications of the unification of costume, dance and music – that transmogrified dancers into *artificial figures*. According to Schlemmer, circus was an "*artistic institution*"[2] with a potential to reform art; while Moholy-Nagy proclaimed that circus, operetta, variety and clowning (Charlie Chaplin, Fratellini) were to act as models for the abolishment of subjectivity.[3] Reforming art and theatre through circus was also a vision of Futurist artists; above all Marinetti, who visited the Cirque Médrano in Paris together with Picasso and Apollinaire and possibly Meyerhold.[4] The circus, which naturalist artists had considered a microcosm of primarily social interest, was now perceived as an aesthetic space, a space of strong contrasts of light and colour. Exploring this sensational space, theatre reformer Max Reinhardt staged the theatre play *Oedipus* in Berlin Circus Schumann in 1910. And in 1941, Ballets Russes-star George Balanchine choreographed a ballet for 50 elephants (in pink tutus) for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (for which Igor Stravinsky wrote the music), yet again using the circus as a stage for avant-garde experimentation. These few examples highlight that modern circus had a genuine significance for avant-garde artists and thinkers: it served as an important source of inspiration not only for the reformation of drama-based theatre but also for the theorisation of avant-garde visions for the performing and fine arts.

While there are important individual studies of the avant-gardes' embrace of and engagement with the circus, the question of how the circus itself relates to the avant-gardes in the broader context of modernism/modernities (and since) remains largely unexplored. Barely discussed are the many ways in which avant-garde ideas, projects and innovators have influenced, and continue to influence, circus practitioners and shows. This edited collection aims to dive deeper into circus and avant-garde history to uncover their connections, interrelations and influences in more detail, including, for instance, the avant-garde-inspired *theatricalisation* of the second Moscow Circus by Nikolai Foregger in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the many collaborations that resulted

from mutual interest and rapprochement – and their cultural impact and legacy. Authors of this book argue that modern circus was not only productive for, but *integral* to, avant-garde cultural creation; that circus played a key role in the historical emergence of modernist innovation and artistic identity, both of which have left a continuing footprint on new and contemporary circus.[5] They trace the *actual* circus practices and circus imaginaries explored in, and emerging from, avant-garde projects, as well as the knowledge (or rather fantasies) *of* circus with which they approached the arts of the ring.[6]

Avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century drew inspiration from the techniques of the circus to viscerally involve the audience and sought to use it to influence the audience with political ideas, which was recalled and echoed by the social activism of the 1960–1970s. It is little wonder that in this period, theatre-makers and performers referred to the circus – and the New Circus movement reflected the social activism of the 1970s as much as the milieu and spirit of avant-garde artistic approaches. Furthermore, it is sensical that circus, a realm of thrill and excitement, appealed to social activists as a vehicle of working-class politics, gender politics (for instance, about strong women) and animal agency – all of which generated a new type of circus. In other words, the emergence of the New Circus is closely linked to the aspirations of theatre practitioners in the wake of the 1968 movement; the term "New Circus" designates the form of the circus that is widely considered to have emerged out of the events of May 1968 and the widespread social unrest of the following years. In search of new forms of art-making, of performing, of working, of communicating with the audience, in search of a contemporary popular theatre and, above all, in search of new and more accessible venues beyond the established institutions, the movement became interested in the circus. Theatre makers of the 1970s and 1980s thus combined circus elements such as acrobatics or clowning with acting, narrative dramaturgy or literary texts. Some of them received their training from traditional circus companies (see Chapter 12). The combination of circus and storytelling was, among other things, what made this New Circus new. Interestingly, however, there was a time long before that when circuses themselves created productions with narrative dramaturgies (see Chapter 2). Like the historical avant-gardes in the 1910s and 1920s, circus arts once again served as a point of reference and source of inspiration in times of social upheaval and aesthetic reorientation – and once again their cultural amalgams became "institutionalised as an acceptable shock, a fashionable sensation, a necessary stimulus".[7]

Considering a range of perspectives woven together to form an illuminating set of ideas that show new insights into early twentieth-century artistic movements on the one hand, and their late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century reinterpretations and revival on the other, *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* presents a mosaic of interconnected analyses and discussions that offer a multifaceted and suggestive – but by no means exhaustive – picture of the interplay between circus and avant-garde projects. Rather than delivering a comprehensive taxonomy of circus and avant-garde links, this collection zooms in

on some of the spectra of their cultural halo, based on chapters chosen for their inherent ability to *narrate* the diversification and dynamics of circus-avant-garde phenomena that inform modern sensibilities, and predate and unfold in contemporary ones – in a transhistorical discursive cultural continuum.

Curtain up! – about this book and its context

Scholarship on circus and clowning has been flourishing in recent years,[8] including analyses of the circus's role as an agent of modernity and vehicle for modernism.[9] Circus scholars have recognised the importance of circus for individual avant-garde projects, for instance in modern literature,[10] and have discussed how individual early twentieth-century artists approached and drew inspiration from circus phenomena (focusing, for example, on Durov, Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Russian avant-garde movements[11]). However, circus performance practice around 1900 – and thus the question of what kind of circus the avant-garde artists actually knew – has hardly been researched, nor has the influence of avant-garde endeavours on the circus itself. This is particularly interesting in the broader context of modernism/modernity. Jeffrey Weiss's 1994 *The Popular Culture of Modern Art* (discussing music hall as the epitome of the modern and an inspirational source for avant-garde aesthetics) and a 2000 article by Erika Fischer-Lichte – "Avant-Garde and the Semiotics of the Antitextual Gesture" – are among the first steps in this direction.

Given the circus's cultural ubiquity and the rich body of evidence of circus as a vital site of avant-garde activity, it is astonishing that it has been neglected in avant-garde and (new) Modernist Studies, which have privileged other popular art forms over the circus as influential "global players" of popular entertainment. Circus is missing in studies exploring the interplay between popular culture and avant-gardes/modernism,[12] as well as in investigations of avant-garde and modern theatre contexts.[13] Even in studies focusing explicitly on popular stages (including musical comedy and revue, music hall), circus is barely mentioned.[14] Adam Versényi's (2006) look at itinerant circus and performance forms influencing Mexican theatrical avant-garde is a rare exception.

Circus and the Avant-Gardes thus contributes novel insights on circus to the fields of Circus Studies and Popular Culture/Entertainment Studies, while also feeding new perspectives into the emerging discourse around the importance of the performing body in modernism (described as a "physical turn" in New Modernist Studies by Claire Warden[15]) – most recently examined in publications such as Burt and Huxley's *Dance, Modernism, and Modernity* (2020) and Penny Farfan's *Performing Queer Modernism* (2017). Among others, these books recognise the connections across "high" and "low" cultural domains within the context of modernism (see also Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz's *Bad Modernism* from 2006). And it is remarkable how close their subjects of study – such as the in-between position of dance in early twentieth-century culture, "straddling popular entertainment and high art"[16] – are related to, and reminiscent of, circus (and its status in society).

Through its focus on circus, *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* also contributes new ideas to another "expansion" evolving in New Modernist Studies: the erosion of the conventional association of modernism with "the difficult, serious or intellectually demanding".[17] This stream of thought has been fuelled by studies like Leonard Diepeveen's *Mock Modernism* (2014; without looking into circus contexts) and also highlights how circus art itself became associated with the difficult, serious and intellectually demanding when injected and unfolding into "elitist" avant-garde concepts. Finally, this volume adds its quota to the ambition of New Modernist Studies to shake the pedestal of the modernist canon: in *Circus and the Avant-Gardes*, familiar names such as Loïe Fuller, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Hugo Ball sit alongside rarely discussed names and artists who were equally influential in affecting and disrupting the modernist project.

In sum, this edited collection examines how circus and circus imaginary have shaped the historical avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century and the cultures they helped constitute, and why this is still relevant today.

> How did the aesthetics, technologies and stage concepts of the circus impact on the artistic projects and styles of historical avant-garde artists? How can the interplay between the performance practices of the circus and the art and theatre of the avant-gardes be defined? How does the link between circus and avant-gardes manifest in their representations and interpretations – imaginaries – in different media, and how are they updated and refashioned today?

Circus and the Avant-Gardes explores these questions by combining the voices of leading circus and theatre scholars, art and cultural historians, film and media researchers. Together they produce a better sense of the cultural work and aesthetic achievements that emerge from the interplay of circus and avant-garde phenomena. In so doing, the book traces the fluid exchange between popular entertainment and innovative, highly influential artistic endeavours in various historical and contemporary circus and circus-related contexts. It also clarifies the role of avant-garde projects as a driver for (new) entertainment and performance styles and the circus's contribution to modernist innovation as central to new understandings of cultural history. Arguing that circus as an expression of what Peter Bailey has called "popular modernism" is not merely a "dynamic complement to that of the avant-garde",[18] but an integral part of the avant-garde endeavour, this project aims to incite and fuel a fruitful dialogue between Circus Studies and New Modernist Studies.

The ubiquitous, eclectically used label "avant-garde" seems to refer to almost any type of anti-traditional art form, the leading edge of artistic experiment and antagonistic groups;[19] hence the use of "-isms" to describe them, as in Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism. Likewise, the term "circus" is a magic hat from which many meanings are conjured up: "circus" is travelling family businesses, flamboyant superlative shows featuring elephant slides

and sword fights with electrical weapons, but also magnificent buildings in the heart of capital cities. "Circus" is also outrageous costumes, ingenious stage mechanics, extraordinary bodies, gender bending and much more. In many ways, it is difficult to define the difference between circus styles, aesthetics and performances and those of other popular entertainments (such as music hall, vaudeville or cabaret), as they historically have shared for instance, practices and lifestyles, as well as performers. Overlaps exist not only in performance practice but also in terminology: music hall, vaudeville and variety theatre are sometimes used synonymously, but depending on the geographical context and its language, they refer to related but different cultural phenomena and institutions.[20] However, avant-garde artists explicitly refer to "circus" – and this book seeks to find out what exactly is meant by this in the various contexts. Far from aiming to reduce the complexity of these terms slipping and sliding between oppositional meanings, authors in *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* were not given or asked for fixed definitions but were invited to present and explore what *they* understand as "avant-gardes" and "circus". However, the authors of this book seem to agree that the term "avant-gardes" does mark the most radically experimental and innovative arts in modernism from the nineteenth century onwards (most authors refer to the many early twentieth-century vanguard movements of Futurism, Dada and Surrealism as "avant-gardes", hence the plural), rather than a cultural or conceptual order abiding outside of, or differing altogether from, that of modernism. Like Gabriele Brandstetter's 2015 (1995) book *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-gardes*, this volume takes the historical avant-garde as a point of departure to address contemporary phenomena.

Part 1 of *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* investigates the historical influences and interrelations between circus, popular entertainment and avant-garde protagonists and projects within different but interconnected cultural contexts and media. To set the scene, the first chapter of this section is dedicated to circus historiography and the current state of research on circus around 1900 as a European, but also international, cultural entertainment form. It provides insights into *actual* historical circus practice and thus into what circus style, performance routines and technologies circus visitors of the early twentieth century could see in circus shows. In other words, it explores what *kind of circus* or circus performances avant-garde artists might have actually seen in order to better understand what circus elements and aesthetics they drew inspiration from. This includes, for example, circus pantomimes, which have received little attention in circus research despite their considerable presence on historical circus posters and playbills and their crucial importance for the success of circus companies. The following two chapters in the first part of the book explore the intersections between circus and avant-garde art by examining, on the one hand, the *theatricalisation* of circus and the *circusation* of theatre in early twentieth-century Russia and the Soviet Union and, on the other hand, revolutionary Czech avant-garde typography. These chapters emphasise that circus influenced not only aesthetics and practices of avant-garde artists, but also their

approach to, and experiments with, various technologies and media. Circus-related new book design – inspired by non-narrative circus programmes, circus visuals and graphic rhetoric – became indeed the specific contribution of the Czech artists to the international avant-garde. They aimed to democratise access to their artistic products and sought to change society in line with their utopian vision. Other avant-garde artists, including Sergei Eisenstein, experimented with circus arts as a means of rethinking causality, integrity and identity in their works. New, highly influential artistic concepts and methods (such as the method of montage) were the results.

The second part studies the ideas and techniques the historical avant-gardes – Dada avant-gardists in particular – drew from the practices of popular theatre for their own experimental projects and the development of avant-garde strategies, and how these practices themselves relate to older forms of popular entertainment: fairground theatre and travelling spectacles. Chapter 5 draws our attention to the historical separation of performance styles and genres and their institutionalisation. In the European context, the understanding of theatre shifted from performative body arts to the literary art of drama in the course of the eighteenth century, where the (physical) theatre arts such as acrobatics, tightrope walking and clowning were separated from a theatre based on literary texts. From a historical perspective, this separation goes hand in hand with the long-standing debate between "high" and "popular" culture. However, the interplay of different performance traditions and genres that avant-garde artists associated with and inscribed into (their) circus also borrowed from other intertwining strands of spectacle: mechanical puppets, waxworks and spectral illusions that were popular in the nineteenth century. As shown Chapter 6 these spectacles and popular performances also constituted a specifically "colonial modernity". Part 2 of the book not only gives insights into specific (historical) performances and contextualises the diverse entertainment and performance practices that were engulfed and absorbed by the avant-gardes – and which reappear throughout *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* – but also proposes a "rethinking of Modernity away from a model of concentrically diminishing ripples, towards a model of small eruptions of energy across interconnected transnational webs of interaction between the apparatuses, performers and audiences of both the frontier and the metropole" (Chapter 6).

Many of the projects and experiments described in the first and second part of this book participated in a major media revolution that finally blitzed the appeal of turn-of-the-century circus and other popular entertainments – such as cinema. For instance, in Paris, the success of this new entertainment was dramatically signalled when in 1907, the old Cirque d'Hiver on the Boulevard du Temple became a Cinéma Pathé and the Hippodrome in the Rue Caulincourt became the Gaumont Palace in 1911, a cinema that three years later surpassed the perennial leader of the nonsubsidised entertainments – the Folies Bergère, the city's most famous English-style music hall – in terms of income.[21] However, as this collection pinpoints from various perspectives, circus lives on, not least in cinema.

Film, attraction and distraction are discussed in detail in Part 3 of the volume, which investigates the ways the novel medium film (and its cousin film animation) emerged from the mould of avant-garde and circus experimentation, and how they transported, carried on, visualised and narrativised their intrinsic link to the world of popular entertainment and avant-garde endeavours. In the first chapter of this section (Chapter 7), Tom Gunning's influential concept of the "cinema of attraction(s)" – that quality of early cinema and animation that celebrated "its ability to show something"[22] – is reassessed and remobilised in relation to how modern spectatorship was envisioned and nurtured by P.T. Barnum – and (his) late nineteenth-century American three-ring circus – as an aesthetic response to the conditions of modernity. The second chapter (Chapter 8) takes new artistic and technological forms of the spectacular as a point of departure for an exploration of the interplay between circus and (early) animation film. It elucidates the cultural and aesthetic links between the animated potentials of the circus, avant-garde visions of mobility and motion contraptions, particularly in relation to the *Cirque Calder*, Alexander Calder's miniature circus performances. Together, the authors of this section make it clear that circus-avant-garde collaborations, interrelations and influences have been capturing the audience's imagination all over the world not only because of their thematic, aesthetic and cultural power and potentialities, but also because of their varied technology.

While the first three parts of this volume explore stage activities, visual fictions and film, the chapters of the fourth section concentrate on theatrical settings and style in relation to performed corporealities and contemporary artistic physicalities (as stages for social theatrics). The first chapter in Part 4 (Chapter 9) ventures into a bold re-definition of wrestling as a contemporary performance practice that emerges from an intricate circus-avant-garde relationship. The author explores how the radical body aesthetics staged in wrestling are linked to the circus mould within the context of avant-garde exhibitionism, and reflects on their connection with burlesque and drag performance. In conversation with contemporary performance artist Le Pustra – who regularly performs on the international circuit in cabaret, burlesque and variety – the second chapter (Chapter 10) focuses on contemporary avant-garde and circus-related visual spectacle. It explores the evolution of a particular Dada costume through various twentieth- and twenty-first-century performances (from David Bowie and Klaus Nomi to Lady Gaga) and its manifestation and meaning in Le Pustra's contemporary reinterpretation. Le Pustra is not only a dazzling performer but also the director of a famous Berlin-based cabaret show that reinterprets early twentieth-century avant-garde performances. His show includes a Serpentine Dance à la Loïe Fuller, whose "style owned a great deal to her early career in burlesque and cabaret" and who became "a full-fledged participant in avant-garde theatre" in 1924 when she collaborated with Tristan Tzara, among others.[23] It is fitting, then, that the third chapter in this section (Chapter 11) is dedicated to Fuller's dance and queerness in the 2016 biopic *The Dancer* by Stéphanie Di Giusto, discussing how vaudeville and other popular stages

provided Fuller with a space to experiment and transgress stereotypical gender roles in her dance. These three chapters explore how avant-garde performance and costume transform(ed) the body of the performer, and how innovations in bodily movement and costume destabilise(d) the relation between different visual, theatrical and performative practices and their established meanings and (modern and contemporary) experiences. By discussing the connections between circus and avant-garde through this contemporary prism, this edited volume also provides an answer to the question of what has become of circus in (what) avant-garde contexts, if the late twentieth century is considered "a time when avant-garde art seems to have become advanced entertainment".[24] Setting off with and referring to history, and then moving on to the imaginaries of circus and avant-gardes bodies, the chapters of the fourth part act as a smooth transition to the fifth part of the book, which is dedicated to a bigger picture and offers theoretical reflections on circus and avant-garde interfaces since the 1970s.

Part 5 of *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* elucidates the cultural fantasies about and around circus and avant-gardes, as well as the ways avant-garde phenomena themselves appear as part of popular entertainment and vice versa. If the late twentieth century is "a time when avant-garde art seems to have become advanced entertainment",[25] what became of circus in (what) avant-garde contexts ever since? Removed from the institutional live circus, separated from their role in the circus arena and their performance routines, and reinterpreted in different, interrelated media, circus phenomena overlaid with representations of an *idea of the circus* generate the imaginary of the circus. Avant-garde protagonists explore(d) such circus imaginaries. Celebrating the circus's *immediacy* and *difference* from everyday life, and its enchanting power to bring very diverse people together, theatre makers and painters of the early twentieth century nurtured and propagated ideas of circus that were only loosely linked to circus reality. The Czech avant-garde artists discussed in Chapter 4, for example, had little opportunity to see real circus performances in their capital city because there was no permanent circus building in Prague and travelling circuses rarely ventured into the capital. Nevertheless, they were inspired by the (imagined) circus and aesthetics and used and developed New Circus visuals (e.g. poster design with hyperbolic slogans and gigantic fonts) and iconography for their revolutionary book designs and typography. The fifth and last part of the book further explores and theoretically frames this *circus imaginary* (which is not only a product of nostalgia, romance or pure fantasy but also of political ideas and actionism); its exploitation by early twentieth-century artists as well as its cultural legacy, which was particularly revived in and since the 1970s with the New Circus (see Chapter 12).[26]

New Circus contested the iconic elements of traditional circus such as "the animal acts, the circus ring, and the ringmaster, and hybridised with different art forms. It was from this form of circus that Contemporary Circus emerged".[27] Protagonists of the New Circus (who are often trained theatre professionals) have been called "avant-garde circus practitioners" as they explore and

embody "circus via the avant-garde ideas on theatre which had percolated through western theatre and dance schools in the post-1968 period".[28] While the first chapter of this section (Chapter 12) focuses on performance activism of and since the 1970s, the second chapter (Chapter 13) maps what "avant-garde" means in today's circus. The practice of contemporary circus artists is often described as "avant-garde". However, the contemporary does not necessarily belong to the avant-garde; it defines the contours and ethos of the circus's contemporaneity. Chapter 13 explores its meaning and definitions. Overall, the last part highlights the significance of circus/avant-garde phenomena for the past, and – through an exploration of their contemporary actualisations (in different media)[29] – also carves out their achievements, relevance and cultural and aesthetic impact on the present.

To bring *Circus and the Avant-Gardes* full circle, the last chapter (Chapter 14) recaps themes from this volume and shows that and how circus is a versatile frame for interpreting our relationship with avant-garde endeavours. It reflects on the coexisting juxtapositions, ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxical dynamics revealed in this book – past and present, "elitist" and "pop", "high" and "low", art and entertainment – and highlights that tradition does not mean stagnation. The chapter tentatively maps how the meaning of "avant-garde" has shifted in circus contexts, and vice versa, and what role the "culture of narration" (not only attraction) plays between them. It critically reflects on what the historical avant-gardists perceived and interpreted as circus – their "idea of circus" – and how this can be defined in the light of circus history. Finally, the last chapter of the volume explores how the insights collected in this book add to and disrupt current discussions revolving around modernism/modernity, in order to revisit what has been called "popular modernism",[30] and, potentially, could be called "popular avant-garde".

Notes

1 Chicago Record-Herald, quoted in Leonard Diepeveen (ed.), *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910–1935* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 3.
2 Oskar Schlemmer, "Mensch und Kunstfigur (1925)," in *Theater im 20. Jahrhundert: Programmschriften, Stilperioden, Reformmodelle*, ed. Manfred Brauneck (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rororo, 1993), 149.
3 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Zirkus, Varieté (1925)," in *Theater im 20. Jahrhundert: Programmschriften, Stilperioden, Reformmodelle*, ed. Manfred Brauneck (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rororo, 1993), 158. See also Claudine Amiard-Chevrel (ed.), *Du cirque au theatre* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1983).
4 See Giovanni Lista, "Esthétique du music-hall et mythologie urbaine chez Marinetti," in *Du cirque au theatre*, ed. Claudine Amiard-Chevrel (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1983), 51–52.
5 See Martine Maleval, "An Epic of New Circus," in *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, eds. Peta Tait and Katie Lavers Tait (New York: Routledge, 2016), 50–64; Katie Lavers, Louis Patrick Leroux and Jon Burtt, *Contemporary Circus* (London: Routledge, 2019).

6 See Mirjam Hildbrand, "Theaterlobby gegen Zirkusunternehmen. Über die Aufwertung des 'Theaters' auf Kosten der zirzensischen Künste," *Forum Modernes Theater* 30:1–2 (2015 [2019]), 19–33.
7 Donald Kuspit, "Avant-Garde and Audience," in *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, ed. Sally Everett (London: McFarland, 1991), 173.
8 See e.g. Andrew McConnell Stott, *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness and the Story of Britain's Greatest Comedian* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009); Louise Peacock, *Slapstick and Comic Performance: Comedy and Pain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (eds.), *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Katie Lavers, Louis Patrick Leroux and Jon Burtt (eds.), *Contemporary Circus* (London: Routledge, 2019); Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "Being the Alien: The Space Pierrots and Circus Spaces of David Bowie, Klaus Nomi and Michael Jackson," in *Southern Space Studies: Outer Space and Popular Culture*, ed. Annette Froehlich (Cham: Springer, 2021 (in press)).
9 See e.g. Gillian Arrighi, "The Circus and Modernity; A Commitment to 'the Newer' and 'the Newest'," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10:2 (2012), 169–185; Gillian Arrighi, "Synthesising Circus Aesthetics and Science: Australian Circus and Variety Theatre at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 17:1 (2019), 1–19; Gillian Arrighi, "Circus and Electricity: Staging Connexions between Science and Popular Entertainments," in *Circus, Science and Technology: Dramatising Innovation*, ed. Anna-Sophie Jürgens (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 81–100; Anna-Sophie Jürgens (ed.), *Circus, Science and Technology: Dramatising Innovation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020a); Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "The Pathology of Joker's Dance: On the Origins of Arthur Fleck's Body Aesthetics in Todd Phillips's 2019 *Joker* Film," *Dance Chronicle* 43:3 (2020), 321–337; Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "Fun-de-siècle: Dance, Popular Spectacles and the Circus," *Tanz & Archiv* 8 (2020c), 172–188.
10 See e.g. Naomi Ritter, *Art as Spectacle: Images of the Entertainer since Romanticism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989); Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Sophie Basch (ed.), *Romans de Cirque* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2002).
11 See e.g. Joel Schechter, *Durov's Pig: Clowns, Politics and Theatre* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985); Oksana Bulgakowa, *FEKS: Die Fabrik des Exzentrischen Schauspielers* (Berlin: PotemkinPress, 1996).
12 See e.g. Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid, *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sascha Bru et al. (eds.), *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture* (Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2011); Scott Ortolano, *Popular Modernism and Its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
13 See e.g. Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2002); Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, "Modernism and Theatrical Performance," *Modernist Cultures* 1:1 (2005), 59–68; Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 (briefly mentioning circus, 198)); Penny Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Claire Warden, "Modernism and European Drama/Theatre," in *The Modernist World*, eds. Stephen Ross and Allana C. Lindgren (New York: Routledge, 2015), 356–364.
14 See e.g. Peter Bailey, "Theatres of Entertainment/Spaces of Modernity: Rethinking the British Popular Stage, 1890–1914," *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 26:1 (1998); Len Platt, "Popular Theater," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture*, ed. Celia Marshik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 221–236.
15 Claire Warden, "Foreword," in *Dance, Modernism, and Modernity*, eds. Ramsay Burt and Michael Huxley (New York: Routledge, 2020), xii.
16 Ramsay Burt and Michael Huxley, *Dance, Modernism, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 34.

17 Warden, "Foreword," xiv.
18 Bailey, "Theatres of Entertainment/Spaces of Modernity," 6.
19 Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.
20 Unlike vaudeville, music halls, variety theatres and other primarily urban forms of entertainment, which experienced a boom in the course of massive urbanisation in the nineteenth century, the circus was on the move in all regions, large and small towns. It developed rapidly with the expansion of national and international transport. Around 1900, circus offered acrobatics and clowning as well as ('wild') animal performances in a large round cage and performances specially adapted to the ring and the circus tent. Circus is less tied to a specific cultural context than vaudeville and other urban popular theatres (see Chapter 5).
21 Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the belle Epoque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 193.
22 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 382. See also Sébastien Denis and Jérémy Houillère (eds.), *Cirque, cinéma et attractions. Intermédialité et circulation des formes circassiennes* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2019).
23 Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 19, 214.
24 Kuspit, "Avant-Garde and Audience," 171.
25 Donald Kuspit, "Avant-Garde and Audience," in *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, ed. Sally Everett (London: McFarland, 1991), 171.
26 In exploring the links between circus and the avant-garde beyond the historical avant-gardes from the early twentieth century, this book concentrates on the circus. See Maleval ("An epic of new circus") for a discussion of how avant-garde theatre makers of the 1970s and 1980s embraced the circus, and studies such as the following for other perspectives, e.g. on how Alice Cooper aspired to create a rock form of Dada and Surrealism (Simon Reynolds, *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and Its Legacy from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2016), 121–125) or to what extend clowning has shaped David Bowie's and Klaus Nomi's work (Jürgens, "Being the Alien"). See also Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 197–228.
27 Katie Lavers and Jon Burtt, with Erin Ball, "Unreal Limbs: Erin Ball and the Extended Body in Contemporary Circus," in *Circus, Science and Technology: Dramatising Innovation*, ed. Anna-Sophie Jürgens (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 50. See also Jean-Michel Guy (ed.), *Avantgarde, Cirque! Les arts de la piste en revolution* (Paris: Autrement, 2001). Overall, the works of a new generation of circus artists increasingly broke away from narrative dramaturgies and crossed the borders to other art forms, such as contemporary dance, performance art and visual and media art. At the same time, more and more ensembles were formed that developed performances based on only one discipline, such as the French Compagnie XY (focusing on partner acrobatics) or the British juggling group Gandini Juggling.
28 Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, 93.
29 In Europe, the term "contemporary circus" became established in connection with the production of *Le cri du caméléon* ("*The Cry of the Chameleon*"), which was created in 1995 by a graduating class of the Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC, Châlons-en-Champagne, France). This conceptual shift from Nouveau Cirque to Cirque Contemporain points to a generational change as well as an aesthetic shift within the field.
30 See Bailey, "Theatres of Entertainment/Spaces of Modernity."

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Part I

Historical circus, popular entertainment and avant-gardes

Influences and interrelations

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2 A treasure trove for avant-garde artists?

Metropolitan circus performances around 1900

Mirjam Hildbrand

In a search for new artistic forms and avenues, the circus of the early twentieth century served as an inspiration for the Western European and Russian avant-garde. Many avant-garde artists picked up on elements and aesthetics from the modern circus and thus questioned the prevailing conventions of the bourgeois cultural institutions. Today, we commonly think of circus as the presentation of extraordinary (physical) abilities and sensationalism, the conscious play of risk, the mastery of human and animal bodies and the absence of narrative forms. But counter to the common imaginary of circus, circus performances around 1900 throughout major European and Russian cities had overarching, narrative dramaturgies. The great success of circuses in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century is largely due to these theatre-like productions, which have been more or less forgotten by the general public and scholars who, until today, have mostly ignored the role of these performances. Using historical sources, I first discuss the performance conventions of circus that were being established in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Subsequently, I provide insight into performances that were staged in Berlin and Paris around 1900, in order to explore the historical avant-gardes' impressions of the circus of their time.[1] As there is a lack of research on historical circus performance practice, I enter uncertain territories. In my conclusion, I discuss this research neglect which is, from my perspective, strongly influenced by the current and consolidated image of circus as a performance format based on autonomous acts without overarching narratives as well as by the categorisation of circus as a so-called "low" art. Given what is (un)known about historical circus practice, the relationship between circus and the avant-gardes, or their circus references, may also need to be re-examined.

Riding through legal grey areas – on the evolution and institutionalisation of modern circus

To understand the institutionalisation of the modern circus, we must consider both the increasingly narrowed concept of theatre and the social upheavals happening around 1800. In the late eighteenth century – within the context

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-3

of Enlightenment and capitalistic industrialisation – the cities of London and Paris saw the rise of a new performance format that, today, we call circus. The format developed through the public performance of equestrian artists. Well-known representatives of this first generation of circus makers were Philip Astley, Charles Hughes and Charles Dibdin in London and Antonio Franconi and his sons in Paris.[2] By the late seventeenth century, the theatre of western culture was undergoing both a literarisation and a shift towards an educational claim, which was mirrored in, and fostered by, corresponding legal regulations. While the concept of theatre became increasingly narrow and confined to the staging of literary texts, the late eighteenth-century circus created a space for the distinctly physical and visual forms of theatre that were popular with large, diverse audiences well into the twentieth century. Austrian theatre scholar Birgit Peter notes that during the establishment of theatre as a drama-based and bourgeois art, the circus became a gathering place for the "other" theatre. This "other theatre" included the performative body practices of performers seen at fairs and markets until the eighteenth century.[3]

From 1800 onwards, particularly successful circus companies built permanent venues that, in many respects, resembled the then-contemporary theatre and opera buildings, both in architectural style and interior design. Hughes and Dibdin's Royal Circus was equipped with both a circus ring and a proscenium stage; so too were Astley's Amphitheatre and Franconi's Cirque Olympique in Paris. The directors, who were often former cavalrymen, hired equestrian artists, tightrope walkers, acrobats, musicians and comedians. Astley, his competitors and their successors distinguished themselves from their less-famous predecessors primarily in their strategic entrepreneurial spirit. From the choice of the venue to the organisation and promotion of their international tours, they left nothing to chance.[4]

In the late seventeenth century, both English and French rulers had established a system of control over cultural performances that took the form of censorship and strict legal regulations. This system of control assured privileged patent theatres a monopoly over dialogue- and stage-based performances. In other words, the system reflected the then-consolidated concept of theatre that considered drama and opera as "high" art and all the other theatre forms (including circus) as "low" or non-art.[5] Therefore, the London circus pioneers were repeatedly confronted with temporary closures and imprisonments during their establishing phase.[6] However, they skilfully used legal grey areas to stage the so-called *hippodramas*, or, in other words: horse theatre. The early circus companies joined and fuelled the hippomania that began in 1750 and continued into the nineteenth century; horse-riding and dressage were in vogue.[7] Horse-riding formed the basis of legitimising and legalising circus practices.

By 1800, horse-based performances with acrobatics, tightrope walking, music, ballet and harlequinades were solidified formats, from which the modern circus has continued to develop. Stable (private and municipal) circus buildings began to shape the cityscapes of London, Paris, St Petersburg, Berlin, Madrid, Copenhagen, Vienna, Riga, Milan and others.[8] The performances

in these venues captivated large and diverse audiences consisting not only of lower socioeconomic classes but also the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The success of circuses, as British theatre scholar Jacky Bratton notes, is a testament to the great appeal of performances that were "free of the ever-tightening constrictions of the moral and literary conception of the drama".[9]

Until well into the twentieth century, circus performances consisted of more than just assembled acts, which is in contrast to common perceptions of modern circus. Circus companies – like the *minor theatres* in London or the *théâtres secondaires* in Paris – staged narrative performances that were referred to as *pantomimes* but were not necessarily silent.[10] Patrick Désile, a French theatre and media scholar, defines *pantomime*, in this context, as a generic term for productions that were, among others, billed as hippo-, mimo- or melodramas, tableaux, *féeries* and vaudevilles. These terms did not correspond to precise categories, but were used according to trends in the performing arts.[11] Today, in the British context, the term "pantomime" is primarily associated with *Christmas pantomimes*; in France, it mostly refers to the silent Pierrot figure made famous by Jean-Gaspard Deburau; and in the German-speaking world pantomimes are considered silent mimic-based gestural performances. Behind these associations lies a multifaceted historical performance practice.

Richard III, Fra Diavolo and dragons – what a pantomime in the circus?!

If we take a closer look at circus companies' surviving playbills and posters, we actually notice that narrative formats were an integral part of their performance practice. The themes of these narrative circus pantomimes – that are closer to the common understanding of theatre than of circus – were varied and included historical or contemporary events and content as well as characters from stories, dramas and operas. For example, an opulent playbill from Powell's Circus Royal announcing a performance in Greenwich (southeast of London) in January 1822, reads "First Time here of Mr. Powell in Grand Historical Equestrian Scene of Sir John Falstaff, Shylock & Richard the third".[12] In the middle section of the evening's programme, Mr Powell impersonates three well-known Shakespearean characters in various scenes – each galloping on horseback. Also announced was equestrienne artist Mrs Henderson in *The Maid of Sargossa* and, as the closing act, "an entire new Ballet of Action, on three tight ropes; entitled Lubin and Annette or The Wandering Pedlar". The "Maid of Saragossa", also known as Augustina de Aragón, is a Spanish national heroine who is said to have defended the city of Saragossa during the Napoleonic siege in the early nineteenth century and whose exploits have been passed down through Lord Byron's epic poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, among others.[13] The scenes on the three ropes, titled "Lubin and Annette", are probably based on a French legend from the eighteenth century, which became known primarily through the story *Annette et Lubin* by Jean-François Marmontel and its staging as a comic opera in Paris in 1762.[14] Thus, early

circus performances built upon stories and cultural themes that were meaningful and known to the audience.

As an example of cultural narratives that were staged and promoted by the circus companies, consider that the orchestra of Powell's Circus Royal played the "celebrated Ouverture to Fra Diavolo" in 1822 while the tightropes were being set up for *Lubin and Annette*.[15] *Fra Diavolo* was not the overture to the opera by Daniel-François-Esprit Auber that is still known today – as that was not premiered until 1830. It may, however, have been the overture of the production *Fra Diavolo, chef des brigands dans les Alpes*, which premiered at the Cirque Olympique in Paris in 1808 and was written by Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier de Trie, a well-known French playwright who was the in-house author at the Cirque Olympique from 1797.[16] Fra Diavolo is said to have fought in southern Italy as the leader of a band of robbers against the French conquerors – until he was captured and hung by Napoleonic soldiers in 1806. Productions of *Fra Diavolo* can be found in many nineteenth-century circus programmes. For example, in 1821, Jacques Tourniaire's troupe performed *Fra Diavolo, oder: Der große Räuber in Calabrien*;[17] from 1847 Circus Renz in Berlin performed *Fra Diavolo*; and in 1866, the Dutch circus Oscar Carré toured with its adaptation in St Petersburg.[18]

In the nineteenth century, an even more popular theme for the circus pantomimes was the eponymous hero of *Mazeppa*. This seventeenth-century historical figure gained notoriety through a lyrical adaptation by Lord Byron in 1819; it was staged in circuses beginning in 1823 and was the subject of a poem by Victor Hugo in 1828 before Franz Liszt set it to music. In fact, Mazeppa reappeared in many incarnations. In 1825, *Mazeppa, ou le Cheval Tartare*, based on the libretto by Cuvelier de Trie, was performed at the Cirque Olympique as a mimodrama in three acts. Six years later, London also had its circus version of *Mazeppa*. In Astley's Amphitheatre repertoire, the play became one of the most popular of its productions and enjoyed renewed success in the 1860s with the first (known) iteration of *Mazeppa* by a female horse rider, famous Adah Isaacs Menken.[19] In German-speaking countries, the Bava-Dumos Company staged *Mazeppa*, a "large pantomime with ballet […] performed by 70 people and 20 trained horses", in Breslau (today Wrocław in Poland) in 1841.[20] At the Circus Renz in Berlin, *Mazeppa* appeared in 1847 as a great historical pantomime entitled *Graf Polowsky oder die Verbannung Mazeppas*.[21] In 1910, German circus critic Karl Döring noted "Ivan Mazeppa, […] Prince of the Ukraine, was tied to a horse in 1663 for a gallant adventure and was chased into the steppe. This historical "equestrian trick" became a treasured circus act. One had to have seen "Mazeppa" in the circus in the seventies".[22] It is thus not surprising that circus historian Caroline Hodak calls *Mazeppa* an "emblème des circulations culturelles" (emblem of cultural circulations).[23] Stories and themes, such as those surrounding *Mazeppa* or *Fra Diavolo*, were being adapted transmedially, built on across shows and circulated – with the internationally touring circus companies – across linguistic borders.[24]

Some themes of the narrative circus productions, however, were anchored in specific regions or linguistic areas, such as *George and the Dragon* in England.[25] Passed down from the Middle Ages through church frescoes and ballads, George became a defining figure of the English mumming plays – an amateur theatre tradition – and functioned as a rallying point for national identity formation from 1880 onward. Bratton recognised that "[d]eeply rooted in the folk tales of England, *St George and the Dragon* is a contender for most-played circus drama".[26] In 1822, Charles Dibdin adapted this story for the circus stage, and in 1833 Andrew Ducrow, a noted English horseman, also enjoyed great success in the role of *George* at the patented Drury Lane Theatre in London. After performing on the theatre stage in 1833, Andrew Ducrow successfully presented *George and the Dragon* as the director at Astley's Amphitheatre from 1834 onwards. This pantomime, as Bratton notes, was a "story with the deepest roots", and similar to *Fra Diavolo* and *Mazeppa* "a drama that might have a life entirely transcendent of boundaries within the world of presentation".[27]

Another dragon that was narratively on the move on German-speaking stages at the end of the nineteenth century (also in the service of national identity creation) was *Fafner* from Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*.[28] Three years after the sensational premiere of Wagner's entire *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1876, Circus Salamonsky brought *Die Nibelungen oder der gehörnte Siegfried* to its Berlin stage in March 1879 as an "extravaganza in three parts and three tableaux vivants with final apotheosis, ballet, evolutions, fights on foot and on horseback".[29] In May 1879, the circus staging of *Nibelungen* also caused a sensation in Leipzig, where Circus Renz put it on as a large-scale pantomime before taking it on tour to Hamburg and Vienna. In those cities, Circus Oscar Carré presented a version of *Nibelungen* in 1881[30] and from 1882, Circus Ciniselli in St Petersburg had a *Nibelungen* pantomime in its repertoire.[31] These narrative productions usually made up the entire second part of an evening programme after the first part of individual circus acts.

Circus pantomimes such as *George and the Dragon* were so popular in England from 1790 onward that the directors of the so-called *legitimate theatres* jumped on the equestrian bandwagon and began to stage *hippodramas* too. The patented (and thus *legitimate*) Covent Garden Theatre hired horses and riders from Astley's company – for example in 1811, for the piece *Blue-Beard*. And as described above, the horseman Ducrow performed successfully at the patented Drury Lane Theatre in 1833. Circus artists on *legitimate* drama stages caused great controversy in the press, as they were clearly crossing ideological and institutional boundaries between the so-called "high" and "low" cultures. The fact that even advocates of "high" literary theatre enjoyed these performances caused a particularly great stir.[32] And in Germany, in contrast to the opera premieres of the entire *Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth in 1876 and of the individual parts in Munich in 1869, newspaper reports praised the elaborate set and technical effects of the *Nibelungen* at Circuses Salamonsky and Renz in 1879. But despite all the praise, for the critics, it seemed highly questionable whether Wagner's works should be performed in a circus at all; circus productions were – in contrast to the performances on

opera stages – considered a so-called "low" or "non-art". Similar to the controversy concerning *Blue-Beard* in London, circus companies overstepped ideological boundaries with the adaptation of the Wagnerian opera themes.[33]

The 1822 programme of Powell's Circus Royal consisted of scenes of familiar themes and well-known characters – impersonated by equestrian artists and tightrope walkers – such as *Falstaff*, *Shylock* and *Richard III*. Bratton notes that "circus managers throughout the century persisted in "getting up" a wide range of pieces that took in farce, pantomime, domestic tales and romances as well as military spectacle, whenever they could get away with it, and sometimes when they could not, in the face of prosecution and repeated fines".[34] In other words, their practice transgressed and pushed the boundaries of the hegemonic (and narrow) concept of theatre. Even after the abolition of the privilege system in 1843, circuses in England were taken to court by theatre directors. Pantomimes with scenery or dialogue – elements reserved for the dramatic theatre – were prone to these attacks. In 1871, for example, the Association of London Theatre Managers took legal action against a performance of a pantomime in a circus house. The Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations of the British Parliament also discussed the topic in 1866 when theatre directors found themselves threatened by the circuses' success.[35] In Paris, too, there were repeated attacks on circus companies, who (in the eyes of, for example, the opera) overstepped conceptional (and legal) theatre-boundaries.[36] In German-speaking countries, the advocates of the dramatic theatre also feared the competition from the circuses. In the last third of the nineteenth century, the German stage organisations tried to convince legislators to restrict theatre laws that had been liberalised in 1869, to limit the circus productions to equestrian and acrobatic acts. Even though they succeeded to some extent in the late 1880s, they could not prevent the circuses from staging narrative performances that were, in turn, thriving well into the twentieth century.[37]

Famous clowns, water shows and film projections – circus pantomimes in the age of the avant-gardes

To keep the public's interest, circus companies – especially those that performed in permanent buildings for long periods of time – had to constantly update and renew their programmes. From the 1860s onward, horse shows became less important, while so-called "exotic" animals, gymnastics and aerial acrobatics increasingly found their way into programmes. With the development of the white clown and the Auguste, clowning also experienced a diversification after 1850. As bicycles and swimming became popular in the last third of the nineteenth century, bicycle acrobats and swimmers also began to perform in circuses. Furthermore, the performances were expanded to include the latest technological advancements.[38] However, after 1900 – in the age of the historical avant-gardes – circus pantomimes were still influential to the performances of large circus companies in Russia and Western Europe.

For example, the Parisian Cirque d'Eté (also known as Cirque des Champs Elysées) that was built in 1841 advertised a two-part performance for 28 August 1896. After the first part showcasing ten acts of equestrian artists, clowns, acrobats and dancers, the second part featured a pantomime in four tableaux called *Robert Macaire*.[39] *Robert Macaire* was originally based on the melodrama *L'Auberge des Adrets,* which premiered to little acclaim at the Ambigu Comique in Paris in 1823. It was later revived in 1832 and gained fame through actor Frédérick Lemaître's interpretation of *Macaire*. The play revolves around Bertrand and Rémond (later known as Robert), two prison escapees who commit murder, steal and become entangled in various relationships while travelling under the name Macaire. Lemaître, who had also appeared in Cirque Olympique pantomimes, developed a new, grotesque and unconventional robber character – an unscrupulous, money-grubbing, hypocritical bourgeoisie crook. Lemaître rode Macaire to success and fame and in the 1830s the plot was adapted to other theatres and appeared in graphic illustrations. In the last third of the nineteenth century, the Parisian circuses also adapted *Robert Macaire* for their performances.[40] This and other pantomimes were probably known to avant-garde artists who went to the circus. For example, the Futurist Marinetti is said to have attended performances with Picasso, Apollinaire and possibly Meyerhold at the Parisian Cirque Médrano, where the famous Fratellini clown trio performed in the 1910s.[41]

Figure 2.1 Cirque Médrano in Paris around 1900. Source: Albert Brichaut (photographer), courtesy of Paris Musées/Musée Carnavalet.

These clowns, from whom the historical avant-garde drew inspiration, also performed at the Nouveau Cirque; a circus building built in 1885, frequented by the Parisian upper class and known for its elaborate aquatic circus productions. The Nouveau Cirque advertised a matinee performance on 22 March 1899 that included a three-part performance. After the first part with equestrian acts, the second consisted of acts with trained elephants and clown interludes by the three Fratellini brothers – Paul and Louis and François, who performed daring jumps from horse to horse – as well as by the famous duo Footit and Chocolat. This part was concluded with a water polo game, which, according to the programme, was performed daily. Unsurprisingly, for the third part, a "pantomime nautique à grand spectacle" was announced – *La Cascade Merveilleuse* in three scenes.[42] This aquatic pantomime with flamboyant decor, set in Java, told the story of the two daughters of a wealthy couple; circuses often fuelled the culture of exoticism and orientalism common of the time. In the first scene, the two protagonists prepared for a feast for *Prince Ghédé* in the presence of four jesters – perhaps played by the circus's famous clowns? The two daughters rode an elephant to the prince's palace, where – in the second scene – the festivities began with various dances. As befits the Nouveau Cirque, the celebration came to a spectacular finale in the third scene; the playbill promised swans, horses, elephants and divers swimming in the ring. The Nouveau Cirque, which existed until 1926, was technically equipped to lower the circus ring with a hydraulic gear into the water basin below in just a few minutes. For the pool, the venue also had a specific and sophisticated lighting system.[43] These stage installations for the water pantomimes were often imitated as the Circus Ciniselli in St Petersburg and Berlin circus venues, too, had them in the 1890s.[44]

In Berlin, the theatre reformer and avant-garde artist Max Reinhardt is famous for (among other things) his 1910 production of *Oedipus* in Circus Schumann's Berlin venue. Later, after World War I, Reinhardt's company bought the circus building and renamed it Grosse Schauspielhaus. The theatre-maker saw potential in the circus venue for the reformation of the theatre arts through circus by, for example, performing on the round stage – which, in his eyes, enhances the physicality of the performers and allows for more direct communication with the audience. Reinhardt was also attracted by the technical possibilities of the former circus building. His predecessors – from Circus Salamonsky (1873–1879) to Circus Renz (1879–1897) and Circus Schumann (1899–1918) – had already experimented for half a century in this venue with new lighting and other stage technologies, such as a retractable ring that could be filled with water (part of the venue since the 1890s).[45] This innovative spirit of earlier creators in the circus building is forgotten today.

Max Reinhardt must have been familiar with the larger productions of his predecessor Albert Schumann, who used the latest technologies in his circus pantomimes in innovative ways. In December 1903, for example, the pantomime *Babel* premiered in this Berlin venue. The pantomime dealt with the Babel-Bible controversy prominent at the time, triggered in January 1902 when

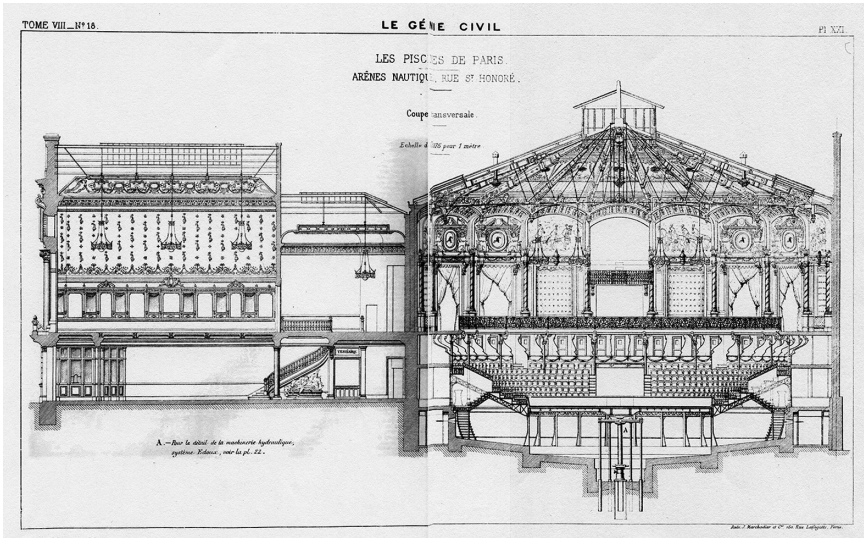

Figure 2.2 Cross section of the Nouveau Cirque in Paris with the hydraulic gear to lower the circus ring. Source: Technical drawing published in the journal *Le Génie Civil* in 1886, courtesy of Circopedia.org.

German assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch gave a lecture that traced descriptions of the Old Testament back to Babylonian models. This academic dispute led to many polemic arguments frequently discussed in the press.[46] According to the Circus's programme, Alexander Moszkowski (founder and publisher of the German-language satirical magazine *Lustige Blätter*) had come up with the idea for *Babel*. Through the course of six acts and eleven tableaux, the audience accompanied a professor in his search for traces of ancient Babylon on the Euphrates – travelling back in time thousands of years to the rule of Queen Semiramis.[47]

The clown Adolf Ferdinand Wolhbrück, as Famulus August, and actor Alfred Lux, as Herold, announced the leaps through time.[48] The juggler and trick rider Joé Hodgini played Sardanapal and the equestrienne artist Mrs Hodgini held the role of Semiramis. At her command, the Tower of Babel, a "wooden construction that rotated higher and higher", was erected in the second act; it included "[a]crobatic evolutions".[49] Sources like these indicate that it was more than clowns (often thought of as the only dramatic figures of the circus) that drove the action of the pantomimes. Although the dialogue of this pantomime has survived and there are some existing press reports of the *Babel* performances, it is unclear how much spoken text was actually staged. Circus Schumann, as well as its Berlin competitor Circus Busch, faced increasing difficulties in obtaining permission to stage dialogue – a privilege of literary theatre – from 1900 onwards. In the 1910s, with the help of lawyers, they tried

to get play permits for unlimited spoken text.[50] However, the police rejected these requests due to the theatre laws of the time. In 1916, Albert Schumann took the Berlin police to court on this issue but lost the case.[51]

As a grand finale, the pantomime *Babel* ended with dances, various technical effects and a water show: the circus ring, transformed into a water basin, served as the river Euphrates. In the libretto, there are repeated references to scenes specifically playing out on the stage and some in both the ring and on stage. In 1909, Albert Schumann even enlarged the depth of the stage and installed a revolving stage as well as lifting platforms between the proscenium and the ring.[52] In contemporary press reports, *Babel* is described as a magnificent production that was highly successful with audiences. Critics wrote that the performance was "elaborate" and "scenically complex", characterised by a wide variety of lighting effects and lavishly furnished by the Berlin company Hugo Baruch (one of the largest international set design companies of the time). The dances by the ballet master Giovanni Pratesi – who also choreographed pantomime ballets at Parisian variety theatres and London music-hall venues[53] – received positive reviews too. In fact, larger circus companies had their own ballet ensembles, and ballet interludes were an integral part of circus pantomimes. In the press reports on *Babel*, critics also argued that academic disputes like the Babel-Bible controversy had no place in the circus and thus the "low" culture. To their surprise, Albert Schumann nevertheless succeeded in bringing a "sensible and meaningful" and "modern circus show" to the circus ring and stage.[54]

According to the libretto of *Babel*, the fall of Babylon should have been performed "cinematographically" in the fifth act, with a white curtain acting as a projection screen in front of the proscenium stage in December 1903 – yet the plan did not materialise.[55] But integrating moving image projections into a circus pantomime was not new, as Constanze Busch, co-founder of the Circus Busch in Berlin, is said to have attempted this as early as 1895.[56] That same year, the Skladanowsky and Lumières brothers presented their first film projectors in Berlin and Paris. Circus Salamonsky (Moscow) and Circus Ciniselli (St Petersburg) announced the use of projections of both still and moving images from the mid-1890s on.[57] In Circus Busch's 1913 pantomime *Sevilla*, a bullfight was shown with a film projector.[58] The circus pantomimes around 1900 were thus veritable multimedia productions. We can then wonder: did they inspire avant-garde artists like Erwin Piscator or László Moholy-Nagy, who both promoted their visions of a more complex theatre (including projections and simultaneous performances on various stages)?

Without success and thus capital, actualisations and technical modernisations for these costly pantomimes in the circus venues would have never been possible. In 1942, after a highly successful decade with numerous elaborate circus pantomimes (often involving the Fratellini trio), Cirque d'Hiver in Paris was brought to a close as a result of World War II and the financial limitations of wartime. The building had still been equipped with a water system in 1933 and the pantomimes of the Circus Busch in Berlin often served as inspiration

Figure 2.3 Postcard of Circus Busch in Berlin in the year 1920. Source: E. Nixdorf (publisher), copyright Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin (Inv.-Nr.: SM 2012-3769).

for its performances.[59] In Berlin, too, a long history of successful circus pantomimes came to an abrupt end in 1937 with the demolition of the Circus Busch venue and the subsequent turmoil of war.[60] Slowly, the pantomimes not only disappeared from the circus stages but so too from the collective cultural memory.

Divisional thinking of theory – on historical performance practice and circus research

If we want to understand the relationship between circus and the avant-gardes, we need to better examine historical circus practice and also question our common understanding of circus. What circus did the avant-garde artists draw inspiration from? And what circus did they actually refer to? Despite the fame and success of the narrative-based performance practice of historical circuses I have outlined in this chapter, there has been a remarkable dearth of research of, and writing on circus pantomimes; this is particularly surprising as circus has received increasing scholarly attention since the 1980s (especially in the English- and French-speaking academic worlds). This has led to numerous historiographical publications and texts mainly focusing on individual circus companies, the history of animal performances, clowning or the development of aerial acrobatics.[61] However, circus pantomimes – despite their considerable

presence in historical circus posters and playbills and their crucial importance for the persistent success of circus companies[62] – have occupied little of circus research. Among the scholars who have explicitly dealt with circus pantomimes, Katalin Teller's contributions are particularly noteworthy for the German-speaking context, while Patrick Désile and Caroline Hodak's, as well as Jacky Bratton's, contributions are noteworthy regarding French- and English-speaking contexts, respectively.[63] Teller's work also offers a detailed overview of the German-, English-, Russian- and Hungarian-language circus historiography research. According to her, various dissertations and studies in the Russian language deal with the regional circus practice of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – including circus pantomimes. These are yet to be translated into other languages for their broader reception.[64]

I then ask: why have circus pantomimes been neglected by researchers? Historiographic writings on circus of the nineteenth century might be one reason. In them, authors often reproduced the dominant theatre discourse with its ideologically motivated demarcation of dramatic theatre and circus. They thus labelled circus pantomimes as foreign elements and manifestations of decay in the circus arts.[65] These views still find their way into historiographic studies today and are clearly based more on the divisional thinking of theory than on the performance practice itself.[66]

Another related reason might be that significant studies mostly consider only *hippodrama* (a term used by Astley and Hughes for their plays), *théâtre équestre* or *aqua/aquatic drama* to have narrative dramaturgy.[67] As demonstrated in this chapter, restricting narrative-based circus productions to the shows with these labels (which conceptually refer to hegemonic ideas of drama) obscures the theatrical continuity of circus productions that reaches well into the twentieth century. For the circus pantomimes (that were, as mentioned, billed with various terms) aesthetic trends, as well as themes and technologies, may have changed, but the dramaturgical styles are consistent.[68] Indeed, after 1860, as Australian theatre scholar Peta Tait points out, horses were being replaced with the so-called "exotic" animals or new technologies.[69] Still, the waning of the hippomania does not mean that circuses were left without narrative productions.

The long tradition of categorising different forms of the performing arts into so-called "low" and "high" culture has had an impact not only on the historical circus practice but has also been shaping – in the form of gaps and bias – academic research on circus. Future studies of the historical circus practice – that was characterised not by the absence, but by the presence, of narrative forms – that employ transnational and transmedial approaches will be insightful. Not only was the mobility of internationally touring circuses noteworthy, but so too was the mobility of themes and creators who moved between genres and beyond legal regulations and societal valuation to appear in different formats and on various kinds of stages. A particularly interesting aspect is the mobility between the circus and the historical avant-gardes in the early twentieth century. If we, in future research, start re-evaluating our ideas of circus practice in the nineteenth century, meaning that we also consider the great importance of

productions with narrative dramaturgies, we will surely also need to allow for new perspectives on the mobility between the circus and the artistic creations of the avant-gardes.

Notes

1 The modern circus developed from the late eighteenth century on as a transnational phenomenon. However, in this chapter I only follow the circus reception of the historical avant-garde and do not address the North American or Australian circus companies.
2 The 'invention' of the modern circus is commonly attributed to English trick rider Philip Astley (1742–1814). Differentiated and critical discussions of circus beginnings are only found in few studies by, for example, Caroline Hodak and Marius Kwint. See Caroline Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque: Le cheval au coeur des savoirs et des loisirs (1760–1860)* (Paris: Belin, 2018), 35–47. Marius Kwint, "The Legitimization of the Circus in Late Georgian England," *Past & Present* 174:1 (February 2002), 77–78.
3 Birgit Peter, "Geschmack und Vorurteil: Zirkus als Kunstform," in *Parallelwelt Zirkus*, ed. Kunsthalle Wien (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2012), 73.
4 See Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque,* 116. Kwint, "Legitimization of the Circus," 27.
5 Nevertheless, in Paris the Cirque Olympique was given an exceptional position within the rigid Napoleonic theatre regulations that were introduced in 1806–1807. In 1811, the circus was included in the ranks of the select *théâtres secondaires*. Between 1811 and 1834, this circus was therefore called Théâtre du Cirque Olympique; legally, it remained a theatre until after 1834 and had its licence extended until 1849. See Patrick Désile, "'Cet opéra de l'oeil' Les pantomimes des cirques parisiens au XIXe siècle," *memento* 4 (October 2011), 3. Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque,* 384.
6 See Kwint, "Legitimization of the Circus," 75–86. Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10–47.
7 See Michael Gamer, A Matter of Turf: "Romanticism, Hippodrama, and Legitimate Satire," *Ninteenth-Century Contexts* 28:4 (December 2006), 308.
8 See Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque,* 86. Pascal Jacob, *Une histoire du cirque* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 70.
9 Jacky Bratton, "What Is a Play? Drama and the Victorian Circus," in *The Performing Century, Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 250.
10 See David Pickering, *Encyclopedia of Pantomime* (Andover: Gale Research International, 1993), 63.
11 See Désile, "'Cet opéra de l'oeil'," 4.
12 Quoted from figure nr. 26 in *Artisten- und Zirkus-Plakate, Ein internationaler historischer Überblick,* eds. Julius Markschiess-van Trix and Bernhard Nowak (Zürich: Atlantis, 1975).
13 See "Zaragoza," Britannica, accessed 28 December, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/place/Zaragoza-Spain.
14 See "Annette et Lubin," Gallica, accessed 28 December 2020, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5602582n.
15 See figure nr. 26, in *Artisten- und Zirkus-Plakate*.
16 See "Fra Diavolo," in *Handbuch der Oper,* ed. Rudolf Kloiber (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2011), 15.
17 See Stephan Oettermann, *Ankündigungs-Zettel von Kunstreitern, Akrobaten, Tänzern, Taschenspielern, Feuerwerkern, Luftballons und dergleichen, Register und Katalog,* Vol. 5 (Wiesbaden, 1993), 1329.
18 See Alwil Raeder, *Der Circus Renz in Berlin, eine Denkschrift zur Jubiläums-Saison 1896/97* (Berlin, 1897), 58. In Russia, circus companies had already gained a foothold by the end of the eighteenth century, see Jewgeni Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt*, trans. Melitina Orlowa, ed. Ernst Günther (Berlin: Henschel, 1970), 15, 27–29, 151.
19 See Caroline Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque,* 330–332.

20 Figure nr. 28, in *Artisten-und Zirkus-Plakate*.
21 Raeder, *Der Circus Renz in Berlin*, 58.
22 Karl Döring, "Zirkus-Pantomimen," *Das Programm*, no. 433, 1910.
23 Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque,* 330.
24 In her study, the British theatre historian Jane Moody describes the cross-genre mobility of content, actors and spectators around 1800 as a "distinctive feature" of the "illegitimate" theatre culture, see Moody, Illegitimate Theatre in London, 5–6.
25 See Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 259–260.
26 Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 259. Emphasis by the author.
27 Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 259.
28 At the end of the eighteenth century, the *Nibelungenlied*, which had been passed down from the Middle Ages, was experiencing an increasing resonance that was encouraged by a political instrumentalisation of it being seen as *purely German*. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the *Nibelungen* were adapted into a variety of lyrical and dramatic texts throughout the German-speaking world. From 1869 on, the *Nibelungen* were inextricably linked with Richard Wagner. See Ulrich Müller, "Die Nibelungen: Literatur, Musik und Film im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Ein Überblick," in *Die Nibelungen, Sage – Epos – Mythos*, eds. Joachim Heinzle, Klaus Klein and Ute Obhof (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2003), 411–414.
29 "Circus Salamonsky," *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin) 73 (12 March 1879).
30 See *Die Presse* 34:186 (8 July 1881), 12.
31 See Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt*, 153. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the close ties between Berlin and the Russian cities of Moscow and St Petersburg were characterised by guest performances of Circus Renz, the relocation of Circus Salamonsky from Berlin to Moscow in 1879 and the use of similar content in pantomimes, see Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt*, 64–88, 153–155.
32 See Gamer, "A Matter of Turf," 305–319.
33 See Mirjam Hildbrand, "'Wohlauf, Richard Wagner aufs Pferd, aufs Pferd!'," in *Unerhörte Theatergeschichten*, *Ein Lesebuch* (manuscript accepted for publication by the editor, Prof Stefan Hulfeld, in early 2020).
34 Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 251. Around 1800, some circus pantomimes also re-enacted current military events with a large number of horses onstage. Such stagings included the Napoleonic battles. Bratton speaks of the Battle of Waterloo reenactment that was performed annually at Astley's Amphitheatre around 1800. She also investigates the extent to which these performances not only contributed to the formation of national narratives but also had ironic and parodying character. Yet, neither Cirque Olympique nor Astley's pantomimes were limited to military spectacles. See Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 251, 256–258. Bratton also criticises Brenda Assael in this context for her narrow, military-oriented representation of the narrative productions of Philip Astley, see Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 61.
35 See Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 250–254. Kwint, in contrast to Bratton (whose writing is supported with sources), remarked that English circus companies had little difficulty with legislation from 1843 (Theatre Regulation Act) onwards. See Kwint, "Legitimization of the Circus," 72.
36 See Désile, "'Cet opéra de l'oeil'," 3.
37 See Mirjam Hildbrand, "Theaterlobby gegen Zirkusunternehmen. Über die Aufwertung des 'Theaters' auf Kosten der zirzensischen Künste," *Forum Modernes Theater* 30:1–2 (June 2019), 19–33.
38 See Gillian Arrighi, "The Circus and Modernity: A Commitment to 'the Newer' and 'the Newest'," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10:2 (March 2012), 169–185 and "Circus and Electricity: Staging Connexions, between Science and Popular Entertainments," in *Circus, Science and Technology, Dramatising Innovation*, ed. Anna-Sophie Jürgens (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 81–100.

39 See Alain Simonet, *Programmes des Cirques en France de 1860 à 1910* (Paris: Arts des 2 Mondes, 2000), 30–31.
40 See Gaston Baty, "La Légende de Robert Macaire," *Hommes et mondes* 2:9 (April 1947): 668–680. Cf. "Cirque d'Hiver/Robert Macaire," Paris Musées Collections, accessed 29 December 2020, https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/de/node/76644#infos-principales.
41 See Giovanni Lista, "Esthétique du music-hall et mythologie urbaine chez Marinetti," in *Du cirque au theatre*, ed. Claudine Amiard-Chevrel (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1983), 51–52.
42 Simonet, *Programmes des Cirques en France de 1860 à 1910*, 36–37.
43 See Clotilde Anleys, "Opérettes de cirque à grand spectacle féérique et nautique: les mises en scenes de Géo Sandry pour le Cirque d'Hiver," *memento* 4 (October 2011), 15. Christian Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque, des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Moniteur, 1982), 116–122.
44 See Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt*, 158.
45 See Hans-Werner Klünner, *165 Jahre Zirkusstadt Berlin, Eine Chronologie der Zirkusbauten an der Spree* (Berlin, Edition Berlin 750, n.d., ca. 1985), 49.
46 See "Der Babel-Bibel-Streit, Politik, Theologie und Wissenschaft um 1900", Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, accessed 23 April 2020, https://www.smb.museum/ausstellungen/detail/der-babel-bibel-streit.html.
47 The play navigates the imperial and colonial expansion of the German Empire without question. According to the libretto, the "advance of German culture" was meant to be shown; this included ongoing archaeological research and the construction of the Baghdad Railway. In both, large German companies were involved and the German Empire financed the projects, see Rosmarie Noack, "Zügig durch die Wüste," *Zeit online*, 12 December 2003, accessed 23 April 2020, https://www.zeit.de/2003/51/Bagdadbahn
48 See libretto *Babel* December 1903, Akte des Berliner Polizeipräsidiums betreffend Circus Schumann, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-05, 1530, Landesarchiv Berlin. Programme booklet *Babel* 13 December 1903, Zirkusarchiv Heino Zeitler, Theaterhistorische Sammlung der Freien Universität Berlin.
49 Libretto *Babel* December 1903; see programme booklet *Babel* 13 December 1903.
50 See Dr. Paul Alexander-Katz to the police department, 31 January 1912, Akte des Berliner Polizeipräsidiums betreffend Circus Busch, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-05, 1924, Landesarchiv Berlin. Dr. Paul Alexander-Katz to the police department, 7 December 1911, Akte des Berliner Polizeipräsidiums betreffend Circus Schumann, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-05, 3067, Landesarchiv Berlin.
51 See Königliches Oberverwaltungsgericht, 27 November 1916, Akte des Berliner Polizeipräsidiums betreffend Circus Schumann, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-05, 3067, Landesarchiv Berlin.
52 Company catalogue ca. 1913, E. de la Sauce & Kloss: Eisenhoch- und Brückenbau. Behälterbau. Formeisen-Lager. Berlin-Lichtenberg, Herzbergstrasse 140, 46–47, Stiftung Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, Foto: Historisches Archiv, III.2 03420.
53 See Sarah Gutsche-Miller, Parisian Music-Hall Ballet, 1871–1913, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 73, 96, 193.
54 In connection with the records for *Babel*, various December 1903 newspaper clippings from the *Berliner Courier*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Die Post*, *Tägliche Rundschau* etc. have been preserved in the censorship files of the Berlin State Archives. See File *Babel* December 1903, Akte des Berliner Polizeipräsidiums betreffend Circus Schumann, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-05, 1530, Landesarchiv Berlin.
55 Supplement to libretto *Babel* December 1903.
56 Paula Busch, *Das Spiel meines Lebens, Erinnerungen*, (Berlin: Eulenspiegel 1992), 70–71.
57 See Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt*, 159.
58 Circus Busch to the police department, 21 March 1913, Akte des Berliner Polizeipräsidiums betreffend Circus Busch, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-05, 1559, Landesarchiv Berlin.

59 See Angleys, "Opérettes de cirque à grand spectacle," 14–23.
60 See Katalin Teller, *Geschichte in der Zirkusmanege, Das Geschichtsbild von Manegeschaustücken*. Postdoctoral thesis, manuscript 2021, 73. Teller estimates that between 1895 and 1935 about 40 million spectators attended the Circus Busch performances.
61 The Circus Studies Reader published in 2016 offers an overview of researchers and topics. See Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (eds.), *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Abgindon: Routledge, 2016).
62 See Teller, *Geschichte in der Zirkusmanege*, 2021. Other researchers like Jacky Bratton and Peter W. Marx have also pointed out this gap. See Bratton, "What Is a Play?," 251. Peter W. Marx, *Ein theatralisches Zeitalter. Bürgerliche Selbstinszenierungen um 1900* (Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 2008), 345.
63 See Bratton, "What Is a Play?;" Désile, "'Cet opéra de l'oeil';" Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque;* Teller, *Geschichte in der Zirkusmanege*, 2021.
64 Teller refers to: Irina A. Seleznëva-Reder, *Formirovanie ėstetiki cirkovogo predstavleniâ. Cirk v Sankt-Peterburge pervoj poloviny XIX*, veka, Dissertation. (Sankt-Peterburgskaâ gosudarstvennaâ akademiâ teatral'nogo iskusstva 2006). Sergej M. Makarov, *Teatralizaciâ cirka* (Moskva: URSS – Knižnyj dom "Librokom," 2010). Ûrij A. Dmitriev, *Sovetskij cirk. Očerki istorii 1917–1941* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1963).
65 See for example Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt*, 55, 61, 157. Signor Saltarino [Hermann Waldemar Otto], *Artisten-Lexikon, biographische Notizen über Kunstreiter, Dompteure, Gymnastiker, Clowns, Akrobaten… aller Länder und Zeiten* (Düsseldorf: Ed. Lintz, 1895; Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der DDR, 1987), 170. Page references are to the 1992 edition.
66 See for example Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus, History and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 16–17.
67 Katalin Teller refers to this in her study, see *Geschichte in der Zirkusmanege*, 2021, 112. This term is used by Brooks McNamara, "Scenography of Popular Entertainment," *The Drama Review* 18:1 (March 1974), 21. And by Pickering, *Encyclopedia of Pantomime*, 10 and 76.
68 Formative English-language research by Arthur Hartley Saxon (1968), Antony Hippisley Coxe (1980) as well as the French study of Caroline Hodak (2018) distinguish horse theatre from the circus and place the decline of horse theatre in the second half of the nineteenth century. See Antony Hippisley Coxe, "Equestrian Drama and the Circus," in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama, Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television 1800–1976,* eds. David Bradby, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 109–118 and 114–116. Hodak, *Du théâtre équestre au cirque.* Arthur H. Saxon, *Enter Foot and Horse, A History of Hippodrama in England and France, Equestrian Drama and the Circus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University press, 1969), 205–227.
69 See Peta Tait, "Replacing Injured Horses, Cross-Dressing and Dust: Modernist Circus Technologies in Asia," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 38:2 (March 2018), 149–164.

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3 The present as a trick or the assault on the spectator's psyche

Circus and the Soviet avant-garde

Oksana Bulgakowa

What should a revolutionary popular theatre look like? The Soviet avant-garde imagined a brilliant, eye-catching and exaggerated show, based on a corporeal performance and articulated in visual – not literary – language. This should be accessible to everyone, especially to an audience unfamiliar with the arts. Circus seemed to be close to this vision.

Between 1917 and 1922, almost all leading Russian theatre directors and theoreticians wrote about circus and the reasons why it should merge with theatre. The most radical theatrical innovator Vsevolod Meyerhold stated: "If I would be asked what entertainment the people need now, I would answer without thinking: only those that the circus can offer".[1] The circus demonstrated strength and skill, infected the audience with courage and inspired it to heroic deeds. The Constructivist Alexei Gan claimed that theatre is a religion the new society had nothing to do with, whereas circus is a show of material order. Grigori Kozintsev, a co-founder of the Factory of Eccentric Actors (FEKS), saw a huge potential in the circus, however, it first needed to be redefined. For Kozintsev, circus was not about "tears under the make-up, sick children at home, and at the end falling from the trapeze";[2] the clown was not just a jester performing agitation couplets, but an electrified clown – the new eccentric on the Eiffel Tower.

Circus dethroned the traditional values of the nineteenth-century theatre: the authority of the literary text, unity, realistic sets, refined psychological acting aimed at the audience's empathy. The connection to the word as the bearer of meaning collapsed, and circus was established as art without literature. Sergei Radlov, one of the most prominent supporters of "circusation", declared at the time: "The improvising actor helps the theatre to kill an evil being, the author who writes 'words for the theatre' in the secluded silence of his study".[3] The slogan that became the content of art was clear and simple; the form of performance was a formally refined primitive for the new generation of theatre makers. "The theatre as circus and the circus as theatre served two different types of spectator: the educated and sophisticated recipient, who, tired of elitist art, looked for naive forms, and the untainted cultural barbarian, who", according to critic Alexander Rykov, "had been catapulted to the theatre by

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-4

the revolution".[4] From the point of view of the Russian avant-garde artists, a circus that could perform in the city as well as in the country had many advantages.

First, it was open to genres mix, free from realistic illusionism, not bound to the structure of the psychological theatre. With the liberation from text, dramaturgy – with a continuous plot and characters that were not following the rules of Aristotle and Lessing – completed the deconstruction of the drama driven by Futurists at the beginning of the century. The new productions were understood as an open construction, consisting of independent acts and sketches. Nikolai Foregger, who had opened in Moscow in the eccentric Futurist Music Hall on 31 December 1921, wrote in January 1922:

> The plot is not psychologically motivated and does not mean the development of an idea in action. It is the sequence of combinations and situations that ultimately determines the beginning and end of a performance, its framework. In contrast to previous theatre (idea, word, psychology) the modern plot is cinematic (thing, space, time). Alogism (mismatch between cause and effect) and contrasts play a key role. The plot is not driven by acting personas, but by acting objects. What is important is the objectivity of causes and effects, the tactility of all collisions, in other words: trick as the base for the construction of a play.[5]

Since there were hardly any new plays about the post-revolutionary reality, the old plays were rewritten.[6]

Second, the new construction of the play aimed at an immediate and strong sensual experience – a blow to the nerves – by any means necessary: danger, hazard, risk, stunning acts, free erotic (circus was the only show where the seemingly naked legs of women could be shown in public). Spectators were meant to hold their breath.

Third, the circus focused on the expressive body, which was discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century by the new schools of dance (Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Laban, Mikhail Fokin), gymnastics and sport as demonstrated by the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896. Body and physical work – compared to the work of proletarians – was at the centre of the show; this was seen as the continuation of experiments with the corporeal theatre that Meyerhold had been promoting since 1906 when he explored the techniques of the *commedia dell'arte*, the Japanese Kabuki and medieval jugglers in his Petrograd Studio on Borodinskaya.

Fourth, circus helped to dismantle the proscenium stage; the actors used the entire space including the ceiling, the cupola and the boxes. The eccentricity avoided everyday banality and the representation of a milieu. The milieu on the stage was replaced by the materiality of wood, ropes and wires; their palpable authenticity supported the artists who did not imitate a trick but carried it out full of risk. Sergei Eisenstein later compared the penetration of the circus onto the stage as the breaking through of reality, akin to the praxis used

by Meyerhold to tell the audience the latest news from the front. The theatre wanted to blur the line between fiction and reality, and circus "was characterised above all by physical, not imitative and illusionistic performance".[7]

Fifth, the circus brought a democratic gesture in communication with the audience, which was not separated from the stage (the ring) by the imaginable fourth wall, forestage, prompter box, orchestra pit and footlight. The clowns easily crossed the ring curb, making the spectators into temporary contributors to their entrées. Not only was the effect more intense but the contact between actors and spectators was direct, and the reactions were expressed openly. An outcry, laughter or a loud exclamation were considered as participation, not as a violation of the illusion destabilising the art experience. The theatre jumped beyond the boundaries of its dramatic form, "hit a somersault and found itself in the circus ring".[8]

These advantages of the circus were recognised not only by the Russian avant-gardists: the enthusiasm for circus within, for example, the Bauhaus and among the Russian revolutionary artists, was aesthetically close but had different foundations. While László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer were interested in the geometrisation of the movement of a human body in an abstract space and saw in circus (and the modern ballet) the passage to this abstract movement,[9] the Russians tried to reform the communication in theatre. The eccentricity was seen as proletarian art, the circus acted as an urbanistic variant of the old Russian fairground folk theatre Balagan and experienced an unexpected transformation in the experiments of Meyerhold, Annenkov, Radlov, FEKS and Eisenstein. First, the directors moved their productions to the circus ring, and then they brought the circus artists onto the theatre stage.

Theatricalisation of circus

Immediately after the October Revolution, the circus experienced a short period of uncertainty. The most famous jester and jumper of the time, Vitalii Lazarenko, describes in his memoirs the hesitation of many colleagues who did not know what kind of costume and mask they should wear; the clowns believed that checked trousers, red-haired wigs and huge clogs were attributes of a humiliated, unhappy hero would be a thing of the past from that point on.[10]

The political satire imbued the circus during the years of the Civil War. The clowns started to look for political masks and were oriented towards contemporary caricature inspired by ROSTA Windows.[11] The new productions appeared as animated political posters. The political meetings after the February Revolution of 1917 were held in the Petrograd Circus Ciniselli, where Leo Trotsky appeared every evening in place of the circus performers. Vladimir Mayakovsky's first revolutionary play *Mystery Buffo* was staged there in 1918. In November 1919, Nikolai Foregger staged an agitational sketch at the so-called Second Moscow Circus – *The Political Carousel*. Pavel Kuznetsov created a three-story set design, comparable to the construction for medieval

mystery plays. On this pyramid, 60 circus artists were supposed to demonstrate the hierarchical structure of capitalist exploitation. Mayakovsky wrote a series of political entrées for the clown Lazarenko: *The Soviet ABC* (1919) and *The World Championship in the Class Struggle* (1921). In the first, the clown performed political epigrams to all letters of the alphabet, in the second he played the circus referee Uncle Vanya and introduced the audience to fighters who appeared as satirical political masks (for example, as the champion of the Crimea, the General of the White Army Piotr Wrangel and others), which were conquered by the world champion, the Revolution.

Between 1919 and 1921, the avant-garde poets, painters, directors and choreographers who were close to Futurism, Imaginism and Symbolism occupied the ring. The poets Vasilii Kamenski, Ivan Rukavishnikov and Vadim Shershenevich; and the choreographers Alexander Gorskii, Nikolai Foregger and Kasian Goleizovskii staged pantomimes in the circus – almost without the participation of circus artists. The latter were worried: they thought that the specifics of their art were gone, especially when, in 1920, Goleizovskii presented a pantomime in the First Moscow Circus in which not a single circus artist took part.[12] It is thus not surprising that as early as 1925, the politicised clowns complained about the diminishing interest from the audience.[13] In the long run, the circus as an institution could neither tolerate the expansionist efforts of the avant-garde theatre directors and designers nor the superficial daily agitation and ideologisation. A new period had begun.

"Circusation" of theatre

In 1919, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment gave the Petrograd directors a small court theatre within the Hermitage where they could practice aesthetic democracy. The theatre became famous with only one production: Yuri Annenkov's *First Wine Burner*, based on Lev Tolstoy's play. It was performed only five or six times in September 1919 and soon became the reason for the closure of the newly founded theatre. Annenkov, a graphic artist and an enthusiastic supporter of Marinetti's theatrical ideas, transformed Tolstoy's simple folk play about the harmfulness of alcohol (brought by the devil over an innocent Russian village) into a theatrical experiment that triggered a whole development – the "circusation" of theatre.

The plot was interrupted by interludes and circus acts that had little to do with Tolstoy's play. Annenkov hired the famous clown Delvari and the contortionist Carloni as well as accordion and balalaika players, couplet singers, dancers and acrobats. He called this combination of theatre and circus "Russian folk music hall".[14] Victor Shklovskii reviewed the production right after the premiere: "Acrobats are introduced as devils; the circus is motivated as a representation of hell".[15] Only the clown's entrées were given without any motivation: "The clown just came and strolled through hell as though it were a Café-Chantant". This was too simple according to Shklovskii.[16] A year later, he declared Annenkov's "mistakes" to be discoveries.[17] This abrupt change of

opinion was provoked by a new theatre opening in January 1920, called "The Popular Comedy".[18] Annenkov's experiment became a programmatic continuation in productions of Sergei Radlov.

Radlov's popular comedy

Sergei Radlov worked at Meyerhold's studio on Borodinskaya from 1913 to 1917, which gave him decisive inspiration to involve the *commedia dell'arte* and fairground theatre traditions. In the manifesto that preceded the foundation of the Popular Comedy, he renounced the stylisation of the theatre from the past. Improvisation and circusation were declared to be the basic principles of his new show. The tempo, the grotesquely portrayed types, the eccentricity "created by the Anglo-American genius" defined the future of the popular comedy in the twentieth century.[19]

Radlov invited comedians from the variety theatres to join his troupe, including jesters, ventriloquists and the stand-up comedian Konstantin Gibshman – who was known as a comic stutterer, worked with fragmentary phrases, pauses and appreciated gestures more than words. The core of Radlov's troupe consisted mainly of circus artists: the aerial acrobats Serge and Taurek, the clown Georges Delvari, the musical eccentric Bob, the quick-change artist Ernani, the contortionist Carloni, jugglers (including the Japanese Takoshimo), the equestrian director Pavel Alexandrov, jumpers, a few ballet dancers and other "colourful birds".[20] Serge and Delvari quickly became the stars – one for his amazing acrobatic perfection, the other for his inimitable ability to make audiences laugh. Radlov attested that he could control the audience's laughter like a conductor.[21] In his subsequently published essay "In Search of Shakespeare" Radlov listed what he tried to unite in his Popular Comedy:

Pathos of tragedy.
Persiflage of satirical comedy. Criminal plot as the red thread of the play.
Expressionist psychology of 100% tension – without intermediate tones and preparations.
Farce as morality in the guise of cynicism.
Film as an accelerating element.
Eccentricity as an attitude that breaks the spine of every logic.
Guignol as doping for the nerves. Circus as a charge of anti-psychological laughter.
Pantomime as a tendency to vividly embody the plot.
Agitation as a social endeavor that breaks through the crust of the art which is no longer in isolation.[22]

The theatre had settled in the Iron Hall, the stage was redesigned according to Shakespeare's Globe – an open wood platform with a small curtain, without proscenium, wings, pockets and footlight. For their acts, the actors also used boxes, galleries and even the chandeliers on the ceiling. In this "naked" abstract

space, Radlov explained, the performer attracted all attention and "was never tired of demonstrating somersaults, juggling with fire, metamorphoses, puns, and other magic tricks banned from the theatre stage".[23] The floor of the Iron Hall was spewed with the shells of sunflower seeds left by the new audience: cigarette boys, workers, soldiers, house servants, homeless kids, candy sellers and traders from the Sitny market who gathered here every evening.

Annenkov criticised Radlov for not having "theatricalised" his circus artist well enough.[24] Nevertheless, Radlov was the first director who consistently tried to combine theatre and circus in a new genre of circus comedies. He used acts and stunts not as unrelated attractions but incorporated into the plot. He wrote the plays himself and used traditional situations from the *commedia dell'arte*, the French Boulevard and Variety theatres, three-penny stories and adventure films. The plots were intentionally simple: young people love each other, but the father is against their marriage, after long or short peripeties he agrees. This pattern provided the material for the first three productions – half circus and half fairy tales: *A Dead Man's Bride* (premiered on 8 January 1920), *The Sultan and the Devil* (premiered on 16 March 1920), *The Second Daughter of a Banker* (premiered on 20 April 1920). The premiere of *The Monkey as Denunciator* in February 1920 was based on a simple trick of disguise: since there were no tamed animals, the actors played a bear, a monkey, a giraffe and a tiger in a circus menagerie. A love plot was subjected to this circumstance and a young man disguised himself as a bear in order to meet his beloved.

The plays, sketched on two pages of exercise books, did not have a fixed text, as Radlov was a faithful follower of improvisation. The literary drama was for him a ballet of phrases, in which the actor was bound to the word as much as the dancer was bound to the prescribed gesture.[25] His play should be created as a live performance. The actors were supposed to improvise the text, but often Radlov was hiding in the stage corner and helped the artists by prompting. Free communication and improvised word exchange with the audience, as it was common in circus, did not cause any difficulties for the artists. The banality of the plots, in which Radlov saw a basic feature of his theatrical democratism, was fiercely attacked by the critics, but the audience loved the theatre for the circus acts that provided the main suspense. The night in the house of the surgeon in *A Dead Man's Bride*, for instance, unfolded as a stunning cascade of jugglers with burning torches, knives, scalpels and other surgical instruments. The wedding of a second daughter of a banker was developed as a brilliant stunt with dishes, bottles and chairs flying around. Fleeing from his pursuers, the monkey-denunciator embodied by Serge performed breathtaking acts in the air by climbing to the galleries, bouncing on the box railing, and finally dangling from the chandelier. In *The Sultan and the Devil*, the Japanese artist Takoshima had the opportunity to "speak in his mother tongue, juggling a small sword with astonishing perfection and demonstrating the enchanting and original folk art of the Far East".[26]

The first season ended on 4 August 1920 with the premiere of the melodrama *An Adoptive Son*, which soon turned into the main attraction of the theatre. An adopted son of a capitalist, who sympathised with the revolutionaries,

was again played by Serge. A wounded rebel handed him secret papers and the boy fled from the police. This chase became the climax of the performance. After jumping over the barrels with water and diving into them, Serge climbed the roof, from which he glided down with a rope. Then he reached for another rope, which was let down from an airplane, and disappeared into the (theatre) sky. Theatricality, circus and physical dynamics determined the intense effect of this cinematic production. In the second season, the theatre experienced a sharp turnaround in repertoire and style. Vasilii Soloviev (an assistant to Meyerhold in the studio on Borodinskaya) and Konstantin Miklashevskii (the author of a fundamental study about the commedia dell' arte) joined the troupe. They staged Molière, incorporated an orchestra with old instruments into the play and refused to work with circus artists. Radlov himself directed Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in which he still included some circus elements, but only as inserted stunts. The improvisation was gone; the circus artists left the company. The audience felt bored.

Radlov tried once more to return to the genre of a circus comedy and directed a melodrama *Love and Gold*, which premiered on 30 January 1921. The action stretched over five different stages simultaneously; villains, apaches and policemen were involved in a tricky crime story in Paris at night. Delvari played a horrified bourgeois fleeing from Paris but on the way, he met criminals everywhere.[27] A contemporary critic wrote that

> The comic element in the melodrama was replaced by the introduction of an eccentric clown, who is not really related to the plot, but rather plays a spectator on stage. […] This technique has always been used in the circus and could be found in great perfection in this piece. The circus clown alienated the melodrama by turning the performance into a parody of itself. [28]

The closure of the theatre in January 1922 occurred for a variety of reasons, including that the state subsidies for the Popular Comedy were cut off – as they were for most theatres during the transition to the New Economic Policy; a temporary retreat to a free market. But there were also objections to its repertoire, which could hardly be called politically engaged. After a series of experiments in the search for the democratic circus-theatre in the first season, the new productions reconstructed the style of the theatre from the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. After the closure of the Popular Comedy, Radlov opened a "Research Workshop" at his apartment searching for abstract theatrical forms that Annenkov was also practising at the time.[29] Their concepts of a total theatre came very close to Oskar Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus experiments. Radlov's development could be interpreted as an example of an expanded theatre pushed by circus beyond its boundaries.

The closure of the Popular Comedy could not stop further experiments with circus and theatre. In 1921, Alexei Granovskii moved his production of Mayakovsky's *Mystery Buffo* to the First Moscow Circus where it was played

in German for the participants of the Congress of the Third International. He mixed pantomimes with circus acts. In 1922, Taïrow circusated Lecocq's operetta *Giroflé-Giroflá*. In April 1922, Meyerhold presented his new system of acting – biomechanics – in a production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, an erotic farce by the Belgian author Fernand Crommelynck. The stage remained empty. The actors performed without make-up in identical production clothes. Every movement in this open space was accentuated and had the effect of a circus act. Meyerhold's students – among them Sergei Eisenstein – played the heroine's lovers. This new school of eccentric movement had a strong acrobatic touch and was conceived as a Russian response to the European expressive dance and American "Taylorism" on stage. In November 1922, Meyerhold presented a new production – *Tarelkin's Death*. Tarelkin died on stage "in convulsions that were common for balagan and circus", wrote one critic and director Vasilii Sakhnovskii.[30] Eisenstein worked in this production as Meyerhold's assistant. At this time, his friends opened in Petrograd a new FEKS workshop and declared a new artistic movement: Eccentrism. They presented their programme during a public discussion on 5 December 1921, accepting their first students and publishing their manifesto in June 1922.

FEKS

"Eccentrism is taken internally: the dosage is elephantine. External usage is no help against faintness, sciatica, melancholia, premature greyness and so on", explained the co-founder of FEKS, Leonid Trauberg, in the movement's manifesto.[31] FEKS wanted not only to set up a new art but also develop a new attitude towards reality: life as a trick. The traditional Russian hypertrophy of self-reflection and the serious high art should be replaced by

> risk, bravery, violence, chase, revolution, gold, blood, laxative pills, Charles Chaplin, wrecks on land, sea and in the air, surprise cigars, operetta prima donnas, adventures of all sorts, skating-rinks, American books, horses, struggle, *chansonnettes*, a *salto* on a bicycle and thousands and thousands of events that make our Today beautiful. [32]

Art and revolution were two amazing tricks – on the same scale as blood, gold, divas and American shoes. If, at the time, there had been these wonderful cigars and skating rings in Petrograd, one could have taken the FEKS's fascination for hedonism, appeal to all senses and excitement through all channels – but both shoes and divas were not real; only signs, pure imagination. Kozintsev declared in his part of the manifesto:

Four blasts on the whistle:

1. for the actor – from emotion to the machine, from anguish to the trick. The technique – circus.
   The psychology – head over heels.

2. for the director – a maximum of devices, a record number of inventions, a turbine of rhythms.
3. for the dramatist – the coupler of tricks.
4. for the artist – decoration in jumps.

For the fifth whistle blast – for the public – we are ready.[33]

> What do we do? We destroy any rotten plot. We break the regular rhythm. We mix opera with circus, drama with operetta, film with burlesque! We proudly call ourselves the theatre of a vulgar taste. Pinkerton is for us more convincing than Aristotle. We hit the audience on the head with dazzling tricks. We send a greeting to our grandpa Marinetti and get to work.[34]

The European researchers attributed this FEKS's hazard to the Futuristic heritage. FEKS were indeed very close to Futurism with their denial of the traditional aesthetic hierarchies and the old idols of the high art; they also used scandal for self-assertion. They abolished a centre as ex-centrics and declared the cult of the boulevard. But this cult ridiculed itself. If the audience craving for entertainment meant fleeing from Shakespeare to the café-chantants, the artists should not move there and stage the sublime serious art forcing the audience to perceive it. There was nothing more stupid, said Trauberg about this proposal.[35] FEKS were not interested in letting the art of good taste appear in a disguise.

> The slogan of their time is: "Revolution brings tasteful art out from the palaces and onto the streets!" It's a religious procession, take off your hats, imagine it! Guilty, comrades! Not that one! To the ABC! The streets bring Revolution to art, our street mud now is circus, cinema, music-hall, Pinkerton![36]

The avant-garde now served as a maid for political enlightenment and agitation. FEKS shaped agitation as advertising, as comics, as circus acts and variety theatre with chorus girls. The programme and practice of FEKS were a reaction to the crisis of the avant-garde in the service of the political enlightenment and to new left mythology. They were very close to Sergei Radlov, auditing the rehearsals at the Popular Comedy.

> But when we gave Radlov our first play to read, he turned pale. "Did I inspire you with these ideas? How could you distort my system to this degree?" Radlov, a man of a high culture, a son of a member of the Academy of Sciences, was horrified by our libretto and by our performances. He thought we were talentless idiots who turned his brilliant ideas into absurdity. "Since when did you, a son of an academician, become an academician yourself?!" we asked him haughtily and parted away.[37]

After the premiere of FEKS's *Marriage* Radlov bitterly joked: "My patent was stolen by the FEKS company",[38] referring to the star of his troupe, the acrobat Serge, who switched to the competition. But Radlov could have accused FEKS of much more.

Marriage, staged in two days and premiered on 25 September 1922, caused a scandal. The well-known Nikolai Gogol's play about a maid Agafja who wanted to find a groom was rewritten. An American music-hall star Agatha had to choose between three mechanical candidates and decided on a screen character: Charlie Chaplin.[39] Charlie is murdered by a detective. Both plots ran in reverse order and were unimportant. In the centre of the performance were the two clowns, Serge and Taurek, who were named Albert and Einstein. They spoke with a German accent and constantly repeated that everything was relative. They brought their circus act – a magical trunk with a double bottom for the resurrection of the dead. Because of this act, the clowns needed a corpse and therefore initiated a crime; the corpse became the object that set the action in motion – the effect produced the cause. Therefore, Charlie was killed and then brought back to life with the help of an electrified farce from the Middle Ages: instead of an enema, the clowns inserted an electrical plug into his anus. It was the clowns' idea to marry Chaplin to Agatha since a marriage usually came with a dowry, and they needed money to adapt for the screen the theory of relativity. Everything and everybody – a music hall star, a detective and Charlie united in a super show – became an object of parody. Also, the plot mocked itself – the detective story, the happy marriage, the idolised Chaplin who at the same time evoked associations with Cesare from *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*.[40] Quotes, acts, stunts and coincidences were taken as prefabricated elements for the performance, and the combiners were happy to be addicted to their own effects. In this system, cinema and circus appeared as a factory of gags, stunts, plot segments and masks.

Kozintsev called the principle of this construction a chain of tricks. Guignol horror and circus brilliance in "death acts"; movie myths and expectations of a happy ending were destroyed by the silly laughter that came up due to the violated order. At the end of the performance, an unknown Ukrainian appeared on the stage and suddenly died of heart failure. A voice beyond the scene explained that the great Russian writer Nikolai Gogol had died for the second time. He was immediately resurrected with the same electrical plug. Gogol stood up and gave a passionate speech glorifying the electric theatre. A professor appeared now and then as a spectator on stage and loudly expressed his outrage at the scenic events and made an advertisement for the political enlightenment and Alexander Scriabin.

Kozintsev and Trauberg offered Sergei Yutkevich and Sergei Eisenstein to join the "factory" and direct whatever they wanted. They wrote *Columbine's Garter*, a libretto in the style of Foregger's parodies. They defined its genre as the "invention of scenic attractions". Like a roller coaster or a devil's wheel, each number was supposed to have a physiological effect on its viewers and

make them hold their breath. However, Eisenstein did not want to produce the play at FEKS, but in a real theatre and thus returned to Moscow.

Eisenstein in Prolekult

The Proletkult theatre department was starting up an itinerant troupe. Eisenstein was offered the leadership of the group. Nineteen young people were put under his direction and became his pupils. They were trained in biomechanics and acrobatics. With this group, Eisenstein started to work on his first production in March 1923. The model for his text montage was a play by Alexander Ostrovsky, the founder of Russian naturalist theatre. It was the 100th anniversary of Ostrovsky's birth. Meyerhold began rehearsing Ostrovsky's *The Forest* in February 1923. Eisenstein decided to compete secretly with his teacher and chose the play *Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man*, shortened to *The Wise Man*. Sergei Tretyakov, a Futurist poet – now a leading theoretician of the Left Front (LEF)[41] – had written a new text and transposed the plot to the Russian émigré milieu in Paris.

Eisenstein conceived of the play as a comedy of masks. The characters – tsarist officials and Moscow merchants – appeared as political clowns. The audience was expected to associate them with the French general Joffre or Italian Fascists. One groom metamorphosed into three officers of Vrangel's White Army. Ostrovsky's text was spiked with recent political jokes and sung to the tunes of old favourites, *Rigoletto* arias and romances popularised by the singer Alexander Vertinsky.

The characters were dressed in electric clown suits. A man wearing a bra with electric lamps played the role of the mother – the bra's red lights lit up in moments of passion. The villain, played by Grigori Alexandrov, wore a black mask with green lights next to his eyes. The play premiered on 26 April and 6 May 1923 in the former villa of the merchant Arseny Morozov, on Vozdvizhenka Street. A green circus carpet with red cloth around the edges covered the floor of the hall. A rope stretched downward from a box seat in the first circle to the carpet on the floor – this was one performance space. There was a trapeze and a large box into which the actors could disappear (a stage "exit"), in order to then reappear on the ropes or in the box seats. One actor sat in a ring dangling from the middle of the ceiling and imitated a parrot. A small curtain hanging from two circus masts served as a film screen.

Under the influence of his new friends from FEKS, Eisenstein decided to incorporate a piece of film into his first theatre production. The piece was called *Glumov's Diary*. Eisenstein wanted to shoot the film in the manner of the beloved American series with thrilling stunts. Alexandrov was climbing up the villa's turret and jumping into a moving car. The performance resembled a circus act (with acrobatics, trapeze, clown acts, magic tricks), a complex kinetic formation that included life-threatening thrill acts like tightrope walking. The press debated whether eccentricity was a proletarian art form and whether this form of theatre could develop the proletariat's consciousness.

Eisenstein conceived of theatre as a method of attacking the audience's psyche. The work of his circus actors was real: anger was represented by a leap backwards, a surge of passion involved climbing the highest circus perch. The production combined different stimuli: tricks, sounds or a salvo of fireworks from under an audience member's seat. All of these stimuli were considered to be of equal value: a drum roll could have the same effect as Romeo's monologue or the colour of a prima donna's tights. The director called one such effectual unit an *attraction*. The way the attractions were combined was more significant than each individual *trick*. Eisenstein arranged his production as a classic case of conditioning – he wanted to train and develop proletarian conditioned reflexes.

While FEKS had called this new construction a trick chain, Eisenstein coined a new term: montage of attractions. In May 1923, he published a theoretical explanation of the performance, the manifesto "The Montage of Attractions" in *LEF*, the magazine of the Left Front. Eisenstein believed that he had gone one step further than his colleagues. Meyerhold, Foregger and FEKS had experimented with a similar free montage of stunts, scenes, songs and film fragments, but they had not yet grasped the theoretical significance of their experience. Shklovsky and other theoreticians of the Formalist school would analyse the principles of combination and recombination in these episodes, just as they examined literary works. Eisenstein was not interested in the composition of a play, but in its *effect*. He believed formal analysis needed to be accompanied by psychological studies – Eisenstein understood theatre to be a form of psychological violence.

> Attraction … is any aggressive moment in theater, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion.[42]

Boris Arvatov, the theoretician of *LEF*, welcomed *The Wise Man* as an example of class warfare against the bourgeois academic theatres and the bourgeois way of life.[43]

Eisenstein returned to the circus – not as a director but as a theoretician. He wanted to dedicate a chapter to circus in his unfinished book *Method* (1932–1948) where he developed a theoretical model that should offer a psychological aesthetic explanation of how archaic pre-logical thinking would determine artistic processes.[44] For him, circus was the art of pure form, which – despite historical development – remained alive, timeless, "unchanged from the deepest antiquity to the present day", "characterized by its […] complete absence of content, in the narrowest sense of the word, though it is one that nevertheless (and perhaps especially for this reason!) can be characterized by undying vitality".[45]

For Eisenstein, every circus act had an immediate ancestor in magical practice and represented all stages of human history in its primary form: taming (as the reconstructed process of domestication of a wild beast by man), the real fight – with death in the gladiators (retained in wrestling), magic and belief in wizards and the ability to fly and levitate (with the aerial acrobats). Eisenstein wrote extensively about the various artistic roles in the circus. For example, he saw the clown as Ivan the Stupid (the hero of the Russian fairy tales), who could not think logically but turned to the sensuous pre-logical thought that turned out to be the smartest. For Eisenstein, the clown was a cross-dressed being. Eisenstein interpreted the gender play of the clown as a form of inversion of hierarchy and rank. At the same time, cross-dressed clowns embodied – in his eyes – the nondifferentiated sexes that defined the primordial existence, a corporeal form of ambivalence so important for the arts.[46]

On the end of the era

In the Soviet Russia of the 1920s, the symbiosis of theatre and circus moved through different stages – from the theatricalisation of circus to the circusation of theatre which gradually developed into a comedy with circus. In 1930, Mayakovsky called his play *The Bathhouse*, a drama with circus and fireworks. In the same year, Radlov staged Mayakovsky's pantomime *Moscow in Flames* in the circus. But this was the last production of this type at the end of a stormy decade when the boundaries between these two performing arts were blurring. Many innovators returned to traditional theatre forms; others switched to film, opera or ballet. In the 1930s, Radlov staged Shakespeare; Foregger became a director at the Kharkiv's Opera house. Annenkov emigrated and worked as a set designer for film. Kozintsev, Trauberg and Eisenstein made their name as film directors. These changes were provoked by personal preferences and by the new understanding what is the socialist art. The avant-garde was condemned as Formalist and hostile to the socialist proletarian spirit. In 1938, Meyerhold's theatre was closed and the director was arrested and executed. The Futurist experiments between circus and theatre had fallen under the spell of Formalism and disappeared from the historical records. Even in the period of the destalinisation of the 1960s – when the banned artists returned in the collective memory and the new theatre histories were written – these experiments were not studied in detail. The strategies of survival in the time of terror, and the rejection of the Formalist "sins" also shaped the memoirs of participants. This complicated situation explained why the directors of these experiments were mentioned very short (if at all) in the most histories of the Soviet theatre or monographs.[47] Only in the late 1970s and then in the 1990s did the new generation of researchers reconstruct the short history of circusation.[48] The interest towards it was pushed by the emerging performance studies, multimedial experiments on stage and in circus and the interest of the theoreticians towards the transdisciplinary approach.

Notes

1 All translations from Russian are – unless otherwise indicated – by the author. Vsevolod Meyerhold, "Da zdravstvuet zhongler," *Echo tsirka* 3 (August 1917), 3.
2 Alexei Gan, "Ravnenie na tsirk," *Ermitazh* 9 (1922), 8; Grigorii Kozintsev, "Pomes' tsirkacha s bezgramotnym poetom," *Teatr* 7 (1924), 13.
3 Sergei Radlov, *Stat'i o teatre. 1918–1922* (Petrograd: Mysl', 1923), 58–59.
4 Alexander Rykov, "Narodnaja komedija," in *Zelenaia ptichka*, eds. Iakov Block, Alexander Gvozdev and Mikhail Kuzmin (Petrograd: Petropolis, 1922), 178.
5 Nikolai Foregger. "P'iesa. Siuzhet. Triuk," *Zrelishcha* 7 (1922), 10–11.
6 See the appeal of Platon Kerzhentsev, "Rewrite Plays! (Peredelyvaite p'iesy)," *Vestnik teatra* 36 (1919), 6–8.
7 Sergei Eisenstein, "O stereokino," in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v 6 tomakh* (vol. 3) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 473.
8 Sergei Eisenstein, "Montazh," *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v 6 tomakh* (vol. 2) (Moscow: Iskusstvo 1966), 454.
9 Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy and Farkas Molnár, *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* (München: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925).
10 Vitalii Lazarenko, "Vospominaniia," *Ogonek* 1 (1939), 21.
11 ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency) was the Central government information agency and became famous for the satirical posters appeared during the Civil War. This visual propaganda was created in the style of Russian lubok by famous artists and poets, among them Mayakovsky, Alexander Rodchenko, Kazimir Malevich and others.
12 Iurii Dmitriev, *Estrada i tsirk glazami vliublennogo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 22.
13 Dmitriev, *Estrada i tsirk glazami vliublennogo,* 28.
14 Iurii Annenkov, "Krizis estrady," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, 494–495 (1920), 1.
15 Viktor Shklovskii, "Dopolnennyi Tolstoi," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 256–260 (1919), 2.
16 Shklovskii, "Dopolnennyi Tolstoi," 256–260.
17 Shklovskii, "Narodnaia komediia i 'Pervyi vinokur'," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 1 (1920), 425–427.
18 About *Popular Comedy* see David Zolotnitsky. *Sergei Radlov: the Shakespearian fate of a Soviet Director* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 7–25; Mel Gordon. "Radlov's Theater of *Popular Comedy*," *The Drama Review* 19:4 (1975), 113–116.
19 Radlov, "Teatry Vozrozhdeniia i vozrozhdenie teatra," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 607 (1920), 1.
20 Alexander Rykov, "Narodnaia komediia," 165.
21 Radlov, "Teatr narodnoi komedii. Otvet druz'iam," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 410–412 (1920), 2.
22 Radlov, "V poiskach Shekspira," *Teatr* 10 (1923), 1–2.
23 Radlov, *10 let v teatre* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929), 179.
24 Annenkov, "Teatr do kontsa," *Dom iskusstva* 7 (1921), 65 – quoted in David Zoloznitskii. *Zori teatral'nogo Oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), 244.
25 Radlov, *Stat'i o teatre*, 16, 58–59.
26 Vasilii Solov'ev, "Sultan i chort," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 406 (1920), 1.
27 Evgenii Kuznetsov, "Liubov' i zoloto," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 669–671 (1921), 1.
28 Rykov, "Narodnaia komediia," 175.
29 Cf. Radlov, "O chistoi stikhii akterskogo iskusstva," *10 let v teatre*, 102–128; Annenkov. "O teatre chistogo metoda," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 724–726 (1921), 1.
30 Vasilii Sakhnovskii, "Meierkhol'd," in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike*, eds. Nikolai Pesochinskii, Elena Kukhta and Nadezhda Tarshis (Moscow: Artist, 1997), 84.
31 Leonid Trauberg, "Cinema in the Role of Accuser," in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents: 1896–1939*, eds. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (New York: Routledge, 1988) and *Extsentrism* (Petrograd, 1922), 60.
32 Trauberg, *Extsentrism,* 64.
33 Grigorii Kozintsev, "A. B.! Parade of the Eccentric," *The Film Factory,* 58.
34 "Manifest extsentricheskogo teatra," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 7 (1990), 73–74.
35 Trauberg, "Cinema in the Role of Accuser," 62.

36 Ibid. Pinkerton, a 'king of detectives', was a protagonist of American dime novels, adapted for the screen, which were very popular in Europa and Russia; it had a real prototype, Alan Pinkerton, who in 1850 founded a detective agency.
37 I interviewed Leonid Trauberg in 1979 in Moscow for my book *FEKS* (Berlin: PotemkinPress, 1995).
38 Radlov, "K piateletiiu gosteatrov," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 8 (1923), 9.
39 For the second and last performance of the play on 30 October FEKS bought a reel with Chaplin's film from a projectionist, showed it during the performance and let the actor who played Chaplin 'leave' the screen.
40 The description is based on my interview with Trauberg. The text of the libretto is published in *Ot balagana do Shekspira. Khronika teatral'noi deiatel'nosti G. M. Kozintseva*, eds. Valentina Kozintseva and Iakov Butovskii (St. Petersburg: Bulanin, 2002), 64–77.
41 LEF – Lef Front of Art – was formed in 1922 as an alliance of pre-war Futurists, Production Artists and Formalists and published the review *LEF* (1923–1924) and *Novyi lef* (1927–28). Leading members were Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Tretjakov, Boris Arvatov, Osip Brik Viktor Shklovsky, Alexander Rodchenko, Sergei Eisenstein.
42 Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works. Vol. 1: Writings, 1922–34*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), 34.
43 *Zrelishcha* 39 (1923): 3, quoted in R. Iurenev, *Sergei Eizenshtein: Zamysly. Fil'my. Metod*. (vol. 1), (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985), 67.
44 Oksana Bulgakowa (ed.), *Eisenstein – Metod/Methode* (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 2009).
45 Bulgakowa and Dietmar Hochmuth (eds.), *Eisenstein – The Primal Phenomenon: Art* (Berlin: PotemkinPress, 2017), 131.
46 Bulgakowa and Hochmuth, *Eisenstein*, 133.
47 Evgenij Kuznetsov (ed.), *Sovetskii tsirk: 1918–1938* (Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1938), 94–96; Dmitriev, *Estrada i tsirk glazami vliublennogo* 20–24; Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and Avant-Garde* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 57–59, 94–97.
48 The most comprehensive investigations are Dadiv Zolotnitskii, *Zori teatral'nogo Oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), 221–287 and Ol'ga Burenina-Petrova. *Tsirk v prostranstve kul'tury* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015).

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4 Typocircus and the Czech avant-garde

Anne Hultsch

Unlike Paris, Prague had no permanent circus building, and there is almost no mention of people attending circus performances in Czechoslovakia in memoirs, letters and similar documents. Yet, circus is the art that shapes various areas of the Czech avant-garde unlike any other – literature, theatre, painting, book design, typography. What is so fascinating about circus? Which of its elements serves as a source of inspiration? And how does it enter into books and journals? For, it is precisely these printed products that are particularly influenced by the circus atmosphere.

The emergence of the Czech avant-garde coincides with the attaining of sovereignty and the founding of the first Czechoslovak Republic. After the First World War, the whole country was moved by a hopeful spirit of optimism, which took shape in an extremely productive and innovative way, especially in the generation born around 1900: "What one has to fight for in much larger centres and what nevertheless hardly exists, does exist in Prague: a creatively active atmosphere",[1] as visitors from abroad, also a little enviously, noted. There is no trace of cultural pessimism and mistrust towards the possibilities of art that prevailed in Germany and Austria, or of a need to break up centuries-old traditions, as exists in Italy and Russia, for example.

If one asks what the specific contribution of the Czech avant-garde is to the international artistic avant-garde, the answer is certainly its innovations in the field of book design. While in Germany, Switzerland or the Netherlands the so-called New or Elementary Typography is developed on the basis of commercial prints (business papers, forms, broadsheets, posters, etc.) and is only applied to the design of the exterior of books at a very late stage, the Czech avant-garde designers set themselves the challenge of redesigning the "most complicated printed product" from the very beginning.[2] Books represent a complex structure of cover, binding, title page, text pages, table of contents, imprint, etc., the design of which should not only be coherent in itself but also coherent in relation to the content of the work. The design elements consistently penetrate the interior of the books, which is where Czech avant-garde books differ from other avant-garde books. Additionally, their material realisation (e.g., paper and print quality) is of better quality overall compared to, for example, the Russian or Polish avant-garde. In the young republic – whose

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-5

first president declared reading to be "exercising a national duty"[3] – books were to be generally accessible and affordable, i.e., serially producible, without compromising artistic quality: "The book has to be perfect and this perfection has to be as inexpensive and as functional as possible".[4] The books should not only contribute to the democratisation of society in terms of content but also contribute aesthetically to the cultivation of taste and the change of viewing habits.

At the end of 1920, the artists' association Devětsil was founded, which initially felt committed to the new proletarian art, but from 1923 onwards, wrote its programmatic writings under the label of poetism.[5] The main aim of poetism – which sees itself as a new aesthetic and philosophical outlook and therefore applies to all areas of art and life – is to open up "all the beauties of this world" by creating a "poetry for all the senses".[6] The aim is to address as broad an audience as possible; after all, nothing less is at stake than the transformation of society.

Karel Teige, one of the Devětsil founders, acts as a tireless, internationally active theoretician and programmer of the Czech avant-garde, who in almost all of his writings, points out the importance of the circus as an art that is both "comprehensible and captivating",[7] which had (too) long experienced disinterest and misjudgement on the part of intellectuals and artists (only "the children and the crowd were always loyal to it"), but is now moving into the foreground.[8] The circus attracts artists "who were bored with the pathetic emptiness of the theatre", moreover, circus uses an international artistic idiom.[9] Similar to Teige's characterisation of circus, Artuš Černík – Czech poet, editor, film theorist and founding member of the Brno section of Devěsil – sees circus as one of the "joys of the electric century" (as one of his articles is titled). Circus provides exoticism, satisfies the curiosity for new things, sensations and wonders and brings variety into the grey of everyday life. Černík finds all this expressed in the well-known oil painting *Circus* (1890/91) by Georges Seurat,[10] which is "as beautiful as the circus itself", "as unusual as anything that can be written about the circus. But the circus so rarely returns to our foggy streets. The roar of the predators so rarely fills the squares of the suburbs".[11] The description of a circus performance actually attended is replaced by a description of a picture showing such a performance; as a tepid substitute for the circus, vaudeville is visited in Prague. Černík writes of the painting that it is much more than a mere (if splendid) picture, for in it everything is form, colour and line and poetry – "rather an excellent poster".[12] This is a very interesting and important statement for the further course of my remarks: A well-designed poster is valued more highly than an oil painting – commercial graphic design is more valuable than painting. It is accessible to a much larger number of people than just those who visit a museum, or the one individual who has the painting hanging on their wall at home.

In the course of the 1920s – parallel to the further development of the film and modern theatre[13] (which takes up circus forms) – the circus is slowly pushed out of the programmatic writings.[14] By this time, however, clowns,

acrobats, the rapid sequence of circus acts, typographically striking posters, typical advertising slogans, the basic shape of the ring, etc., had already taken on a life of their own independent of the circus; however, be they in theatre or books, they still refer to their circus origins.

Picture poems or the exterior life of books

If books – like the circus – are to appeal to all the senses and attract attention from the outside in order to reach as broad a readership as possible, you have to come up with new concepts and ideas. For example, a book cover should serve as a poster and advertisement for the book as well as reflect its contents in a concentrated manner.[15] Because of their pathos, the epitome of good posters at that time were those of the Cirque Médrano in Paris,[16] which was also regularly visited by Czech artists during their visits to Paris. Teige describes the Cirque's posters as "poems in the middle of a Parisian street".[17] In his 1928 book *Svět, který se směje* (*The World That Laughs*), he writes that the world of the circus is an "extraordinary universe of imagination and joy", "a universe that laughs and a universe that writes poetry".[18] Circus, poetry and *joie de vivre* are, therefore, in his view, directly related. For the design of the cover of his above-mentioned book, Teige used a film still from Charlie Chaplin's film *Circus* (released the same year), which clearly shows the close networking between various centres of the avant-garde and their knowledge of one other. The film is reviewed by graphic-designer, author and propagator of *Nejskromnější umění* (*Most Humble Art*) Josef Čapek, along with three very beautiful drawings contributed by Adolf Hoffmeister, a fine draftsman and caricaturist.[19] In addition to the aforementioned painting of Seurat, Chaplin and the legendary clown trio of Fratellini brothers (who were active in the Cirque Médrano) were particularly popular among the Czech avant-garde, as evidenced by their images permeating Czech publications. Chaplin was most often on a front cover,[20] but the Fratellini brothers also have their own text dedicated to them by Richard Weiner, who lived as an author and journalist in Paris.[21]

To give the covers the desired poster character, the so-called *picture poems* are created: poems in picture form, usually based on photomontages. Perception is accelerated by the simultaneous display of the individual – visual – elements next to each other. The covers thus become programmatic surfaces; the means by which the avant-garde disseminates its progressive art production. The picture poems are reminiscent of circus programmes, which traditionally do not follow a well-composed plotline, but can be characterised by a rapid change of successive, different images and performances. This is about diversity, variety and about possibilities that "classic" paintings and poems do not offer, which is why inspiration is sought in film, sport, tourism and, indeed, the circus.[22]

As an example of a picture poem cover, consider the first edition of the poetry collection *Pantomima (Pantomime)* from 1924 by Vítězslav Nezval, the authoritative poet of Czech poetism and surrealism, designed by painter and photographer Jindřich Štyrský.[23]

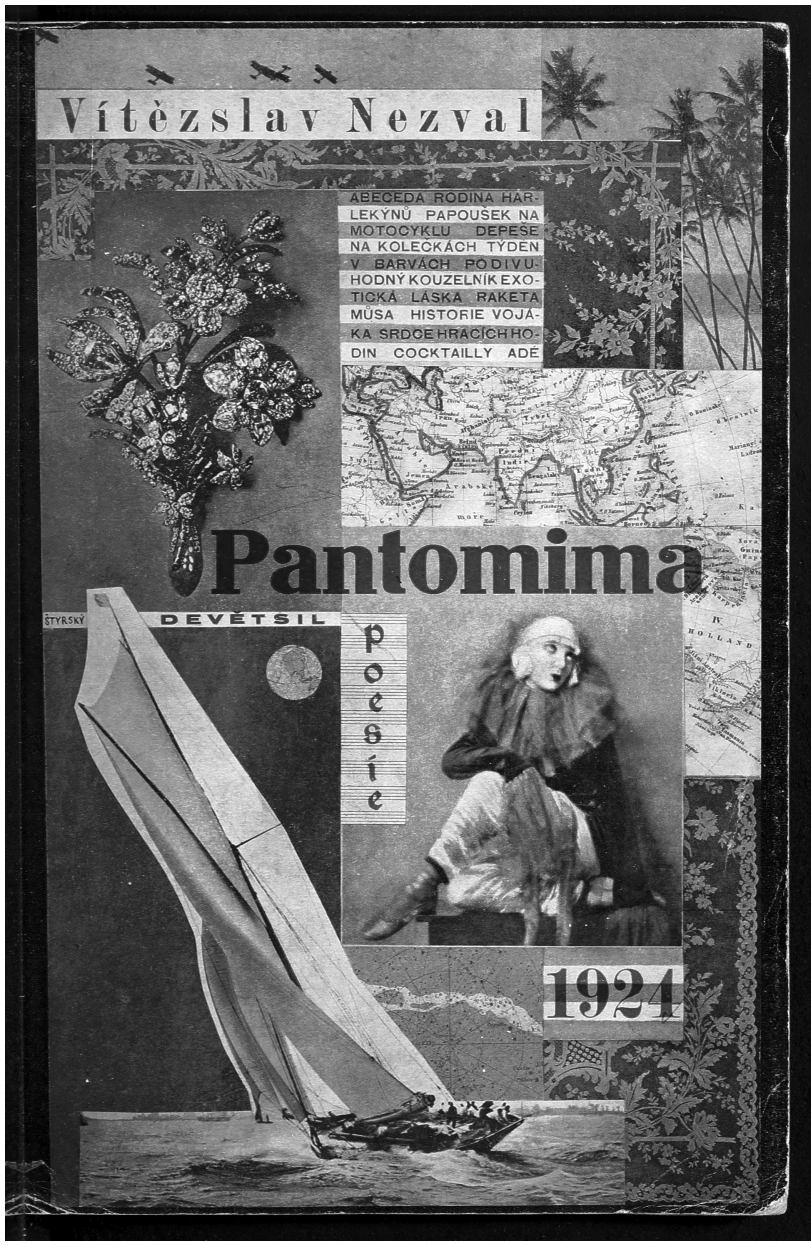


Figure 4.1 Cover of Vítězslav Nezval's Pantomima (1924) by Jindřich Štyrský. Source: SLUB Dresden / Vloe.33, Kaps.66.

Štyrský uses all the Devětsil's favourite motifs on this cover, but in most cases, they simultaneously conceal something other than what they seemingly represent: aeroplanes (as a flock of birds), a bouquet of flowers (as a brooch), a sailing ship in the wind, a map of the world and a map of the stars (Cassiopeia as distant islands), a globe (as the moon over the sea), a sad Pierrot (as a woman), palm trees, music paper (with "poetry" written inside), etc. Even the table of contents, which is printed on the outside cover and is accurate in itself, is witty due to the unique arrangement of the lines in the text, which turn, for example, the "podivuhodný kouzelník" ("wonderful magician") into a "hodný kouzelník" ("good magician"). So much is shown at once that you discover something new every time you look at it. The reading of the book – which should not only be read but also looked at – begins with the cover – which should not only be looked at but also read. The unusual and poetic character of the individual elements is tamed by a strictly geometric arrangement. With the pantomime in the title, the magician in the content, the Pierrot image in the centre, an obvious reference to the circus is made. The cover also looks like a billboard advertising for the Devětsil artists' association. Not only are their favourite motifs taken up, but the name Devětsil is also explicitly placed between the title of the book and the globe-moon, which also depicts the simple geometric figure of a filled circle.

It is precisely this figure that serves as the basic ideogram for the Devětsil artists' association. The cover of their constituent anthology is formed by the large inscription "Devětsil", below which is a large circle filled with black, and below that is the place and year (Praha 1922).[24] That is all. On the half-title (the page carrying nothing but the title of a book) the sign is repeated without any text; on the title page, it is transformed into a thick-walled, unfilled circle. The circle – and thus the basic shape of the circus tent or the ring (and, incidentally, also of a Prague theatre stage planned at the time but never built)[25] – appears on the covers of both magazines and books, usually in black or red. In this respect, it makes almost no difference which artist designs the respective cover. Although the overall design is quite individual depending on the author, nowhere is the black or red filled circle missing; it serves as a resting point and captures the eye. Teige writes, for example, that he usually chooses basic colours and basic geometric shapes, because he is "of the opinion that the balance of an orthogonal surface corresponds best to orthogonal shapes, square and rectangle; the circle imposes itself as the shape most pleasing to the eye".[26] So, the circle itself enforces its aesthetic qualities. It is a simple, perfect, pure form, harmonious, internationally understandable. And, it always contains an irrational element through the π in its formula, which is important to Czech avant-garde artists. Initially, it carries no meaning in itself (as on the cover of the anthology *Devětsil*), but it can also be used iconically (as with the globe-moon on the cover of *Pantomima* or on the cover of the two issues of the magazine *Disk*, where this geometric figure also symbolises a discus).[27]

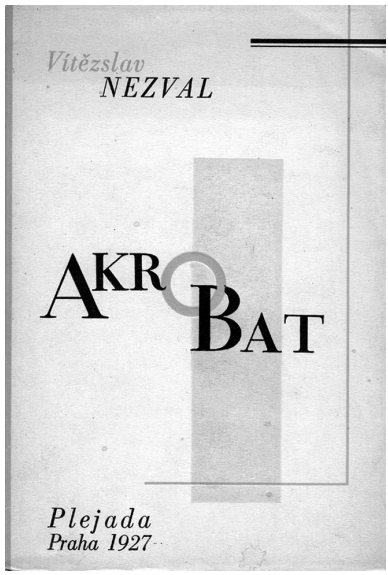


Figure 4.2 Cover of Vítězslav Nezval's Akrobat (1927) by Vít Obrtel. Source: SLUB Dresden / Vloe.98,Kaps.12.

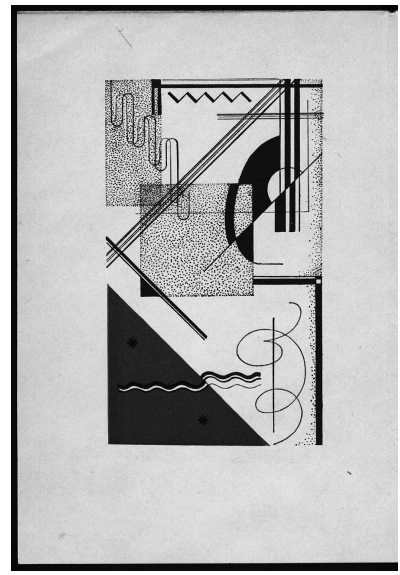


Figure 4.3 Frontispiece in Vítězslav Nezval's Akrobat (1927) by Vít Obrtel. Source: SLUB Dresden / Vloe.98,Kaps.12.

A circle is also used by architect, (graphic) designer and poet Vít Obrtel to design a purely abstract cover for Vítězslav Nezval's 1927 volume *Akrobat (The Acrobat)*,[28] thus drawing attention to another aspect of the circle: it is also a letter. Here, the circle stands as a link between the "akr" and "bat" (which are at different heights), and thus forms the "o". The image becomes writing (Teige, on the other hand, shows in various works how writing becomes the image). Nezval alludes to the connection between circle and letter in his poem "O", from the cycle "Abeceda" ("Alphabet"). The last verse states that every equation has its unknown,[29] which brings us back to the circular formula. This example alone illustrates well how the synchronous perception of different meanings of one and the same sign is required, as mentioned about the individual motifs of the *Pantomima* cover.

The frontispiece in *Akrobat* is no less interesting, for it is a drawing that reproduces slow, fast, spinning, horizontal, vertical, diagonal movements. The circus takes an abstract form, which calls into question its very role of presenting real reality and real bodies, distinguishing it from theatre.[30] Geometric figures and forms remain, but Obrtel gives them a lyrical touch by inserting diagonals or the sweep of a whip. The viewer is indirectly invited to mentally fill this abstract circus with the figure of the acrobat by reading the book. At

this point, the circus is so present in the avant-garde books that it no longer needs to be shown representationally.

Typography or the inner life of books and magazines

Czech poet and anarchist Stanislav Kostka Neumann begins the first 19 verses of his poem "Cirkus" ("Circus", written as early as 1913) with the fact that the lyrical I is not talking about the circus at all, but about the posters of the circus, which explode like a grenade. They shake up the life of the towns and villages they hit because the posters bring the illusion of a different life from exotic places.[31] The whole poem is characterised by great dynamism and power, which brutally dominates everything and whose immense attraction does not permit escape. This poem could only be published in 1918, striking a similar chord to what it describes. The Czech avant-garde took up the force of the circus posters and adopted both their outer form and individual content-related statements.

First of all, there is evocative play with different font sizes and font types. This device is used particularly beautifully in the volume of poems *Pantomima* (mentioned earlier in connection with Štyrský's cover). The interior of the book is the responsibility of Teige, who chose a different typeface for each section, with the intention that the typeface be appropriate for each poem. Here, too, the typography is not without deeper meaning. The section "Exotic Love" is written in *Fraktur* (an angular form of Latin alphabet calligraphy), which is otherwise not used at all for Czech language publications. By using this style, Teige made it extremely difficult for the Czech reader to read this interesting topic. And, since in *Fraktur* script the letter "x" only differs from the "r" by an open loop at the base of the character, for a reader not used to reading *Fraktur*, "e*x*otic love" almost automatically becomes "e*r*otic love". The different fonts visualise the intentionally very heterogeneous texts and genres represented in the book. Even just by flicking through the pages, one can now see how quickly the different acts follow one another, which only works in this form because all three participants (Nezval, Štyrský, Teige) are perfectly attuned to one another and all elements are coordinated. Stanislava Fedrová, a Czech theorist of intermediality, interprets the naming of Devětsil on the cover as an indication of collective authorship,[32] although the individuals Nezval and Štyrský are also named. The divisions are comparable to the circus acts as announced on the cover poster; Devětsil would be the name of the circus, Nezval that of the principal, in this reading.[33] Since constructivist typography – that is, the typography that gave the book a new form and structure and made the design of the covers follow the laws of practicality and economy, i.e., they were no longer adorned with purely decorative ornaments, but instead geometric shapes, simple fonts and contrasting colours – is concerned with the graphic organisation of the book as a whole and not just individual parts,[34] this reading seems entirely justified.

Beyond the content and form of the texts themselves, the illustrations are novel for a volume of poetry and feature numerous circus-like motifs. They follow the idea of modern illustrations as represented by Štyrský. What matters to her idea of modern illustrations is "an intense emphasis on the relationship between the *principle of* the work and its *formal expression*", so that the "spaciousness of the *theme of* a poetic work […] coincides with the *subject of* the illustration" and vice versa.[35] The very first image in *Pantomima* is a black and white reproduction of Štyrský's oil painting *Cirkus Simonetta* (1923). In addition to actual illustrations, Štyrský made for two texts by Nezval (one for "Pierot cyklista" ["Pierrot the Cyclist"] and four for "Podivuhodný kouzelník" ["The Wonderful Magician"]), one can also find, for example, a page on which portrait photos of the three Fratellini brothers are shown diagonally. Paul Bouissac writes about how the circus can be read as a text so that the timing in the sequence of individual acts has an important function.[36] Again, it is about when the reader finds each illustration in the book when reading it linearly – like attending a circus performance. The sequence of illustrations in *Pantomima* begins with the image of a circus itself, then a Pierrot appears on a bicycle, followed by the act of the Fratellini brothers, and so on. So, in this respect, too, it can be argued that the overall design of the book is comparable to a circus programme.

In another way, the circus enters the book *Sever – jih – západ – východ* (*North – South – West – East*) by prose writer and journalist Karel Schulz, published in 1923 with a cover by Teige and architect Jaromír Krejcar. Inserted into the text are typographically reproduced printed matter and signs, including a poster that leaves no doubt that it is a circus poster, promising "evenings of joy, illusions and miracles".[37] In this context, it is interesting that these offset typographical elements do not so much serve as illustrations, but rather become part of the text – they do not interrupt, but continue to write. The poster, which does not explicitly mention circus, announces all kinds of sensations; the company – called "Grand Théâtre Variété" – presents itself as international and electric, thus modern in technical terms. However, there is no doubt that it is a travelling circus, for the narrative text mentions wandering around, a tent behind the town and circus music; moreover, in reference to Neumann's poem, there is talk of the small town having been "invaded".[38] The poster works with promotionally effective exaggerations and announces a metropolitan vaudeville to the province. In the capital, as the above quotation from Černík shows, people long for the travelling circus that roams the province. The text is set along an axis, with different font types and styles used, as found on real circus posters.

Real circus posters like to call out the exclusivity, the one-time or last-time nature of the performance, and therefore, the need to hurry to visit the circus. Daily newspapers also feature typographically eye-catching advertisements of similar content designed to generate an audience for that day's performances. The saying "Dnes naposled" ("Today for the last time") is particularly popular,[39] and is taken up by the avant-gardists.

Dnes naposled ("Today for the last time")

The saying "Dnes naposled" first appears, as far as I could find, in 1924 in a drawing by Otakar Mrkvička (a painter and one of the most prolific book designers of the Czech avant-garde), which serves as an illustration to the poem "Panoptikum" ("Panopticon") by representative proletarian poet Josef Hora in the magazine *Trn*[40].

A panopticon (labelled as such) is shown; on the left side it says "never seen", to the right there is the entrance fee (20 Heller) and along the right edge the word "Attention!". Between the legs of a thick town crier, it is indicated that a different programme will be shown each evening, but this is crossed out and replaced by "the same" in different handwriting. This witty pseudo-correction is put on display, exposing the statement as an advertising lie and at the same time implicitly questioning the last time of the last time; the crier announces with a big drumbeat what is written on the skin of the drum – thus in a circle: "Dnes naposled!" This lettered drawing is inserted within delimiting straight lines of text columns so that it could just as well be the image of an advertisement on a newspaper page.

Notably, in a round word-picture mark, the saying appears again just a few pages further on in the same magazine issue, in the poem "Cirkus" ("Circus") by Jaroslav Seifert, who is an important poet of poetism and future Nobel Laureate.

Here, however, it no longer serves merely as an illustration *between* parts of the text, but as a direct component *of* the text.[41] With it, the final point is set in a double sense. The handwritten draft of this poem shows that the combination of word and image is the poet's idea, which then only has to be implemented concretely by the typographer (here, Teige, who wrote the instructions to the printer on the draft).[42] This was technically difficult to accomplish at the time, as can be seen from the fact that this poem is printed four times – in four different versions – during the avant-garde period (i.e., until about 1938), with the text always crafted differently into the black circle, which itself has an uneven shape.[43] The poem says that on one day a famous fire-eater took a little virgin dancer into his arms for the first time, and on the evening of that very day the clown released a large balloon with the inscription "Dnes naposled" to greet the audience. The question arises as to what "for the last time" refers to: the demonstration, the embrace, the virginity? Only in the latter case would the statement of unrepeatability actually apply. The figure of the black-filled circle can be seen as an abstracted balloon by reading the text on it, but at the same time, through abstraction, it joins the long line of use of this figure in Czech avant-garde typography.

The last edition of the text, which falls within the period of the avant-garde, sets itself apart from the three earlier ones. The 1938 poetry collection *Svatební cesta* (*Honeymoon*), although explicitly stated in the imprint that it is the second edition of the collection *Na vlnách TSF* (*On the Waves of TSF*)

PANOPTIKUM.

Josef Hora

Vyvolavač je červenobílý
a červenobílý je i štít.
Obtloustlý bubeník, vlastenecký básník
podle rozkazu na buben reklamy bít,
bubnuje v kůži.

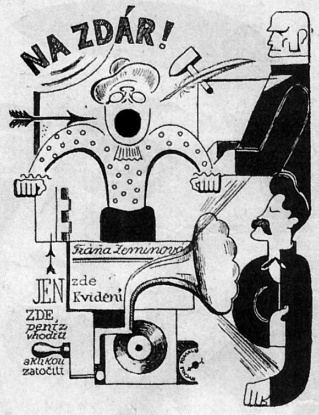
I bouda i buben i básník
jsou zaručeně domácí výrobek.
Vyvolavač je doposud — ale to přejde —
trochu víc červený nežli bílý —
prý jakýsi Marxův pohrobek.

— Rrračte vstoupiti!
Nikdo není nucen nic si koupiti,
ba ani se to nedoporučuje.
Zbit bude jen ten, kdo vyrušuje.
Rrračte vstoupiti!
Jedinou podmínkou je daně platiti
a dáti republice což její jest,
jmění a krev, práci, peníze, čest!

I.

Vstupné je zaplaceno, opona vytažena,
vosková figurina, velkohubá žena,
Fráňa Zemínová u vchodu vítá nás.
Věru jak živá — až na ten hlas.
Neb běda, zde se mlčí . . .

Havlíček ve vosku, Palacký ve vosku,
oba jsou složeni v postranním kiosku
s nápisem: „Zastaralé metody.
Poznámka pro uvarování nehody."
Zato však v průčelí z tabulky plechové
pod pěti postavami čtem: „Moderní
Čechové".



Pohnutá mysl hned pravdu si setká,
ví hned na čem je, kdo zná dějiny.
„Poutníče, postůj, zde před tebou Pětka
zaujímá postoj strážců Otčiny."
Výmluvný pohled v bystrých zracích
hraje.
Škoda jen, že vosk dějin trochu taje.
Pro jistotu tedy přečti si,
v mramor tesané nápisy:

1. Já jsem Švehla.
Václave Prášku, kam jdeš?
Statky a hnojiva jsou základem státu,
komunismus je krádež.

2. Já jsem Bechyně.
Socialismus je řečnické cvičení.
Cvičení pomáhá člověku vzhůru:
Nenechat Marxe však, byli jsme
ztraceni.

50

Figure 4.4 Illustration to Josef Hora's "Panoptikum" (1924) by Otakar Mrkvička. Source: Private collection.

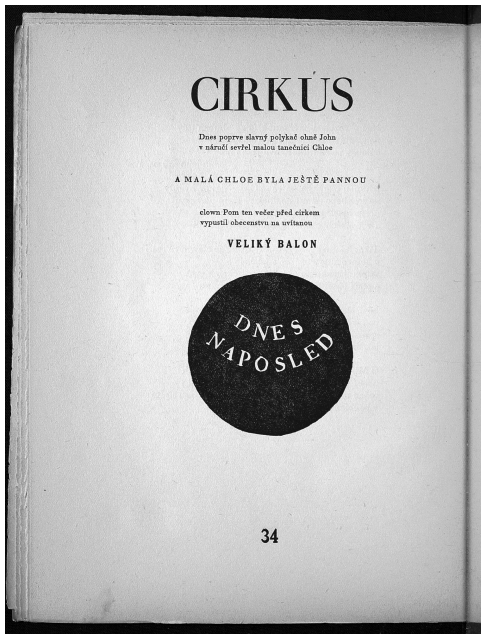


Figure 4.5 Typography of Jaroslav Seifert's "Cirkus" (1925) by Karel Teige. Source: SLUB Dresden / Vloe.53,Kaps.6.

(1925), it is completely reworked typographically. Unfortunately, a designer is not named in it, but it is clear that it is not Teige. Everything that was typographically striking in the earlier editions has now been removed. Only the poem "Cirkus" stands out, in which the original combination of text and image is (mostly) retained. One significant difference is that the balloon is no longer the avant-garde circle, but is clearly identified as a balloon by a string hanging downwards. The design now simply looks playful. Abstraction must give way to mimesis. In addition, in the 1924, 1925 and 1929 editions, the text is axial and one or two verses are set in majuscules, evoking the poster style. In the 1938 edition, both the title and the text are left-justified, there is no play with different font styles, and only the balloon is centred. It is interesting how much the transformation of the whole book changes its reception. As the title suggests, it is now only a collection of love poems, something previously eclipsed by the wit that the typography inscribed in the texts.

With the 1925 edition, Teige creates the "iconic" work of the Czech avant-garde par excellence, because he knows how to work the typography down to the last detail without having to resort to illustrations. He consistently visualises the poems *as texts* through the sole use of components of the typecase. In the

process, the form becomes a function of the content from which it organically emerges. He is concerned with "finishing this poetry typographically and transposing it into a visual sphere".[44] The comparison with the later edition makes it sufficiently clear that he brilliantly succeeds in actually continuing the poetry of the texts.

But not everyone shows understanding for this typographic masterpiece. While the old printer František Obzina, to the astonishment of young artists, takes on everything and accepts the challenge – which is, remember, technically difficult – and manages it to the great satisfaction of his clients,[45] the bibliophile Arthur Novák is left confused: he speaks of "mindless *clowning*", indicating that, although he rejects it, he does understand the circus-like character of the book. Addressing Teige, he continues: "I would have wished him to have seen the production of the book for which he provided the draft. He would have seen a circus in the printing press of Obzina like no other in the world."[46] The use of the word "circus" here is, of course, metaphorical and negative. In bourgeois-bibliophile circles, neither the avant-garde's enthusiasm for the circus nor for poetist typography is shared.[47] In this way, the avant-garde would have achieved one of its goals, to provoke consideration of the (re)position(ing) of art in society through a radical innovation of artistic forms and individual arts.[48]

Another time "Dnes naposled" appears is in the score for a lyrical film that Seifert and Teige wrote together. The end of the text "Přístav" ("Port") (1925) shows the image of a crane lifting a cage containing a lion. A giraffe is led away under this cage. The crane with the cage, on which a clown is suddenly sitting, turns towards the audience. The clown jumps down, and the crane with the cage disappears to reveal a view of a circus with an audience in the background: "The clown jumps through a paper circle, falls to the floor, onto the sand of the ring, picks up a large balloon from the floor and throws it into the audience." The flying balloon bears the red inscription "Dnes naposled".[49] This inscription is again designed as a black word-picture mark. This time it is an unfilled circle in which the writing runs around the edge, leaving an empty centre – it is the *paper circle* that the clown jumps through to enter the *ring circle*. Here, the circle does not mark the end – for there is still "end" underneath, which seems like a confirmation or affirmation – but only if one remains on this page because the point is to be able to see the circus behind the paper.

However, this is still not the end of the typographical game of this saying. In a text that fills a whole page in a magazine and looks like a traditional, non-avant-garde circus advertisement, it appears once again in 1927, now not as a word-picture mark, but in text form. The caption reads "Cirkus Kludský přijel do Prahy!" ("Circus Kludský came to Prague!"),[50] which also indicates a circus advertisement. That it is not a circus advertisement can only be recognised by the fact that the text and the drawings surrounding it (a montage of drawings and photos) contain an author's name: Mrkvička.

In other words, the text shows that it is indeed an advertisement in the unreal sense, but not for a specific circus in a specific place at a specific time,

Figure 4.6 Otakar Mrkvička "Cirkus Kludský přijel do Prahy" (1927). Source: Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze.

but for the circus in general, and its posters. Mrkvička takes up the individual elements of the circus that fascinate the avant-garde and summarises them in words and pictures on his designed page: exoticism, periphery, breaking up boredom, enchanting colourfulness, art of joy. Finally, set off by a thick black dot, comes the saying "Dnes naposled" written in majuscules as the last heading, under which it says:

> And tomorrow, on the rubbish dump of this corner of the suburbs, where only a few tenement houses still stand, only the hint of the circle that was the circus ring yesterday. […] And the spring wind and rain tears at the circus posters.[51]

The circle and the posters remain from the circus that has moved on. But in the dirty suburban corner, they too disappear over time due to the effects of wind and weather. However, they are preserved in the publications of the avant-garde, which gives permanence to the ephemeral nature of the circus. We can now read "Dnes naposled" day after day if it suits us.

Typocircus – conclusion

The examples discussed here, which can fuel many more discussions, show that there are numerous references between the Czech avant-garde typography and circus, which is no coincidence, as indicated by the programmatic writings presented at the beginning of this chapter. If book design is still the flagship of the Czech avant-garde today and the circus is an art that inspires it in many respects, then it must almost inevitably come to this synthesis that I call the "Typocircus". Another point to be mentioned in this context is that very few avant-garde artists allow themselves to be pinned down to just one art form. Therefore, many of those who work, for example, as book or poster designers, also work as stage designers (e.g., Antonín Heythum, Hoffmeister, Mrkvička, Teige, František Zelenka), which means that sets of modern plays have a striking number of graphic elements (the geometrisation of figures, the placing of posters and inscriptions on the stage, etc.), which can also be found as elements of book design. The borrowings that modern theatre makes from the circus also come into the books through these personnel connections.

It is interesting to observe that typography's reference to the circus is not limited to adopting the design of circus posters. It also manifests itself on a structural level, for example, when the poetry collection *Pantomima* is realised as a typographically transposed dramaturgy based on performance acts and, to that extent, circus performance, as well as on a more abstract level when the Devětsil shares the circle with the circus as an ideogram. The round shape of the circus ring – from which the entire circus topology unfolds – is also the only immutable feature in circus.[52] In addition, there are elements that are admired about the circus; first and foremost, its internationality. On the one hand, this means

the exoticism – vaunted in almost every programmatic writing of the Czech avant-garde and which means everything that is *exō* (from Greek, outside, i.e., it does not come from one's own world)[53] – but not only that. Of equal concern here is the clowns' "internationale of laughter"[54] ("The Internationale" is a left-wing anthem) and the fact that through the "speechlessness" of the circus, communication functions via optical signs. This is taken up in the picture poems as a method to meet the need for an international means of communication that transcends language barriers.[55] It is about the acceleration of perception and the appeal to all the senses through the simultaneity or rapid change of individual elements. Furthermore, the perceived unchanging universality of the circus – which is not subject to fashions and does not chase after trends, and uses the standardisation of its programme and (last but not least) its transportable architecture (as if from a construction kit) – arouses the interest of the avant-garde. In the 1930s, the avant-garde changed their approach to typography when they increasingly wanted to accelerate processes and, in this respect, also standardise and normalise them (format, typesetting scheme, cliché, arrangement of the information in the masthead and the order bar of a magazine, etc.).[56] In circus, the utmost precision, perfection and discipline as well as balance and harmony are required to achieve the admirable, seemingly effortless results. The same applies to the effect of a book, which should be well thought through to the last detail, coherent in the colours and forms that correspond to the respective text, without making this ostensibly noticeable. All parts should form a harmonious whole, which in the best case gives new accents to the text. This identity, and the exact interplay of content and form, is also offered by the circus. However, as in this case, it can only be achieved if all stakeholders can rely on each other and work together collectively. The works presented here are all collective products that the author and typographer create together so that they can be received by many people at the same time, for another common feature is the popular appeal and collective perception. Today one would say that access to the books should be "low-threshold". The circus is clearly anchored in the consciousness as a popular art form. The Czech avant-garde pursued it programmatically to achieve this goal, for which the circus serves as a great model. The avant-garde wants as many people as possible to feel addressed by her books and thereby become readers, so that they can enjoy all the beauties of the world for the last time, every day.

Notes

1 Hans Richter, "Prag," *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* 3 (1924), 38.
2 Karel Teige, "Konstruktivistická typografie na cestě k nové formě knihy," *Typografia* 39:3 (1932), 42.
3 Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Můj poměr k literatuře. Šaldův český román* (1925) (Praha: Ústav T. G. Masaryka, 1994), 37.
4 Emil Skácel, "Knihy pod šturcem," *žijeme* 2:2 (1932), 58.
5 For more detail on poetism, see Jeanette Fabian, *Poetismus: Ästhetische Theorie und künstlerische Praxis der tschechischen Avantgarde* (Wien, München, Berlin: Otto Sagner, 2013).

6 Karel Teige, "Umění dnes a zítra," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, eds. Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige (Praha: Večernice Václav Vortel, 1922), 202; Karel Teige, "Manifest poetismu," in *ReD* 1:9 (1928), 328.
7 Karel Teige, "Nové umění proletářské," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, eds. Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige (Praha: Večernice Václav Vortel, 1922), 16.
8 Karel Teige, "O humoru, clownech a dadaistech (1924)," in *Avantgarda a známá a neznámá: svazek 1: Od proletářského umění k poetismu 1919–1924*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín (Praha: Svoboda, 1971), 584.
9 Teige, "Umění," 163.
10 This image is printed both in Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige (eds.), *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, (Praha: Večernice Václav Vortel, 1922), 142 and on the back of the anthology Jaromír Krejcar (ed.), *Život II. Sborník nové krásy* (Praha: Výtvarní odbor Umělecké besedy, 1922), accessed 4 June 2021, http://bibliothequekandinsky.centrepompidou.fr/imagesbk/RP216%5C002/M5050_X0031_PER_P02161922002.pdf, which is central to the Devětsil.
11 Artuš Černík, "Radosti elektrického století," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, eds. Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige (Praha: Večernice Václav Vortel, 1922), 138.
12 Černík, "Radosti," 138.
13 The modern theatre in Czechoslovakia is the Osvobozené divadlo ("Liberated Theatre"), founded in 1926 as the theatre section of the Devětsil. The first play of the avant-garde theatre is considered to be an adaptation of Molière's play *Georges Dandin* under the title *Circus*[!] *Dandin* (1925, new under the umbrella of the Devětsil 1926). See František Černý, *Kalendárium dějin českého divadla* (Praha: Svaz českých dramatických umělců, 1989), 72.
14 In the second manifesto of poetism (1928), circus itself is no longer featured, but the names of four clowns are mentioned under the sign of the comic. See Teige, "Manifest poetismu," 335.
15 See Otakar Mrkvička, "Kniha a plakát," *Život* 8 (1928), 85; Karel Teige, "Moderne Typographie," *Typografia* 34:7–9 (1927), 206; Karel Teige, "O fotomontáži," *žijeme* 2:6 (1932), 177.
16 See Josef Šíma, "Reklama," in *Život II. Sborník nové krásy*, ed. Jaromír Krejcar (Praha: Výtvarní odbor Umělecké besedy, 1922), 102. Circuses are said to be the first to use posters for advertising purposes. See E. Miller, *Působivá reklama a jak ji psáti* (Praha: Sfinx, 1929), 252.
17 Karel Teige, "Obrazy (1924)," in *Avantgarda a známá a neznámá: svazek 1: Od proletářského umění k poetismu 1919–1924*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín (Praha: Svoboda, 1971), 541; Karel Teige, "Naše základna a naše cesta: Několik principiálních poznámek," *Pásmo* 1:3 (1924), 1.
18 Karel Teige, *Svět, který se směje* (Praha: Odeon, 1928), 59, 60.
19 Josef Čapek, "Chaplinův 'Cirkus' a Chaplinův optimismus," *Přítomnost* 5:8 (1928), 121–122. The illustrations are not by Čapek himself, as Stanislava Fedrová suppose, see "Cirkus v moderní literatuře," in Tomáš Winter, Pavla Machalíková, Stanislava Fedrová, and Hanuš Jordan, *Cirkus pictus – zázračná krása a ubohá existence: Výtvarné umění a literatura 1800–1950* (Cheb: GAVU, Řevnice: Arbor vitae, and Praha: Artefactum, 2017), 123.
20 In addition, he can be seen on Teige's book *Film* (Praha: Václav Petr, 1925); on the cover of Karel Smrž, *Jak se vlastně dělá film* (Praha: Šolc a Šimáček, 1928) created by Mrkvička; on the magazine cover of *žijeme* 1:2 (1931) created by Ladislav Sutnar; and on the cover of Karel Smrž, *Dějiny filmu* 4 (Praha: Družstevní práce, 1933) created by Muzika.
21 See Richard Weiner, "Clowni," *Přítomnost* 2:25 (1925), 395–398.
22 See Karel Teige, "Poetismus," *Host* 3:9/10 (1924), 203.
23 See Vítězslav Nezval, *Pantomima* (Praha: Ústřední studentské knihkupectví a nakladatelství, 1924), accessed 4 June 2021, http://bibliothequekandinsky.centrepompidou.fr/clientBookline/service/reference.asp?INSTANCE=incipio&OUTPUT=PORTAL&DOCID=0374754&DOCBASE=CGPP.
24 See Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige (eds.), *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (Praha: Večernice Václav Vortel, 1922), accessed 4 June 2021, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items

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25 See Jiří Frejka, "o universálním jevišti," in *fronta: mezinárodní sborník soudobé aktivity*, eds. Fr. Halas, Vl. Průša, Zd. Rossmann and B. Václavek (Brno: fronta, 1927), 106–107, where designs by architects Krejcar and Josef Chochol are discussed and Chochol's design is shown. In the illustrations section of the anthology there is also another design for a round theatre stage by Zdeněk Pešánek (fig. 86–87).

26 Teige, "Moderne Typographie," 206.

27 See *Disk*, no. 1 (1923), accessed 4 June 2021, https://dnnt.mzk.cz/view/uuid:0ca95f00-b0e6-11e3-b833-005056827e52?page=uuid:1cd4f080-bb4d-11e3-a597-5ef3fc9bb22f; *Disk*, no. 2 (1925), https://dnnt.mzk.cz/view/uuid:2501d2d0-b0e6-11e3-9d7d-005056827e51?page=uuid:59c151b0-bb56-11e3-a597-5ef3fc9bb22f.

28 Vítězslav Nezval, *Akrobat* (Praha: Rudolf Škeřík, 1927).

29 Nezval, *Pantomima*, 10.

30 It should be noted that the duo Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich stylise themselves as clowns after the model of the Fratellini brothers in their extremely successful revue theatre, precisely because they do not consider them to be human beings but rather sculptures or an unreal and at the same time supernatural model. See Jiří Voskovec, Michal Schonberg, *Rozhovory s Voskovcem* (Praha: Brána, 2005), 36.

31 See Stanislav Kostka Neumann, "Cirkus (1913)," in *Nové zpěvy* (Praha: Fr. Borový, 1918), 37.

32 See Fedrová, "Cirkus," 126–127.

33 Here, Stanislava Fedrová – who due to the fact that both the texts of this collection and the illustrations used in it have also been published individually elsewhere, is of the opinion that one should speak of multimediality rather than intermediality (see Fedrová, "Cirkus," 126) – cannot be entirely agreed with, since the changing fonts are added as a further medium and it is less about the statement of the individual pieces but of the entire collection. The overall context of this collection, as presented, creates new possibilities of reception for the texts it contains.

34 See Teige, "Konstruktivistická typografie," 44.

35 Jindřich Štyrský, "Radosti ilustratóra knih," ed. Adolf Hoffmeister, *Jarní almanach Kmene* (Praha: Klub moderních nakladatelů Kmen, 1932), 130.

36 See Paul Bouissac, *Semiotics at the Circus* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 22, 27.

37 Karel Schulz, *Sever – jih – západ – východ* (Praha: Vortel a Rejman, 1923), 132.

38 Schulz, *Sever*, 133.

39 For example, such advertisements can be found in *Venkov* (15 September 1921), 7 or *Český směr* (31 July1928), 4.

40 Josef Hora, "Panoptikum," *Trn* 1:4–5 (1924), 50. Only the illustration is also shown in Fedrová, "Cirkus," 114.

41 Jaroslav Seifert, "Cirkus," *Trn* 1:4–5 (1924), 66.

42 Jaroslav Seifert, "Cirkus (Draft with typographic realisation)," in *Památník národního písemnictví Praha*, fond Seifert, L.a. 6/2014.

43 See – apart from the already mentioned variant in *Trn* – Jaroslav Seifert, *Na vlnách TSF* (Praha: Václav Petr, 1925), 34; *Básně* (Praha: Družstevní práce, 1929), 88; *Svatební cesta* (Praha: Melantrich, 1938), 41. Fedrová, "Cirkus," 115 shows the draft as well as the variants from 1924 (with incorrect bibliographical information) and 1925.

44 Teige, "Moderne Typographie," 207.

45 See Jaroslav Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa. Co všechno zavál sníh. Dodatky* (Praha: Akropolis, 2015), 352.

46 Arthur Novák, "Jaroslav Seifert: Na vlnách TSF. Str. 70. 1925. Václav Petr v Praze VII. Cena 14 Kč," *Vitrinka na krásné knihy, vazby a jiné hezké věci* 2:6 (April 1924–1925), 167. Here, one learns in passing that despite its exciting and elaborate design, the book was in fact not expensive (14 crowns from then correspond to about 11 euros today), but that it was really an everyday book for the broad masses.

47 This is also evidenced by a newspaper report from 1927 that the Kludský Circus had to leave Prague again quickly due to a lack of audience, which testified to "the higher intellectual level of the Prague people" to whom circus entertainment did not suit. "Velká voda a velký cirkus," *Večer* (19 June 1926), 2.
48 See Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders, "Die künstlerische Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert – Einleitung," in *Metzler Lexikon Avantgarde*, eds. Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2009), 1.
49 Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige, "Přístav. Partitura lyrického filmu," *Disk* 2 (1925), 12, accessed 4 June 2021, https://dnnt.mzk.cz/view/uuid:2501d2d0-b0e6-11e3-9d7d-005056827e51?page=uuid:59c151b0-bb56-11e3-a597-5ef3fc9bb22f. Only the word-picture mark is depicted in Fedrová, "Cirkus," 114.
50 Otakar Mrkvička, "Cirkus Kludský přijel do Prahy!," *Pestrý týden* 2:17 (1927), 11, http://www.digitalniknihovna.cz/mzk/view/uuid:c04f883f-435d-11dd-b505-00145e5790ea?page=uuid:745a61b7-435e-11dd-b505-00145e5790ea.
51 Mrkvička, "Cirkus Kludský," 11.
52 See Bouissac, *Semiotics*, 14–15.
53 See Vladimír Štulc, "Exotismus," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, eds. Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige (Praha: Večernice Václav Vortel, 1922), 179.
54 František Halas, "Úsměvem clowna …," *Pásmo* 1:5–6 (1924–1925), 6.
55 See Teige, "Moderne Typographie," 207.
56 See Teige, "Konstruktivistická typografie," 57–58. This goes hand in hand with a sharpening of social consciousness (in the early 1930s, Czechoslovakia can no longer escape the effects of the Great Depression), which leads to the playful lightness of the early years of the avant-garde, and with it the circus theme slowly disappears from the books. It returns in a different form during the time of the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany, when the novel *Cirkus Humberto* (Praha: Fr. Borový, 1941) by Eduard Bass in particular enjoys great popularity, of which a total of five editions appear in the first year of publication alone. However, this is more about the serious concern of strengthening national self-confidence, which is combined with circus nostalgia. The illustrations on the dust jacket and binding (by František Tichý) are again concrete, but do not lack wit. A female artistic rider is shown on the cover, a male artistic rider on the binding. The dust jacket can be removed just as the female rider disappears from Humberto's circus and the life of its director, the rider.

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Part II

Staging circus outside the ring

Avant-garde experiments in the early twentieth century

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5 Circus, Dada, Vaudeville

Historical avant-garde – between popular and experimental theatre

Martina Groß

This chapter explores the historical avant-garde between popular and experimental theatre strategies by considering early Dada productions. Therefore, I carve out the relationship between circus practices and experimental Dada performances and argue that vaudeville – both a genre and a technique – can be identified as a link between circus practices and Dada experiments. With this, I will exemplify the aesthetical as well as political endeavours of early Dadaists during the *soirées* at the Cabaret Voltaire and their experimental stagings. In order to emphasise their position between popular and experimental theatre, I will highlight their predilection for vaudeville techniques and how they are associated with cabaret and variety formats. By closely inspecting vaudeville, its genesis and – subsequently – its transformative character in all its ambivalent notions, we can then consider the historical separation of performance styles and their institutionalisation, including the differentiation of circus arts like acrobatics, skipping, magic, clowning and drama-based theatre. Seen from a historical perspective, this separation contributes to the longstanding debate between "high" and "popular" culture.

It is not my purpose here to explore all the many Dada performances, such a task would need a much more extensive study. Instead, I will trace a few important examples that interlink historical avant-garde artists, popular entertainment forms and experimental staging. These examples illustrate that avant-garde artists were particularly intrigued by circus and vaudeville practices and aesthetics and their potential for innovation and critique. In this regard, the German literary scholar Peter Bürger considers Dadaism to be "the most radical movement within the European avant-garde" emphasising that "with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism".[1] He explains that Dadaism "no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society".[2] This radical and apparently irreconcilable attitude of Dadaism towards bourgeois national culture and the demand for the dissolution of artistic limits deserves closer investigation – all the more so because the Dada stage not only shared strategies and performance practices (interacting with the audience and the variety format) with popular theatre forms (like circus and vaudeville), but a history that goes back to older forms of

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-7

entertainment – fairground theatres and itinerant spectacles. These spaces were reinterpreted by avant-garde artists and provided transnational foundations for the development of avant-garde strategies.[3]

"Dada-Circus" and the Cabaret Voltaire:[4] a rupture with modern European theatre cultures

> Traditional bourgeois culture with its court theatre and humanist education cannot even be said to have the vitality of decadence. But from the street, the fairground, the circus and cheap fiction new forms – or forms associated with despised corners – emerge and take possession of the traditional stage. The clown has burst in upon the dying ballet, the light and airy dwelling-machine usurps the place of architectural styles long dead, and the old harmonious stage-drama is replaced by the open-work cabaret.[5]

This excerpt from Ernst Bloch's 1928 review of Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*) corresponds to the historical avant-garde artists' and intellectuals' shift towards an experience of cultural disintegration – *a fortiori*, the world at war – and away from bourgeois national culture. Popular entertainment and new or despised art forms that came from the "street, the fairground, the circus"[6] were an essential and inspirational source for experimental performances. They also inspired versatile forms of popular theatre, such as cabaret and variety theatre, which combine different performance styles structured by techniques of collage and montage.[7] The works and writings of such diverse artists as *inter alia* Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, Hans (or Jean) Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Marcel Janco, Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy give evidence to this fact.

Thus, the Italian writer and author of the "Futurist Manifesto", Marinetti, glorifies the variety theatre on behalf of Futurism and points to his deep disgust with "the contemporary theatre (verse, prose, and musical), because it vacillates stupidly between historical reconstruction (pastiche or plagiarism) and a photographic reproduction of our daily life".[8] Similarly, the German painter, sculptor and stage designer Oskar Schlemmer emphasises his admiration for popular entertainment in its versatile forms – such as variety theatre, Japanese theatre and puppet theatre as well as the various practices of circus performers.[9] Also, László Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian painter, Bauhaus teacher, photo- and typographer, focuses on popular theatre forms in his 1925 essay "Theater, Circus, Variety". He imagines a fully immersive multimedia experience in which the stage design, lighting and sound are equally as important as the written word and the actor's physical presence. To that effect Moholy-Nagy acknowledges that "CIRCUS, OPERETTA, VAUDEVILLE, the CLOWNS in America and elsewhere (Chaplin, Fratellini) have accomplished great things, both in this respect and in eliminating the subjective".[10]

All of these artists highlight the special connection between the stage and the audience. Marinetti, for instance, argues that variety theatre "is alone in seeking

the audience's collaboration. It doesn't remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in surprising actions and bizarre dialogues. And the actors bicker clownishly with the musicians".[11] Oskar Schlemmer reflects on the relationship between stage, actor and audience regarding bourgeois culture and popular entertainment:

> This confrontation of passive spectator and animate actor preconditions also the form of the stage, at its most monumental as the antique arena and at its most primitive as the scaffold in the market place. The need for concentration resulted in the peep show or "picture frame", today the "universal" form of the stage. The term theater designates the most basic nature of the stage: make-believe, mummery, metamorphosis. Between cult and theater lies "the stage seen as a moral institution"; between theater and popular entertainment lie variety (vaudeville) and circus: the stage as an institution for the artiste.[12]

This special connection between stage and audience, the predilection for popular entertainment forms and the rejection of drama-based theatre as a medium of bourgeois national culture applies in particular to the founders of the Dada movement. The first Dada group in 1916, also referred to as "Zürich Dada", consisted of artists and intellectuals who sought exile in Switzerland due to the ongoing war in Europe. John Elderfield underlines in his introduction to the English translation of Hugo Ball's Dada diary *Flucht aus der Zeit* (*Flight out of time*; first published in 1927): "Zurich in 1916 was the centre of expatriates of many countries and of many persuasions".[13] The German poets and performers Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings; Romanian-Israeli visual artist, architect and art theorist Marcel Janco; German-French sculptor, painter and abstract artist Hans Arp; Romanian-French performance artist Tristan Tzara and German writer and psychoanalyst Richard Huelsenbeck – understood their Dada activities as a stage on which anti-war sentiments and anti-nationalism were celebrated as a "buffoonery and requiem mass".[14]

Dada emerged in the middle of, and as a reaction to, the brutality of World War I. At the beginning of the so-called "Great War", according to the historian Jeffrey Verhey in his study *The Spirit of 1914*, many intellectuals shared the enthusiasm of the *Augusterlebnis* ("August experience"), the alleged jubilation in Germany at the outbreak of World War I. However, this attitude changed in 1915/1916.[15] Although one can easily criticise the intellectuals' ideas of 1914 – and many contemporaries and historians have done so – their discourse on the "spirit of 1914" is an important background component to understanding the Dada movement. While Verhey has pointed out that idealism was one of the sources of the intellectuals' enthusiasm, one can find an even more important motivation in Siegfried Kracauers essay "Vom Erleben des Krieges" ("On the experience of war") which stems from the intelligentsia's longing for an audience. Kracauer noted that the modernisation of the German economy and society segregated Wilhelmine[16] highbrows and created

a sense of alienation. At the same time, they also felt that they were the natural voice of public opinion. Thus, they sought not only to give meaning to the events around them, but also to explain what the German nation was fighting for by placing themselves at the front of a "mass audience". So placed, Wilhelmine artists and academics hoped to become – once again – the voice that represented public opinion.[17]

For Hugo Ball, who protested several times against the humiliating nature of a world war in the twentieth century, Kracauer's observation on Wilhelmine artists and intellectuals from 1915 became a "laughingstock" in early 1916. Two months after the inauguration of the Cabaret Voltaire,[18] a small stage in the back room of the Dutch wine tavern "Meierei" in Zurich's Spiegelgasse No. 1, Ball noted in his diary:

> Our cabaret is gesture. Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least this one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect. What could be respectable and impressive about it? Its cannons? […] Its idealism? That has long been a laughingstock, in its popular and its academic edition. The grandiose slaughters and cannibalistic exploits? Our spontaneous foolishness and our enthusiasm for illusion will destroy them.[19]

This attitude towards bourgeois national culture in light of World War I is also reflected in the notion of "Dada-Circus". Dada-Circus not only refers to circus as a unifying metaphor of the manifold Dada experiments, but can also be seen as a kind of self-staging programmatic concept, as used by Tristan Tzara in his *Dada Manifesto* and *Manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine*,[20] or by Raoul Hausmann on his business card (on which he referred to himself as a ringmaster) and, of course, by Hugo Ball in his diary.[21]

All traditional values of culture were questionable in Hugo Ball's opinion. With the members of the early Dada group, Ball revolted against the dominant, bourgeois social and aesthetic values of modern Western culture in the arts and literature. Between February and June 1916, they mounted a series of performances and *soirées* at the Cabaret Voltaire. Over the course of these events, they introduced theatrical and poetical means of dealing with the surrounding madness. Their radical critique of language, drama-based representation and bourgeois subjectivity led to new and experimental forms of aesthetic practice. This is the context in which circus elements and mixed forms like cabaret and vaudeville gained importance and were employed in Dadaism. In this regard, it is worth noting that when Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings left Germany in May 1915 for Zurich, they found employment as a pianist and a singer in a vaudeville troupe called "Flamingo". Though Ball was annoyed by working in the Flamingo troupe, he acquired techniques and methods that proved invaluable at the Cabaret Voltaire, such as "'working' an audience, training performers for constantly changing parts and songs […] as well as maintaining a constantly high level of enthusiasm and energy".[22] Accordingly, the *soirée*

programme consisted of acts – such as Ball's "magical bishop", Janco's comical and grotesque masks (see Chapter 10 in this book) and Sophie Taeuber's unconventional dance – that clearly referred to the clown figure (its ancestors and its emergence from the *Commedia dell'arte*, *zanni* and *harlequin*) as well as to an extended family of fools, jesters, picaros and tricksters.[23] Each depiction has a variety of functions, all focused on their status and image of being "other" in terms of a dissenting subject in light of traditional national culture. Analogically, the open structure of a variety show, the montage of scenes and the series of acts evoke non-narrative circus programmes and older forms of vaudeville as a theatrical experiment.

This anti-classical dramaturgy set the frame for a different interaction with the audience: The dramaturgy of a series of acts does not necessarily correspond to a question of taste but contains a maximum of interfaces within the individual performances and a maximum of contrast between the acts due to the self-contained nature and small size of the individual acts.[24] The German academic and film director Alexander Kluge expands on this in his short text on *Nummerndramaturgie* focusing on pre-cinematic circus acts, dramaturgy and time perception.[25] He underlines that contrast and contact as the law of the variety principle ("Gesetz des Variationenprinzips")[26] create a unity of continuity and change as well as a unity of predictability and astonishment, which are important to overcome classical dramaturgy.[27]

Thus, the variety principle and techniques borrowed from older forms of vaudeville are essential elements of the experimental staging and the dramaturgy of the *soirées* at the Cabaret Voltaire. They gave rise to an energy that enabled Dadaists to offer alternative experiences to the traditional text- and drama-based performances, while at the same time coming to terms with the war: "The ideals of culture and of art as a program for a variety show – this is our *Candide* against the time".[28] It is precisely in this sense that Hugo Ball understood his Dada activities and the Cabaret Voltaire as a stage on which anti-war sentiments and anti-nationalism were celebrated as a "buffoonery and requiem mass".[29]

By showing language's autonomy, and with it "an experimental modelling of an alternative community",[30] Ball's sound poems demonstrate its resistance to becoming an instrument for nationalist purposes.[31] This is particularly noticeable in his poem "Gadji beri bimba" that – compared to the better-known sound poem "Karawane" – does not have a descriptive or even suggestive title.[32] Similar to the word "Dada", the poem "Gadji beri bimba" performs the uprooting of the sign from its referent. With this, Ball radicalises the performative nature of language as already suggested by Tristan Tzara.[33] Thus, his sound poems, performed on stage, can be seen as manifestations of radical aesthetics and linguistic experiments driven by a redemptive impulse that was to be found *in* language and less *through* language – similar to Walter Benjamin's theoretical reflections on this topic, presented under the title *On Language as Such and the Language of Man* (1916) in that same year.[34] Word, which for Ball is related to the Evangelical concept of *logos*, had lost its principle. Not only time but also

"syntax has come apart",[35], Ball noted in July 1915, observing "[d]isintegration right in the innermost process of creation".[36] The world at war created a rupture within traditional systems of reference, marking a *caesura* in the early twentieth century. A fundamental change was taking place in ways of apprehending the world and furthermore in the apprehension of time. Discerning the world as on general hold, Ball's Dada experiments tried to reverse the relationship between word and image. Equally, this had a strong impact on the relationship of dramaturgy, scenography and experimental costume design.

In this context, Ball announces the invention of a new genre of poems: "'Verse ohne Worte' [poems without words] or Lautgedichte [sound poems], in which the balance of the vowels is weighed and distributed solely according to the values of the beginning sequence".[37] In describing the reading of his first poem, Ball focuses on the costume, which was specially designed for this performance and considered equal to the poem itself: "My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside".[38] He also mentioned his "high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat", which is eponymous for his "magical bishop" performance.[39] Ball points to the impact of the costume design on his physical presence on stage, explaining that he was fastened at the neck in such a way that he could give the impression of "wing-like movement"[40] by raising and lowering his elbows.

It is worth noting that the "magical bishop" costume and the "wing-like movement" resulting from the movement restricting design represent an early example of what the US-American theatre scholar Michael Kirby will refer to in the 1970s as "'non-matrixed representation' or 'non-matrixed symbolization'"[41] and the "costume continuum",[42] meaning a "condition in which the performer does not act and yet his costume represents something or someone".[43] In his 1972 essay *On Acting and Not-Acting*, Kirby describes the different stages of acting and delivers an important differentiation of the transitions from "non-matrixed performing" (not-acting) to "complexe acting" (acting) emphasising, that "not all performing is acting".[44] Kirby's categorisation is not only important in terms of technical differentiation, rather his analysis is valuable because it highlights the various forms beyond traditional "classical" acting.

In this respect, the genre-defying conception of the "magical bishop" figure testifies to the attempt to reverse word and to grant costume, vocal performance and physical presentation an equal position within the variety format:

> On all three sides of the stage I had set up music stands facing the audience […]. I could not walk inside the cylinder so I was carried onto the stage in the dark and began slowly and solemnly:
>
> gadji beri bimba
> glandridi lauli lonni cadori
> gadjama bim beri glassala
> glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
> blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim[45]

Figure 5.1 Hugo Ball on stage in a cubist costume at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916. Source: Suisse Literary Archive (SLA), Bern. Estate Ball-Hennings (photographer unknown).

Ball's diary entry describes the performance of "Gadji beri bimba" in June 1916, but no recordings were made of the so-called "magical bishop" performance,[46] so we can only refer to Ball's own descriptions in his diary:

> The stresses became heavier, the emphasis was increased as the sound of the consonants became sharper. Soon I realised that, if I wanted to remain serious (and I wanted to at all costs), my method of expression would not be equal to the pomp of my staging.[47]

Ball testifies to the experimental character of the performance and his fear of embarrassment as he recognised the dancer and choreographer Mary Wigmann and Rudolf Laban in the audience.

> Then I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West. […] For a moment it seemed as if there were a pale bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year-old boy. […] Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried down off the stage like a magical bishop.[48]

This extract of the sound poem "Gadji beri bimba" highlights its noteworthy and unique qualities: it is non-mimetic, trans-verbal and rhythmic. With these language experiments, and the comical mask, early Dada performances at the Cabaret Voltaire negated the universal or timeless characteristic of the traditional theatre paradigm: "What fascinates us all about masks is that they represent not human characters and passions, but characters and passions that are larger than life. The horror of time, the paralyzing background of events, is made visible."[49]

World War I dramatically called into question the concept of theatre as "timeless" or even "universal". The early Dada performances, I argue, reveal the "first steps" of questioning the concept of traditional, drama-based theatre. They can also be considered as the beginning of the frequently mentioned rupture of modern European theatre. In this context, theatre scholars often turn towards theories like those of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, two of the most influential thinkers of twentieth-century theatre, both in terms of politics and aesthetics. Brecht's work in particular, which encompasses theory and practice at the same time, acts as a reference. Early Dada experiments and writings, however, already point to a process of rupture in modern theatre. Accordingly, there is a connection between Hugo Ball and Bertolt Brecht. Joel Freemann – an American literary scholar and specialist in German

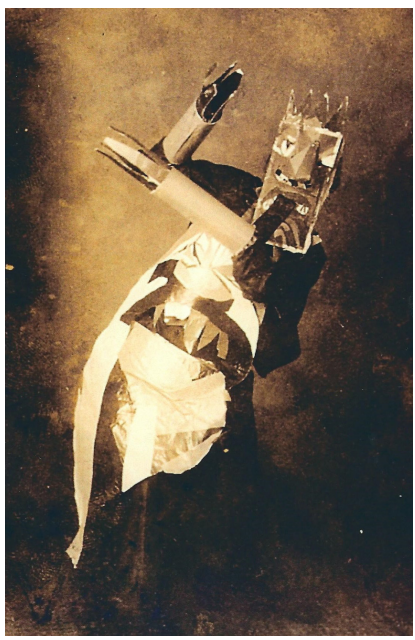

Figure 5.2 Sophie Taeuber-Arp dancing at Cabaret Voltaire wearing a masque by Marcel Janco in Zurich around 1916. Source: Foundation Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber Arp E.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth (photographer unknown).

studies– refers to Hugo Ball's diary entry from March 1916: "The distancing device is the stuff of life. Let us be thoroughly new and inventive. Let us rewrite life every day".[50] Although seemingly cryptic, this phrase reveals an aesthetic position fundamental to the avant-garde of this period: the aesthetic principle of *Verfremdung* (alienation, distancing). During the Dadaist era and in the writing process of his diary *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (*Flight out of time*), Ball provided an important emerging aesthetic principle that gained wide influence among the German intelligentsia before Brecht mentioned it in the 1930s – in a different way, of course, and related to his conception of Epic Theatre.[51] In Ball's theoretical writings and the stage performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, a different idea of *Darstellung* (representation) emerges that cannot be separated from the impact of the war on theatre and on Ball himself.

What unifies most stages of that time – whether they understood themselves as war-stages or anti-war theatres – was their adherence to drama-based theatre. Whatever their political or aesthetic position was, they were not questioning the concept of the drama-based theatre itself. They were representing the reality of their own time (and present) within a mimetic narrative based on word, speech and dialogue. Since the early modern period, European theatre has been primarily concerned with the stage enactment of dramatic texts. As in most Western theatre, the human figure remained the principal element of productions and was characterised above all by language, dialogical structure and discourse: it was determined by and grounded in pre-existing dramatic texts. The rejection of dramatic form, character-oriented Aristotelian dramaturgy, convention of mimesis and fictive worlds enables the Dada stage performers to envisage a more open form that is compatible with a rapidly changing view of the world and the human subject. Early Dada experiments formed a new, outside position. The structure and dramaturgy of a variety show embraced the performed reflections on the philosophical nature of language and masks – and transgressed the rigid boundaries separating "high" and "low" culture.

Vaudevillian genres and techniques – on the tensions between "high" and "low" culture

Although the origins of the term "vaudeville" are disputed, academics agree that vaudeville was "growing out of the medieval entertainments found in Paris"[52] and evolved from "vau-de-vire" (in the fifteenth century) to "voix-de-ville" (in the sixteenth century) to "vaudeville" (in the seventeenth century). It is difficult to determine when the terminology changed from "voix-de-ville" to "vaudeville", but it must have been by 1674 since the latter term is in Nicolas Boileau's *Art poétique*. Boileau describes the vaudeville as a satiric and often political ballad – sung and amplified by the voices of the city or "voix-de-ville".[53] Vaudeville's etymology may also have descended from the French verbs *vauder* (to turn, to switch) and *virer* (to transfer, to transport). In either case, and despite all anachronism, *vaudevire* is a genre of early popular singing that relies on easily sung melodies.[54]

The vaudevillian genre's beginnings are attributed to Norman fifteenth-century poet and songwriter Olivier Basselin and the monophonic chant of the so-called "Compagnons gallois". The impact and popularity of this genre depended on the possibility of active participation; the audience was familiar with the well-known melodies and original texts. These characteristics were transferred to the "voix-de-ville" (voices of the city) and became established to later characterise the vaudeville practices of the fairground theatre (*Théâtre de la Foire*): the preoccupation with topical issues, parodistic methods and the abolition of hierarchies between stage and audience, producers and recipients. As the "voix-de-ville" were methodologically anti-elitist and simultaneously held a clear cultural claim, they were attributed a highly integrative function. This was amplified by the vaudeville practices at the fairground.[55]

Vaudeville as a theatrical practice has its origins in early eighteenth-century Parisian fairgrounds and theatres. Facilitated by the restrictive cultural policy of the *Ancien Régime*, vaudeville practices emerged from the lack of permitted performance opportunities and as a theatrical experiment between audience and artists that defied categorisation.[56] The use of comic songs or operatic parodies within plays occurred in the second half of the seventeenth century, thanks to the Italian comedians (or the *Comédiens Italiens*) who resided in Paris from 1570 on. When the *Comédiens Italiens* were expelled from France in 1697, the genre that they had inspired – plays interwoven with song and operatic parody – moved to the Parisian fairgrounds and formed an alliance with the circus and other popular practices. About the same time, in 1673, the absolutistic cultural policy under Louis XIV systematically confined all performance troupes residing in Paris to three official theatres: *Académie royale de musique* (opera), *Comédie Française* and the *Comédie Italienne*. Each institution was awarded a specific privilege, which led to a separation of the performing arts. While the *Académie royale de musique* held the monopoly on music, singing and dance, the *Comédie Française* was entitled to give classical tragedies and comedies in French. The Italian comedians, after their return to Paris in 1716, were devoted to *commedia dell'arte* performance practices. Hence, each of the three institutions possessed a monopoly-like repertoire of particular performance styles. Given this constellation, conflict was inevitable: every theatrical presentation that touched the privilege or monopoly of the established institutions resulted in a quarrel (*Querelle*). The height of these conflicts is called the Parisian theatre war, which was staged in a self-referential manner by Alain-René Lesage and his collaborators. Lesage, who left the *Comédie Française* after a discord over the scandalous success of his comedy *Turcaret* and turned to the fairground, played a leading role in the development of vaudeville as a theatrical practice in response to this conflictual situation during the Parisian theatre war.[57] He used different vaudeville techniques to circumvent the performance bans and to establish new possibilities of performing in complicity with the audience. Lesage's attempt to criticise the *Ancien Régime*'s theatre politic by inventing new forms that stage the absurdity of Parisian theatre culture highlights why

the early Dadaists reverted to vaudevillian techniques for both innovation and critique.

The strategy of the fairground theatre during the *Querelle* may be summarised as follows: When the fairground theatre staged a new play, the French and Italian comedians felt offended by the use of language and dialogue, as well as by the style of representation. They, therefore, lodged a complaint with the parliament and asked for the police authority to defend their privileges. As a result, the fairground theatres were banned from introducing dialogue, monologues or speaking in any form. This is why performers started singing and dancing –which displeased the Opera, so they prohibited the singing and dancing. The lack of permitted performance possibilities gave rise to the *Pièces en écriteaux* ("plays on placards"), which not only related to vaudeville as a constitutive element but also anticipated silent cinema:[58] The actors mimed while the dialogue was shown, word by word, written in large letters on placards. Sometimes the actors carried the placard themselves, and sometimes, as shown on the frontispieces, the placards were strips of canvas rolled around a stick carried by two suspended boys dressed as cupids. As soon as the text was unrolled, the orchestra started to play the *Airs* (well-known melodies) and the audience sang the words on the Écriteaux. The *Pièces en écriteaux* were makeshift and transitory by nature. Yet, the structure of these early vaudeville practices and their aptitude for parody made them successful, especially in light of the concurrent Parisian theatre war. The prohibitions and official decrees against the fairground theatres represented complicity with the Parisian audience. Curiosity unified all social classes to see the latest creative innovations of the *forains* (as the actors and *Entrepreneurs de spectacle* of the fairgrounds were called). Experimental forms staged theatre criticism (through parodies), and its topicality ensured the success of the fairground theatre.[59]

This success eventually led to a privilege of its own: the privilege of the *Opéra comique*. In the course of its institutionalisation, the fairground theatres dissociated themselves from parts of their origin – namely, circus practices such as acrobatics, rope skipping, magic and clownery. In the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century, seen from a historical point of view, circus practices were clearly related to the fairgrounds, though this connection seemed to crumble in the middle of the eighteenth century.[60] It should be noted that the institutionalisation and separation of the performing arts was undertaken by the *Ancien Régime* and was exemplary of European theatre development at the time. It also marks the first step towards the marginalisation of the circus arts.

Though fairground theatres disappeared from public spaces with their integration into the *Comédie Italienne* in 1762, the Napoleonic theatre decree of (July 29) 1807 played a decisive role in continuing the separation and division of the performing arts that started under Louis XIV. This decree limited the Parisian theatre landscape to eight stages: four "first-rate" and four "second-rate" theatres (*Grands théâtres* and *Théâtres secondaires,* respectively) – all other forms of theatrical representation were regarded as non-theatre.[61] To avoid

competition, each theatre was restricted to particular genres. This classification was not only formative for French theatre culture but has also shaped theatre genres and their social esteem worldwide since the nineteenth century. Terms like "tragedy", "comedy", "grand opera", "comic opera", "vaudeville", "variety", "melodrama" and "pantomime" can largely be traced back to the Napoleonic theatre classification. With these processes in mind, two important points relate to my argument: firstly, the Napoleonic theatre decree meant circus arts were no longer a theatrical performance art.[62] As such, it was not granted a venue, a form, a genre or an option for institutional integration.[63] Secondly, the Théâtre du Vaudeville – a "second-rate" theatre – defined the theatrical form of the vaudeville. Initially, it had an open structure and featured various types of Italian comedians and itinerant troupes passing through Paris. After being clearly classified by decree as a French popular theatre, the theatre was now restricted to "small pieces mingled with verses to well-known melodies and parody".[64]

Over the course of this cultural-political intervention in the nineteenth century, this form came to be known as French vaudeville and was taken up by famous authors like Eugène Scribe or Georges Feydeau.[65] Thus, unlike many experimental forms and figures that disappeared with fairground theatres – the obscure figure of the Gilles,[66] for example, or the early *Opéra comique* with its inconsistent, mixed elements – vaudeville survived because of its transformative character. This transformative character is strongly related to the aforementioned variety principle that abetted variations and conversions from an experimental makeshift form at the Parisian fairgrounds to a global popular entertainment genre:

> The term "variety" can be seen as both an aesthetic principle and as a template for a whole "variety" of related genres. The variety genres are on the one hand specific to individual cultures, such as minstrel shows from the USA, music hall from England, or cabaret in France, but they also achieved global impact as the variety show as a format was adopted around the world albeit under different names.[67]

Thus, from the very beginning, the genres and techniques of vaudeville were able to resist restrictions, but also to respond to innovative forms and aesthetic and political changes. Like the circus (with whom it shares elements taken from the fairground theatres), vaudeville is a culturally and geographically eclectic phenomenon.[68] Whereas the nineteenth-century French vaudeville can be "better compared to the twentieth-century television situation comedy (for which it should also be recognized as a model)",[69] the American and British vaudeville evolved differently. Less a genre and a comical play with a coherent plot, the US-American vaudeville borrowed from several different performing arts and therefore it reveals itself as both nothing and everything.[70] In accordance with its variety show structure, it consisted of a series of acts that integrated various circus elements and aesthetics (e.g. pantomime, clowning,

tightrope dancing, wrestling, skits, costume ballet, etc.). On this account, the US-American vaudeville foregrounds vaudeville's dramaturgical function, not the genre. This dramaturgical function spurred the transmedial character of vaudeville that traces a line from *Pieces en écriteaux* to the US-American Vaudeville and to silent film (e.g. by Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy).

As stated above, on the one hand, vaudeville is a popular entertainment genre; on the other, it is a technique and method. Historical avant-garde artists restored the self-referential – yet self-critical – potential of vaudeville as a technique *and* method. One might even call it a phenomenon of recurrence, considering the revival of the performance practices of fairground theatres.[71] Thus, the early Dada experiments deliver important incentives for the development of theatre in the twentieth century. Not only do they question the relationship of art and society, but they also transgress the rigid boundaries separating "high" and "low" culture while reuniting circus practices and experimental theatre strategies.

Notes

1 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans., Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 2. The translation is based on the second edition of *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).
2 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 2.
3 For more detail on the fundamental role that transnationalism plays in reframing the historiography of the avant-garde, see James M. Harding, John Rouse (eds.), *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2006).
4 The reflections in the following paragraph are based in part on an article about the idea of *Darstellung* (representation) in Hugo Ball's theoretical writings and stage performances, see Martina Groß, "Performing the Escape of Time – Hugo Ball, Dada and World War I," in *Disasters of War. Perceptions and Representations from 1914 to the Present*, eds. Steffen Bruendel and Frank Estelmann (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019), 87–98.
5 Ernst Bloch, "Philosophy as Cabaret," in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Peter Osborne, vol. 1 (Philosophy), (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), 1. This review of Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* was first published in *Vossische Zeitung* (1928) under the title *Revueform in der Philosophie*, later reworked and republished in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Zürich, 1934) and translated into English in *New Left Review* 116 (1979), 94–96.
6 Bloch, "Philosophy as Cabaret," 1.
7 Bloch reviews the striking analogies between Benjamin's genre-defying, experimental text and the avant-garde aesthetics: "If cabaret is a journey through a disintegrating culture, Benjamin's essay gives us snapshots or rather a photomontage of the trip." (Bloch, "Philosophy as Cabaret," 1) Thus, it was the Russian photographer Sasha Stone, a close friend to Benjamin, who offers clear references to the typographical works of Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus school with his book cover for *Einbahnstraße*.
8 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Variety Theatre," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 127.
9 See Oskar Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, eds. Walter Gropius and Arthur S. Wensinger, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 17–46.

10 Laszló Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Circus, Variety," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, eds. Walter Gropius and Arthur S. Wensinger, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 54.
11 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Variety Theatre," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 127.
12 Oskar Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, eds. Walter Gropius and Arthur S. Wensinger, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 18.
13 Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, trans. Ann Raimes, ed. John Elderfield (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), XIX.
14 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 56.
15 Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126–129. See also Steffen Bruendel, "100 Jahre 'Augusterlebnis'. Deutungskonjunkturen eines historischen Phänomens," in *Sommer 1914. Wege ins Unbekannte*, eds. Nils Löffelbein, Silke Fehlemann and Christoph Cornelißen (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016), 191–216.
16 This notion refers to the era of German history between 1890 and 1918, enfolding the reign of the imperator Wilhelm II from the resignation of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck until the end of World War I and Wilhelm's abdication during the November Revolution. This period roughly coincided with the Belle Époque era of Western Europe. For further reading see Geoff Eley and James Retallack (eds.), *Wilhelminism and Its Legacies. German Modernities and the Meanings of Reform, 1890–1930. Essays for Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).
17 Siegfried Kracauer, "Vom Erleben des Krieges," in Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften* 5:1 (Aufsätze 1915–1926), ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 11–22. This essay was first published in: *Preußische Jahrbücher* 161:3 (September 1915), 410–422. See also Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914*, 128–129.
18 Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 67 (16 June 1916): "The ideals of culture and of art as a program for a variety show – this is our *Candide* against the time." John Elderfield points out that this is the only indication of why Cabaret Voltaire was named as such.
19 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 61 (14 April 1916).
20 See Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 297–305.
21 Regarding the notion of Dada-Circus, cf. Günter Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 43; Christine Mundt, *Dichterische Selbstinszenierung im französischen Theater von Vigny bis Vitrac. Vom "poète malheureux" zum "homme moderne"* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 311; Yvonne-Patricia Alefeld, "Raoul Hausmann – Pose Poesie Performance," in *Schriftsteller-Inszenierungen,* eds. Gunter E. Grimm and Christian Schärf (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008).
22 Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72.
23 See David Robb, *Clowns, Fools and Picaros: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) for a cultural-historical context regarding the figure of the clown in popular culture.
24 See Alexander Kluge, "Nummern-Dramaturgie," in *Bestandsaufnahme: Utopie Film,* ed. Alexander Kluge (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1983), 105.
25 Kluge, "Nummern-Dramaturgie," 105.
26 Kluge, "Nummern-Dramaturgie," 105.
27 Kluge, "Nummern-Dramaturgie," 105.
28 Ball, *Flight Out of* Time, see note 6, 67 (16 June 1916).
29 Ball, *Flight Out of* Time, 56 (12 March 1916).
30 See T. J. Demos, "Circulations: In and Around Zurich Dada," *October* 105 (2003), 150.

31 To clarify the link between Ball's above-mentioned "experimental modelling of an alternative community" through language's autonomy and his anti-nationalist attempt, Benedict Anderson's idea of nations as imagined communities can be helpful. Anderson emphasises the connection between the use of a common language and the emergence of imagined communities. Moreover, and relevant to our context, he posited changing conceptions of time as an important factor. This coincides with the decline of religious communities and dynastic realms, which made it possible to 'think' the nation. For further reading see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 9–36 (London, New York: Verso, 1991).
32 Angela Merten, Karl Riha and Jörgen Schäfer (eds.), *DADA Total: Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), 56.
33 See Tristan Tzara's insistence to change the spelling of the compilation prepared by Richard Huelsenbeck for Kurt Wolff, from "Dadako" to "Dadaco", to create difference from Germanic connotations. See Tzara's letter to Huelsenbeck (5 September 1919) in *WeltDada Huelsenbeck. Eine Biografie in Briefen und Bildern*, eds., Herbert Kapfer and Lisbeth Exner (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1996), 35.
34 See Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 314–332.
35 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, note 3, 25 (9 July 1915).
36 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, note 3, 25.
37 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 70 (23 June 1916).
38 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 70 (23 June 1916).
39 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 70 (23 June 1916).
40 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 70 (23 June 1916).
41 Michael Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," *The Drama Review* 16:1 (March 1972), 4.
42 Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," 4.
43 Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," 4.
44 Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," 3.
45 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 25 (9 July1915).
46 For an auditory impression of Ball's performance, see "Gadji-beri-bimba" performed by Trio Exvoco (Hanna Aurbacher, Theophil Maier and Ewald Liska) from the album *Futura Poesia Sonora*, Cramps Records: Milan 1980, accessed 15 April 2017, http://www.ubu.com/sound/ball.html.
47 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, note 6, 70–71 (23 June 1916).
48 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, note 6, 70–71 (23 June 1916).
49 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, note 6, 64–65 (24 May 1916).
50 Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 56 (12 March 1916).
51 See also Joel Freeman, "Ernst Bloch and Hugo Ball: Towards an Ontology of the Avant-Garde," in *Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde*, ed. Dafydd Jones (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 239. See for further reading Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002). Originally published in German under the title *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).
52 Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly (eds.), *Vaudeville, Old & New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xii.
53 See Nicolas Boileau, *Art poétique*, pres. Sylvain Menant (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 97.
54 A more detailed examination of the transformation of the genre from chanson to theatre is also offered by Guy Spielmann, "Le Vaudeville, de la chanson au théâtre (XIVe-XVIIIe siècles)." in Le Vaudeville à la scène, éds. Violaine Heyraud et Ariane Martinez (Grenoble: Éditions littéraires et linguistiques de l'Université de Grenoble (ELLUG) 2015), 19–28. See also Costa, Beatrice, Elfriede Jelinek und das französische Vaudeville (Tübingen: Narr Francke 2014), 23–35.

55 See Costa, *Elfriede Jelinek und das französische Vaudeville*, 23–35.
56 For a more detailed investigation of the topic and concerning a theatre historical meaning see Martina Groß, *Querelle, Begräbnis, Wiederkehr. Alain-René Lesage, der Markt und das Theater* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016).
57 Groß, *Querelle, Begräbnis, Wiederkehr*, 97–132.
58 See for exemple Dominique Lurcel, *Théâtre de foire au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1983), 13.
59 See Eugène d'Auriac, *Théâtre de la Foire. Dix pièces intégrales avec un essai historique sur les spectacles forains* (Paris: Garnier frères, 1878), 25; Victor Barberet, *Lesage et le Théâtre de la Foire* (Genève: Slatkine Reprint, 1970), 28. For a detailed study on Parisian theatre audiences in the first half of the century see Henri Lagrave, *Le théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1972).
60 See Gérard Régnier, *The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as a Clown,* ed. Jean Clair (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 350.
61 See Nicole Wild, "Les spectacles de curiosité du Premier au Second Empire," *Vibrations* 5 (1988), 13–28.
62 An exception is the Parisian "Cirque Olympique": The Franconi family who run the "Cirque Olympique" were able to escape the ban on their circus activities by successfully arguing that the circus was not a theater at all. See *Archives nationales*, F21.1142 ("Surveillance des salles de spectacles de Paris, Cirque Olympique, Direction Franconi").
63 For further reading see Rüdiger Hillmer, *Die napoleonische Theaterpolitik* (= Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 49) (Köln, Weimar and Wien: Böhlau, 1999).
64 Léon de Lanzac de Laborie, *Paris sous Napoleon. Spectacles et musees* 8:2 (Paris: Plon-Nourrit 1913), 145.
65 See Henri Gidel, *Le vaudeville* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), 1–55.
66 For a closer inspection see Georges Doutrepont, *Les Types populaires de la littérature française* 2 (Brussels: M. Lamertin, 1926–1927).
67 Christopher Balme, "Repertoire and Genres," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Age of Empire*, ed. Peter W. Marx (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 187.
68 Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1 and Gérard Régnier, *The Great Parade*, 350.
69 Jennifer Terni, "A Genre for Early Mass Culture: French Vaudeville and the City, 1830–1848," *Theatre Journal* 58:2 (May 2006), 221–248.
70 The study of Robert C. Allen, a historian of American popular culture provides a detailed discussion of how vaudeville evolved as a form of popular entertainment in the United States. See Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 185. Although it is not the subject of this chapter, it seems relevant to point out an ambivalent notion of circus and vaudeville in the nineteenth century: both are devoted to staging the 'other' in terms of dissenting subjecthood. In this regard, Rachel Adams posits that they were also trading on the idea of superiority of the white northern peoples, selling the myths of racism and imperialism, and can therefore be seen as part of the ideological apparatus. This is linked to criticism of the many "exotic" aspects of circus and vaudeville shows. At the same time, Adams relies on the work of Judith Butler, who suggests that the freak show tells us about the ways in which the figure of the other is constructed. There is nothing 'natural' about the unnaturalness of the freak, and our definitions of difference depend on our socially located senses of who we are, and thereby who we are not. See Rachel Adams, *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6.
71 On this topic, cf. Alexander Košenina and Steffen Martus (eds.), *Frühe Neuzeit – Späte Neuzeit. Phänomene der Wiederkehr in Literaturen und Künsten ab 1970* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) and with a particular focus on fairground theatres, see Martina Groß, *Querelle, Begräbnis, Wiederkehr*, 332–341.

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6 "Attractive novelties"

Spectacular innovation and the making of a new kind of audience within colonial modernity

Martyn Jolly

White settlers in the Australian colonies keenly sensed their extreme position in the world. They were geographically separated from the metropolis and lived in environments where the unacknowledged violences of colonial conquest were taking place all around them. They felt their extremity in their nagging nostalgia for the "home" of Britain, and they experienced it as they eagerly awaited intermittent news from the rest of the world. However, even though they were estranged by time and space, metropolitan and frontier spaces of entertainment were closely connected. Just as you cannot have an imperial capital without its supporting colonies from which new wealth is extracted, you also cannot have metropolitan spectacles such as exhibitions and panoramas without "exotic" scenes from "distant" places to supply the visual appetites of audiences. And when metropolitan audiences inevitably dried up, not only provincial but also colonial tours were an integral part of every performer's transnational life.

In nineteenth-century newspaper advertisements for entertainment, one word remains constant among the dizzying proliferation of ornate names for all the visual spectacles on offer – "novelty". Novelty was sought in New York, Paris and London, of course, but it was sought even more ardently in New South Wales, Victoria and Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). The desire to come and see the latest innovations had a particular urgency for colonial spectators because they knew that their part in the imperial project was to occupy its geographically leading edge. For them, the psychogeography of the empire supercharged the idea of novelty. Novelty measured their distance from familiarity and certainty, and helped them locate themselves within the emerging spaces of colonial modernity.

In frontier spaces, the gravitational pull of the central metropole was weaker. In the colonies, new cultural forms – such as circuses, mechanical entertainments and visual spectacles – could more easily become unmoored and remixed. The powerful force of novelty within these spectacular entertainments is therefore a useful lens through which to see the colonial settler experience as an experience of modernity – colonial modernity. Theories of colonial modernity see frontiers as spaces of an experiential production, not just spaces for the belated reception of culture produced and packaged in the metropole.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-8

In Robert Dixon's words, they seek to "re-envisage the cultural landscape of empire or the world system as a set of interdependent sites, a network of relations rather than one-way transfer of culture and authority, or a writing back to the centre which is always reactive and supplementary".[1]

Innovations in spectacle were transmitted to the colonies in various ways. Often just the name or idea arrived as a report, say, in the *Illustrated London News*, and was adapted and developed within a colonial space. Or, at other times, a travelling show person physically imported a spectacular innovation which was then combined with other entertainments. In the colonies, professional practices needed to be improvised, so individual biographies were frustratingly mercurial. Previously stable categories and hierarchies were perpetually collapsing and reforming. The roles of mechanists behind the scenes and performers before the audience were continually mutating. Exhibition venues were frequently remodelled, renamed and re-used. Ideas for shows were often appropriated and adapted. The only thing that did not change was the audience's expectations for new attractions and experiences.

There are extensive histories of Australian colonial art, photography, music and theatre, and some preliminary histories of Australian, colonial moving panoramas, transparency paintings, magic lanterns and circuses.[2] But of the rest of the visual culture of the period – such as travelling "wizards" and "professors", stage magicians, tableau vivants, pyrotechnics, Aboriginal "corroborees", camera obscuras, balloon ascents, rope walkers, equestrians, blackface minstrels, freaks and performing animals – much remains unexplored.[3] Individually, many of these strange events were minor and ephemeral, but taken together they formed a fundamental part of the experience of colonial modernity.

The culture of "attraction" in the nineteenth century does not fall neatly into the categories in which it is normally discussed. The genres which we now know as "circus", "theatre", "cinema" or "art" do not provide an adequate map to the diversity of entertainments consumed during that period. Nor do historicist notions such as "pre-cinema" or "stage pioneers" explain the diversity of performative practices and technological apparatuses with which audiences engaged. If, rather than retroactively creating lineages for subsequently developed "creative industries", we pay attention to the diversity of audience experiences at the time, and if, rather than just trading in remnant historical artefacts, we also imagine ephemeral historical experiences, then a new, far more complex, terrain emerges.

This terrain is particularly variegated around the mid-century. In most histories of popular entertainment in Australia, the period discussed here – from the 1830s to the 1870s – is treated as the precursor to the subsequent development of a "critical mass" of substantial and stable entertainment infrastructure. Performing arts scholar Gillian Arrighi, for instance, has argued convincingly that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was the Australian circus that showcased technological innovation and the teleology of modernity.[4] But, in its very volatility, the earlier mid-century period also starkly demonstrated many of the characteristics of colonial modernity.

To navigate these complexities, I will follow three chronological threads – mechanical puppets, waxworks and spectral illusions – through the tangled skeins that made up visual spectacle in the Australian colonies. Our understanding of the circus and the avant-garde helps us analyse how these technological apparatuses mobilised the attention of their colonial audiences. First of all, each of these apparatuses was new. However briefly, they disrupted the flow of received culture. Their very existence as "a novelty" directed their audiences to the future, not the past. Secondly, each relied on a technology which was marvellous and astonishing. Often presented as a "show within a show" and instantiated as a series of "demonstrations" or "feats" which hybridised human bodies with mechanical technologies, each tested the perceptual assumptions and experiential habits of viewers. Thirdly, each was heterogeneous and unstable. To produce perpetual novelty, each relied on the continual breaking apart and recombination of existing forms. Fourthly, each was delocalised. Travelling show people were the mobile loci for the transmission across different geographies, and translation across different media, of both local and imported content.

Although they were specific to their time, through their novelty, hybridity, heterogeneity and delocalisation, these apparatuses also connect the experience of colonial modernity to our own experience of digital postmodernity. For instance, digital dramaturgy, telematics, motion capture, projection mapping and closed-circuit camera systems are transforming performative practices, while online networks, high-definition streaming and virtual and augmented reality are transforming the geographies and temporalities of audience engagement. These current intermedial developments cast a new light on the audiences for colonial spectacle, not as the amorphous "receivers" of innovation, but as active generators of novel experience.

Mechanical puppets

One of the most important touchstones for nineteenth-century spectacle in Europe, and subsequently in the colonies, was Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's influential *Eidophusikon* ("Image of nature") exhibited in Leicester Square in 1781. Built into a large box, it used changes of lighting to animate three-dimensional scenes painted on opaque and translucent screens.[5] Subsequent London attractions were updates and elaborations on the *Eidophusikon*. For instance, "Thiodon's Grand Original Mechanical and Picturesque Theatre of Arts" enhanced its lighting changes with mechanical effects.[6] The lighting changes were controlled by shutters, oil lamps, reflectors and coloured paper filters. The mechanical effects included two-dimensional figures of articulated sections of painted wood, metal and card, which were slid along transverse grooves in the front of, and between, the receding planes of painted scenery. As they were pushed along on long wooden bases, they may have turned wooden wheels and crankshafts, which operated metal rods and sprung wires, to "automatically" animate the figures with lifelike movement.[7]

Operating in a context of "rational entertainment", Thiodon's handbills were eager to distinguish these new technologies of vision from all the dubious political, social and sexual baggage which had accreted to the theatre over the previous centuries:

> The entertainments offered at this Theatre are quite distinct from that of a Theatrical Description, and on this Account, together with its surprising Ingenuity, and harmless Tendency, is peculiarly calculated to attract the Notice and Support of those whose religious tenets forbid their participation in amusements of a more Marked and Decisive character.[8]

Metropolitan attractions such as these were quickly re-invented in the colonies. In 1834, the 24-year-old musician, artist, carver, wood-turner and gilder George Henry Peck, who had recently emigrated to Van Diemen's Land, combined all of his skills to stage his own Theatre of Arts in Launceston.[9] Peck's "Entertainment of the most novel and amusing description" was, he announced, completed "on the plan of the celebrated *Monsieur Thiodon's Theatre of Fine Arts*".[10] It consisted of various "sublime" scenes of Italy and Switzerland, "not on a flat surface, but by absolute scenic models, retiring from the spectator, Ships, Boats, Figures, [etc.], moving by mechanical means, forming a Charming *coup d'éoil*, that will delight and surprise the beholder". It was "interspersed with, and accompanied by, choice and appropriate Music".[11] Peck must have brought a Thiodon handbill with him when he came to the Australian colonies, because in remarkably similar language to Thiodon's, he re-assured his colonial audience:

> This Entertainment, from its innocent and highly moral character (being totally distinct from anything of a dramatic nature) [and from its ingenuity and harmless tendency], is particularly recommended to the notice of those families whose religious tenets forbid their participation in Thespian amusements [of a more marked and decisive character].[12]

A month or so after opening, Peck updated his Theatre of Arts with "Buonaparte Crossing the Alps and the Storm at Sea". It promised to show "The Passage of the Great St Bernard [Pass], By Buonaparte, and his Grand Army of Reserve, consisting of 30,000 men". The audience could expect to see, apparently at several miles distance, the "the continual Passing of the Troops over Dreadful Precipices", "Troops of Infantry Drawing Cannon, Cassions, Baggage, [etc.]". They could also expect to see, apparently at close range, "The Monk of St Bernard and His Dog, The Grand Entry of Buonaparte, and his Retinue [etc.]".[13]

Peck also promised that "A STAG will appear with all its natural movements" along with "Thiodon's Celebrated figure of the SPORTSMAN AND HIS DOG in pursuit of a HARE". The "Drop Scene", a painted scene on a single sheet of canvas – which came down in front of the staging so a new

mechanical scene could be prepared behind – showed "The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons, In October Last, [1834] as it appeared from the Surry side of the River". The drop scene would then be lifted to reveal the next three-dimensional scene of "The Storm at Sea". The entire show was accompanied by music on the piano-forte from Miss Pettingell, "A Young Lady, of surprising talent, only twelve years of age".[14]

The show was a success: "The 'Passage of Napoleon Across the Alps' is exceedingly striking, but there is too much glare of light on the scenery. 'The Storm at Sea' is excellent, and excessively ingenious".[15] Peck's exhibition was so popular that when the Colony's governor, Lieutenant Governor Arthur, brought his wife and family, he had to stand for the entire performance so the ladies could be seated.[16]

The scenes of Napoleon Crossing the Alps and the Storm at Sea were copied from Thiodon, but Peck's drop scene was of the very recent "The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons", which had occurred only five months earlier, and was only reported on in detail in Van Diemen's Land the month before.[17] These innovations made his exhibitions topical and used the power of spectacle to connect settler audiences to "home". Peck continued to add novelties to the show. He was a musician himself and sometimes played his "admired imitations of the celebrated Paganini", as well as adding vocalists.[18] He also began to add items of local interest. For instance, one new scene showed "MOUNT WELLINGTON [the mountain behind the town of Hobart] As seen from Sandy Bay [a suburb of Hobart], with the upper part of Davey Street". Peck had begun the season by replicating Thiodon's "Stag, Sportsman, Dog and Hare", but in this new scene he promised that this international experience would be dramatically localised: "in addition to a variety of Local Figures, 'The Death of the Kangaroo'".[19]

George Peck had brought an extraordinary range of talents with him to Van Diemen's Land, from woodturning to violin playing. Another emigrant combined a similarly eclectic mix of skills. Thomas Rea trained as a gunsmith in Britain, while also learning magic and ventriloquism. He migrated to Van Diemen's Land in 1842, setting up as a gunsmith in Launceston. In February 1844, he took advantage of the large crowds coming to Launceston for the races and combined all three talents – mechanical engineering, sleight of hand and ventriloquism – into one "Splendid Entertainment". Having "performed before Her Majesty the Queen, and other Members of the Royal family (by whom he was honoured with unbounded applause), and to numerous and fashionable audiences", he announced that he would exhibit his "grand Mechanical Wax-work Figures, performing various astonishing dexterous Feats". Rea's "Novel Display" would be the "greatest effort of modern ingenuity ever exhibited". It would comprise the "most perfect Automaton Representations of numerous interesting gestures, movements, performances and positions, of various characters, of MEN, and different species of ANIMALS, BIRDS, REPTILES".[20] The figures, which were perhaps half life-size, may have been string puppets, with metal armatures suspended from above on rubber bands, and pulled down

to the stage and manipulated by strings from below and to the sides. Rea, who probably used all of his skills as a gunsmith to engineer the puppets, promises that the "joints of these figures are constructed similar to those of a human being, consequently they act on the same principles – their performances, attitudes and feats surpass all conception."[21]

The armatures were clothed and were perhaps given wax faces. Rea promised, "The other figures represent many of the HEROES of HISTORY, INDIAN CHIEFS, SLAVES [etc.] – their Dress and Appearance give them throughout a striking resemblance to life". Rea used his skills of ventriloquism and mimicry to endow them with speech: "They will perform several ancient, modern and foreign Feats of Dexterity, Dance in elegant style to Music, Speak, Recite, and Dispute with each other, to the delight and great amusement of the company". Rea's performance also referred to the craze for animal and human automata, "ALSO, A FIGURE OF A SERPENT WILL COIL ROUND A LION as naturally as life, while, at the same time, Mr REA will IMITATE THE ROARING OF THE LION. This part of the performance will conclude with an ARTIFICIAL HUMAN SKELETON, Appearing in 36 different attitudes, which never fails to give unbounded satisfaction."[22]

The next section promised many feats of conjuring and legerdemain, which were becoming part of the standard repertoire of magicians of the period. As

FIG. 5.—TOM MINOR THE CLOWN AND HIS SKELETON.

Figure 6.1 Engraving by Louis Poyet from 1897. Source: *Magic, Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions Including Trick Photography*, Albert A. Hopkins (ed.) (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Company, 1897), 172. Author's collection.

Figure 6.2 Advertisement by Professor Rea from 1844. Source: Cornwall Chronicle (Launceston), 28 February 1844, 4.

with Thiodon and Peck, Rea, although promising "astonishment", was careful to place his entertainment in the realm of rational entertainment, aimed at all demographics, including children, rather than the dubious world of the theatre. "MR REA particularly intimates to Parents and Guardians, that his performances are of such a nature, that no fear need be apprehended that any indelicacy will be introduced, by which the morals of the young may be contaminated".[23]

Rea assumes that his audience is aware of the long European history of automata uncannily replicating human movement through clockwork motion[24] and waxworks representing the characteristic gestures of historical figures,[25] but promises that his performance is one of "modern ingenuity" acquired through "his persevering industry and talent".[26] At this time, modern magazines devoted to rational education, such as the *Magazine of Science*, regularly discussed automata as well as wax sculpting within an engineering, rather than a theatrical, framework.[27]

Rea's figures were neither traditional wax works nor traditional automata, but a hybrid. One newspaper described them as "Fantoccini, or Puppet-dancing, which is the best we ever saw".[28] But not only did Rea's command of engineering in metal allow him to create hybrid moving figures, but his command of mimicry and ventriloquism allowed him to endow them with uncanny life. A viewer in 1863 reported that:

> We need scarcely say that the marionettes are puppets, androides (sic), automata, or whatever else it may be agreed to call them, which are by a

> complex arrangement of strings, springs, wires and joints, made to simulate the motions of the human form with the most astonishing accuracy. The only portion of the entertainment to which we must record an objection, is the giving of the automata *voice* – the said voice or voices being supplied by the exhibitor and other persons, whose elocutionary powers, and other obvious deficiencies of speech, do not by any means add to the illusion, or impart interest to the entertainment.[29]

In early 1852, a Royal Marionette Theatre opened in the Adelaide Gallery, London, using 150 articulated string puppets about three-quarters of a metre high, modelled from papier mâché, cork and wood, which had been imported from Italy.[30] As part of the show, a puppet character "Albany Brown" acted as a "theatre manager", "interviewing" the puppets for engagements in the theatre. The show also included the puppets performing *Bombastes Furioso*, a broad burlesque on tragic opera that was popular throughout the nineteenth century. The "theatre within a theatre" was illustrated and described in the *Illustrated London News*, 17 January 1852.

Nine months later, in September 1852, one of Australia's earliest theatres, the Saloon of the Royal Hotel in Sydney, was fitted up, probably by the showman Henry Merlin,[31] for a "Royal Marionette Theatre and Theatre of Arts".[32] The double title was an each-way bet, referring both to the recent Royal Marionette Theatre in London and to the slightly older Thiodon's Grand Original Mechanical and Picturesque Theatre of Arts, discussed above. "This kind of performance is highly spoken of in all the recent English papers, and the one about to be opened in Sydney we believe is not behind on either taste or artistic decoration to those of the mother country, and reflects the highest credit on the spirited proprietor".[33] To the sound of hired musicians, the audience saw scenes of Waterford, Rome, The Alps, The Great Temple of Tartary and a model of the Crystal Palace. Scene changes took ten minutes behind "Drop Scenes" of The Castle of Europe; Zion; Constantinople; and a "looking-glass curtain" which mirrored the audience back to them.[34] Rather than the string puppets of that year's London Royal Marionette Theatre, the Sydney version seems to be more like the older form of the mechanical theatre, where a series of two-dimensional mechanical figures slid out within the painted scenes. Nonetheless, "the attendance was numerous and respectable, the scenery beautiful, and the general effect of the miniature stage and the proscenium strikingly attractive".[35]

Back in Britain, the Royal Marionette's and their "manager", the puppet character Albany Brown, continued their success, introducing the word "marionette" to the English language.[36] Meanwhile, in Sydney, the idea of the puppet character "Albany Brown" was appropriated for a second marionette theatre which opened in April 1853. In London the old Adelaide Gallery "formerly fitted up for the administration of galvanic shocks and such like instructive inflictions" had been "converted into an elegant theatre, exclusively devoted to performance by marionettes".[37] In Sydney, the old Olympic

Circus – which had previously been used by the American circus performer J. S. Noble, the Australia circus performer James Henry Ashton and the English circus performer Henry Burton[38] – was fitted up as an "exceedingly neat theatre" for Sydney's new Royal Marionette Theatre.[39]

Although the Sydney newspapers grandly announced that "Mr Albany Brown and His company having arrived in this colony, intend giving the first of their performances on Monday the 4th of April",[40] in fact "Albany Brown" was only a character read about in the London newspapers, which would be performed by a puppet in Sydney. Merlin's second incarnation of the Royal Marionette Theatre, unlike his first, almost certainly used marionettes, but these may have either been made in Australia, imported from overseas, or a combination of both. Merlin's mother, who made and exhibited wax flowers as Mrs Foster, may have assisted with the making and maintenance of the marionettes.[41] Voice actors were required to speak the dialogue of the puppets from behind the "proscenium within a proscenium", and Merlin advertised for "one or two persons acquainted with stage business, salary no object to competent persons, also good Comic Singer. Apply to the Theatre".[42] Newspapers commented on the impressive size and dress,[43] and the "well-contrived performances of the wood, wax, and pasteboard marionettes".[44]

As in London, the puppet character Albany Brown "interviewed" the marionettes, and their performance of *Bombastes Furioso* was received with "shouts of approbation".[45] But the quest for endless novelty meant that within a few days "Albany Brown" was announcing that soon this burlesque "must positively be withdrawn for Further Novelty! RECOLLECT THE GOLDEN AGE PRODUCED THE MARIONETTES, the most amusing Company in the Southern Hemisphere, who […] have not only delighted but astonished the audience".[46]

The "Further Novelty" included acts such as the mystic performances of Signor Blitz known as "The Wizard of the South" (who seemingly caught a bullet in his teeth).[47] Programmes also included comic dancing from Mr Cook, comic singing from Mr Grant, Mr Upson and Mr Bruton, and blackface minstrelsy[48] from Mr Walter Howson.[49] The evening concluded with Grand Panoramic Views,[50] including moving panoramas and mechanical figures of the Alps and the Great Temple of Tartary,[51] which had been used the previous year in the Saloon of the Royal Hotel incarnation of the Royal Marionette Theatre. These were supplemented with a panorama of the Arctic Regions including a squadron of mechanical figures in search of the lost explorer Sir John Franklin.[52] This free, improvised combination into a single entertainment of different spectacular technologies – puppetry and moving panoramas – and different narrative genres – well-known theatrical burlesques such as *Bombastes Furioso* and recent imperial events such as the search for Franklin – is more characteristic of colonial modernity than metropolitan modernity.

In 1859, two exhibitors, "Professors" Morris and Taylor, opened "a very interesting novelty" in Pitt Street, Sydney: "[a] series of stereoscopes of large size is arranged around a room, exhibiting views of every description – forming

a complete cosmorama".[53] This "Stereoscopic Exhibition" was supposedly from the London Stereoscopic Company at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, and under the patronage of Queen Victoria, but within a few months, the Professors gave up on stereoscopes and completely remodelled their room. For "Theodon's (sic) Mechanical Theatre" they built a recessed mechanical theatre stage behind a large opening they had cut into the rear wall of their Saloon.[54] Accompanied by "a lady at the piano" the audience saw

> the Polar regions, with the yacht Fox, which lately returned to England with relics of the late Sir John Franklin's expedition, frozen in among the ice. Her crew are observed on different parts of the ice; some sawing through it, others picking out a mound in search of relics, and others engaged at different other things. Polar bears and other animals peculiar to the region pass in miniature across the scene, which closes with an illumination intended to represent the Aurora Borealis.[55]

After an interval, they saw "the sea in motion" with various well-known ships passing to and fro, accompanied by "a life boat, sea birds, and other things peculiar to marine scenery".[56]

Morris and Taylor had temporarily borrowed the familiar names and the associated prestige of The London Stereoscopic Company and Thiodon's Mechanical Theatre. But ten years later, Thomas Henry Aspinall, the former assistant and son-in-law of Thiodon himself, brought his family and the show *Thiodon's Exhibition of Arts and Wonders* to Australia (after a tour of the US) where it toured for the rest of the century.[57]

Thirty-five years after the Thiodon name had first been appropriated by George Peck in Van Diemen's Land, a mechanical theatre directly associated with the original was finally on display in the Australian colonies, and it may have been the most mechanically sophisticated yet seen. Various scenes of history were enacted by mechanically animated staging and mechanical figures, "giving life to the aspect, and illustrating as it were the minor wonders of mechanism".[58] A feature of the original Thiodon's mechanical theatre which had been a set-piece since the 1830s, and which had been copied by George Peck, was still there: a hare was followed by a sportsman and his pointer dog. "After some highly natural manoeuvres, the sportsman levelled his gun, and shot the hare dead, and carried him home with every sign of rejoicing". An automaton, "who betrayed no symptom of mechanical agency" swung on a slack rope. "The spectators seemed to quite believe in the little man, and encored him".[59]

Waxworks

As well as the touchstones of de Loutherbourg's *Eidophusikon* and Thiodon's Mechanical Theatre, another extremely important touchstone for colonial modernity was Madame Tussaud's Waxworks, which had opened as a

permanent Museum in London in 1835, after 33 years of touring through Britain. In the Australian colonies, Madame Lee was making a living as a tightrope walker and comic dancer, while married to the circus equestrian Thomas Lee. She and her four children danced their way around the colonies as "Madame Lee and Petite Family". She was well known for replicating the Spider Dance of Lola Montez,[60] the international star who had toured the Australian goldfields with her salacious, skirt-lifting dance two years earlier. On the tight rope, Madame Lee sat on a chair and placed on a table before her two lit candles, a decanter, and a glass from which she drank to the health of the audience.[61]

In 1857 Lee opened a waxworks in Melbourne, "a la Tussaud".[62] It featured effigies perhaps imported from Madame Tussaud's itself in Britain, mainly of the Royal Family.[63] To many people in Melbourne the new waxworks were a sign that they were progressing towards the achievement of "the social comforts, enjoyments, and amusements of our home recollections".[64] One visitor felt wonder at "how such things find their way out here to this new city where in general our home friends look upon us as dwelling in tents, and feeding on mutton, tea and damper".[65] In 1858, Lee sold the waxworks to Mrs Ellen Williams, who advertised herself as an "artist in wax".[66] Williams was the unmarried companion of the phrenologist Professor Philemon Sohier,[67] and his Phrenological Museum of casts of heads joined Lee's original collection, which Williams began to enlarge with more topical figures, such as recently hanged murderers. She may have modelled these from engravings in the press. Mrs Williams became Madame Sohier in 1859 and the Melbourne waxworks expanded to become one of Melbourne's most popular and enduring institutions, continually updating itself with new attractions.

Another artist in wax, Maximilian Ludwig Kreitmayer, emigrated to Victoria in 1858, after studying anatomy in Germany and medical wax modelling in London. In 1861, to rival the Sohier's Phrenological and Wax Museums, he opened a Grand Anatomical Museum which included an "anatomical Venus", a life-size wax female body with removable parts.[68] In early 1862, both rival waxworks displayed wax models of the famous explorers Burke and Wills, just a few weeks after news of their death reached Melbourne, and before they had even been given their State Funeral.[69]

Melbourne became gripped by their "heroic" tragedy and was hungry for more.[70] In March, a mechanical diorama was painted. As the 12 large canvas scenes unrolled, the audience followed the explorers from their grand departure from Melbourne until their death. The panorama had "Novel Dioramic and Automaton Effects". In the best scene, "The Stony Desert", painted from a description left in one of the dead explorer's journals, mechanical camels crossed the field of view, perhaps in the opposite direction to the unrolling of the canvas, which "produced a capital effect".[71]

Following the success of diorama, the Sohiers worked with the Melbourne sculptor Sydney George Camroux to add to their Burke and Will display with a further wax tableau of "BOURKE (sic) EXPIRING in the ARMS of [another

Figure 6.3 Albumen silver stereograph showing waxwork diorama of Burke, Wills and King at Cooper's Creek in the year 1862. Source: Samuel Clifford (photographer), courtesy of State Library of Victoria.

explorer] KING, the finest figures ever seen in Australia, a sad, yet pleasing, a correct but graceful, study from nature. […] This is in itself a poem, an elegy full of pathos and tenderness".[72]

Kreitmayer became the Sohiers' business partner in 1863, and in 1869 bought out the business. He expanded the number of living human freaks and theatrical acts he exhibited. For instance, in 1889 Jo Jo the dog-faced youth, originally contracted to the US showman P. T. Barnum, toured to the Waxworks. "The Bourke Street footpath is so crowded […] that a police constable is specifically told to […] regulate the traffic".[73]

Spectral illusion

If de Loutherbourg's *Eidophusikon* was a touchstone for colonial mechanical spectacle, and Madame Tussaud's a touchstone for colonial waxworks, the third touchstone for the optical and illusory spectacle was the famous Pepper's Ghost illusion, first developed by the engineer Henry Dircks, then introduced at the Royal Polytechnic Institute in London by the showman Professor Henry Pepper in late 1862. The illusion, which relied on the fact that glass can both reflect and transmit light, became endlessly adaptable to a variety of different purposes. The industrialists James Hartley and Henry Bessemer had developed patents for large sheets of plate glass in 1847 in 1848; for the illusion, a large-as-possible sheet of plate glass was inclined at an angle at the front of the stage, with its edges hidden. A magic lantern using limelight brightly illuminated an actor against a matt black background, who was hidden from the audience's direct view but reflected in the glass. Other actors behind the

glass could interact with the "spectre". At the Polytechnic, the illusion was integrated into the Institution's "rational entertainment", where, after being startled by the appearance of a "spectre", audiences were instructed in its scientific principles.[74]

In August and September 1863, eight months after the ghost's debut, and at the same time Pepper was fighting his own legal battles in London over his rights to the illusion,[75] different showmen in the Australian colonies were also threatening each other with legal action and taking out pre-emptive notices of their intention to apply for patents. In Britain, Pepper used his scientific lectures at the Royal Polytechnic and the Dickens play *The Haunted Man* at the Adelphi Theatre to showcase the illusion. In Australia, the play most commonly chosen in which to mount the technology was the wheezy old melodrama *The Castle Spectre* from the late eighteenth century. Written by Matthew Lewis, one of the leading writers of the gothic horror craze and author of the bestseller *The Monk*, the play had been a longstanding favourite with audiences everywhere, including the colonies. When it was performed in 1833 at Sydney's Theatre Royal, the titular spectre appeared in a simple white sheet – "and, above all, we have – a *ghost!* A proper ghost, in a white sheet, as all ghosts ought to be, who amuses herself o' nights, by singing 'lullaby' to frighten a drunken, cowardly old friar, and a chattering old woman".[76] The play was performed regularly in the colonies from then on. In 1862, it was revived at the Theatre Royal, Ballarat, where the ghost was still an actor clad in a sheet, even though it was now enhanced with coloured lights:

> The spectre scene at the close of the second act was exceedingly well managed, the colored (sic) lights being thrown on the figure just at the right moment; and imparting to it a most ghastly effect. […] [It] will be repeated this evening, when those who are fond of horrors should not neglect to be present.[77]

For those who were "fond of horrors", the Australian colonial Pepper's Ghost craze began in Victoria a year later, when no less than four different versions were promised to Melbourne audiences. Firstly, Edwin Wollaston, Henry Beaufoy Merlin and Louis Lawrence Smith advertised at a Melbourne theatre, confusingly calling itself the Royal Polytechnic Institute:

> The GHOST! The GHOST!! The GHOST!!!. The APPARITION of the GHOST, with an improvement of an important nature, imparting additional sensational effects, will appear positively […]. This is an invention of a gentleman who has just arrived with it from England. Patents have been taken out in each of the neighbouring colonies, and the proprietor has determined to prosecute with the utmost rigour anyone infringing on the patent. […] The public are cautioned against spurious ghosts, got up by means of screens. See advertisement of patent, signed by the Attorney General.[78]

The "gentleman who has just arrived with it from England" was probably Henry Merlin who, after being a proprietor of Sydney's Royal Marionette Theatre (discussed above), had returned to the UK for a visit, and may have seen an early demonstration of the effect by Pepper.[79]

Although the three entrepreneurs reproduced, along with their advertisement, their intention to patent "an INVENTION for the production of PHANTOMS and APPARITIONS",[80] others were not deterred. William Robert Martin and Cyrus Mason also promised that The Royal Haymarket Theatre would have "The Great Spectral Illusion, As produced in London, and patented for the colonies by Messrs Martin and Mason. Experiments have been witnessed, and proved highly successful. […] The Great SENSATION of the Age".[81] However, their production of *The Castle Spectre* was a disappointment; the sheet of plate glass appears to have not been large enough to cover the stage, so only some members of the audience had a view.[82]

Another venue, The Theatre Royal, also advertised with a poster campaign across the suburbs that the illusion would be included in their Saturday night programme. But at the last moment, the theatre manager Barry Sullivan appeared and informed the expectant audience that he had just received a threatening lawyer's letter, so could not present the illusion.[83]

Finally, The Royal Princess's Theatre promised Melbourne that: "The POLYTECHNIC GHOST will shortly be produced, with terrible reality. Patented Patented Patented".[84] Madame Sohier's Waxworks, discussed above, made fun of the whole farrago:

> Caution – Ghost stealing – anyone stealing our GHOST at Madame Sohier's WAXWORKS, will be dreadfully prosecuted. […] TERRIFIC ANNOUNCEMENT – The GHOST, the veritable Simon Pure of a Ghost – the greatest Ghost Alive – will appear at the WAXWORKS EXHIBITION As soon as it is made to work pretty well. Patents have been for all parts of the world. In the meanwhile, those who are fond of the horrible (and who is not?) will find plenty of Phantasmagoria, Phantoms, Spectres, Gnomes, Demons, and Ghosts flitting about the CHAMBER of HORRORS.[85]

The ghost did not spend long in Melbourne, and the apparatus was soon taken to Sydney. In September 1863, Sydney's largest theatre, the Royal Victoria Theatre, promised that William Pitt[86] "the acknowledged agent and only successful operator of Professor Pepper and Dirckes" wondrous discovery, will appear and illustrate this great phenomenon every evening until further notice.[87] Not only did the theatre promise the usual gothic ghost play *The Castle Spectre*, but it also promised that "the great Phenomenon Shakespeare's Grand Tragedy of MACBETH is in active preparation, in which will be introduced thirteen ghosts – Ghosts of Banquo, Fleance, the Witches, and seven Kings. The eminent vocalist and actress, Madame Sara Flower, is expressly engaged to appear in this great production".[88] It appears that in the end, only the Ghost of

Banquo appeared,[89] but nonetheless they quoted Shakespeare's Hamlet himself to claim the authenticity of their illusion – "Touching this vision here, it is an honest ghost. That let me tell you".[90] The Royal Victoria Theatre's investment in Pitt and the illusion paid off. The shows were a success:

> Suffice is to say that a spectral figure walks and moves about the stage, and that although palpable and distinct to the sight, it is yet impalpable to the touch. In endeavouring to seize hold of it, the hand finds no resistance as it passes through the ghostly figure. It is truly one of the most astounding delusions that ever was presented to the present generation.[91]

Sydney's smaller Prince of Wales Opera House also staged the illusion to rival the Royal Victoria Theatre. The ghost of a murdered nun delighted "lovers of spectral illusions" in a play written especially for it, *Raymond and Agnes*.[92] The Opera House even induced a ghost to smoke a pipe and fire a gun,[93] while the Governor and his wife promised to attend.[94]

The craze for the ghost quickly subsided in the colonial capitals of Melbourne and Sydney, but it continued to attract audiences on provincial circuits. The ghost from the Melbourne Royal Polytechnic went on the road for a few weeks. Merlin introduced the "now famous Polytechnic ghost" to Castlemaine with a "brief lecture on Spiritualism".[95] Billed as "The Greatest Marvel of the Age"[96] the ghost scene from *The Castle Spectre* also toured Tasmania as a standalone spectacle, but, like all innovative spectacle, it was plagued with technical issues.

> The great sensation of the evening was of course the introduction of the veritable ghost – the invention of Professor Pepper, – which created such a *furore* in England a little time ago. The apparition was introduced in a short selection from the play known as *The Castle Spectre*, and it would have been wonderfully effective, but for the fact that there was some defect in the lime light used. We may as well inform readers that this singular illusion is produced by the simple reflection of a human figure, by aid of the lime light, on a sheet of plate glass. Of course, if the light is imperfect the illusion will be equally so, and although the principle of the exhibition was fully demonstrated last evening in the earlier part of the scene, the sudden failure of the light destroyed the perfection of the illusion. With a little more care, however, the Ghost may appear with success.[97]

Following provincial tours such as this, variations of the illusion were incorporated into many different acts. For instance, 11 years after its invention, the English magician Dr Sylvester, who performed as The Fakir of Oolu, used Pepper's Ghost technology in St Georges Hall in Melbourne.[98] Five years after that the ghost returned, staged by the international travelling showman D'arcy Read who had come to the Australian colonies via South Africa. His ghost illusions combined the illusion with a blackface minstrel act, so that "[t]he usual

programme of a negro minstrel concert was carried out in an excellent manner by the human and ghost minstrels alternately".[99]

While his illusion was being retailed around the world, Professor Henry Pepper himself had slowly been losing relevance to audiences in London, so he embarked on an international tour. He arrived in Victoria in mid-1879 with "a large amount of scientific exhibition apparatus and full staff of professional assistants".[100] "Pepper's Scientific Festival", billed as an "ILLUSORY ENTERTAINMENT" featured all of his Polytechnic hits, with the added excitement of an electric light.[101]

While previous incarnations of the ghost in Australia had staged it as simply another theatrical novelty, when its original co-inventor – "From the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London Patronised by Her Majesty the Queen and Royal Family"[102] – re-presented it, he needed to more delicately maintain the balance between spectacular illusion and scientific phenomenon. "He has […] been nightly delighting large audiences with his lucid expositions of various natural phenomena, as well as with the illusions that have made his name so famous".[103] When presented by Pepper himself, the Ghost was simultaneously theatrical illusion and scientific curiosity. In one of the first illustrations of the illusion, Professor Pepper stood off to one side, observing the materialisation with cool detachment,[104] but as the years progressed, Pepper found himself increasingly caught in a paradox. He needed to generate an air of "mystery" around his illusions to maintain audience interest but to be a "scientific"

Figure 6.4 Illustration of Professor Pepper and His Popular Science Illustrations from 1879. Source: Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier, 29 September 1879, 4.

professor he also needed, at some point, to explain the scientific principles behind the illusion.

In Australia, Pepper was able to address this paradox with a twist of local innovation. By the time of Pepper's arrival, the white settlers to the New South Wales colony had their own home-grown ghost story – Fisher's Ghost – a popular ghost story that had accreted around the actual murder of Frederick Fisher in 1826 in Penrith (west of Sydney). The story was powerful for colonial audiences because it played on the great distance between New South Wales and Britain, and the way colonists could reinvent themselves, their personal relationships and their social status as they moved between frontier and metropole. A greedy settler had murdered his neighbour, Frederick Fisher, telling people from the district that Fisher had returned to England, leaving him with power of attorney over his property. According to the story, Fisher's ghost began to appear, sitting on the top rail of a fence, indicating to passers-by the spot where his body had been buried.

When urban myth and technological apparatus combined, the effect on audiences was powerful, "[t]he illusion was most cleverly managed, and evoked continued applause".[105] To increase the sense of authenticity, Pepper first read the story to the audience from *Tegg's Magazine*, "a journal published in Sydney many years ago", then:

> the curtain rises, and you see a fence, surrounded by brushwood. The story is closely followed, and you see a man named Weir appear. As Weir comes upon the stage, a shadowy something forms before him, and the apparition of Fisher is seen upon the fence. Weir tries to grasp it, but his hand encounters nothing, and the ghost vanishes. Then it returns again, and Weir, marking the fence, departs to initiate the search which is said to have resulted in the discovery of the murdered body of the man whose apparition he saw, and the identification and discovery of the murderer.[106]

Pepper had also expanded his repertoire with another major illusion, which he called *metempsychosis*; like Pepper's Ghost, it used a giant sheet of plate glass with disguised edges. This one was mirrored with vertical strips of silver of increasing width, so that as it was slid at a 45-degree angle across the stage, what was on stage behind the glass was gradually replaced with what was off stage (but increasingly reflected) in the mirrored strips.[107] But, like all showmen in the colonies, even Pepper eventually ran out of audiences for his exhibitions. He moved to Queensland, where he built a bungalow and lived for several years before returning to the UK in 1889.

The Pepper's Ghost illusion was later adapted into another, more salacious, illusion. In 1889, Felix Kreitmayer of the Melbourne Waxworks – now rebadged as the Royal Museum – introduced *Amphitrite*, a "young and beautiful water nymph", who appeared to be gracefully floating, swimming and diving in an underwater grotto decorated with corals and marine plants.[108] In fact the "agreeable young person"[109] was lying on a rotating black turntable and reflected in glass.

Figure 6.5 Colour litograph of the swimmer Amphitrite from 1889. Source: Courtesy of State Library of Victoria.

Conclusion

The various curious events I have discussed are only a small sample from the complex mosaic of spectacle in colonial Australia. It is difficult to know exactly what the actual scale of the promised spectacles were, although it is safe to assume they were probably more rudimentary than implied and often presented in cramped rooms to small audiences.

It is also impossible to know exactly how many of the extravagant claims of the show people actually manifested in front of an audience, although the rare comments from newspapers frequently complained that things did not go off quite as advertised. It is difficult to speculate exactly what the relationship was between individual colonial show people and their metropolitan progenitors. Sometimes an idea, a piece of conceptual "software", came out to Australia as a report in a metropolitan newspaper and was attached to a mechanism fabricated in the Australian colonies. Sometimes, the apparatus itself came out in the hold of a ship but was repaired or elaborated on in Australia by people who may have had some contingent skills in scene painting, wax modelling, carving, gilding or gunsmithing. However, although much remains unknowable, through the evidence presented above we do know that in the colonies, however fleetingly, "the new" was actively produced, as well as passively consumed.

Figure 6.6 Illustration of a Scene in Osborne's Olympic Arena from 1854. Source: Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier, 20 May 1854, 4.

As James M. Harding has pointed out, the historical avant-garde was always colonialist in its eager consumption, from Paris, of the "primitivist" art and dance of Africa and Australasia. It was also imperialist in its self-conceptualisation: "the very notion of a front guard feeding the vital centre presents us with a discomforting reminder that the term *avant-garde* first emerged as a characterisation of artistic practice in the heyday of nineteenth-century European colonial enterprise, when edge to centre/centre to edge relationships structured the hegemonic mechanisms of empire".[110] Nonetheless, most scholars of the avant-garde still tacitly accept this topos, obsessed with the one-sided "cutting edge" rather than the two-sided "border". Harding is tempted to call on scholars "to break from their Eurocentric fixation and to finally acknowledge the global simultaneity of the basic forms of avant-garde expression".[111]

Adding to calls such as this, there is another demand to rethink the larger history of the popular experience of modernity itself – away from "concentrically diminishing ripples", towards an interconnected transnational web of interactions between the apparatuses, performers and audiences of both the frontier and the metropole. My examination of some of these small eruptions

of energy allows us to identify some overarching characteristics of colonial modernity.

Colonial modernity was a modernity of scarcity. There were never enough audience members, and never enough skilled performers. Managers had to continually re-mix their programmes while advertising for replacement singers and performers. International show people would arrive with much fanfare from Britain or the US, but after only a few weeks in Sydney or Melbourne find themselves on the road, first in prosperous towns like Maitland, Ballarat or Launceston, but then in smaller places where only a handful of settlers lived.

Colonial modernity was a modernity where the break with the classical past that was necessary to constitute the new historical period of empire – part of what Frederic Jameson has called "some wider dialectic of continuity and rupture" – was experienced more acutely.[112] For instance, the uncanny effects of Thomas Rea's ventriloquised automatons were explicitly linked to modern mechanical ingenuity, and therefore colonial progress. The affectingly tragic tableau of the waxwork explorers Burke and Wills not only linked them to past imperial heroes but reminded white settlers of the continuing terrors of the continent they still barely knew.

Above all, colonial modernity was a modernity of intensity. The novelty, hybridity, heterogeneity and delocalisation of the various spectacular attractions often spurred audiences to outrageous physical behaviour. *Sydney Punch* portrays patrons demonstrably weeping with tears freely flowing down their faces as Madame Bishop Sings *Home Sweet Home*.[113] In 1848, some audience members in the pit of Sydney's Royal Victoria Theatre deliberately knocked over the pair of oxy-hydrogen magic lanterns with which the travelling showman J.W. Newland was giving the first limelight dissolving-view show in Australia.[114] Somebody hid in the theatre after a performance of Melbourne's Royal Marionette Theatre and tried to set the theatre on fire, escaping by cutting through the canvas at the back of the stage.[115] Somebody else used a candle at three o'clock in the morning to try to burn down Robert Radford's recently established Royal Circus in Launceston, but only managed to destroy the scenery.[116] The silk bags of gas balloons were also frequently sliced open, and the gas set on fire, both before and after ascensions.[117] And the circus tent, lit by "a tin-hoop chandelier, with its wreath of flaming tallow-dips", was collapsed on the audience by local larrikins in Marcus Clarke's comic story "How the Circus Came to Bullocktown".[118]

These extreme reactions indicate that although colonial modernity may have had a visual economy of scarcity, it was nonetheless also one of phenomenological intensity which we associate with the avant-garde. It literally mobilised audiences in a way that the more regulated spaces of conventional theatre or exhibitions could not. This also connects those audiences from the obscure, lost places of colonial spectacle to audiences today. We may be dispersed amidst the etiolated spaces of various digital encounters, but we still crave the intensity of novelty, just like them.

Notes

1 Robert Dixon, *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity: Frank Hurley's Synchronised Lecture Entertainment* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), xxiii–xxiv.
2 See Harold Love (ed.), *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* (Sydney, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1984); Philip Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Currency Press, 1995); Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788–1914* (Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press, 1990) and *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788* (Melbourne, VIC: Longman, 1995); Mark St Leon, *Circus: The Australian Story* (Melbourne, VIC: Melbourne Books, 2011); Gillian Arrighi, *The FitzGerald Brothers Circus: Spectacle, Identity, and Nationhood at the Australian Circus* (Melbourne, VIC: Australian Scholarly, 2015); Mimi Colligan, *Canvas Documentaries: Panoramic Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century Australia and New Zealand* (Melbourne, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2002); Anita Callaway, *Visual Ephemera: Theatrical Art in Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2000); Elizabeth Hartrick, *The Magic Lantern in Colonial Australia and New Zealand* (Melbourne, VIC: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017).
3 Starting points are: "Australharmony: An online resource toward the history of music in colonial and early Federation Australia," https://www.sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/; "Design and Art Australia Online," https://www.daao.org.au/; and enthusiast sites like "Magic in Sydney," accessed 1 April 2021, http://www.sydney-magic.net/.
4 Gillian Arrighi, "The Circus and Modernity: A Commitment to 'the Newer' and 'the Newest'," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10:2 (2012), 171 and "Synthesising Circus Aesthetics and Science: Australian Circus and Variety Theatre at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 16:3 (2018), 238.
5 Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 17–127.
6 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 214–215.
7 An idea of how the staging worked can be derived from the 'toy theatres' or 'paper theatres' which were popular in domestic parlours at the same time, see John Bell, *A Short Entertaining History of the Toy Theatre* (Cambridge: Great Small Works, 2008). An idea of how these puppets may have worked can be derived from some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mechanical puppets from the European *Theatrum Mundi* tradition in the Puppet Theatre Collection, The Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
8 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 228.
9 Robyn Lake, "George Peck's Theatre of Arts," in *Australharmony*, ed. Graeme Skinner, accessed 1 April 2021, https://sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/peck-lake.php.
10 *The True Colonist Van Diemen's Land Political Dispatch*, 21 January 1835, 1.
11 *The True Colonist Van Diemen's Land Political Dispatch*, 21 January 1835, 1.
12 *The True Colonist Van Diemen's Land Political Dispatch*, 21 January 1835, 1 and *The Tasmanian* 27 March 1835, 3.
13 *The Tasmanian*, 27 March 1835, 3.
14 *The Tasmanian*, 27 March 1835, 3.
15 *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 7 April 1835, 7.
16 *The Tasmanian,* 8 May 1835, 7.
17 *The True Colonist Van Diemen's Land Political Dispatch*, 21 February 1835, 3.
18 *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 28 April 1835, 3.
19 *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 28 April 1835, 3.
20 *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 28 April 1835, 3.
21 They may have been similar to the mechanical puppets illustrated in *Magic, Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions Including Trick Photography,* ed. Albert A. Hopkins (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Company, 1897), 172.
22 *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 28 February 1844, 4.

23 *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 28 February 1844, 4.
24 For automata in general see Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls: The Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).
25 For waxworks in general see Pamela Pilbeam, *Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks* (London: Hambledon, 2003).
26 *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 28 February 1844, 4.
27 *Magazine of Science and School of Arts*, 23 April 1842, and vol. X 1842.
28 *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 9 April 1844, 3.
29 *The Star* (Ballarat), 16 March 1863, 2.
30 George Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (New York: John de Graff, 1955), 240–244.
31 Henry Beaufoy Merlin later became one of Australia's most significant photographers. See Geoffrey Barker, *Beaufoy Merlin: Photographer Showman 1830–1873: From the Collections of the State Library of New South Wales* (Sydney, NSW: Geoffrey Barker, 2018).
32 Richard Bradshaw, "The Merlin of the South," *Australasian Drama Studies* 7 (1985), 91.
33 *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 19 August 1852, 10.
34 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 1852, 1.
35 *The People's Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator*, 18 September 1852, 2.
36 Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*, 242.
37 *The Times* (London), 13 January 1852, 4.
38 Bradshaw, *The Merlin of the South*, 93.
39 *Bell's Life and Sporting Reviewer*, 16 April 1853, 2.
40 *The People's Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator*, 2 April 1853, 2.
41 Bradshaw, *The Merlin of the South*, 120.
42 *The People's Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator*, 2 April 1853, 2.
43 *The People's Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator*, 9 April 1853, 3.
44 *Empire* (Sydney), 3 May 1853, 2.
45 *Empire* (Sydney), 14 April 1853, 1.
46 *The People's Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator*, 16 April 1853, 2.
47 *Empire* (Sydney), 3 May 1853, 2.
48 The practice of white performers wearing blackface makeup to caricature African American slaves had come to the Australian colonies from the United States in the late 1830s and remained popular for well over a century. See Richard Waterhouse, "Minstrel Show and Vaudeville House: The Australian Popular Stage 1838 to 1914," *Australian Historical Studies* 23:93 (1989), 366–385.
49 *The People's Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator*, 16 April 1853, 2.
50 *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 16 April 1853, 11.
51 *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter Valley Advertiser*, 1 June 1853, 3.
52 *Empire* (Sydney), 14 April 1853, 1.
53 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1859, 1; *Empire* (Sydney), 29 August 1859, 4.
54 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 1860, 1.
55 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 1860, 5.
56 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 1860, 5.
57 Richard Bradshaw, "Thiodon's Wonders: A Mechanical Theatre in Nineteenth Century Australia," *Australasian Drama Studies* 51 (October 2007), 18–35.
58 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 30 August 1870, 5.
59 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 30 August 1870, 5.
60 *Northern Times* (Newcastle), 2 October 1858, 3.
61 *Northern Times* (Newcastle), 29 September 1858, 2.
62 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 4 June 1857, 5.
63 *The Age* (Melbourne), 29 May 1857, 5; *The Argus* (Melbourne), 20 May 1857, 6.
64 Mimi Colligan, "Waxworks Shows and Some of Their Proprietors in Australia, 1850s–1910s", *Australasian Drama Studies*, 34 (April 1999), 87.

65 James Neild, *My Notebook*, 9 May 1857, 158. Quoted in Mimi Colligan, "Waxworks Shows and Some of Their Proprietors in Australia, 1850s–1910s," 87.
66 Mimi Colligan, "Waxworks Shows and Some of Their Proprietors in Australia, 1850s–1910s," 88.
67 For more on Australian phrenology see Alexandra Roginski, *The Hanged Man and the Body Thief: Finding Lives in a Museum Mystery* (Melbourne, VIC: Monash University Press, 2015).
68 *Catalogue of Messrs Baume and Kreitmayer's Grand Anatomical Museum* (Melbourne, VIC: Shaw Hartnett, 1861), iv.
69 Joanna Gilmour, *Sideshow Alley: Infamy, the Macabre and the Portrait* (Canberra, ACT: National Portrait Gallery, 2015), 116. *The Argus* (Melbourne), 1 January 1862, 8.
70 For more on the Burke and Wills myth see Tim Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills: From Melbourne to Myth* (Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 2002).
71 *The Herald* (Melbourne), 8 March 1862, 5. Mimi Colligan, *Canvas Documentaries: Panoramic Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century Australia and New Zealand*, 56–60.
72 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 1 May 1862, 8.
73 *The Australasian* (Melbourne), 15 June 1889, 11.
74 Jeremy Brooker, *The Temple of Minerva: Magic and the Magic Lantern at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London 1837–1901* (London: The Magic Lantern Society, 2013), 112.
75 *The Herald* (Melbourne), 20 November 1863, 3. Professor Pepper, *The True History of the Ghost and All about Metempsychosis* (London: Cassell, 1890).
76 *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser,* 19 February 1833, 3.
77 *The Star* (Ballarat), 19 August 1862, 2.
78 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 August 1863, 8.
79 Barker, *Beaufoy Merlin: Photographer Showman 1830–1873*, 5.
80 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 August 1863, 8.
81 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 August 1863, 8.
82 *The Bendigo Advertiser*, 13 August 1863, 3; *The Herald* (Melbourne), 11 August 1863, 2.
83 *The Herald* (Melbourne), 17 August 1863, 2; *The Age* (Melbourne), 17 August 1863, 5.
84 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 August 1863, 8.
85 *The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 August 1863, 8.
86 This William Pitt may be the prominent Melbourne scene painter who in 1853 had arrived in Melbourne from London where he had family and professional connections to the theatre. Earlier that year he had painted the Burke and Wills mechanical diorama. See *Design and Art Australia Online*, accessed 1 April 2021, https://www.daao.org.au/.
87 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 1863, 1.
88 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 1863, 1.
89 *Bells Life in Sydney and Sporting Chronicle*, 26 September 1863, 2.
90 *Empire* (Sydney), 21 September 1863, 1.
91 *Empire* (Sydney), 8 September 1863, 4.
92 *Bell's Life in Victoria and Sporting Chronicle*, 19 September 1863, 3.
93 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1863, 1.
94 *Empire* (Sydney), 7 September 1863, 1.
95 *Mount Alexander Mail*, 29 September 1863, 2.
96 *The Mercury* (Hobart), 31 May 1865, 1.
97 *The Mercury* (Hobart), 31 May 1865, 2.
98 *The Herald* (Melbourne), 22 December 1874, 2.
99 *The Riverine Herald* (Eucha), 2 May 1879, 3.
100 *The Age* (Melbourne), 10 July 1879, 4.
101 *The Age* (Melbourne), 19 July 1879, 5.
102 *The Age* (Melbourne), 25 July 1879, 4.
103 *Illustrated Australian News*, 2 August 1879, 122.
104 "Scene from the Spectre drama, at the Polytechnic," *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 7 February 1863, illustrated in Jeremy Brooker, *The Temple of Minerva: Magic and the Magic Lantern*

at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London 1837–1901 (London: The Magic Lantern Society, 2013), 112.
105 *Evening News* (Sydney), 21 October 1879, 3.
106 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 1879, 5.
107 *Illustrated Sydney News*, 29 September 1879, 4.
108 *The Herald* (Melbourne), 30 November 1889, 2.
109 *The Australasian*, 7 November 1889, 26.
110 James M. Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, eds. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 21.
111 James M. Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance," 29.
112 Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 23.
113 *Melbourne Punch*, 22 May 1856, 128.
114 Elisa deCourcy and Martyn Jolly, *Empire, Early Photography and Spectacle: The Global Career of Showman Daguerreotypist J.W. Newland* (London: Routledge, 2020), 77–80.
115 *Bells Life in Sydney*, 23 April 1853, 2.
116 *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 26 February 1848, 3.
117 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 December 1856, 5.
118 Marcus Clarke, "How the Circus Came to Bullocktown," *The Australasian*, 20 August 1870, 6–7; 3 September 1870, 6.

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Part III

Stages of technology

Circus, avant-gardes and (new) media

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7 "Like a three-ring circus"

The avant-garde appropriates the circus in the battle between distraction and attractions

Tom Gunning

A young lover of clowns discovers attractions

Shortly before his untimely death in 1948 at the age of 50, Sergei Eisenstein wrote a brief essay on the technological innovation of stereoscopic cinema.[1] In the 1920s, Eisenstein had aligned the new art and technology of the cinema with the revolutionary avant-garde of the Soviet Union through his theory of montage, a radical approach not only to cinematic space and time but to the relation cinema was forging with its spectator. Fast-forward to the late 1940s: Eisenstein had survived (at great cost) not only the Nazi invasion, but the Stalinist terror, which coerced the avant-garde artist experiments of the 1920s into an anodyne celebration of the cult of personality. The Stalinist policing of aesthetic practice had curtailed Eisenstein's final masterpiece, *Ivan the Terrible*, shelving its second part and stopping the production of its third part. In the 1930s, Eisenstein officially apologised for the formalist excesses of his past work and wrote approvingly of Stalinist policies. Yet, even these essays contain attempts to extend his artistic explorations under an oppressive regime.

Initially, his essay on "Stereoscopic Films" towed the Stalinist line by denouncing the formalist art of his youth:

> Are we not witnessing the inevitable and inexorable decay of the so-called "pure" abstract art because it does not satisfy the inner urge for knowledge inherent in every progressive-minded person?
>
> This art appeared and could exist for a short period as a reflection of the decadence of the doomed social class that engendered it.[2]

But after this conventional Socialist Realist attack on modernist art, Eisenstein says something more daring:

> And yet there is a no less "abstract" form of art that has existed almost unchanged for centuries – the circus".
>
> That is because, without attempting to trespass on the sphere of knowledge with which other arts are coping more successfully, the feats of dexterity, strength, self-possession, volitional purposefulness and daring one

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-10

> sees at the circus, will always be in keeping with men's inborn striving for the fullest possible development of these qualities, a striving rooted in human nature.[3]

Praise of the circus as expressing mankind's striving for its fullest development seems little more than commonplace; but, by comparing circus to abstract art, Eisenstein smuggles in an aspect of his avant-garde youth: the attempt to undo traditional bourgeois art forms by utilising the popular arts. Borrowing from the circus spearheaded this avant-garde strategy.

In the 1920s, Eisenstein came to cinema through avant-garde theatre and had studied with the greatest Soviet experimental theatre director, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Meyerhold shook up the Russian theatre by introducing performance styles taken from a variety of popular and historical forms, including circus. The influence of circus on avant-garde theatre in the Soviet Union of the 1920s was widespread, including the Workshop of Nikolai Foregger (whose Russian acronym is Mastfor) and the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), which drew on the tradition of "eccentric" clowning and later declared, "we [FEKS] wanted to create a show in which a series of tricks would unite elements of circus, jazz, sport and cinema".[4] Theatre historian Daniel Gerould names 1922 as the height of the influence of circus on Soviet theatre.[5] In this year, Meyerhold converted the nineteenth-century play *Tarelkin's Death* into a fast-moving clown show with actors swinging on a trapeze and firing pistols at the audience.[6] This bold approach to an established classic demonstrated to Eisenstein – his young assistant on that production – that circus could enliven the theatre. Eisenstein's fascination with the circus began in childhood, and his biographers see his early encounters with clowns as formative not only of his art, but of his personality.[7] His first solo theatre production at the Proletkult Theatre in 1923 – Ostrovsky's classic comedy *Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man* (which he shortened to *Wiseman)* – strove to outdo his master Meyerhold in its eccentricity and reliance on circus. Years later Eisenstein wrote that in this production his direction "developed not only from illusionary acting movement but from the physical fact of acrobatics. A gesture expands into gymnastics, rage is expressed through a somersault, exaltation through a *salto-mortale*, lyricism on 'the mast of death'."[8]

To explicate this radically avant-garde approach to Ostrovsky's play, Eisenstein wrote his first theoretical essay, "The Montage of Attractions".[9] Eisenstein intended to use what he had learned from Meyerhold to further destroy the foundations of bourgeois theatre with its static sets and psychological conception of characters. His system of attractions would "liberate theater completely from the yoke of 'illusionary depictions' and 'representations'".[10] The montage of attractions aspired to be a scientific method of theatre analysis, breaking it into its basic elements. Smashing the unity of a realist illusion, Eisenstein approached directing as an assembly of units he called "attractions" addressed directly to the audience. In a later essay recalling this youthful period, Eisenstein explained this concept (speaking of himself in the third person):

> Don't forget it was a young engineer who was bent on finding a scientific approach to the secrets and mysteries of art.
>
> The disciplines he had studied taught him one thing: in every scientific investigation there must be a unit of measurement.
>
> So, he set out in search of the unit produced by art!
>
> Science knows "ions", "electrons," "neutrons".
>
> Let there be "attractions" in art.[11]

Eisenstein did not found his direction on the text, a concept of characters or even a plot to be "represented". The basis of his new scientific approach to theatre lay in affecting the audience, the spectator: "The molding of the audience in a desired direction (or mood) is the task of every utilitarian theater". The instrument of this process, he declared, was the "attraction", which he defined as "any aggressive moment in the theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator".[12] Eisenstein dressed his love of the circus in materialist, scientific clothes, referring to Pavlovian psychology of conditioned reflexes – the reigning influence on Soviet psychology in the 1920s.

Eisenstein wished to justify turning a classic play into a clown show; the avant-garde logic of attractions provided the means. Traditional theatre directing, Eisenstein argued, aimed at "'revealing the playwright's purpose', 'correctly interpreting the author', 'faithfully reflecting an epoch', etc". But in his new approach, "the attraction and a system of attractions provide the only basis for an effective show".[13] In his production of *Wiseman*, Eisenstein did not attempt to realise a classic text, but to put on an "effective show", using the vocabulary of popular theatre. Defining attractions as everything that made an impression on the audience – from "the color of the prima donna's tights" to Romeo's soliloquy or "a salvo under the seats of the auditorium" – Eisenstein directed attention away from a representation of the play's action and setting to its physical and emotional affects.[14] The scenography of the circus allowed Eisenstein to shift from an imagined reality and focus directly on the spectator and her reactions. Performance became circus-inspired – consisting of highly physical actions – and the stage served as an arena rather than an illusionary represented space.

Eisenstein broke Ostrovsky's play into 25 attractions.[15] These included battling clowns splashing each other with water, satirical songs and dances, the projection of a short film on a screen within the set, juggling acts and acrobatic feats; key moments were marked by traditional circus turns. At one high point, Mamayeva (the female lead) climbed a huge pole attached to another character's belt and balanced on its top (this was presumably the "mast of death" Eisenstein referred to in his later essay). The hero Glumov ascended above the stage pulled by means of a rope; the villain Golutvin balanced on a slanted wire over the heads of the audience, followed by a red-nosed clown descending the wire holding on by his teeth and finally falling into the audience. The whole

production ended with a burst of fireworks set off under the viewers' seats. In his later (1937) manuscript *Towards a Theory of Montage*, Eisenstein described these circus feats as literalisations of metaphors spoken in the dialogue (for instance, Mamayeva says "it's enough to drive one up a pole" before she clambers up the mast of death, while the clown says "oh slippery slippery are these ways", as he falls off the slant wire). Eisenstein described this transformation of narrative and dramatic action into circus acts as an "abstraction": "Thus in this first change of treatment the generalized abstraction of the circus thrust its way through the visual objectivity of the theater".[16]

Besides returning to a childhood passion and following in the footsteps of his master Meyerhold, the circus allowed Eisenstein to rethink the nature of theatrical space. As with Meyerhold's Constructivist sets of the 1920s, the stage formed a part of real space, an arena. In place of imitative gestures and feigned emotions, performers presented demonstrations of physical dexterity and skill. In place of the organic unity of character motivations and plot development of the representational-narrative theatre, the text became a pretext for a series of discontinuous attractions, following the logic of "and now for something completely different". Presenting a classic play as a "show" based in a "system of attractions" jettisoned unity of setting and action in favour of a progression founded on semi-autonomous events "aggressively" aimed at the spectator.

Eisenstein called this method the "*montage* of attractions". In his slightly condescending later account of the origin of his phrase, he wrote:

> Everyday language borrowed from industry a word which means assembling of machinery, pipes, machine tools.
>
> This striking word is "montage" which means assembling, and though it was not yet in vogue, it had every qualification to become fashionable.
>
> Very well!
>
> Let *units of impression combined into one whole* be expressed through a dual term, half industrial and half music hall.[17]

While attractions, such as traditional clown acts and feats of acrobatics, may belong to the ages, Eisenstein's concept of montage sounds distinctly modern. This hybrid phrase, and its realisation in the production of *Wiseman*, reveals the process by which Eisenstein made the circus into an avant-garde form. He consciously placed the audience or spectator at the centre of this assembly. This montage of attractions was a machine designed to affect the viewer, to make an impression on her, through a series of aggressive shocks, rather than the creation of an imagined diegesis of traditional theatre.

The term *montage* accents Eisenstein's relation to the Leftist Constructivist movement of Soviet Art of the 1920s, which took the machine as the model for art-making. Comparison to the machine underscored that montage did not indicate an inert assembly, but a purposeful design with work to do. As Eisenstein applied his method to cinema, the analogy to a machine became even clearer. In his 1925 essay "The Montage of Film Attractions", Eisenstein

applied the process of montage to film: "The author intends to subject the audience to a definite series of shocks, a 'prescription' that summarizes the general emotional effect on the audience and the pressure that will inevitably be exerted on the audience's psyche".[18] In film, as in theatre, the montage of attractions works on the spectator, moulding and transforming her. Eisenstein emphasises the aggression of the attraction and its impact on the viewer. In his 1925 essay "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form" he attacked filmmaker Dziga Vertov's term "Kino-Eye" for its apparent passivity, saying:

> *It is not a Kino-Eye that we need but a Kino-Fist!*
> Soviet cinema must cut through to the skull![19]

In the same essay he declared: "a work of art […] is first and foremost a *tractor plowing over the audience's psyche*".[20] While a certain sadism in Eisenstein's psychic make-up should never be ignored, this emphasis on the aggression defines the specific attraction the circus had for the avant-garde and its use as a weapon against official high art.

Barnum and the railroad circus: modernity under the big top

In the 1930s, after Stalinist policy replaced the eccentricity of the avant-garde with the ideals of Socialist Realism, Pavel Markov (the literary director of the Moscow Art Theatre) observed that these artists had tied the influence of the circus in the previous decade to the modern environment: "They claimed that the quickening tempo of modern life demanded a corresponding change in theater forms".[21] The circus did more than provide the avant-garde with a series of techniques; it hinted at a metapsychology of the modern spectator. The montage of attractions responded not only to the scientific love of analysis; it sprang from an awareness of the modern environment and the psychology of those who inhabit it. The tumult of stimuli with which the modern city and factory bombarded the human sensorium justified the turn to aggressive forms of art. Writers and critics such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer have all offered analyses of the modern environment as a force against which the human psyche need protection.[22] In his classic essay "The Metropolis and Modern Life" (1903), Simmel described the detached mental state the modern metropolis provoked as a defence against its perceptual and physical assaults: "There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. It is at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts".[23] Walter Benjamin's appropriated Sigmund Freud's term "stimulus shield" to describe a psychic attitude that protects one against trauma, which Benjamin attributed specifically to the impact of modern urban space and new technology.[24] This modern daily experience of shock demanded new aesthetic strategies in order to reach a blasé public. In "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility" Benjamin described the

avant-garde mode of Dada as being like a missile, saying: "It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile quality".[25] As in Eisenstein's "Kino-fist", the avant-garde required direct, quasi-tactile, contact with its audience. The work of art no longer sought to place the viewer in a contemplative absorptive reverie but grabbed her attention. The technique of the circus had always been attention-grabbing, building upon centuries of a popular scenography that prized the visceral and spectacular rather than narrative and representation. With the commercialisation of popular entertainments and the creation of a mass audience in the late nineteenth century, the circus, especially in the USA, became not only a big business but a stream-lined, steam-powered system of attractions. Applying the scientific management that characterised the innovation of Frederick Taylor and the modern factory system of the 1890s, the "railway circus" (to use Jane M. Davis's phrase), became an icon of the new age.[26]

The modernity of the circus may seem paradoxical since circus attractions – its display of exotic animals, indigenous people and "racial exotics",[27] and its accent on the body – seem in many ways to celebrate the "primitive". But, of course, fascination with the primitive characterises modern culture – not to mention modern art.[28] With the death of Barnum's greatest attraction, the massive elephant Jumbo smashed by an express train in 1885, these different energies collided disastrously. Barnum hastened to commercialise this event through photographs and lithographs, and ultimately had a taxidermist stuff Jumbo's enormous hide and put it and his skeleton on display during his 1886 season.[29] More than the nature of Barnum's attractions, however, his system of putting on a show that travelled across the country epitomised "the quickening tempo of modern life" and inspired the avant-garde as well as the modern military.[30] This showmanship took on its most memorable form in the 1880s when Barnum began to merge his circus with those of his rivals and created "The Greatest Show on Earth" and its ultimate montage of attractions: the three-ring circus.

The circus employed one of the basic forms of popular scenography: the variety form. Brooks McNamara in a classic essay defined the "variety structure in which there is no transfer of information from one act to another […]. Ordinarily there is no strong attempt to create an integrated scenography".[31] Part of the avant-garde nature of Eisenstein's production of *Wiseman* came from applying circus's variety structure – consisting of more or less independent attractions – to a play originally having a unified narrative structure. Eisenstein saw the vulnerable and impressionable spectator of modernity, accustomed to an environment of shocks, as the basic component of his system, both aesthetic and political. Instead of being insulated in a stable sense of self and the coherent world by stagecraft based on realist illusion, the spectator of attractions was stripped to a physiological and emotional core. In a word, she was overwhelmed. In his three-ring circus, Barnum created an environment where the viewer was deliberately immersed in multiple stimuli.

Contemporary journalists widely reacted to the effects of the three-ring circus. When Barnum brought his circus to Great Britain in 1889, *The Times*

of London observed: "It is precisely the immensity, the complexity, the kaleidoscopic variety and, to use the word in its strict etymological sense, the incomprehensibility of the show that Mr. Barnum's genius is displayed".[32] Historian of popular culture Robert Tolls quoted a New York critic from 1881 commenting on Barnum's three rings: "The only drawback to the performance was that the spectator was compelled to receive more than his money's worth; in other words, that while his head was turned in one direction he felt he was losing something good in another".[33] The ambivalent nature of these comments highlights the modernity and the aggressive nature of the novelty. Novelist William Dean Howells firmly denounced the innovation. Praising the simpler circus of his youth, he complained that with Barnum's spectacle he "was given more than I was able to grasp".[34] Neil Harris, in his essential discussion of Barnum, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, described the three-ring circus's effect on spectatorship this way:

> Intimacy was lost along with certain kinds of interactions between performers and spectators. The circus was becoming too big to permit audiences to do more than stay in their seat and watch the show, passive prisoners of their own excitement and bewilderment.
>
> The sparring, jostling articulate masses who swarmed through Barnum's museum in the fifties and sixties were different from the quieter crowds of the seventies who sat enraptured by the trapeze artist and animal acts.[35]

Harris's view of the new massive circus of the late nineteenth century resembles Guy Debord's twentieth-century critique of the "society of the spectacle", with its passive audience in thrall to a visual array they can barely understand or critique.[36] Harris claimed that, "[b]y the late nineteenth century, the thrust towards the spectacular had taken over mass entertainment. Stage productions featured glitter and verisimilitude".[37]

Here we encounter the basic question of the avant-garde's appropriation of the devices of the circus or the dialectic of attraction/distraction, the paradox historian of popular entertainments Robert C. Toll called "satisfaction through saturation".[38] Where Harris, Debord and others see the perils of spectacle, Eisenstein saw opportunities. The overwhelmed audience could be moulded to think and act, rather than left in a state of bewilderment. For the avant-garde the circus was a tool, not an end – attractions formed its instrument, as the spectator was its material.

The circus laid bare a central contradiction of modernity which the avant-garde responded to. Janet M. Davis puts this paradox succinctly:

> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the term "three-ring circus" is synonymous with chaos in the American lexicon. […] But […] the physical operation of the three-ring railroad circus that came to life during the Gilded Age was quite the opposite […].[39]

Davis's term for the late nineteenth-century circus balances "three-ring" and "railway". "Three-ring" introduces the possibility of chaos; "railroad" the necessity of order. As she claims, "[w]ith its competing visions of normality and subversion, the ubiquitous turn-of-the-twentieth-century railroad circus represents a potent study of contradictory cultural production".[40] By the end of the nineteenth century, the US railroad made the expanded circus possible through its rapid and reliable transportation of the material, animals and personnel. The railroad system exemplified the organisation of labour and modern management that made modern business function in a predictable and timely manner.[41] As Davis puts it, "the train turned the pastoral circus into an enormous industrial amusement, with an elaborate division of labor and a disciplined, time-bound industrial work ethic".[42] If the spectacle of surfeit and excess gave an impression of chaos, the actual process of production in the circus demanded the opposite. As Davis points out, the circus became a model of efficiency: in the 1890s the US War Department travelled with the circus "to observe how show managers coordinated massive numbers of people and animals".[43]

Davis has pointed out the parallel between this degree of organisation and the scientific management Frederick Taylor was bringing to the factory system of labour and design at this time.[44] Peel back the carnival of costumes, acrobatic feats, the kaleidoscope of visual attractions and one discovers the regimens of physical training, the organisation of labour (think of the raising of the massive big top that fascinated the population of each town the circus visited) and the 65 specially designed railway cars that ran on the transcontinental railroad that carried this factory of entertainment. Circus publicity never tried to conceal the labour which produced the circus but rendered it part of the spectacle.[45] Publicity vaunted the image of the circus as a modern industrial enterprise for decades. Cecil B. DeMille's elegiac Academy Award-winning film from 1952, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, made with the full cooperation of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, opened with the director's portentous narration. After describing the wonder and colour of the circus, DeMille intones: "Behind all this, the circus is a massive machine whose very life depends on discipline, motion and speed, a mechanized army on wheels that rolls over any obstacle in its path".[46]

We make a mistake if we see the contrast between the apparent frivolity and fantasy of circus and the purposeful rationality and discipline of the Taylorisation of labour that underlies it simply as a contradiction, rather than a source of its dialectical attraction for the avant-garde. The "circusisation" of the Soviet theatre in the early 1920s makes this abundantly clear.[47] Meyerhold claimed "bio-mechanics" – the systematic training that underlay his innovative approach to acting – was inspired by Taylor's approach to industrial labour.[48] The Proletkult movement and the left avant-garde embraced the confluence of aesthetics with modern industrial methods, seeing art as a specific form of a rationalised production.[49] The avant-garde culture of the 1920s promoted an emulation of the machine and utopian ambitions to reshape

the human body as efficient, promulgated by Taylor's Soviet disciple Alexei Gastev.[50] The artist was understood as an engineer, the performer as a precision machine. Meyerhold's physical training based on Taylor and Gastev not only aimed at providing actors with physical motions that were economical and effective but to help them achieve a new psychological perspective whereby humans could find their place among modern machines. The circus provided both the perfect model for and the best demonstration of, this new conception of art.

How are we to visualise this modern spectator as envisioned by the avant-garde of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Undoubtedly this complex issue remains a topic for further research and analysis. But provisionally, I would differentiate the spectator of modernity from the seemingly spellbound members of the society of spectacle envisioned by Situationist Guy Debord in post-war France (imaged on the cover of the American edition of his essay by an audience wearing 3D glasses, supposedly enthralled with the latest innovation of stereoscopic cinema). Eisenstein had a more dynamic view of his spectator than Debord – just as he had a more positive image of stereoscopic cinema. Yet, as we confront the aporia of the spectator of the circus seen through avant-garde lenses, we do sense a certain contradiction at its centre.

The Greatest Show on Earth, DeMille's belated cinematic paean to the circus, was released in 1952, just a couple of years before the Ringling Bro. and Barnum & Bailey Circus played its final season under the canvas Big Top tent so essential to its identity (in 1955). This frankly rather bizarre film spends much of its two and half hours showing circus performances and the labour that goes into them, rather than developing its rather banal romance plots (Thank God!). It frequently cuts away from the acts to show reactions of its all-white squeaky-clean audience. Clearly staged rather than documentary footage (and including a number of cameos of Paramount stars) these shots are striking in their variety, revealing an unexpectedly complex view of the circus audience. Many are conventional reaction shots: the audience applauding, laughing or gasping, pointing in unison, turning their heads to follow the swing of a trapeze, or a woman saying she cannot watch a death-defying act. But some shots show more peculiar reactions: a woman who turns to watch one ring, while a man watches the other. The consumption of carnival food becomes almost as important as visual absorption; kids stare off as they lick ice cream cones, scoff down hotdogs and pink cotton candy or slurp bottles of pop. One adult laughs uproariously and gulps down his ice cream while his son sitting next to him watches warily, embarrassed or frightened by all the frivolity around him. Another small boy glumly watches a midget turning flips while the rest of the audience laughs and applauds. A strange ambivalence appears here: a mixture of delight, anxiety and even ennui, all the stranger for being deliberately staged for the film. In this elegiac tribute to circus in its fading days, we see less nostalgia than a complex image of a public enjoying its excitement and anxiety by satiating itself with food and spectacle.

Detachment at the bar and the flying trapeze

The modern spectator seems encased in a sort of boredom – what Simmel called the blasé attitude – and requires a degree of aggression from an attraction to gain her attention. Jonathan Crary has defined attention as a keystone for the experience of modernity and the psychological discourse surrounding it.[51] This discourse paired attention with its apparent opposite, distraction; but for Crary, this opposition reflects less a logical contradiction, than a dynamic interaction. "Attention and distraction were not two essentially different states, but existed upon a single continuum, thus attention was, as most increasingly agreed, a dynamic process, intensifying and diminishing, rising and falling ebbing and flowing according to an indeterminant set of variables".[52] In asserting this continuum, Crary somewhat deviates from many accounts of modernity (he cites Simmel, Benjamin and Adorno) that see distraction as the decay of attentiveness.

> My contention, on the contrary, is that modern distraction was *not* a disruption of stable or "natural" kind of sustained value-laden perception that had existed for centuries but was an *effect*, and in many cases a constituent element, of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects. If distraction emerges as a problem in the late nineteenth century, it is inseparable from the parallel construction of an attentive observer in various domains.[53]

Crary plots the terrain of modernity as a battleground between attention and distraction. This struggle results less in a zero-sum game than a dynamic interplay, with various strategies that keep the extremes in play. For instance, Richard Wagner designed the scenography of his festival theatre in Bayreuth as a major bastion against the distractions of modern life, fostering a nearly hypnotic absorption in the spectator.[54] In 1878, soon after its opening, Eugène Véron observed that during these performances, "the spectator would be exclusively preoccupied with the spectacle and could not be distracted by foreign impressions […] and nothing could distract their attention from the point on which it should be concentrated".[55] Crary follows Theodore Adorno in calling this approach "phantasmagoric", which Adorno defined as "the occultation of production by means of the outside of the product".[56]

Crary poses a counterpoint in effect to Wagner's phantasmagoria in his discussion of Georges Seurat and especially his paintings of popular entertainment: *Parade de cirque* (1887–1888) and *Cirque* (1891).[57] But besides his profound analyses of these paintings (including his innovative comparison of *Cirque* to the animations of Émile Reynaud), I find it surprising that Crary says little about the circus, which would seem to be the most obvious antidote to Wagner's spectacle of absorption. Seeing the phantasmagoria as the instrument of repression and the circus as the means of enlightenment, however, would be too simplistic. The circus remains an ambivalent product of modernity, offering possibilities rather than a conscious critique. The Soviet theatre of

the 1920s – of Foregger, Meyerhold and Eisenstein – *transformed* the circus they appropriated and redefined its possibilities. For the avant-garde, the circus offered an exploration of the possibilities of spectatorship in modernity with an entirely different model from that of drama-based theatre or the trance theatre of Wagner and the later Symbolists. These possibilities involved more than a choice between the regime of attraction and distraction. At the core of the modern experience lay a desire for distraction.

A modern work guides us to this core: Edouard Manet's 1882 painting *A Bar at the Folies Bergère*. As Manet's final masterpiece, this work presents us with many enigmas which art historians have delighted in exploring, especially the bizarre sense of depth and surface created, partly by an apparent misalignment of the mirror that forms the background of the scene, and the resulting juxtaposition of reflection and reality.[58] As Paul Alexis said in a contemporary review of the 1882 Salon where it was exhibited, the painting became "the most exactly modern […] of the works on show".[59] Central to its riddle of surface and apparent depth is the face and expression of the barmaid who confronts us directly with her gaze. Robert Herbert says, "in his austere figure we find the anonymity and loneliness inherent in the arbitrary encounters of the modern life".[60] T.J. Clarke's analysis of what he called "Manet's painting of modernity"[61] revolves around this ambiguous look, "starting from its lack of depth, its resistance to interpretation, its impossible mirror and incomprehensible barmaid".[62] Clarke insists on the illegibility of this face as it regards us, its range of possible states in mind:

> that of patience, perhaps, or boredom and tiredness, or self-containment. We might even have it as "inexpressive" in the sense of the word that implies there is something being deliberately held back, or some mistake has been made about how best to signal what one is feeling. But the problem is that all these descriptions fit easily and so lightly, and none cancels out or dominates the rest: so that I think the viewer ends by accepting – or at least by recognizing – that no one relation to this face and pose and way of looking will ever quite seem the right one.[63]

This face haunts us, rather than simply appearing as tabula rasa. It is far from the hidden interiority of a sphinx or the Giaconda. Rather, like so much in the painting, it remains a surface that both projects outward and reflects back, a gaze. Associations with boredom seem hard to shake, even if they never become simply the solution to the question. An invocation of Simmel's discussion of the blasé attitude seems most appropriate, and leads to Clarke's conclusion, "she is *detached*: that is the best description".[64]

Why make this digression that seems to take us so far from the circus? The distance becomes only apparent, and the circus is signalled almost comically, by a play on a scale as well as surface and depth. Where are we? we might ask; the painting's title answers unambiguously: at the Folies Bergère. This famous Parisian location was not simply a bar where men could drink and pick up

women, but a glorified version of the Parisian café-concert, a popular form where both entertainment and drinks were provided. Although the singers of popular songs reigned supreme at the café-concert (sometimes called the café-chantant), other forms of entertainment performed as well, especially at the Folies Bergère. If our attention detaches itself from the direct gaze of the barmaid and her visually puzzling environment, we discover at the very margin of the painting, in the upper left corner, the minuscule legs of the attraction then performing: a female aerialist on a swinging trapeze. This tiny fragment of female anatomy, taking up less surface space than the face of the barmaid, adds certain wry humour to her sombre tone.

The Folies Bergère's impresario, Léon Saris, had made the interior of his establishment resemble a theatre with tiers of permanent comfortable seats (reflected in the mirror) somewhat separate from the promenade and bar where patrons could circulate easily and interact. The circus supplied many of the non-musical acts, including animal acts and acrobats, but primary among these were the aerialists on the flying trapeze.[65] Invented a couple of decades earlier by Jules Léotard (who also designed the close-fitting knitted costume which bears his name), this spectacular act became a mainstay at the Folies Bergère. At first male stars such as the comic Hanlon-Lee Brothers dominated the aerial acts. Eventually, female artistes appeared, such as Leona Dare and Katarina Johns (who is probably the performer shown in Manet's painting).[66] J.K. Huysmans described the hurly-burly that characterised the Folies Bergère in 1879: "it is only with difficulty that you can move about, and only with difficulty that you can make out, through the dense ranks of bodies, an acrobat on stage who is methodically devoting himself to some gymnastic exercises on a fixed bar".[67] The Folies Bergère created a modern realm of distraction with competing centres of attention, rendered by our difficulty in initially noticing the trapeze artist in Manet's composition.

The three-ring circus remained an American practice while European circuses retained the single ring presentation. But Huysmans's description of the Folies Bergère indicates that the push-pull of multiple attractions dominated, even if it lacked the scale of Barnum's Big Top. Manet's painting uses the contrast in scale between the supposedly featured attraction of the trapeze and the inexpressive face of the barmaid to convey the competing registers of attention. Whether we read her expression, as many contemporaries did, as boredom or not, her gaze clearly is not focused on the trapeze performance. Undoubtedly, as a working girl, she could not afford to focus her attention on the act as a paying customer. But we also sense that this world of entertainment holds little that captivates her. An impresario for such a site of modern encounters would strive to mount attractions that could pull such young women out of their blasé state, shielded against the shocks of modernity. In his composition, Manet captured precisely the intertwining of distraction and attraction that Crary describes. We are far from a society of the spectacle as usually understood, filled with self-satisfied spectators absorbed by their fantasies. Attention here remains unstable.[68]

What conundrum could this face present to the avant-garde? Let me return briefly to Eisenstein's reflections on his youthful attempts to destroy the illusions of bourgeois theatre. His 1945 essay "How I Became a Film Director" recalls watching the face of a seven-year-old son of an usheress at performances at the Proletkult theatre. His expressions perfectly mirrored the situations he watched on stage, leading Eisenstein to conclude "the boy must have simultaneously and fully experienced all that the actors on stage were experiencing – or convincingly portraying". This mirroring horrified the young revolutionary and avant-gardist:

> That was downright dangerous.
>
> Horribly unspeakably dangerous.
>
> Only think why strive for reality if for a small sum of money you can satisfy yourself in your imagination without moving from your comfortable theater seat.[69]

For Eisenstein, the attractions of *Wiseman* with direct effects on the audience and destruction of any imagined plot and setting counteracted such danger.

The circus enacted the modern seesaw between distraction and attraction. It approached the viewer not as a group of dreamers to be seduced into a fantasy, but as a body and psyche that must be physically and emotionally seized, shocked out of impassivity. The structure of the circus recognised the viewer's distraction, her need to be shaken out of a non-centred blasé attitude. But it did not attempt to centre attention hypnotically as Wagner had done with his darkened theatre, a hidden orchestra and a set designed to channel sightlines to its most essential aspects. Instead, the circus embraced a scattered spectacle and sought to offer mobile attractions wherever one turned, to display more than anyone could take in in a single glance. In a culture that acknowledged boredom, the montage of attractions formed a response.

Of course, this dichotomy presents things too tidily; circus impresarios made use of whatever was available to move their audience, including scenarios of fantasy. Perhaps, only avant-garde theorists and practitioners recognised the possibilities of the circus and radicalised their implication for an assault on traditional theatre and spectatorship. Although the distinction between modernism and the avant-garde may divide the complexity of a range of practices too sharply, we can see them as alternatives. Wagner's Bayreuth versus Barnum's three-ring circus does indicate distinct options available to the artist confronting the dilemma of modernity. That Eisenstein embraced both – from his youthful *Wiseman* to his 1940 production of *Die Walkure* at the Bolshoi – as part of Soviet cultural reaction to the Stalin–Hitler nonaggression pact, drives home how unstable the currents of modernity may be. Like a three-ring circus: we never can be sure which way to look.

Notes

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2 Eisenstein, "Stereoscopic Films," 130.
3 Eisenstein, "Stereoscopic Films," 130.
4 Leonid Trauberg quoted in Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater: Tradition and the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 124.
5 Daniel Gerould, "Eisenstein's *Wiseman*," *The Drama Review* 18:1 (1974), 71.
6 Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 186.
7 See Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: The Definitive Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 23–24; Yon Barna, *Eisenstein* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 33–34; and Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography* (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 2001), 5.
8 Sergei Eisenstein, "Through Theater to Cinema," in *Film Form*, ed. and transl. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1949), 7–8.
9 Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," in *Eisenstein Writings 1922–1935*, ed. and transl. Richard Taylor (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 33–38.
10 Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 35.
11 Sergei Eisenstein, "How I Became a Film Director," in *Notes of a Film Director* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d. (1946)), 16.
12 Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions," 34.
13 Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 35.
14 Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 35.
15 Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 36.
16 Sergei Eisenstein, *Towards a Theory of Montage*, eds. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1991), 231.
17 Eisenstein, "How I Became a Film Director," 17.
18 Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 46.
19 Sergei Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," in *Eisenstein Writings 1922–1935*, ed. and transl. Richard Taylor (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 64.
20 Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," 62.
21 Quoted by Gerould, "Eisenstein's *Wiseman*," 72.
22 See besides the essays cited below David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (New York: Urizen Press, 1979), 135–160; and my essay "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In) Credulous Spectator," *Art & Text* 34 (1989).
23 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Modern Life," in *Individuality and Social Structures,* ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 329.
24 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings* (vol. 4, 1938–1940), transl. Harry Zorn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 317–318.
25 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings* (vol. 3, 1935–1938), transl. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zorn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 2002), 119.
26 For Taylor's innovations see Daniel Nelson, *Frederick W. Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1980). See also Jane M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
27 For a full consideration of the Barnum's display of indigenous peoples, see Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and The Making of U.S Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
28 See Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Random House, 1938).
29 On Jumbo, with lavish illustrations, see Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt II, and Peter W. Kunhardt, *P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman – An Illustrated Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 273–281; 298–301.
30 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 78.

31 Brooks McNamara, "Popular Scenography," *The Drama Review* 18:1 (1974), 19.
32 Quoted in Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 275.
33 Robert C. Toll, *On with the Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 62.
34 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 25.
35 Harris, *Humbug*, 241.
36 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 1983).
37 Harris, *Humbug*, 291.
38 Toll, *On with the Show*, 62.
39 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 81.
40 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 25.
41 For the importance of the US railroad to the emerging business practices see Alfred Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977; especially Part II "The Revolution in Transportation and Communication," 79–205).
42 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 51.
43 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 78.
44 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 42.
45 Davis, *The Circus Age*, 46–50.
46 *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Paramount Pictures, 1952) directed by Cecil B. DeMille.
47 Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater*, 94.
48 Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 183.
49 Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159–160.
50 Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 145–164.
51 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 22–23.
52 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 47.
53 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 49.
54 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 247–248.
55 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 252.
56 Theodore Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Manchester: New Left Books, 1981), 85; see also my treatment of the Phantasmagoria in "The Long and Short of it: Centuries of Projecting Shadows: From Natural Magic to the Avant-Garde," in *The Art of Projection*, eds. Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), 23–35.
57 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 186.
58 T. J. Clarke, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 24–254.
59 Quoted in Clarke, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 239.
60 Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 80.
61 Clarke, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 245.
62 Clarke, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 248.
63 Clarke, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 251.
64 Clarke, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 254.
65 Albert Boime, "Manet's *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère* as an Allegory of Nostalgia," in *Textual Intersections: Literature, History and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Rachael Langford (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 119–139.
66 Boime, "Manet's *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*."
67 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Parisian Sketches*, trans. Brendan King (Sawtry: Langford Lodge, 2004), 32.
68 We might contrast Debord's discussion with Siegfried Kracauer's 1926 essay "The Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and

trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323–328. Of course, the difference in period of writing partly explains the differences.

69 Eisenstein, "How I Became a Film Director," 13.

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8 The animated circus and new arts of motion

Kristian Moen

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, the animator Norman McLaren returned to his distinctive technique of drawing directly onto celluloid with *Hoppity Pop* (1946). In the film, three different coloured shapes spring from below the screen and begin to perform an extraordinary series of movements and metamorphoses to the music of a calliope, an instrument traditionally used for "announcing the arrival of the circus with its ghostly, fluted timbre".[1] Each set in their own section of the frame, the shapes begin as a blue squiggly line, two red triangles with their tips touching, and a green X shape. They jitter to the music, stretch, spin and reform themselves. As the film progresses over its less than two-minute running time, the shapes twist, turn, split and transform, taking on anthropomorphic and expressive forms. Briefly fleeing the screen, they return and new shapes join them – the frame becomes filled with moving shapes, sometimes in unison and sometimes in counterpoint, which continue to perform until the music stops. Moving from the high culture and avant-garde associations with the Museum of Non-Objective Art that he had developed just a few years earlier in New York, McLaren draws his abstractions into a new context: the popular entertainments of the circus. Much like the works he created within a milieu of modernist experimentation, McLaren's animated circus became a free-flowing and playful display of colour and form in motion.

As animation is a medium centrally concerned with the spectacular and expressive potential of movement, it is little wonder that an array of films – including *Hoppity Pop* – would invoke, recreate and reimagine the circus in animated form. Especially in the American context, the circus as a historical institution was integrally entwined with movement: the travelling show criss-crossing the country on the rail, the labour of humans and animals building enormous temporary tents, the languorous parade of marvels marching down the city street, the big top showcasing multiple spectacular activities taking place at the same time, the trapeze artists embodying human flight, the controlled – and sometimes out-of-control – movement of animals. Each of these elements helped shape the circus as a sight of extraordinary spectacle and motion. The circus appeared as a recurring site throughout early animation, providing the background and the subject matter for dozens of popular

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-11

animated series alongside more experimental animated works.[2] Much more than simply a means to represent the circus, the form and appeal of animated films were also aligned with the circus. Writing in 1934, the architect, stage designer and writer Claude Bragdon explained how animated films "have less and less affinity with what is called 'good theatre' and more and more with the three-ringed circus, with its clowning and acrobatics, its thrills, stunts, surprises and races punctuated with destruction and disaster".[3] For Bragdon, this was a problem. But for animators and artists, the circus-like qualities of animation were a source of creative potential.

Alexander Calder created his own animated circus with *Calder's Circus/Cirque Calder* (1926–1931). This was a performance of doll-like sculptures, motion contraptions and mechanical toys which would unfold like a circus on a compact "stage" that Calder would fashion within spaces such as the floor of an apartment living room. While not animated in exactly the same sense as an animated film, the work's emphasis on mobility and its use of automated devices – among other elements – lent it an animated quality that would shape its form, its reception and its impact. This chapter examines how *Calder's Circus* and a diverse range of animated circus films produced between the 1910s and the 1930s were situated in the overlapping spaces between animation, avant-garde art and the circus. Rather than adopting a generalised definition or essentialist idea of the avant-garde, I use it as an optic which brings certain features to the foreground. Reaching back in time to the nineteenth century and moving beyond the confines of specific artistic movements, I hope to illuminate how *Calder's Circus* and a wide array of animated films share the aesthetic approaches associated with avant-garde art, including qualities of subversion, resistance, playfulness and liveliness.

Calder's Circus was celebrated by prominent avant-garde artists in Paris, and Calder would go on to develop aspects of its aesthetics in his later hugely influential works of kinetic art. The performance that was documented in *Le Grand Cirque Calder 1927* (Painlevé, 1955) is made up of almost 30 acts, with an array of dolls or toys enacting different scenarios drawn from the circus. Constructed from materials including wire, cork and cloth, these miniature performers are set in motion by Calder, who would arrange the apparatuses and position his performers for their moment in the spotlight. From acrobats to bucking broncos to chariot races to tightwire acts, Calder's circus displayed a panoply of motion. Some are visually unsettling: a belly dancer whose winding mechanical control allows for her bodily movements to have alternating rhythms, a balloon attached to a clown's mouth which topples a female assistant, a clown whose head extends each time he takes off another layer of clothing. Some offer more elaborate set-ups, showing off kinetic ingenuity: a wire weight-lifter's body jerks awkwardly as he lifts a wire weight and sets it down again, a tubular sword-swallower bends carefully so that he is not pierced by the blade in his body and wire acrobats catch one another while swinging through the air. The design of these circus performers and their environs is expressive and simple, highlighting that these figures are made for motion.

It is little wonder that *Calder's Circus* would be of considerable interest to a range of artists in the circles of the Parisian avant-garde; many of the qualities evident in the work resonated with the formal experimentation of modernist ideas and methods at the time, including the unfamiliar use of found objects, the reliance on simplified forms and the creation of striking juxtapositions.[4] Gabrielle Buffet connects *Calder's Circus* to an emerging avant-garde fascination with motion, including "Futurist theories and manifestos" and Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase", as well as new approaches to sculpture in the work of artists such as Naum Gabo and Alexander Archipenko.[5] At the same time, she writes that Calder "was more affected by mechanical dynamism than by the artistic atmosphere in which he grew up, and the four years he spent studying engineering left a permanent mark". In addition to its relation to artistic movements and engineering practices, the work is deeply indebted to popular forms. For example, L. Joy Sperling has shown how *Calder's Circus* uses Schoenhut's "Humpty Dumpty Circus" – a mechanised circus toy that first came out in 1903 – while at the same time drawing upon Calder's experience watching actual circus performances in both American and French contexts.[6] It is by creatively developing an aesthetics of motion from avant-garde, scientific and popular contexts that *Calder's Circus* generates much of its artistic power.

Linking Calder's Circus to the dynamics at play in a range of animated films from the first half of the twentieth century, I examine how the circus offered a highly charged site through which to celebrate, question and explore the aesthetics of motion. Drawing Calder's Circus into the orbit of films, including the stop motion *Fétiche Prestidigitateur* (Starewicz, 1934) and the feature-length Disney animation *Dumbo* (Sharpsteen, 1941), we can see how the distinctive forms and spectacles of the circus were transposed and extended into new technological and artistic forms offered by animation. Circuses offered a particularly suitable form for animation as their varied events needed little narrative motivation and their emphasis on spectacles of motion coincided closely with animated form. As the circus was fluidly drawn into animation through its very form, two other central spectacles of the circus also lent themselves particularly well to animation: aerial performances and animal acts. The flight of aerialists and acrobats was a recurring sight of fantastic freedom in animated films, a place of wonder that offered extraordinary scenes of mobility. Similarly, the circus was transformed into a space where the vitality of animals became a central thematic and visual concern. Opening up new routes of freedom where the structure of events, the images of flight and the lives of animals express liberatory potential, animated films used fantasies of motion in ways that resonated with *Calder's Circus*. Drawn into animated form, the circus became a sight of mobility, expression and freedom.

Motion and discontinuity in the animated circus

Among the earliest visitors to *Calder's Circus* were Gustave Fréjaville and André Legrand (writing under the pen name Legrand-Chabrier). As established music

hall and circus critics, they offered a perceptive account of Calder's playful and astonishing performance that coupled a sense of enchantment with seeing astonishing sights of liveliness. Fréjaville characterised the experience of watching *Calder's Circus* as if he were peering through an "eyeglass" and seeing "the illusion of a real circus becoming animated".[7] For Legrand, as well as displaying the skill of an animator with its "marvel of technical schematic observation", *Calder's Circus* evoked a more artistic and creative set of aims.[8] Describing Calder as an "animator of the circus", he wrote:

> His artists are the toys that he has conceived and created to resemble men and animals of the circus ring, based on their exercises. These are not marionettes, exactly. These are stylized silhouettes, dazzling in their condensed resemblance, and obtained by means of chance, iron wire, coils, cork, elastic bands … the resurrection of the dead from the "trash"… rather than take that in a pejorative sense, in the end it is a divine act to return aesthetic form and life to this junk.[9]

Jed Perl describes how Calder had found a highly sensitive audience in Legrand.[10] Not only was Legrand an established critic of circuses and the music hall, he was associated with the avant-garde Symbolist circle of Remy de Gourmont and had written on a key influence of this circle, the poet and critic Théophile Gautier. Perl observes that it may have taken one with

> Legrand's largeness of spirit to grasp the idiosyncratic brilliance of Calder's still nascent gifts – to grasp them at a time when Calder himself may not have known exactly what he was up to. Legrand recognized what was to become Calder's first true subject – namely, the poetic possibilities of popular expression and the high lyric art to be extracted from quotidian themes.[11]

And more. With his understanding of Symbolist art and Gautier's critical approach, Legrand would have been attuned to the artistic potential and oneiric beauty to be found outside of established narrative structures or representational values.

This kind of perspective was a key element of changing notions of artistic form over the last two centuries, an integral part of what Jacques Rancière characterises as the "aesthetic regime of art". For Rancière, "Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it […] a regime of perception, sensation and interpretation of art is constituted and transformed by welcoming images, objects and performances that seem most opposed to the idea of fine art".[12] This open and playful vision of art has shaped the potentials of aesthetic form, allowing for a more varied vision of what art could be and how it could open up new perspectives rather than abiding by hierarchies of value. Rancière writes:

> The aesthetic paradigm was constructed against the representative order, which defined discourse as a body with well-articulated parts, the poem

> as a plot, and a plot as an order of actions. This order clearly situated the poem – and the artistic productions for which it functioned as a norm – on a hierarchical model: a well-ordered body where the upper part commands the lower, the privilege of action […]. The aesthetic revolution developed as an unending break with the hierarchical model of the body, the story, and action. The free people, says Schiller, is the people that plays.[13]

Calder's Circus was embedded in the aesthetic regime of art. Rather than a bravura performance of skill or a carefully woven narrative, the miniature circus broke with established values and structures in order to allow details of form and movement to come to the fore. Accompanied by sudden and seemingly unmotivated shifts in tone, compressed in time and space, and removed from its place, the circus was recast as animated art.

Animated circus films from the same period similarly tended to avoid narrative aims in their self-consciously novel displays of forms in motion. The lack of a prominent narrative through-line was certainly not atypical in mainstream animations at the time – a string of gags and self-conscious displays of animatedness were typical to the form through its early years and continued to be evident in certain production contexts long after. But, where the circus helped create a distinctive quality for animated films was in its pre-existing string of events – a ready-made series of recognisable scenes could unfold with minimal justification. Dozens of animated films at the time would be structured around a series of elements drawn from the circus: a poster or parade announcing the circus's arrival, the putting up of the big top, sideshow performers, an animal menagerie, animal acts involving bareback riders, elephant performances and lion tamers, and aerial acts such as shallow dives, trapeze artists and tightrope walkers. Refiguring these varied events and embellishing them with gags, character-based incidents or extraordinary images of motion, animated films would develop their animated circuses from a series of events with little attention to developing a cohesive narrative. For example, *Bobby Bumps at the Circus* (Bray, 1916) offers a very loose narrative about Bobby and his dog Fido wanting to attend the circus as a pretext for a series of visual gags and spectacles involving circus elephants and bareback horse riding. Well into the 1930s and 1940s, this aesthetic of the circus would continue to structure animated films. For example, *Animal Cracker Circus* (Harrison, 1938) and *Circus Today* (Avery, 1940) were little more than a series of circus events transfigured by animation and given humorous twists. Even in more narratively integrated films, a similar attention to displaying a range of circus events dominated. *Mickey's Circus* (Sharpsteen, 1936), for example, is loosely based on Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse attempting to deal with the unruly activities of a troupe of performing seals and orphan mice. Over the course of its various accidents and events, the film unfolds as if it were a circus performance, showcasing animal tricks, clowning, the human cannonball, high-wire acts and a shallow dive.

With the same supervising director, *Dumbo* – the fourth feature-length animation produced by Walt Disney – adopted a similar balance between depicting a narrative and presenting an unfolding series of animated circus events. In "*Dumbo* and the Circus of Childhood", Michael Carlton describes the structure:

> *Dumbo* is less a traditional three act story than a series of individual sequences loosely tied together […]. with different sequences borrowing their tone or content from the circus itself – the advertising extravaganza of arriving in town, the gala display of putting up the tent, the parade, the animal acts, the freak show, and the clowns […]. It all ends with the ultimate flying act, in which Dumbo is able to perform aerial stunts as the new star of the show.[14]

Despite such elements of discontinuity, the narrative drive of *Dumbo* still threatened to dominate the film in the eyes of Siegfried Kracauer, writing at the time of the film's release:

> One is reminded of the old comedies; they too have suffered from their extension to feature length. Film comedy and cartoon coincide in that they do not aim at the development of plots but rather at the exposition of particular incidents. For both kinds of film the whole "story" is just a gag or a series of gags. Hence they should be brief; for only on this condition can the plot keep its quality of a thread that holds together the pearls of the gags.[15]

In *Hollywood Flatlands*, Esther Leslie highlights how Kracauer saw *Dumbo* as having "betrayed the anarchic essence of the cartoon".[16] She contextualises Kracauer's account in relation to an earlier article of his, "a paean to the Spanish circus act, Andreu-Rivel". Leslie describes how that article emphasised the value of performance as "a collection of chances, barely held together into a unity" so that "[t]he hierarchy of values of the everyday is reversed, or set in question". In such an act, aligned with an aesthetic regime of art, "the unimportant looms large" and one finds "a refusal to follow the path straight ahead, in favour of the inadvertent inventiveness of ideas".[17] The freedom afforded by a departure from narrative determinants – turning towards the aesthetics of the circus – opens up new paths of thought and imagination.

In many respects, the "Pink Elephants on Parade" dream sequence in *Dumbo* captures the extraordinary potentials of departing from narrative continuity and entering into the discontinuous world of the circus. Proceeding from the floating ephemerality and mutable surface of bubbles, the sequence unfolds as an extraordinary series of metamorphoses evoking imagery of the circus, including the performing elephants themselves, tightrope walkers and sideshow performers. The sequence intensifies its abstractions as it shifts away from the iconography of the circus after a particularly astonishing series of

overlapping images: a belly-dancing elephant becomes reduced to a circle which then opens to reveal an eyeball. The surrealist qualities introduce a new kind of oneiric world, with the sequence shifting tenor to focus on images of modern motion. It begins with elephants dancing, skating and skiing. After two elephants become charged with electricity, modern modes of frenzied motion – cars, trains, speedboats and roller coasters – blast across the frame. These images coalesce and clash, exploding into slowly tumbling pink elephants that metamorphosise into the purple hue of clouds in the dawn light. This is a visual rhyme of *Dumbo*'s later flight, a dreamlike image of movement that will add a final, climactic scene of motion to the film. Avoiding the strictures of representational accuracy and conventional plotting, motion comes to the fore. Rather than a detour from the film's formal and thematic concerns, the sequence can be seen as a distillation of those concerns, highlighting the primacy of motion in a free-flowing, delightful and unexpected outpouring of transforming imagery.

Much like these animated circuses, the performances in *Calder's Circus* were primarily developed to foreground motion. As Calder turned more towards abstraction shortly after the first performances of the circus, the same emphasis on motion underpinned his work. He wrote: "As truly serious art must follow the greater laws, and not only appearances, I try to put all the elements in motion in my mobile sculptures. It's a matter of harmonizing these movements, thus arriving at a new possibility of beauty".[18] *Calder's Circus* drew upon such an approach to a multiplicity of movement in its animated poetics. In a short piece he wrote in 1931, Calder highlighted the mobility of his art, writing of "vectors which represent speeds, velocities, accelerations, forces, etc" in which "Nothing at all of this is fixed. Each element able to move, to stir, to oscillate, to come and go in its relationships with the other elements in its universe".[19] The same kind of mobile energy unfolds in the circus animations of his own work and contemporaneous animators – a flow and flux of movement represented through the movement of animated circus performers.

Kineticism and aerial performances

Aerial artists and animal acts were two of the most important kinetic sights of the circus. They were also integral to animated circuses, spectacularly displaying animals – often invested with anthropomorphic qualities – and showing impossible motions of extraordinary flight. In a passage quoted by Rancière in relation to the aesthetic regime of art, Théodore de Banville wrote of how poetry could be expressed through aerial performances with their animalistic nature:

> Reviving the beast and the god in the human, such is the task of the poet, having remained instinctive in a world stuffed with commonplaces, and whose thinking soars winged and free above frenetic stupidity. This is also the task of the mime and the gymnast. But what the poet does

> only figuratively, though his soaring and leaping rhythms, the mime does in reality, literally. He frees his very own flesh from awkwardness, from the painfully acquired heaviness of social man. He has rediscovered the young fawn's startled flight, the cat's gracious jumps, the monkey's terrifying leaps, the panther's dazzling energy, and at the same time this fraternity with the air, with space, with invisible matter, that creates both bird and god.[20]

Developing de Banville's ideas, Rancière describes how "the acrobat clown" defies "terrestrial gravity and the game of social roles".[21] Motion, aerial performance and animality come together in such performances. The combination of animality and flight in de Banville's account is significant for animated circuses as they developed both liberatory facets through extraordinary visions of kineticism. In doing so, animated circuses envision freedom from human constraints that corresponds with the freedom afforded by a departure from narrative structures.

Qualities of motion and flight are addressed by Adolf Behn in an early account of Calder's mobile sculptures from the late 1920s, "Sculpture as Aerial Act: Alexander Calder at the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf". Behn writes:

> The wire frames, which stand there gently bobbing, springing, vibrating like soundlessly working circus performers, are drawn with wonderful wit, and it's delightful to follow how the loops, bends, and twists of wire drastically characterize human and animal. Sculpture has become … an aerial act.[22]

For Behn, this is a striking break from traditions which have emphasised "mass, corporeality" in sculpture, following on from the work of Archipenko. Behn draws out vital qualities of lightness and animated movement in Calder's art, writing of "these aerial acrobats of Calder's, which are a downright apotheosis of the circus performer".[23] While referring to a different kind of sculpture than the ones animated by Calder in the circus, the same emphasis on the variations and unexpected turns of aerial motion appears throughout *Calder's Circus*: little bits of cloth that represent birds erratically vibrate as they jerkily make their way down a wire to the arm of a costumed performer; a spotlight casts an ominous shadow on a long-limbed wire figure who slides down a tight rope; another performer leaps from a height, slowed in their descent by their outfit puffing out beneath them. In *Le Grand Cirque Calder 1927*, the most elaborate aerial performance occurs near the end of the film. After setting up a stretch of canvas as a safety net beneath an elevated tight rope, a wire figure is attached so that it can swing back and forth at the movement of a pulley. With hooks for hands and feet, this tiny performer leaps across space, grabbing onto a series of platforms suspended in the air. These aerial acts in *Calder's Circus* offer miniature dramas that foreground air rather than solidity, the sudden movement of flight rather than the sculpted form. The movements are awkward, erratic

and abrupt. But their impact highlights the fundamental visual appeal of seeing flight itself.

Animation lends itself particularly well to the extraordinary imagery of flight. Peta Tait describes the impact of seeing aerial acts with real performers: "wingless flying invited poetic responses of wonder and astonishment that elevated it beyond humanness, as if performers were superhuman and god-like. Flying acts evoked ideas of freedom from the constraints of everyday movement, reinforced by the defiance of gravity, of natural laws".[24] Animation emphasised this sense of expansive and limitless motion, from early examples such as Dud's dreams of being an aerial performer at a visiting circus in *Boyhood Days, Dud the Circus Performer* (Carlson, 1919) to later visions of motion taking flight in films such as *Buddy's Circus* (King, 1934) with its climactic array of high-wire stunts. Animated circuses would often use aerial scenes for their most spectacular moments. *Mickey's Circus* (1936), for example, builds its finale around aerial performance, with Mickey Mouse blasted out of a cannon and landing on a high wire. As the scene develops, it continues to create extraordinary motion: the animated characters are drawn into a performance of flight and descent, balance and counterbalance, that is punctuated by dynamic framings and contrasts of colour. Bodies twist and pull back against gravity, objects stretch and distort, motion suddenly switches direction and changes speed – all of this culminates with an electrified Mickey and Donald balancing on unicycles and joining together as their images are superimposed, multiplied and distorted. While the scenario itself displays a dangerous and dramatic activity, the formal expression of aerial movement offers a thrilling display of animated motion.

Perhaps the most famous instance of an animated aerial performance occurs in *Dumbo* when the young elephant launches himself through the air in a scene of extraordinary vitality, dynamism and lightness. This display of flight under the big top shows a graceful Dumbo, a break from the more naturalistic scenes and a move into wonderful impossibility. Like a plane – which is a visual reference point acknowledged later in the film in a newspaper headline for the "Dumbombers For Defense" – Dumbo soars above, held aloft by his ears. This sense of freedom, coupled with speed and a seemingly unbounded movement through space, is picked up at the end of the film when Dumbo is shown in flight, following a streamlined circus train. In a modern context where the "powerful and supple movement" of trains would be compared with "acrobatic prowess" and where modern scientific ideals of motion were becoming vitalised in the bodies of trapeze artists, the train becomes an extension of both flight and Dumbo's extraordinary achievements.[25] From a circus acrobat to a flying elephant to a modern train, the aesthetics of free motion crosses forms and sites. In animated circuses, motion is what matters.

Anthropomorphism and animality

While animated circuses would push aerial performances into new intensities of spectacular motion, they often took the image of animals in a different

direction by coupling the visual impact of animal motion with a sensibility that would question the exploitation of animal performers as instrumentalised beings. *Calder's Circus* foregrounds the kinetic physicality of animals while at the same time revealing the mechanisms of control that underpin the circus. One of the final acts is an awkward performance of an elephant constructed from wooden blocks for its legs, a patch of grey felt for its torso and a rubber tube for its trunk. Led into the ring by its trainer wearing a colourful military uniform, the elephant steps gingerly over its trainer and then, rigged to a wooden plank with Calder manipulating a simple mechanism, stands on its hind legs. The elephant's moment in the spotlight ends with Calder placing its trunk into a bowl and blowing through the other end. Confetti in the bowl – presumably representing water – surges and sprays up, spilling outside of the bowl. The elephant turns and trundles off. While the design and the use of motion are fascinating, the overall effect is more a pitiful and ironic performance, hardly the spectacle associated with circus elephants. In *Entertaining Elephants*, Susan Nance writes of how

> The icon of the jovial circus elephant […] introduced Americans to a mode of capitalism linked to expanding human supremacy over other animals. Premised on mass production and mass consumption of animal bodies, this was a consumer capitalism facilitated by images of animals, like the circus elephant, that obscured the backstage realities of their production.[26]

Such performances of elephants were constructed from a careful control over the animal's movement. Distilling the performance into its component parts, Calder both displays the motion of animals as a spectacle and the controlling environment that facilitates this.

This approach continues in the next animal performance, the penultimate show in *Calder's Circus*. For the length of the show, a lion has been caged within a colourfully decorated caravan beside the main performance space. Made of wire with a fluffy yarn mane, the lion is a beautiful and charming creation. To ready his performance, less appealing figures emerge from behind the scenes: the ringmaster, a wire figure in a tuxedo with an enlarged hand, and the lion-tamer, a wire figure with an arched arm holding a cloth whip. The lion is taken out of its cage, and it elaborately bounds back and forth, moved by Calder's hand. The tamer descends from an elevated position and inserts his head into the lion's mouth and holds the position. After this set-up, the lion is then placed upon a circus stand where – at the gesture of the lion-tamer's whip – he stands unnaturally on his forelegs, straight up. The lion-tamer gestures with his whip again and the lion sits. Calder quickly pushes a little mechanism beneath the stand and several brown balls roll out – these lion droppings are then dutifully concealed, as Calder uses a miniature shovel to cover them with sawdust before pushing them away to the side. The lion is then attached to a new mechanism, fixed to a contraption that allows him to rear up at the lion-tamer when Calder pulls a string. Taunted by the whip of the lion-tamer,

the lion surges forward repeatedly. The lion-tamer stands straight and does not budge, holding a gun in his wire hand – he suddenly raises the gun and shoots the lion. The lion topples over, dead. Much like the sequence with the elephant, but with an even greater feeling of pathos, the depiction of the lion's performance undercuts the thrill of the circus to reveal a sense of exploitation and sadness.

Calder's first book, *Animal Sketching* (1926), describes the kinetic qualities of animals and the need to express a sense of motion when representing them. The first section of the book, entitled "Action", is filled with simplified and dynamic sketches of animals, explaining that animal "lives are of necessity active and their activities are reflected in an alert grace of line even when they are in repose or asleep … there is always a feeling of perpetual motion about animals and to draw them successfully this must be borne in mind".[27] While, as Jed Perl points out, "one must tread carefully in quoting from *Animal Sketching*" due to Calder's dissatisfaction with some of the text that was written by others but attributed to him, the work and its imagery still establishes a vital sense of kineticism in both Calder's art and his vision of animals.[28] His circus displays some of these qualities, particularly through the sculptural forms of arched and curving wire that suggest a latent motion in the lion and the weighted mechanisms of the elephant's legs. But this mobility is restrained by the tricks the animals are made to play, their beings as creatures of action thwarted within the constraints and violence of the circus environment. With Calder's impassive attitude and the careful arrangement of mechanisms to create motion, the cruelty of the spectacles is amplified. These scenes capture a disruptive and distinct quality of animal life, a life that is constrained and punished by the rules of the circus.

A similar set of themes around animality and motion would be explored in *Fétiche Prestidigitateur* (Starewicz, 1934), a film made by the animator and filmmaker Wladyslaw Starewicz whose work also crossed between avant-garde and popular contexts.[29] Writing in 1936, Marie Seton described him as "in the nature of a twentieth century Aesop who is using the cinema in order to relate fables which are designed for a grown-up audience".[30] His sensitivity towards animal life was coupled with an extraordinary attention to expressive motion, animating figures often made of "odd bits and pieces, twigs, wire, straw or cork", much like Calder's circus performers.[31] In *Fétiche Prestidigitateur* a girl's dream of a circus is brought to life when the dolls and bric a brac of her room become animated, with her puppy doll *Fétiche* in the leading role. The film presents an enchanted circus of anthropomorphic objects and creatures which culminates with the appearance of a stuffed lion. Hit by an overeager toy clown, who uses a baton as a riding crop, the lion transforms into a fierce creature. Attempting to deal with the unexpected situation, *Fétiche* traps the lion in a cage and conjures a lion-tamer. Cut from paper, the lion-tamer holds a gun in one hand and a whip in the other. Despite being dressed for the role, he is no match for the lion, flung from the cage after trying to restrain and then shoot him. Reluctantly taking on the role of the lion tamer, *Fétiche* steps

in but almost immediately strikes himself with his own whip by accident. As he cries in pain, the lion pauses and then leaps over, licking the wound. They befriend one another, with *Fétiche* closing the lion's jaw when he starts to roar and sweetly petting his head. The lion shrinks in size and then *Fétiche* cradles him in his arms, rocking him to sleep like a baby. The circus ends on this note of gentle kindness. The film's climactic scene presents a vision of liveliness and sympathy rather than control and dominance at the heart of its animated world.

Fétiche Prestidigitateur displays a world of animated and animal motion coming to life through discarded objects and seemingly inert materials in much the same manner as *Calder's Circus*. Patricia E. Chu describes how *Calder's Circus* resonates with an "idea(l) of plasticity that was at play in popular culture" that was taken up by the Surrealists and other avant-garde artists.[32] Chu explains, "[t]he circus, unlike the zoo, took living bodies and treated them as if their biological and cultural forms were not limiting. Performance and motion produced new life forms".[33] This sensibility was evident in *Calder's Circus*, which also evoked a fascination with the sense of latent motion in objects and things, contributing to a work while "not pretending to produce actual life or to imitate it mechanically, instead focuses in its aesthetic on the *properties* of life".[34] Chu foregrounds how the impact of inertness suddenly brought to life, alongside the use of unexpected and accidental events, relates to an emergent avant-garde aesthetics. Aesthetic forms that do not participate in the same kind of generative performance – like animated films – can offer a similar sense of creative vitality, one which presents animated beings invested with unpredictable energy rather than imposed order.

At the time, mainstream animated circus films would often depart from established codes of the circus to generate unexpected twists and invest their animated animals with unexpected forms of liveliness. For example, *Alice's Circus Daze* (Iwerks, 1927) shows the performance of lions in its penultimate circus scene. Reining the lion in with a baton and then smugly taking a bow, the lion-tamer then puts his head in the animal's jaws. The lion closes his mouth and keeps it closed as the tamer tries to extricate himself – like taffy, he pulls his neck back until it snaps and his head is left in the lion's mouth. The lion swallows his head and licks his lips, while the headless tamer gestures to demand its return. Finally, he gets his head back, but the lion then punches him and his head flies off and falls into the paws of another lion – the lions then play catch with the lion-tamer's head. The scene is shown in a playfully animated way so that the horror of the actual event is (largely) absent, but at the same time it takes on a disturbing quality in its mockery and contempt for the lion-tamer, and its celebration of animality and playfulness.

Offering a similar departure from established norms, *Boop-Oop-a-Doop* (Fleischer, 1932) shows Betty Boop in a lion cage, brandishing a whip to keep several lions at bay. They roar and growl, kept back by the snapping of her whip. One lion slowly sneaks up behind Betty – members of the audience shout at her to "look out" but she does not respond. The lion continues to approach, shown from a high angle view within the cage until he reaches

out and takes a handkerchief that is lying next to her. He stands and quickly moves beside her, tapping her on the shoulder and telling her gently, "pardon me … you dropped your handkerchief". He then passes it to her politely and opens the door of the cage, bowing towards her as she quickly exits. Suddenly anthropomorphised and shown to be kind and unthreatening, the lion's action both reflects Betty's extraordinary charm and the empathy that animated films tend to have towards the animals which fill their frames.

A similar treatment is evident in the climactic scenes of *Animal Cracker Circus* (Harrison, 1938). The film sets out a more typical circus context with the ringmaster introducing its lion-tamer as being in "a single-handed battle with the most ferocious beasts of the jungle". Shown inside the ring, with whip, hoop and chair in hand, the lion-tamer begins by dominating the wild lions but then takes his whip and turns it into a flute, which leads the lions to mimic him, dancing in synchronicity atop their pedestals. Much like *Fétiche Prestidigitateur*, the circus is a fantasy in the mind of a child and the performing figures are made from everyday items that have become animated. Here, that takes the form of animal cracker cookies coming to life. As the lions burst out of the cage, they are shown to be cookie-sized, harmlessly nipping at a puppy and eventually following the child as his mother takes him to bed. Although a cel animation, the imagery of two-dimensionality and miniaturisation is much the same as *Fétiche Prestidigitateur*, indicating a playful reflexivity and showing an awareness of the artificial codes of the circus.

By turning a sympathetic eye towards their animal subjects, these films replace the spectacle of danger and violence with a much more nuanced and gentle vision of animal life. When a circus becomes animated, new expressive opportunities arise for the animals that were so central to the spectacle and appeal of the circus. This includes Calder's distillation of animal movements into simple forms of motion while extending also to the more elaborate effects offered by the presence of anthropomorphic, transforming and fantastic animals in animated films. Perhaps the most famous example of animated film's sympathy towards animal performers is *Dumbo*, which weaves its narrative around a highly sympathetic main character who embodies animated potentials of freedom – escaping his cage and taking flight. However much these animal tales still depend on problematic ideas of animality, such as a non-recognition of difference in their anthropomorphised qualities or a continued emphasis on a spectacular display, they nevertheless take circus animals into new expressive directions through animated form.

Conclusion

Animated circuses used an aesthetics of discontinuity, extraordinary flight and anthropomorphic liveliness in ways that resonated with avant-garde art. From examples with a close relation to avant-garde practice – such as *Calder's Circus*, *Fétiche Prestidigitateur* and the "Pink Elephants on Parade" sequence in *Dumbo* – to works with a less direct but nevertheless tangible sense of stylistic

experimentation, the subject matter of the circus offered expressive and thematic routes that deepened animated film's associations with an aesthetic regime of art. Even in animations which are themselves not avant-garde works, such as *Dumbo*, the depiction of motion, flight and animal life underpins a dynamic vision that pushes against limitations and constraints. Developing de Banville's ideas of a poetics of motion flowing from flight and animality – "soaring and leaping" above the limits of the everyday – animated films seized the opportunity to showcase new forms of liberatory motion and expression.[35] Throughout this chapter, I have explored how animated circuses resonate with qualities associated with the avant-garde through a diverse range of contexts, including Rancière's "aesthetic regime of art", prominent figures and movements associated with artistic experimentation in the 1920s and 1930s, aesthetic values of liveliness and the discourse circulating around the works under discussion. When contending with the sheer variety of animated circuses, such a multifaceted approach allows us to more clearly see points of intersection with avant-garde values and ideas.

The circus offered a basis for animation to depart from narrative structures, providing opportunities to instead focus attention on forms of movement. This was extended into the animated aerial acts, a spectacular and unbounded event that animation – with its fascination for movement – could elaborate to striking effect. Rather than yoking animals to their place on a circus stage, animated works extended this sense of freedom, offering unexpected and sympathetic depictions of animality and kineticism. Bridging avant-garde values and the potentials of animation as an expressive and aesthetic form, hierarchies of control are overturned as lions emerge from their cages and elephants go on parade.

Notes

1 Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19.

2 Most major American animated series from the 1910s to the 1940s included a circus-themed film, ranging from *Farmer Al Falfa's Tentless Circus* (Paramount-Bray, 1916) and Felix the Cat in *Felix Wins Out* (Messmer, 1923) to Mickey Mouse in *Mickey's Circus* (Sharpsteen, 1936) and *Circus Today* (Avery, 1940) for the Merrie Melodies series. For an account of other early animated films which draw upon the circus, including canonical works such as *Fantasmagorie* (Cohl, 1908) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (McCay, 1914), see Ruth Richards, "The Circus and Technologies of Animation," in *Circus, Science and Technology: Dramatising Innovation*, ed. Anna-Sophie Jürgens (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 143–158.

3 Claude Bragdon, "Mickey Mouse and What He Means," *Scribner's Magazine* (July 1934), 42.

4 For an account of the relation between *Calder's Circus* and the avant-garde, see L. Joy Sperling, "Calder in Paris: *The Circus* and Surrealism," *Archives of American Art Journal* 28:2 (1988), 16–29.

5 Gabrielle Buffet, "Sandy Calder, Lunar Blacksmith," *Cahiers d'Art* 1 (2015), accessed 19 May 2021, https://calder.org/bibliography/cahiers-dart-1945/ (originally published as "Sandy Calder, forgeron lunaire," *Cahiers d'Art* 20–21 (1945–46), 324–333).

6 L. Joy Sperling, "The Popular Sources of Calder's Circus: The Humpty Dumpty Circus, Ringling Brother and Barnum and Bailey, and the Cirque Medrano," *Journal of American Culture* 17:4 (Winter 1994), 1–14.
7 Gustave Fréjaville, "Les Attractions de la Quinzaine," *Comoedia* (24 April 1929). Author's translation.
8 Legrand-Chabrier, "Paris-Montparnasse et son cirque," *La Patrie* (6 May 1929). Author's translation.
9 Legrand-Chabrier, "Alexander Calder et son cirque automate," *La Volonté* (19 May 1929). Author's translation.
10 Jed Perl, *Calder: The Conquest of Time, the Early Years, 1898–1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 216.
11 Perl, *Calder*, 216–217.
12 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), x.
13 Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xiv.
14 Michael Charlton, "Dumbo and the Circus of Childhood," in *The Big Top on the Big Screen: Explorations of the Circus in Film*, ed. Teresa Cutler-Broyles (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2020), 105–106.
15 Siegfried Kracauer, "Dumbo (1941)," in *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings: Essays on Film and Popular Culture*, eds. Von Moltke Johannes and Kristy Rawson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 140.
16 Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002), 201.
17 Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 201.
18 Alexander Calder, manuscript, "It Shall Move – On Mobile Sculpturess" (8 March 1932), trans. Calder Foundation, accessed 19 May 2021, https://calder.org/bibliography/que-ca-bouge-a-propos-des-sculptures-mobiles-1932/
19 Alexander Calder, "Comment réaliser l'art," *Abstraction-Création, Art Non Figuratif* 1 (1932), trans. Calder Foundation, accessed 19 May 2021, https://calder.org/bibliography/abstraction-creation-art-non-figuratif-1932/
20 Quoted in Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 76.
21 Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 78.
22 Adolf Behne, "Sculpture as Aerial Act: Alexander Calder at the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf," *Welt Am Abend*, 11 April 1929, trans. Ross Benjamin, accessed 19 May 2021, https://calder.org/bibliography/welt-am-abend-1929/
23 Behne, "Sculpture as Aerial Act."
24 Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.
25 Fréjaville, "Les Attractions."
26 Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 5.
27 Alexander Calder, *Animal Sketching* (1926) (Pelham: Bridgman Publishers, 1929), 9.
28 Perl, *Calder*, 190.
29 See Léona Béatrice and François Martin, *Ladislas Starewitch, 1882–1965* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).
30 Marie Seton, "Trick Film Makers: Starevitch, Reiniger, Bartosch," *World Film News* (October 1934), 31.
31 Seton, "Trick Film Makers," 31.
32 Patricia E. Chu, "Sea Urchins and Circuses: The Modernist Natural Histories of Jean Painlevé and Alexander Calder," *Modernist Cultures* 13:2 (2018), 205.
33 Chu, "Sea Urchins and Circuses," 205.
34 Chu, "Sea Urchins and Circuses," 206.
35 Quoted in Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 76.

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Part IV

Circus-avant-garde bodies

Contemporary artistic physicalities

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9 "Glitter and broken bones"

Professional wrestling, circus, avant-garde and the radical participatory body

Claire Warden

At first glance, the circus, avant-garde performance and professional wrestling might appear to have little in common. They arguably appeal to different demographics and are understood and consumed in profoundly different ways by audiences, performers and journalists alike, as well as by those outside their separate spheres of fandom. However, a consideration of the spatial descriptors of wrestling suggests otherwise. Kit McFarlane's conclusion that "the ring itself remains the canvas of the performers as artists"[1] plays on the dual meaning of the word "canvas" as an artistic and sportive site – marking a challenge to, though by no means a repudiation of, the ring as (just) a bloodied, violent site of macho-masculine antagonism. This multi-dimensional association of the "canvas" opens wrestling up to new inter-artistic allegiances. A consideration of the term "ring", likewise, enables connections. In the circus, the origins of the circular arena emerged in the equestrian performances of Philip Astley's riding school in eighteenth-century Lambeth, the circular space "creating a centrifugal force through the galloping horse which bolstered the balance of the rider".[2] The circularity of the ring in the early circus (there is a clear etymological association, of course) enabled the performing bodies to both exhibit more effectively and to maintain physical control, partly allaying the risk of falling off at speed. Avant-garde theatre, too, used, and continues to use circular performance spaces and activities; consider, for example, Antonin Artaud's play of parricide and incest *The Cenci* (1935). This performance, as Christopher Innes notes in terms eerily similar to Helen Stoddart's description of Astley's circus above, "choreographed the actors into a pattern based on centrifugal forces".[3] Polish director Jerzy Grotowski likewise based his movement exercises on orbital patterns.[4] For avant-garde performance, the movement of the performers and the performance space align. Historically, the use of circular playing spaces rather than proscenium challenged the bourgeois aesthetic of the nineteenth-century stage. Avant-garde performance practices continue to use the circular space, particularly to challenge the viewer's experience. As an example: in 1977 Marina Abramovic and Ulay created *Relation in Movement* in which they drove in circles on a city square in Paris for hours with Abramovic shouting the number of laps through a megaphone. This extreme test of stamina produced a black circle of tyre marks.[5] Iranian performance

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-13

artist Pantea Shayesteh created *Circle* (2018) (in terms pertinent to the intersection of combat and art in this chapter) as a "symbolic fight",[6] communicating with the audience through a genderless improvisation. Originating in the ancient amphitheatres of Rome and Athens, the circular stage is by no means new. But the avant-garde has adopted this fluid spatial design to viscerally involve the audience. In this chapter, "avant-garde" is acknowledged as complex and multi-dimensional (in terms of space, aesthetics and time). I define it as a continuing commitment to performed experimental practices from the early twentieth century to the present day. Performance here is not confined to the stage but, rather, I adopt a broader rendering, understanding the activity of the body as the initiator of creativity. I use the singular of avant-garde because I understand it as pluralised from its inception; by definition, it is always already a multiple. Accordingly, in its comparative analysis, this chapter sees the contemporary immersive performance, 1970s' happenings, and early twentieth-century cubo-futurism (amongst others), though profoundly diverse in terms of context and intention, as emblematic of a similar impulse for experimentation and, therefore, suitable points of comparison. As I will go on to explore, this expansive, body-centred concept of the avant-garde enables this unusual triangulated reading with circus and professional wrestling.

The circular playing space is vital for professional wrestling performance, too, which, like these more conventional theatrical spaces, can trace its origins back to the Ancients. Even today, Greco-Roman wrestling uses a square mat with a circle painted on it.[7] Contemporary professional wrestling commentators commonly refer to wrestling's "squared circle", a boxing-style ring with ropes and a sprung surface (though its actual springiness differs wildly). Like the circles in the circus and the avant-garde, wrestling's non-circular circle also encourages a centrifugal effect for the artist-athletes; one of the first actions trainee wrestlers learn, "running the ropes", for example, literally sees wrestlers bouncing off the taut ropes, rebounding them back into the fray. For all three – the circus, avant-garde theatre and professional wrestling – there is the sense that this ring (a circular descriptor itself of course) is a space set apart. "The [wrestling] ring", Annette Hill suggests, is "a sacred space"[8] The circularity of these playing spaces can be read through avant-garde dancer Anna Halprin's spiritual reading of dance: "people form circles … In these archetypal movements people seemed to be tracing out the forms and patterns of a larger organism, communicating with and being moved by a group body-mind or spirit"[9] The circle enables a participatory collaboration that taps into an almost primaeval human sense of space; we appear to naturally gravitate to the circular.

This brief analysis of the canvas and the ring enables two opening provocations. Firstly, for all their differences, there is an intertwined performance historiography of circus, the avant-garde and professional wrestling, one centred on embodied performance techniques in space. Secondly, I propose, these three histories, divergent though they seem, can be read contiguously as ways of exhibiting the body as a subversive, radical presence. Understanding these histories as entangled, in the imagination at least, enables a radical, embodied

awareness, as well as a dismantling of high/low art categories that have divided these histories. Consequently, this chapter "Glitter and broken bones",[10] sets up an integrated history of circus, the avant-garde and professional wrestling that challenges conventional comparisons with a sport that denigrate wrestling *and* the unspecific notion that wrestling is like theatre (which in many ways it is not). From here, it proposes that reading wrestling alongside circus and the avant-garde (rather than, say, boxing) imbibes the wrestling body with radical potential. It proves this alternative reading by introducing innovative artists who are creating a subversive underground culture, centred on the radical body, that stands in outspoken contrast with the commercial, slick renderings of wrestling that we see on our television screens.

Embodying a shared historiography

Scholars, fans, critics, practitioners and promoters struggle to define professional wrestling. In the introduction to our 2016 *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and I suggest: "Professional wrestling is always more than theatre, more than sports (and maybe simultaneously less than both of these established, acceptable modes of entertainment)".[11] The novelist Angela Carter writes: "Sometimes professional wrestling is like chess, and sometimes like ballet, and sometimes like a crude morality play".[12] In *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, Sharon Mazer maintains, "professional wrestling is not accepted as a legitimate sport – nor, obviously, can it be considered legitimate theatre".[13] In his recent study, Laine cites wrestling as "a tradition, an institution, a ritual even while it is a fleeting entertainment, a carnival trick, and a flippant waste of time".[14] R. Tyson Smith's description of professional wrestling as a "Kafkaesque blend of *Jerry Springer* and *Jackass*"[15] connects this form with two other difficult-to-define televisual phenomena – the tabloid titillation of reality television and the stunt-prank comedy show – as well as with experimental modernist avant-garde poetics.

Suffice to say, professional wrestling is the most slippery of popular culture forms. WWE (previously WWF)[16] wrestling is a global brand with big names crossover stars such as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and John Cena, yet wrestling can also be found on Saturday nights in local working men's clubs in post-industrial, northern English towns. There is glitz and glamour, sequined costumes and dazzling lights, but also barbed wire weapons, grotesque characters and vitriolic audience chants. It is theatrical but not theatre, physical but not a sport, playfully performative but not *entirely* pretend. It is simultaneously too real (injuries) and too phoney (this is, after all, play fighting). One of the key accusations made against professional wrestling, from its inception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is that it is fake. This dismissal of wrestling is predicated on its miscategorisation as a sport; compared to football and athletics it feels too much like a silly game. Wrestling's fakery has come under increased scrutiny in recent years with Donald Trump's presidency, his look, message and methods often read through his background in professional

wrestling.[17] Interestingly, circus and the avant-garde have also been maligned by this association.[18] In a determinedly antitheatrical gesture, wrestling, circus and avant-garde are, indeed, often used as pejoratives. Words associated with performance – melodramatic, operatic, stagey, theatrical – convey disapproval, unlike those associated with other art forms. As children, we are told not to make a spectacle of ourselves or show off.[19] Understanding the difficulties of definition and the long-held associations, at the start of *Performance and Professional Wrestling* we sit firmly on the fence when we say wrestling is a "special case in that it is at once scripted, theatrical, and fake, and improvised, performed, and real".[20] It is *not not fake*, in other words, but it is also *really real*.

Comparing it to the "circus or the arena", semiotician Roland Barthes understands wrestling as a "spectacle of excess".[21] Barthes describes an audience that "abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees".[22] This act of abandonment is a deliberate choice to immerse in the fiction. Barthes's description points to the importance of ocularity rather than cognition, as such. Again, as happens so often in the circus and in much avant-garde performance (but certainly not always), the spectacle is not an intellectual exercise, but a visceral one: dazzled by the lights, the glamour and the risk, or else deeply moved by the beauty or even frustrated by the lack of clarity.

Wrestling's liminal, inter-artistic identity is indebted to the intertwined performance historiography to which Barthes alludes. Professional wrestling emerged from circus and other popular art forms such as music halls and variety theatre. Contemporary wrestling is simply a current manifestation of a convention of ritualised combat which has, over the past century, adapted to the "circus side-show, the saloon/vaudeville circuit, the first urban sports arenas, the earliest one-camera live television, then cable, then the Internet".[23] Wrestling has proven itself to be resilient, remaking itself for each new context or dissemination format. The history of wrestling as, or in, the circus can be traced back to 1848 when French soldier Jean Exbroyat formed a wrestling circus troupe.[24] The most famous circus showman P.T. Barnum understood the draw of wrestling, signing up fighters Ed Decker[25] and Katie Sandwina, the proclaimed "Strongest Woman that Ever Lived".[26] In fact, as Benjamin Litherland proves in his path-breaking study *Wrestling in Britain*, "a plethora of wrestlers doubled as circus and vaudeville strongmen",[27] ensuring that the shared historiography is firmly centred on the performing body.

While the historic connections between wrestling and circus are clear, the relationship between wrestling and the avant-garde is less obvious. Given the avant-garde's typical associations with the revolutionary, the subversive and the intellectually difficult (though, of course, this is a generalisation), the comedic, parodic world of wrestling might seem shallow and frivolous. Yet, wrestling, whether professional or amateur, inspired historical avant-garde artists. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, for example, produced the plaster relief *Wrestlers* in 1914 (cast 1965), an image that has something of the "slap-and-tickle humour of the Edwardian music hall".[28] The wrestler and strongman, found in the circus

and the fairground, appeared with regularity in the art of the Russian futurists. Painter, illustrator, wrestler and circus worker Vladimir Burliuk, for example, was immortalised in Michel Larionov's *Portrait of an Athlete* (1910) which pictures him as a muscular figure with a dumbbell in hand. The well-built wrestler reappears in Natalia Goncharova's painting *Wrestlers* (1908–1909), which features two substantial figures in "lock up". The Russian historical avant-garde looked to wrestling, exhibited in circuses, for, in Tim Harte's words, "a bravado, energy, and corporeal freedom well suited to their iconoclastic attitudes toward convention".[29]

This connection with avant-garde history has made a number of surprising reappearances over the century since Gaudier-Brzeska and Goncharova. One of the most infamous was the painter Andy Warhol's interview with compere "Mean Gene" Ockerlund at the WWF's February 1985 MTV show *The War to Settle the Score*. This show set up the main event at the first Wrestlemania (wrestling's Superbowl) which was to take place the following month between Hulk Hogan and "Rowdy" Roddy Piper. After the match, Warhol stumbled into the dressing rooms and conducted a seemingly impromptu interview with Ockerlund to share his excitement. His artwork, *Wrestlers*, was produced around the same time (1976–1986) and shows a repeated image of two wrestlers in the ring stitched with thread. Another late-twentieth-century avant-garde figure influenced by the world of professional wrestling was US anti-comedian and performance artist Andy Kaufman. The self-proclaimed "Intergender Wrestling Champion", Kaufmann fought many women between 1979 and 1983, and even wrestled himself, playing both the "face" (the goodie) and the "heel" (baddie).[30] His wrestling gimmick made its way on to mainstream television when he started up a feud with wrestling legend Jerry "The King" Lawler on *Late Night with David Letterman*. There is still a degree of doubt and debate as to whether the run-in, which ended with Lawler slapping Kaufman, was real or (in wrestling parlance) a "work" (staged). In Britain, which is the context that particularly interests this chapter, Peter Blake's 1992 film *Masters of the Canvas* with mysterious masked wrestling legend Kendo Nagasaki and Jeremy Deller's 2010 film *So Many Ways to Hurt You, The Life and Times of Adrian Street* illustrate the way that professional wrestling has continued to inspire avant-garde artists, particularly those interested in the intersection of popular culture and experimental aesthetics. Most recently, under pandemic restrictions, televised professional wrestling performed without audiences has been newly compared to avant-garde theatre, namely the stripped back, artificial stage of Samuel Beckett.[31]

Radical participatory embodiment

Despite this briefly shared historiography, it would be a stretch to say that there is a sustained relationship between these forms. While circus is wholly indebted to the live experience, wrestling has achieved global popularity through screens; while avant-garde performance is often perceived as radical

and progressive, wrestling has regularly displayed reactionary political views and, at times, deeply troubling stereotypes and behaviours. This book enables a dynamic rereading of the intersections between circus and the avant-garde, but where does this leave that perennial outlier – professional wrestling? My provocation is that there is a vital presence that webs circus, the avant-garde and professional wrestling together: the radical participatory body. Focusing on the wrestling body through the lens of circus and avant-garde practices loosens it from accusations of fakery and the associated comparisons with "real" sport. Instead, it reimagines professional wrestling as an embodied performance art where the tropes, innovations and activities of circus and the avant-garde act as vital comparative arts. Doing this entirely shifts the expectations of, and assumptions about, professional wrestling.

In approaching the triad of wrestling, circus and the avant-garde in this way, it is important to note that I am not eliding the problem of the body in wrestling. The art-sport places innumerable stresses on the body and, with normally crammed schedules, wrestlers have little time for physical rest. The cumulative effect of regular bumps and bruises is often overlooked.[32] Partly due to the physical and mental strain of wrestling, coupled with self-medicating through drugs or alcohol, there have been a number of high-profile breakdowns, early deaths and tragic suicides. For all the radical potential, wrestlers' bodies exist in a system of competition where performers cover up the injury to ensure they keep bookings or else suffer physical and mental health concerns as they strive to be the best "worker". Further, there is no escaping professional wrestling's troublesome racist, sexist and homophobic history, where bodies are incorporated into storylines to be abused, laughed at or vilified. Beneath the surface of even the most enlightened wrestling companies, there are very real stories of abuse and misogyny.[33]

However, to *only* view the wrestling body through these homogenous lenses is to do it a disservice and ignore the embodied potential of this form. Wrestling is neither progressive or regressive, radical or conservative (without solidifying these complex terms). Rather "meaning is produced by the tussles and conflicts of those participating: wrestlers, promoters and audiences".[34] This is as true for the actual body of the wrestler as for the storyline. The same could certainly be said of the avant-garde and circus, of course. For, both are not inherently radical; the avant-garde has always had a surprising element of fascist myth-making[35] and, while the circus, as Stoddart describes, has "been an arena for many transgressions, these have rarely been of an overtly political nature, in fact in these terms it has been consistently conservative".[36] Wrestling's treatment of bodies that are not white, male and able has clear similarities, for example, with the circus tradition of the freak show. Given this complex historiography, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this chapter makes a case for the *potentially* radical participatory body as the connecting node between circus, the avant-garde and professional wrestling.

"It is therefore in the body of the wrestler", Barthes notes, "that we find the first key to the contest […]. The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes

a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight".[37] In wrestling, the body tells the story. It takes on a similar role in the circus; as Peta Tait suggests in her reading of trapeze artists, circus "exemplifies cultural attunement to bodily display".[38] In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider, analysing contemporary performance art, conducts a similar reading of avant-garde performance: "performers make apparent the ways in which bodies are stages for social theatrics".[39] While the body is the site of communication, sometimes this is explicit and sometimes obscure. It plays with pretence and fakery, danger and risk. It can pose a challenge to assumptions about gender, sexuality, disability, age and ethnicity, but it can also perpetuate these assumptions. In short, the body acts as a way of connecting these disparate forms and their histories, and, more than this, becomes the entry point to recategorise wrestling as a performance art.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes an "intercorporeality": "it is the lot of living bodies to close upon the world and become seeing, touching bodies which (since we could not possibly touch or see without being capable of touching or seeing ourselves) are *a fortiori* perceptible to themselves".[40] On the face of it, professional wrestling could be read as an intercorporeal art *in extremis*, bodies clashing together to the extent that the contact can be heard and felt viscerally in the audience. To the uninitiated, it seems far from participatory in any collaborative sense. The handshake – the example Merleau-Ponty provides in *The Visible and Invisible* as an everyday embodiment of the truism that "I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching"[41] – seems too gentle by comparison. Barthes's description of the intercorporeality of wrestling is far more brutal: the "forearm smash, this loud slap of the forearm, this embryonic punch with which one clouts the chest of one's adversary".[42] The aural and visual clues here suggest not a corporative reciprocal sense of touch but, rather, an aggressive, enforced, perhaps even abusive action. Yet Barthes's contextualising of this move gives the suggestion of an underlying, alternative intercorporeality: "only the image is involved in the game, and the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoyed the perfection of an iconography. It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle; it is only an intelligible spectacle".[43] So, the violence of wrestling is not about maiming an opponent or winning the match; rather, it is part of a collaborative embodied exhibition. In wrestling this is known as "kayfabe", that is the performance of a legitimate fight with all its violence. Interestingly, this term emanates from wrestling's circus and fairground roots.[44] The key thing here, Barthes says, is that the spectacle is intelligible: logical kayfabe (even when the audience knows it is intelligible rather than sadistic) needs to be maintained. This demands a collaborative embodiment which is almost always masked. Nonetheless, it is always present. It is for this reason that wrestling can be more accurately compared to impalement arts in the circus; an act that looks dangerous and even violent is actually reliant on the synchronicity of the body of the thrower and the assistant. Contrary to appearances, then, wrestling displays an open, generous

intersection of bodies, providing a potential model for collaborative artistic practice.

The audience is vital to the successful realisation of the wrestling spectacle. They watch the performance in a visceral way, partly embodying Merleau-Ponty's understanding of vision as

> a combat which at times has no victor and a thought for which there is from now on no titular incumbent. I look at him. He sees that I look at him. I see that he sees it. He sees that I see that he sees it. The analysis is endless.[45]

Peta Tait imagines this perpetual act of seeing and being seen in the circus as deeply embodied: "Moving eyes see moving bodies bodily".[46] The same would apply to avant-garde performance where innovators find new ways of reimagining the actor-audience relationship through the body, whether through the carnivalesque playfulness of *1789* (Ariane Mnouchkine 1974) or the immersive experiential *Sleep No More* (Punchdrunk 2011). The performance spaces, therefore, are sites of aural/haptic intercorporeal collaboration. In their communicative entanglement, they demand audience analysis that actively moves beyond the singular and, instead, understands the audience in a "complex, multisensory" embodied way.[47] This means there is an unpredictability about all three forms. This can be a real unpredictability; in wrestling, for example, there is always the potential for the audience to reject the performance, to boo when they should cheer (or vice versa), or to even get involved physically (the elderly lady attacking the "heel" wrestler with her handbag is a recurring presence, especially in British wrestling of the 1970s and '80s). Sometimes, as Tait suggests in reference to human–nonhuman circus antics, this unpredictability is carefully choreographed.[48] The same would be true of the chaotic anarchism of a performance group such as Forced Entertainment.

This unpredictability produces risk. The preference is that these three forms, in Peta Tait's description of Circus Oz, "perform[s] danger".[49] The unpredictability that engenders embodied risk *should* be a spectacle. This is not always the case, however, and, arguably, the potential real risk of these forms is intrinsic to their popularity, as is the case in the impalement arts, of course. As Tom Dawkins (the British wrestler Cara Noir) says, "[Physical risk] has to be there. It has to flirt with the real".[50] For wrestlers, blood can be a signifier of this risk. In avant-garde performance practice, blood is both a symbol (think: Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty play *A Spurt of Blood* 1925/first production 1964) or a very real actuality; feminist performer-artists, for example, such as Carolee Schneemann, Judy Chicago and ORLAN use menstrual blood to make gendered stigmas visible.[51] Self-injury, either through blading (using a hidden razor blade to slice the scalp giving the impression that the wrestler has been seriously injured) or through the extreme use of weapons in hardcore wrestling, is, "excessive to the representational labour of wrestling".[52] It is no longer an enactment of pain and risk, it is a "real act".[53] These

extreme moments of wrestling performance make considerably more sense if read alongside avant-garde performance, rather than sport.

These preliminary inter-artistic reflections about the body – as an intelligible symbol, as a collaborator with other bodies belonging to performers or audience members and as the focus of risk (performed or actual) – add up to a deeper understanding of wrestling, not as a fake sport, flimsy popular culture or impossibly tarnished by its political associations, but as a, to coin a phrase, "avant-garde circus". This new categorisation is firmly grounded in the bodies of the wrestlers as performance practitioners.

Defying the definitions of wrestling

Appearing alongside the exponential growth in British independent wrestling over the past decade, new practices have arisen in twenty-first-century Britain centred on the radical, subversive body which demonstrate the potential of wrestling as avant-garde circus. They play with the conventions of wrestling, while creating genre-twisting intertextual relationships with live art, burlesque and surrealist comedy in order to comment on, and reenact, disability and gender normativity.

Aaron Williamson is a prolific artist/performer whose work is informed by his experience of becoming deaf.[54] Williamson's interest in circus and the avant-garde goes back to his appreciation of the controversial 1932 Tod Browning film *Freaks*, which narrates the story of a trapeze artist who joins a circus troupe to seduce and kill a dwarf for his inheritance. But the plan backfires; the trapeze artist is captured and horrifically attacked to turn her into a Human Duck: hands melted, eye gouged out, covered in feathers. While this film began as mainstream horror, it has been reimagined as an avant-garde art project.[55] In essence the trapeze artist's normative body is reengineered by non-normative circus "freaks". This film (its dark humour and anti-eugenicist potential) was key to the sensibility of Williamson's collaboration with fellow performance artist Katherine Araniello: Disabled Avant-Garde (DAG).[56]

In 2019, Williamson's new exhibition drew attention to the institutional failure to collect, preserve and exhibit the lives and art of disabled people. As a counter-narrative, he recreated a series of fictional, historic disabled personalities who each had their own archive. One of these was 1980s' wrestler Andrew Callaghan who lost his hearing through a wrestling-provoked injury to his ears. Transforming his act, he became Cain in Chains, a "heel" "hardcore" wrestler who attacked his opponents with weapons.[57] Williamson sees Cain in Chains as an outworking of British wrestling culture, particularly citing legendary British comedy wrestler Les Kellet as an inspiration. Kellet's notoriously complex character-led fellow wrestler Max Crabtree to describe him as "a bit like Pagliacci the clown".[58] Other wrestling figures of particular interest to Williamson include British legends Klondyke Kate and the "Exotic" Adrian Street for their playful attitude to gender performance: they were presumed to be same-sex attracted but, in reality, neither were. Williamson cites wrestling's

"wilful inauthenticity", reading it through contrasting genealogies of performance art: Joseph Beuys's "po-faced earnestness of Universal truth and so on" and Andy Warhol's understanding of performance as a "fluid medium through which to destabilise and to celebrate uncertainty and inauthentic posturing".[59] Williamson even collaborated on a project in Germany which asked attendees to choose between Beuys and Warhol; if they chose the latter they moved on, if the former he wrestled them to the ground. Williamson's mashing of wrestling and the avant-garde in Cain in Chains – read in light of his interest in the circus freak show as a site of disability awareness – becomes a dynamic re-embodiment of disability arts and its lost history.

As Williamson presents the wrestling ring as an arena to reimagine disability history and culture, Heather Bandenburg reads it as a "space of defiance" for feminists.[60] Like Williamson, she cites Klondyke Kate and her embodied challenge to typical feminine behaviours as an inspiration. "To me wrestling is an act of resistance", says Bandenburg. "Wrestling, in itself, requires you to be unladylike – to gain bruises, to make too much noise, to be grappled and groped, handled by people who are essentially strangers for the enjoyment of other strangers. To turn your weak, fecund body into a weapon is itself a feminist act".[61] Her current project *Mummy Vs* uses wrestling to explore the issue of parenting during the pandemic. It is a "story of the isolation and monotony of a childcare crisis under extreme circumstances. Women are the sacrificial lambs of Covid, we are wrestling daily – this makes the wrestling literal".[62]

Bandenburg describes Tom Dawkins who wrestles as Cara Noir as a "performance artist as much as a wrestler", his practice illustrating how "wrestling is ready to become more avant garde".[63] Dawkins's collaborations with fellow wrestler, athlete and performer Claire Heafford further illustrate the potential of wrestling practice. Heafford's mixed background in athletics, gymnastics and arts practice (she worked with Punchdrunk) means she has had embodied experiences of liberating self-expressive practices, as well as abusive behaviours. "When I discovered wrestling in 2015", she says, "what I was attracted to was the use of the radical subversive body and the gendered basis on which the practice was built – almost as a reverse mirror to the enforced performance of femininity that I had experienced as a gymnast".[64] In their 2018 cabaret show *I Need to Cher*, Dawkins played Madonna, and Heafford, Cher. Using drag practices, they set up the scene as a wrestling match: "Dressing Tom up as a woman and then making Cher win seemed to circumnavigate all of the gender issues that kept being re-inscribed when he remained a man and I remained a woman, performing masculinity and femininity".[65] Wrestling, here, provides a surprising space of embodied experimentation, a method of reworking gender normative practices.

What is most noticeable about these examples of contemporary British wrestling is the innovative, risk-taking playfulness that moves the wrestling from a fake sport into a form that wholly embraces an anarchic performativity. One of the most interesting and controversial recent examples is Schadenfreude and Friends who consistently point to the theatrical artifice of

wrestling by hosting matches with invisible wrestlers and inflatable dolls. This group of friends stretches the typical "rules" of wrestling to their extremes, creating, in their words, a "professional wrestling absurdism".[66] While the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented live performance – catastrophically affecting circuses, avant-garde performers and wrestlers – British wrestling's latest contribution seems, again, to sit at the intersection of the three forms. *You are Cordially Invited…* is a COVID-secure film produced by Richard Calvert (who wrestles as Charles Crowley). It follows the journey of wrestler Elijah who finds a minute circus tent in a field. Entering, he discovers Crowley, whose persona is a circus ringmaster, telling the collected throng that "Last wrestler standing enters 2021 a winner". The resulting melee is a mixture of recognisable wrestling moves, short character-based vignettes and bloodied, exploding bodies that would not have looked out of place in an expressionist film. What emerges is a form of wrestling that extends its intrinsic liminality by exhibiting tropes of circus, avant-garde performance, as well as other forms of popular culture such as computer games and soap operas. Ultimately Elijah is blown up by the dastardly Crowley, leaving just his boots in the field, his radical participatory body exceeding its limits. It is here, in these innovative reimaginings of wrestling – sitting right at the dynamic intersection of these three performance forms – that the potential of the radical participatory body emerges.

Notes

1 Kit McFarlane, "A Sport, A Tradition, A Religion, A Joke: The Need for a Poetics of In-Ring Storytelling and a Reclamation of Professional Wrestling as Global Art," *Asiatic* 6:2 (December 2012), 146.
2 Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 14.
3 Christopher Innes, *Avant-Garde Theatres 1892–1992* (London: Routledge, 1993), 68.
4 James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta, *Jerzy Grotowski* (London: Routledge, 2018), 102.
5 Marina Abramovic and Ulay, "Relation in Movement (1977)," accessed 10 January 2021, https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/catalogue/art/abramovic-ulay/relation-in-movement/4486.
6 Pantea Shayesteh, "The Circle (2018)," accessed 10 January 2021, https://mai.art/apos-sibleisland/circle.
7 Peter Culley and John Pascoe, *Sports Facilities and Technologies* (London: Routledge, 2009), 143.
8 Annette Hill, "Spectacle of Excess: The Passion Work of Professional Wrestlers, Fans and Anti-fans," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18:2 (2015), 186.
9 Anna Halprin, *Moving toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 228.
10 This title is taken from Cara Noir's description of his rise: "the wrestler formerly known as Tom 'Blackbelt' Dawkins emerged from the shadows of middle-card mediocrity to blaze a trail through the British Wrestling scene … leaving a trail of glitter and broken bones behind him," accessed 2 March 2021, https://caranoir.com/back-story.
11 Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and Claire Warden, *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (London: Routledge, 2016), 4.
12 Angela Carter, "Giants' Playtime," *New Society* 29 (January 1976), 227–228, 227.

13 Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, 2nd ed. (Jackson, MS: Mississippi University Press, 2020), 21.
14 Eero Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* (London: Routledge, 2020), 1.
15 R. Tyson Smith, *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 39.
16 For clarity, the WWE as it is now known stands for World Wrestling Entertainment. It is by far the largest wrestling company in the world with an enormous global audience.
17 See the 2007 Wrestlemania match Battle of the Billionaires which saw Trump and WWE CEO Vince McMahon each nominate a wrestler to fight on their behalf, the loser having their head shaved. As co-editors of *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, we contributed to one of the early analyses of this connection in the wake of Trump's victory (see Oliver Lee Bateman, "Wrestling, Politics and the Violent Realities of 2016," *Pacific Standard* (22 December 2016), accessed 15 January 2021, https://psmag.com/news/wrestling-politics-and-the-violent-realities-of-2016). However, the three of us, and many others, have been careful to advocate wrestling outside of Trump's presidency (See the three-article conversation between us – Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and I – and Sharon Mazer in *TDR* May-Aug 2017).
18 See Edward Luce, "Donald Trump's Circus Act is a Sinister Distraction," *Financial Times* (26 August 2018), accessed 15 January 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/1683fb06-a791-11e8-926a-7342fe5e173f, in which he called Trump "the circus maestro or our age": "The circus act children love the most is the one that is meant to distract them". See also Alex Melamid, "Blame Donald Trump's Rise on the Avant-Garde Movement," *Time* (12 May 2017), accessed 15 January 2021, https://time.com/4777118/avant-garde-koons-trump/. He particularly associates Trump's rise with the infantilism of contemporary art.
19 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1981), 1.
20 Chow, Laine and Warden, *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, 3.
21 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 15.
22 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 15.
23 Lawrence McBride and S. Elizabeth Bird, "From Smart Fan to Backyard Wrestler," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press), 166.
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10 Glam clowning

From Dada to Gaga – a conversation with Le Pustra

Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Le Pustra

A creature from outer space recently visited Earth, where it appeared on a Spiegeltent stage. It emerged from the dark in a glossy black-and-white space-suit-carapace, worn tuxedo-style over a black-and-white striped bodysuit; the white-painted face and black lips crowned by a shiny, pointy headpiece. Brightly illuminated by multicoloured spotlights, this Neon Noir Sci-Fi Pierrot performed at the world-renowned Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2016, and it is one of the many fictitious alter-egos of Vaudeville's Darkest Muse, "Madame" Le Pustra. Amalgamating theatre, drag, fashion and fine arts, Le Pustra reformulates his body through costumes, whose hyperstylised sartorial splendour pushes the boundaries of theatricality and sexuality. Le Pustra can be best described as (but not limited to) an iridescent queer *kunstfigur* – a creation of beauty and living work of Surrealism-inspired art. From underground cabaret darling to accidental club kid-cum-avant-garde fashion muse, Le Pustra is a colourful shapeshifting conduit thriving on visual stimuli.

His most iconic role is that of creative director (and star) of the sumptuous *Le Pustra's Kabarett der Namenlosen* – a contemporary cabaret play reimagining the provocative and progressive 1920s in Berlin. And in yet another plot twist, Le Pustra made his TV debut in 2020 as the enigmatic nightclub owner, Edwina Morell, in the award-winning German blockbuster crime drama *Babylon Berlin* (Season 3) – and will reprise this role in Season 4. Juxtaposing and syncretising different styles and performing genres – combining, for instance, New Wave references with astro-glam pop and a witty gothic vibe – Le Pustra creates and represents new cultural identities and physicalities, which exploit ideas of the out-of-the-ordinary, of vivacious extraordinariness. Some critics thus compared his art with the work of Tim Burton.[1] Other reviewers described him as "visceral, subversive and, above all, entertaining"[2] and as "offbeat", "thrilling and delighting".[3]

As this chapter clarifies, the unique visual fictions that Le Pustra has created for the stage and the camera also draw inspiration from, and add to, the rich cultural legacy of avant-garde aesthetics, circus iconography and clown imagery. However, we hasten to add that Le Pustra is neither a circus performer nor a clown. By exploring the glamorous visual aspects of the delicious art of clowning in his art – its visual rhetoric of exaggeration, artificiality and ambivalence – he *transcends* the clown, or, to be more precise, the Pierrot. In

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-14

doing so he creates new beings. Le Pustra's out-of-this-world costume mentioned above (and its recent reinterpretation), which is an aesthetic blend of avant-garde imaginary and (space) Pierrot references, is a perfect example. It is the contemporary artist's take on a costume that originally emerged from a Dada background and reappeared in the late 1970s (and thereafter) in contexts probing and challenging "[t]he notion of performance as an avant-garde tradition".[4] By inspecting the sparks set off in Le Pustra's imaginative costume by the friction and interplay between avant-garde and circus references, space and Pierrot allusions, this chapter reveals a novel way of looking at both avant-garde and circus in contemporary performance.

Figure 10.1 Le Pustra as "Klaus Nomi". Source: Courtesy of Le Pustra; Natalia Illing, Pixelgnom.de (photographer), Basil Prinz (makeup), Berlin 2021.

The body-cum-costume

As the creator, curator and conférencier of a highly acclaimed (and consistently sold out) theatre/cabaret production that revives the spirit and performance styles of the early twentieth century – featuring, among others, a dazzling LED-lit version of Loïe Fuller's Serpentine Dance (performed by the renowned artist and dancer Vicky Butterfly) and a stage appearance by expressionist cabaret artist Valeska Gert (interpreted by the incomparable Bridge Markland) – Le Pustra has burnt both avant-garde aesthetics *and* their contemporary reinterpretation into our twenty-first-century cultural consciousness. His *Kabarett der Namenlosen* ('Cabaret of the Nameless'), chameleonic solo performances and photographic and media appearances reveal a complex web of visual and cultural references to avant-garde aesthetics. One of Le Pustra's enigmatic stage personae – the Neon Noir Sci-Fi Pierrot – is particularly interesting within the context of the circus-avant-garde theme, as it condenses and reshapes a fascinating chain of influences reaching from Dada to New Wave performance and beyond. The historical background is elaborated in the first part of this chapter, and we will explore it together with Le Pustra in the second part.

Dada and body masks

In June 1916, Hugo Ball (who essentially founded the Dada movement in European art) described the masks used in Dada performances in his *Dada Diary*, including full-body masks and one of his "special costume[s]", in some detail:

> My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witchdoctor's hat. […] I could not walk inside the cylinder so I was carried onto the stage in the dark and began slowly and solemnly.[5]

Squeezed into this immobilising, obelisk-like outfit, and with a dead-serious expression on his face, Ball recited, among other things, his sound poem *Elephant Caravan* – mixing the cadence of priestly lamentation and liturgical singing with onomatopoeia. While the audience exploded with laughter, screaming and applauding – after they had overcome their initial shock about the grotesque performance – Ball was carried down off the stage "like a magical bishop".[6]

As this one example already indicates, Dada art is contradictory, unpredictable, elusive and self-negating, without consequences. Austrian writer and artist Raoul Hausmann (one of the protagonists of the Berlin branch of the art movement) called Dada a state of continuous stirring and constant change, more of a state of life and inner mobility than an artistic movement.[7] The Romanian/French avant-garde poet and performance artist Tristan Tzara defined it as a state of mind,[8] and much later, in a 1959 interview, added that

Dada was not a "school" or "direction", but an "adventure" directed "against all conventions, theories and dogmas".[9] In his history of Dadaism, Richard Huelsenbeck (who was involved in founding the Berlin Dada group) pointed at simultaneity as the essential artistic Dada trait. He drew his inspiration from "events of everyday life, the big city, the Dada circus, rumbling, screaming, steam sirens, house fronts and the smell of veal roast" all affecting him at the same time.[10] Dada also took up and further developed what other, earlier art movements had excogitated and enshrined in their tumultuous manifestos. Dada performances and cabaret-style soirées, for instance – which synthesised various art forms with improvisation and shock effects – made new use of creative techniques conceived and staged by Futurists all over Europe in the early twentieth century. In the words of German avant-garde artist Hans Richter, Dadaists had "swallowed Futurism wholeheartedly. In the process of digestion, however, [they] had spat out all kinds of stumps and stalks".[11]

In opposition to the classical tradition of theatre and its contemplative reception, Futurists understood variety theatre as the theatre of the future – as an anti-academic, non-monotonous melting pot glorifying action, heroism, skill, instinct and intuition (see the manifesto "Variety Theatre"[12]). Admired as primitive and naïve, and as a synthesis of all that humanity has thus far crystallised to laughingly distract itself from material and moral pain, Futurists praised the iconoclastic power of variety shows. Celebrating the unlikely and absurd, acrobatics and artistry, eroticism and seduction, eccentricity and clownery, shock effect, record and "psycho madness", variety theatre – from the perspective of the Futurists – fostered the destruction of the solemn, the sacred, the serious and the sublime in art.[13]

Following in these conceptual footsteps, famous Dada performances were staged at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich (in 1916), featuring an improvised potpourri of cabaret and folk songs, chansons, balalaika and piano music, recitations from novels, novellas, poems, theatre plays, verse declamations, dances and all sorts of other things (albeit arranged according to conventional patterns). In Cabaret Voltaire (and other Dada shows), performers regularly appeared in elaborate facial and body masks made of painted cardboard, "copying a mix of African themes and other motifs based on the machine aesthetics of the Futurists".[14] Some of those masks (created by visual artist Marco Janco) were painted blood-red and frightening; German-French Dadaist Hans Arp described them as "languishing foetuses, lesbian sardines and ecstatic mice".[15] Somewhat more objectively, Hugo Ball noted about his performance in *Sphinx and Strawman*: "The play was performed in two adjoining rooms; the actors wore body masks. Mine was so big that I could read my script inside it quite comfortably. The head of the mask was electrically lighted; it must have looked strange in the darkened room, with the light coming out of the eyes".[16] As Annabelle Melzer has recognised, Ball's tubular costumes and geometric cardboard encasements, which looked a little amateurish or hastily cobbled together (in historical photos), are reminiscent of "the rectilinear vocabulary of Cubism", Depero's conical Futurist figures and the abstract puppets created by Hans Arp and his wife Sophie Taeuber.[17]

Improvised on the spot, dances featuring and emerging from unanticipated and unpredictable movements (the Laban dancers for instance "danced in front

of Arp's biomorphic cucumbers" – "plastic representations of an internal event") were also part of these performances which embodied "elements of chance and spontaneity in the immediacy of the creative act".[18] This artistic spirit, the treatment of the actor as an object and its physical conception were further intensified in the 1920s. For example, Tristan Tzara's play *The Gas Heart* (*Le Cœur à gaz*; design and costumes created by Sonia Delaunay) caused a sensation and theatre scandal – at the 1921 premiere, it was howled down by the spectators, who left the theatre during the performance. Recalling the object-actor of Picasso's *Parade* designs, Tzara's performers appeared in immobilising, thick cardboard trapezoids on stage, which divided the body into angular parts.[19] Likewise, transmogrifying actors and dancers into artificial figures, the geometric, stiff, hypersculptural costumes developed by Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer and team in the 1920s for the *Triadic Ballet* (*Triadisches Ballett*) aimed to make the performer's body disappear behind abstract props or costume pieces as much as possible; to make costume parts independent of the wearer and thus create a certain kind of "own life".[20] The relationship to Dadaism was stressed by Schlemmer himself: "The artistic climate here [at the Bauhaus art school] cannot support anything that is not the latest, the most modern, up-to-the-minute, Dadaism, circus, variety, jazz, hectic pace, movies, America, airplanes, the automobile".[21] Such avant-garde thinking and the idea of performance soon became intertwined, at least according to performance scholar Richard Schechner, who wrote that the notion of performance as an avant-garde tradition reached "from the second decade of the twentieth century, the era of the Futurists and Dadaists", to the 1970s, "perhaps even ending then right when Bowie was peaking".[22] If the notion of performance can be described as the performance of the body-cum-costume, then the avant-garde tradition has not yet come to an end.

The fantastically long life of a costume from Dada to Gaga

In 1979, David Bowie appeared on the NBC show *Saturday Night Live* and performed the song "The Man Who Sold the World" in a conical, inelastic black-and-white costume which looked like a mongrel cross between a truncated pyramidal form (advertising pillar-style) and a latex tuxedo. This look was directly inspired by Sonia Delaunay's designs for Tristan Tzara's play *The Gas Heart* (mentioned above); it is said to also refer to Hugo Ball's costume contraptions.[23] In fact, during the 1970s, Bowie recurrently referred to avant-garde aesthetics as a major source of inspiration (for example, the set design of his 1974 Diamond Dogs tour drew on Dadaist art[24] and Weimar sensibility). In a 1976 interview, Bowie clarified: "I was always totally bedazzled by all the art forms of the twentieth century […] from Expressionism to Dadaism".[25] And, Dada was in vogue. For example, referring to the mode of anarchy which was developed in the Cabaret Voltaire to outrage over the conventional, the style of Alice Cooper (who reached his commercial peak in the 1970s) was dubbed "Dada rock";[26] and early punk was described as Dada – becoming "anti-rock" the way Dada aesthetic became known as "anti-art".[27] It is thus hardly surprising that Joey Arias, one of the two accompanying performers of

Bowie's *Saturday Night Live* appearance, commented on the show: "It was all very Dada".[28] However, it was not Bowie, but one of his two background performers, who added a truly new potency to the visual imaginary of the geometric, black-and-white Dada costume and its cultural genealogy: Klaus Nomi, one of the most glittering stars of Glam[29] and New Wave artists.

Nomi, who in his out-of-this-world falsetto sang opera, rock'n'roll and astral pop songs for earthlings, was called by his critics a "futuristic clown", "singing mutant" and an "asexual creature, a sad clown with the physique of an alien in love with Callas and Elvis Presley".[30] He considered himself to come from outer space. In his cabaret-style performances with their Kabuki-meets-Bauhaus setting, he consequently pursued the idea of being a space alien from a glamorous galaxy dropped down to earth to sing "earth-pop".[31] His visual appearance corresponded to this narrative:

> Nomi was slight and balding but worked that into his otherworldly appearance as well. The pointy black hair on either side of his skull was waxed into sharp triangles. A phallic clump of it, rounded at the end, protruded from the top of his elfin skull like a single antenna. Nomi's stare was blank but his expression was wry. His lips were painted black and bee stung. His cheeks were deathly white. Klaus Nomi looked like Felix the Cat's demented German Cousin.[32]

Ingenious, rather than demented, Nomi had Bowie's tailor make his own Delaunay-inspired signature tuxedo: a stylised V-shaped, glossy black-and-white spacesuit-carapace of a tuxedo, which fused sci-fi, high-camp glamour and Pierrot iconography. A sartorial hybrid, Nomi's version added danger, indefinability and genderlessness of the white clown and the alien to the costume. White clowns (Pierrots) and aliens both embody arcane identities, the subversion and negation of gender and 'authentic' identity[33] – and they can be read as ciphers for cosmic longing and artistic existence.

Referring to the iconography of the sad clown herself (for instance, on the cover of the single *Applause*) and claiming both Nomi and Bowie as significant influences on her work, Lady Gaga unsurprisingly picked up Nomi's signature cabaret tuxedo and transformed it into a low-cut black-and-white striped little dress (in her 2008 *Telephone* video). Now epitomising the synthesis of performance art with mainstream pop music,[34] our culturally-charged, iconic black-and-white costume thus became a mere sexy accessory. The transition from Dada to Gaga, one could conclude, led to an empty reference whose cheap charm is that of a sartorial peacock extravaganza. But this dead-end is not where the history of the costume ends. It is in the performance and visual art of Le Pustra where the magic and cultural fascination with the costume unfolds into new beings. Under the creative aegis of Le Pustra, a sartorial form of auteurism emerges from the obelisk-like cabaret tuxedo: the costume becomes the text, while the performance ascribes new meaning to it.[35] In other words, tracing a line between pieces of a found story is also making up or creating a story – Le Pustra's own story.

Figure 10.2 Le Pustra as "Astro Nomi". Source: Courtesy of Le Pustra; Natalia Illing, Pixelgnom.de (photographer), Basil Prinz (makeup), Berlin 2021.

Le Pustra's prismatic physicus fiction

Vaudeville's darkest muse and Neon Noir Sci-Fi Pierrot on avant-garde and circus aesthetics – a conversation with Anna-Sophie Jürgens

ASJ: Le Pustra, you have a background in Theatre and Fine Arts, and when you delve into the history and design of costumes, you become a "visual debauchee". This is what you called yourself in one of our previous conversations when you described to me the unrestrained pleasure that you take in garment design, fabrics and fashion from different periods. Your stage personae and many of the characters that you create and represent in your visual art seem to be particularly drawn to the fashion and styles of the early twentieth century, especially the 1920s, a decade known for its artistic innovation and experimentation. It thus seems appropriate to start our discussion with what I dubbed above your "Neon Noir Sci-fi Pierrot". When and where did you first perform in your Nomi-inspired costume?

Le Pustra: Can I just begin by saying I LOVE being called a "Neon Noir Sci-Fi Pierrot"! It conjures up fantastic imagery in my mind. My first public appearance 'as Nomi' was at Torture Garden in London on 6 September 2013. Since 1990, Torture Garden is Europe's most famous fetish-themed nightclub known for experimental art and innovative performances usually with a dark, gothic or fetish fantasy narrative. So I felt this was the perfect platform to debut Nomi as the costume was slightly fetishistic (even though my characters on stage are all very asexual) and he is such a cult figure. My intention was *to bring Nomi to life* through a multimedia performance using video visuals, lighting and live performance (I sang a Dresden Dolls song). I was *not impersonating* Nomi but wanted to project a *hologram of sorts* (perhaps from his home planet) to introduce him to a new and younger audience ready to discover his legacy. I really enjoyed the *sci-fi noir* and *futuristic* elements of this project. Nomi's striking style, enigmatic persona and haunting vocals really captured my imagination and this performance was my personal tribute to this most important and special performer.

ASJ: What intrigues you particularly about Nomi's style?

Le Pustra: I am very interested in geometric shapes and the fascinating work of Oskar Schlemmer immediately comes to mind. However, it was the triangular shape of Nomi's famous vinyl tuxedo suit that inspired me to recreate my own version. I collaborated with Amy Day, a London-based latex designer, and she came up with the reversible and slightly bigger V-shape created out of latex and foam. A Klaus Nomi latex hood finished the final illusion and the hair also had triangular shapes. Latex is most often used for club or fetish wear, but has been embraced by fashion designers – and still seems to be a provocative fabric choice today. The Nomi costume has proven to be very versatile and a witty way to experiment with body shapes. It is also interesting to note how one's movement and posture is directly

affected by wearing this tuxedo suit. I actually got in touch with Joey Arias – Nomi's abovementioned partner/collaborator – and showed him a photo of myself in the Nomi costume. Joey replied that "Klaus would have loved it". I then arranged to meet Joey during his London trip shortly after our conversation (I think this was in 2014), but it was a very awkward moment as Joey apparently did not remember me when we met but happily posed for a photo anyway.

ASJ: Speaking of photos … over the past few years you have worn your Nomi-inspired costume for a number of projects, including several photo shoots[36] and performances as a singer.[37] And your own art clip "Le Pustra: Vaudeville's Darkest Muse" is accompanied by a Nomi song.[38] Could you describe one or two of these projects and the 'power' of Nomi's art in more detail?

Le Pustra: Klaus was a German countertenor (for those poor unfortunate souls not yet acquainted with the artist) and he possessed a powerful singing voice mixing New Wave sounds with Pop Music – all presented as an avant-garde outer space-fashion-alien persona. His hypnotic singing filled the underground nightclubs of 1970s New York and bemused audience members marvelled at his mesmerising voice and rather peculiar appearance. It must have been quite the sight!

For my editorial and interview with *Dark Beauty Magazine* (an art and fashion magazine specialised in storytelling photography), Pablo Rodrigeuz (an uber-talented makeup artist) created three unrelated *looks* for the photoshoot and we used a grey geometrical set for the background. The first character was a club kid Leigh Bowery/Nomi-inspired *hybrid* using shocking pink face paint and baby blue powder to recreate and update Bowery's iconic makeup combined with the Nomi tuxedo suit; "The Emperor's New Clothes" look with illustrated and cartoonesque makeup inspired by the illustrations by Karl Lagerfeld; and the final "Shapeshifting Dark Alien" look – covered in real treacle and giant black sequins.[39] I loved the final results.

The video you mentioned was a short piece using Nomi's interpretation of "The Cold Song" (originally composed by Henry Purcell for the opera *King Arthur*) as inspiration, and I edited the video myself. It was filmed during a very productive phase shortly after I discovered Nomi's work. The footage was filmed by a lovely filmmaker called Leo Baker and shot in London in 2010, I believe. I always enjoy how music videos are edited and prefer the choppy, quick-cut style approach.

I would be very curious to know how Nomi's music and stage persona would have evolved if he were still alive. He managed to only release two albums during his short career and I am convinced that he never reached his full potential as a musical artist. Perhaps he achieved as much as it was going to *be possible* for such a unique artist. Nomi's signature look was the oversized tuxedo and we instantly recognise it – even to this day. I hope to find my own signature garment that people will associate with me although the Pierrot character seemed to do just that. I constantly discover new artworks online, immortalising and interpreting my Pierrot character.

Figure 10.3 Le Pustra as "Astro Nomi". Source: Courtesy of Le Pustra; Natalia Illing, Pixelgnom.de (photographer), Basil Prinz (makeup), Berlin 2021.

ASJ: Before we talk about the role of the Pierrot character in and for your art, I have one last question regarding Nomi. In one of our conversations, you said that the way Nomi performed on stage "came naturally to him" – and that you were impressed by it. Nomi only had one stage persona, performing in the iconic signature suit, which maybe was a bit of a mask. What are your thoughts on this?

Le Pustra: The now famous suit was inspired by Nomi's successful appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in 1979, singing backing vocals for David Bowie. Klaus decided to create his very own version of Bowie's Dada inspired costume and I think that decision paid off in dividends. Klaus not only transformed himself by using his imagination, vocal talents and strange appearance to great effect but also managed to create a fascinating stage persona with what was available to him, so I am really impressed by what he has achieved. Most of the 1970s' New Wave artists in New York had a "DIY" approach to their art and this total artistic freedom benefited Nomi immensely. It must have been such a liberating and exciting time to be in New York amidst all this creativity and collaborations and new ideas bursting at the seams. Klaus probably felt so inspired and free to express himself in all his glorious weirdness and accepted by the artistic community. So in answer to your question, I do not think he used his suit as a mask per se, but perhaps more to put himself into artistic context as he clearly felt like an alien or outsider – which he fully embraced and exploited. He clearly was an exhibitionist and wanted to be looked at by using fashion and styling to achieve that goal. I am not entirely sure in what direction his costumes and stage persona would have evolved if he had the opportunity but then one can perhaps argue he would not be so iconic now if he had done that.

ASJ: The figure of Pierrot is rocket fuel for your art. In fact, not only did you once tell me that this character exerts a tremendous gravitational pull on you, but you also said: "I am the eternal Pierrot". Since you told me: "I create myself as a living painting with Pierrot as its base", I would be interested to know what you think about the role of clown-inspired persona-creation and artistic self-staging in your art, and the potential risk of confusing Le Pustra-as-Pierrot and Le Pustra-*and*-Pierrot.

Le Pustra: I cannot pinpoint the *exact* moment I took on the Pierrot (*or* Pedrolino) persona but for as long as I can remember, I have always felt like a *modern day Pierrot*. I grew up feeling very alienated from my peers (high school was a nightmare) so I purposely lost myself in daydreaming to cope with the mundane, and also gravitated towards films (for example) for escapism, especially sci-fi and fantasy. The Pierrot became the alter-ego for many alienated artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and I was no different.

Fast forward to late 2009, and it was during my time spent in Italy that the Pierrot part of my personality fully emerged: not only on stage as a costumed character but also emotionally and psychologically. It was a *eureka* moment and everything suddenly all made sense and a feeling of serenity washed over

me. It sounds terribly dramatic, I know. One of my proudest achievements was a collaboration in 2012 with a delightful Finnish couple Atelieri O. Hapaala, who specialised in Vintage portrait and boudoir photography. We created a beautifully dreamy image of me as Pierrot: soft, romantic, pensive and seated on a chair wearing a white dance costume, Elizabethan white neck ruff and ballet slippers. I think this image captures my own melancholy so perfectly – which echoes the true essence of the Pierrot.[40]

Clown imagery just seemed to be imprinted in my subconscious somehow hence why I was always so fascinated by the circus and the colourful makeup they wore. So when I first started performing, I applied makeup to my face with only my fingers but eventually learnt to use actual makeup brushes. I enjoyed the texture of the makeup on my fingertips and mixing the paint on my face and blending the colours, but this often led to a messy dressing room with rainbow-coloured fingerprints everywhere. The signature Le Pustra makeup style only emerged in the following years and was essentially based on Joel Grey's emcee role from the 1972 Bob Fosse film *Cabaret*, and early twentieth-century German expressionist silent films: a white powdered face, smudgy-dark eye makeup, thinly drawn sad eyebrows, pastel hues of coral-coloured cheeks and dark blood-red angled lips and, on occasion, painted-on doll kiss-curled hair in matte jet-black. The application and blending were naturally refined over the years but the white face remained a constant base for all the different characters I experimented with.

It is believed the white-face clown makeup was associated and introduced with the Pierrot character in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Clown makeup is usually referred to as a mask but wearing this so-called white mask actually gave me visibility and the courage to go on stage, even when I did not feel confident to do so. So, I was not hiding behind a mask but rather empowered with this heavily painted face whilst still being myself: I did not actually take on a different persona. Performing on stage never came naturally to me (even though in my mind I knew I was supposed to do this) and I would experience such overwhelming fear and anxiety having to face a live audience. And I would ask myself why the hell am I even doing this? Without *the makeup*, I seem to be rendered invisible again and the interest in me would quickly fade away. Over the years I often struggled with the notion that I *should* be more chaotic, impulsive and frantic on stage like my contemporaries (you could say they could resemble traditional circus clowns compared to the gentle Pierrot) but I seemed to be more cerebral (to my own detriment) when approaching making work and interpreting a character like the Pierrot. Oh, how I envied those other performers' perceived confidence on stage and wished I too would be more confident … but alas! Strangely I eventually found comfort and took solace in my introverted nature. A friend once told me: "Your vulnerability is your greatest strength".

Figure 10.4 Le Pustra as "Space Cadet". Source: Courtesy of Le Pustra; Natalia Illing, Pixelgnom.de (photographer), Basil Prinz (makeup), Berlin 2021.

It is fascinating how powerful using white makeup actually can be, and in my case, I was surprised how people supported and embraced Le Pustra, this timid, soft-spoken little slip of man.

Audiences often seem to have difficulty though at times separating the *real me* from the whimsical (depending on the character *du jour*) Le Pustra character they see on stage, and as I created such an effective transformation apparently, I am almost never recognised without the makeup and costume. People would genuinely be perplexed and confused. "You look *so* different, I would have *never* recognised you", I would be told time after time. So, I have the pleasure of awkward social interactions and the exasperating task of constantly having to *re-introduce* myself to people (some of whom I have met before on multiple occasions who would then apologise profusely afterwards). At events or parties, I would sometimes be completely ignored by others until they are *alerted* that it is "Le Pustra". It is all rather quite mortifying. People are always expecting something "to happen" when they encounter an artist in white face makeup, so a certain amount of pressure and expectancy is involved.

ASJ: This reminds me of what Peta Tait has described as an essential (and distorted) characteristic of the cultural imaginary of the circus – that circus performers are *defined* and *recognised* by their costumes, which are susceptible to the "confusion between a consciously constructed performance persona and that of the performer's personal identity".[41] And this is where the avant-garde comes in. You have been called an "avant-garde artist";[42] however, in our conversations you have said that this is not a word or self-label that you would assign to yourself or to your work, although aspects of your art could be considered avant-garde. What aspects did you have in mind?

Le Pustra: Yes, I have been promoted and described as avant-garde even though I do not limit myself to any specific label or genre. In fact, I believe that Le Pustra does not fit in *any specific* art movement or subculture but has been part of and influenced (subconsciously perhaps) by most or all of them. Whilst my work is certainly open to interpretation, I must emphasise the fact that I am still active in exploring my work. I am in a constant process of artistic transformation. So one can perhaps argue that my work does actually represent Dadaism in the sense of the abovementioned quote by Raoul Hausmann (who understands Dada as a state of inner mobility) as Le Pustra *as the art* is always contradictory and elusive and my work is in a constant state *of change and continuous stirring*.

From 2006 until 2009, I was part of a comedy duo named Pustra/Vileen's Vaudeville and our work was based on a shared interest in absurdist humour, slapstick and films. For example, if something made us laugh, if it made *NO* sense at all and was completely ridiculous, we would incorporate the gags into our live shows and in later video work. We also relied heavily on circus aesthetics, including sideshow and vaudeville, and this influenced our initial costume and makeup choices. Our characters were essentially circus sideshow – *freak show* – characters and would often be billed as such in variety and cabaret shows. We exhibited ourselves (as I would like to call it) on the internet and eventually,

a London nightclub invited us to perform. We had a wonderful time in the process by being as weird and as controversial as possible, but not always in the best of taste, I should add. I also taught myself the musical saw, learnt to eat fire and walk on broken glass (which resulted in a trip to the Emergency Room) to incorporate more circus/vaudeville elements to our shows, and in my later work. I also offered a Masterclass in North American Vaudeville – and the subject still fascinates me today.

After the split in 2009, I reinvented myself as a solo performer and used many different stage names including "Mr Pustra" and "Pustra the Soothsayer" before settling on Le Pustra. The French "Le" is intentionally masculine instead of the feminine "La". I began experimenting with self-identity and attempted to create performance artwork that could be considered avant-garde. It consisted usually of multimedia performances dealing with subject matters ranging from suicide and depression to religion and S&M using video visuals, electronic music, movement and sometimes homemade papier-mâché masks. I was quite interested in Kabuki theatre but never fully explored this. However, these performances were not very well received *nor* successful at the time – something that seems to echo the early performances of Dadaists. I thus abandoned this style of internalised performances as I felt alienated from the audience so I had to question myself: What is my *real* intention? What do I want to say? I was very lost and did not know who to be and/or what direction to follow, so I experimented with *everything*. But it felt disingenuous at the time and I needed another way to connect and express myself. Or maybe I was just not good enough at being a serious performance artist as the problem seemed to be that I *was* taking it all too seriously and I was not anarchic nor ironic. People often find avant-garde art performances pretentious or confusing and perhaps feel slightly embarrassed that they did not *get it*. So, the label of something *being* avant-garde always seems to be used *after* some time has passed or when the work has been re-examined and suddenly becomes relevant and interesting. That is only my opinion though. So I continued *soldiering on* and performed at experimental avant-garde art club nights, for instance Act Art (under the name "Daemiane") and fetish club Torture Garden (where I debuted the Nomi performance in 2013, mentioned earlier) in London. These were artistic *anything-goes* club nights that allowed and encouraged queer performers, such as myself, the freedom to experiment with any theme and medium. I really enjoyed video art at that time and showing short films and visuals were always part of my show. I had many triumphs and plenty of failures. At times I went too *dark* with performances and I had a lot of unfinished projects and unrealised ideas. But that's the journey.

The next time I was to dabble in avant-garde theatre (also known as Experimental Theatre) was a project called "The Gorey Cabinet" with a German mime performer and actor called Malik Ibeis. We were very influenced by technology, absurdist humour and subcultures – such as Steampunk – and of course, circus aesthetics, so it was wonderful to revisit my circus roots. The horror Victorian illustrations of Edward Gorey and gothic films of director Tim Burton further fuelled our imagination. We were working

on a very avant-garde interactive stage set, abstract music and geometrical paper costume designs, but the project was abandoned in 2014 shortly before I relocated to Berlin in April of 2015.

ASJ: It seems that your stylised black-and-white Sci-Fi Pierrot costume, of which Nomi's suit is an ancestor – and thus, to a certain extent, also Dadaist performance aesthetics – and your approach to fashion more generally could be positioned within this context.[43] Do you agree?

Figure 10.5 Le Pustra as "Club Kid Creature Feature". Photo: Natalia Illing, Pixelgnom.de / Makeup: Basil Prinz (Berlin, 2021).

Le Pustra: Yes, I agree. Connecting with fashion is where I truly felt my most authentic self, if that makes sense? I participated in several avant-garde fashion shows and projects – including London Fashion Week and Berlin Alternative Fashion Week. The designs were often stark, geometrical in construction and deliciously avant-garde in concept. Some of the garments even had a Bauhaus quality to it, instantaneously transforming oneself into *une oeuvre d'art*. I worked with a young Serbian designer, called Ivana Pilja, and I even had the pleasure of directing one of her theatrical fashion shows in Berlin. I also walked for designer Ziad Ghanem in 2012. Instead of using traditional models, Ziad opted for fabulous and inspiring LGBTQ+ and POC models in all shapes and sizes. Being able to strut fiercely down the runway in glorious makeup and styling, posing for frenzied clicking cameras – it was exhilarating to say the least! No rules. Just be fabulous, daaaaaahling! Plus, the venue was stunning: London's Freemasons Hall. Pure Art Deco splendour.

I thus became a muse (I'd like to think), for avant-garde fashion designers and stylists, which felt much more natural than attempting to create superficial performance art nobody understood *nor* really cared for.

ASJ: Historical avant-gardists – including Dadaists, Futurists and Surrealists – were interested in aesthetics of popular entertainment (vaudeville, circus, clowning, etc.) as well as combining different media. It sounds like you can particularly relate to their ways of *synthesising*. How would you react if someone called your visual art "neo-dada" or "neo-avant-garde"?

Le Pustra: I would definitely lean more towards Surrealism or Dadaism if I had to choose a twentieth-century art movement but could not really find anything to relate to in regards to 1950s/s1960s Neo-Dadaism. It seems to be re-emerging though (Post-Neo-Dadaism?) mainly as internet memes which I do not actively participate in, but I do enjoy them on occasion. Twenty-first-century art movements I could be perhaps considered part of are visual culture and participatory arts. But it will be interesting to see where it all leads or what comes next. Synthesising is a major factor in my work and thought process as I prefer a variety of aesthetics and themes to create something new or at least freshen it all up with a lick of paint. At the moment, I am particularly interested in 1970s Glam Rock, Retro-Futuristic imagery and Dadaist photography.

ASJ: Thank you for this wonderful conversation. We are looking forward to discovering these new influences – may be in the form of Glam Rock Pierrots? – in your future work.

Le Pustra: Oh thank you for speaking with me. Yes, "Glam Rock Pierrots" sounds like a great name for a Post-Neo-New Wave band, don't you agree? In the future, I shall continue to experiment with visual references and continue to create live performances, finally complete my photo art book and hopefully do more television or even film. I am looking forward to getting back on set for *Babylon Berlin* and the next run of *Le Pustra's Kabarett der Namenlosen* in Berlin.

Figure 10.6 Le Pustra as "Neon Nomi". Source: Courtesy of Le Pustra; Natalia Illing, Pixelgnom.de (photographer), Basil Prinz (makeup), Berlin 2021.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank and acknowledge photographer Natalia Illing and makeup artist Basil Prinz for their artistic collaboration in creating the images for this chapter of the book *Circus and the Avant-Gardes*.

Notes

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5 Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: Viking, 1974), 70.
6 Ball, *A Dada Diary*, 71.
7 Quoted in Jürgen Bohle, *Theatralische Lyrik und lyrisches Theater im Dadaismus: Eine Untersuchung der Wechselbeziehung zwischen lyrischen und theatralischen Elementen in dadaistischer Aktion* (PhD thesis, Saarbrücken, 1981), 52.
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10 Richard Huelsenbeck, *En Avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Hannover: Paul Steegemann, 1920), 21. Translated by ASJ.
11 Hans Richter, *DADA – Kunst und Antikunst* (Köln: DuMont, 1973), 32. Translated by ASJ.
12 Bohle, *Dadaismus*, 30.
13 Bohle, *Dadaismus*, 31–32.
14 Maftei, "The Case of Dada," 223.
15 Bohle, *Dadaismus*, 321.
16 Annabelle Melzer, *Latest Rage and the Big Drum: Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 80.
17 Melzer, *Latest Rage and the Big Drum*, 64. Hans Richter described the puppets Arp made as being "the first abstract puppets ever used at puppet shows… They moved with a grace not of this earth and would have out-circused even Calder's circus in their purity." (Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), 288). See also Patrick Leroux's chapter in this book.
18 Melzer, *Latest Rage and the Big Drum*, 68.
Melzer, *Latest Rage and the Big Drum*, 64.
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20 Dirk Scheper, *Oskar Schlemmer: das triadische Ballett und die Bauhausbühne* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1988), 270.
21 Peter Wollen, "Cinema/Americanism/the Robot," in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, eds. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 42.
22 Schechner, "Avant Gardes," 313.

23 Christopher Breward, "For 'We Are the Goon Squad': Bowie, Style and the Power of the Lip Cover, 1967–1983," in *David Bowie is the Subject*, eds. Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh (London: V&A Publishing, 2013), 212.
24 Kathryn Johnson, "David Bowie Is," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.
25 Camille Paglia, "Theatre of Gender: David Bowie at the Climax of the Sexual Revolution," in *David Bowie Is*, eds. Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh (London: V&A Publishing, 2013), 84.
26 Simon Reynolds, *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and Its Legacy from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2016), 121. Cooper actually modelled for Dalí in a publicity stunt in 1973.
27 "In the early days of London punk, one could hardly find an article on the topic without the word 'dada' in it: punk was 'like dada,' everybody said, though nobody said why, let alone what that was supposed to mean." (Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 200, see also 199).
28 Marc Spitz, *Bowie: A Biography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), 305.
29 Glenn O'Brien, "The Birth of Glitter Rock," in *Glam: The Performance of Style*, ed. Darren Pih (Liverpool: Tate, 2013), 129.
30 Andrew Horn (director), *The Nomi Song*, DVD, 2005 (1:05:38, press reviews, original in French).
31 Ken McLeod, "Bohemian Rhapsodies: Operatic Influences on Rock Music," *Popular Music* 20:2 (2001), 197. For an extensive discussion of Nomi's and Bowie's link to clown aesthetics, see Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "Being the Alien: The Space Pierrots and Circus Spaces of David Bowie, Klaus Nomi and Michael Jackson," *Southern Space Studies: Outer Space and Popular Culture* 2, ed. Annette Froehlich (Cham: Springer (accepted for publication July 23, 2020)).
32 Spitz, *Bowie*, 300–301.
33 Alien imaginary "differs" the notion of "authentic" identity according to Ken McLeod, see "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music," *Popular Music* 22:3 (2003), 339.
34 Victor P. Corona, "Memory, Monsters, and Lady Gaga," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46:4 (2013), 725. See her costume in the first video still in Anna Pickard, "Does Lady Gaga's Telephone Video Ring Your Bell?" *The Guardian*, accessed 16 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/mar/12/lady-gaga-telephone-video-beyonce and Gaga on Nomi in Alexis Petridis, "From Yoko Ono to Lady Gaga: How Pop Embraced Performance Art," *The Guardian*, accessed 26 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jul/07/performance-art pop-lady-gaga-yoko-ono. Gaga's background includes a stint as a neo-burlesque dancer (see Philip Auslander, "Twenty-First-Century Girl Lady Gaga, Performance Art, and Glam," in *Global Glam and Popular Music: Style and Spectacle from the 1970s to the 2000s*, eds. Henry Johnson, Ian Chapman and Henry Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 183).
35 See Robert Violette, *Leigh Bowery* (London: Violette Editions, 1998), 16.
36 See "Le Pustra as Klaus Nomi (Behind-the-Scenes)," accessed 14 December 2020, https://www.darkbeautymag.com/2014/08/behind-the-scenes-with-le-pustra/.
37 See for example "Le Pustra Sings 'Jack's Lament' from the Nightmare before Christmas," accessed 17 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUkSK1Zo1wM and "Wig in a Box (From Hedwig and the Angry Inch) by Le Pustra," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn_2cCO4JiE.
38 "Le Pustra: Vaudeville's Darkest Muse," accessed 17 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=CIKgXbIQeD0.
39 The makeup was created by Argentinean makeup artist Pablo Rodriguez, see "Behind the Scenes with Le Pustra," accessed 14 December 2020, https://www.darkbeautymag.com/2014/08/behind-the scenes-with-le-pustra/ Leigh Bowery (1961–1994) was a highly

influential Australian performance artist, club promoter and fashion designer who used extravagant costumes, which he called "Looks", to reshape his bodily contours. For his relation to circus and clown aesthetics, see Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "Costumes of Belonging: 'Fitting in' Circus Fabrics in the Novels *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* by Peter Carey and *The Pilo Family Circus* by Will Elliott, and the Costume-Cum-Body Art of Leigh Bowery," in *Social Beings, Future Belongings: Reimagining the Social*, eds. David Bissell, Miranda Bruce, Helen Keane and Anna Tsalapatanis (London: Routledge, 2019), 98–104.

40 See "Le Pustra Pierrot," accessed 15 January 2021, https://lepustrashop.bigcartel.com/product/mr pustra-pierrot-poster.

41 Peta Tait, "Performing Shamelessness: Leigh Bowery, Copi and Queer Body Physicality," in *What a Man's Gotta Do?: Masculinities in Performance*, eds. Adrian Kiernander, Jonathan Bollen and Bruce Parr (Armidale: CALLTS, 2006), 219. Peta Tait also detects a "connection to the live tradition of theatre and circus" in Bowery's performance of defiant shamelessness and moving body, and discusses the location of his art of dressing the body within the history of theatre (219).

42 Roma Daily News, "Teatro Palladium."

43 See e.g. "IVANA PILJA A/W13 featuring LE PUSTRA," accessed 15 December 2020, https://vimeo.com/60108684 and "Le Pustra," https://fashionstream.tv/video/le-pustra/.

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11 The aesthetics of queer work

Loïe Fuller's exhausting life as performance art in Stéphanie Di Giusto's *The Dancer* (2016)

Wesley Lim

Stéphanie Di Giusto's auteur biopic *The Dancer* (2016) depicts the life and performances of Loïe Fuller – the epitome of an interdisciplinary artist, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a dancer, choreographer, stage director, lighting designer and protocinematic figure, this American most famously danced beginning in 1892 at the circus and the Folies Bergère (a famous music hall in Paris) – at a time when many artists performed both in the circus and popular theatre. The open atmosphere of these venues allowed Fuller's curious and inquisitive nature to blossom into her avant-garde performances. Her Serpentine Dance involved her twirling a highly voluminous, light fabric around herself with bamboo poles extending her reach. Changing, coloured lights illuminated her performances from the wings and below as she danced on a raised platform. The effortless and organic beauty of the swirling textile masked the arduous and calculated work to create it. Di Giusto's film melds Fuller's two worlds of her dances and her everyday life, highlighting an aesthetic of work, exhaustion, pain and ambiguity. Even though the film critic Susan Wloszczyna bemoans the fact that

> [t]here are too many scenes of Fuller physically and mentally suffering for her art as she questions if what she does actually qualifies as dance. How many times do we need to see her soak her body in a vat of ice?[1]

I argue that, in the film, the atmosphere of the Folies Bergère was essential in giving her an open space to explore her queer identity; not only through her performances but also through a stylised kind of "performance art" focused on laborious and taxing endeavours. Through close analysis of cinematic sequences and scenes, I demonstrate that it is precisely this persistent representation of a battered, questioning body from Fuller's everyday life that becomes highly stylised in exploring a queer aesthetic of work.

Clare Croft defines "queer dance" as "the pleasures *and* difficulties of moving between multiple, layered identities. Frustration and diminishment physically reframed as strength".[2] This seems to be exactly what the director desires to portray: Fuller's intersectional identity, her both open yet specific interests, and the arduous work leading to her empowered agency. The cinematic genre

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-15

of the biopic often presents the life of a historical figure deemed worthy of remembrance. According to film scholar Belén Vidal, it portrays frequent reenactments of pivotal events, maintains a "cavalier" understanding of historical facts and highlights the individual's story, and in doing so, creates its own kind of historical writing.[3] Di Giusto certainly takes liberty in this biopic by inventing characters and dramatising events that may not have occurred. While biopics often look back in time, they also aim to address posterity and therefore often grapple with contemporary concerns. Film studies scholar Dennis Bingham recognises that biopics of women are often fraught with suffering and victimisation; however, female directors often try to empower their protagonists through feminist tendencies.[4] Visual culture scholar Tina Olsin Lent observes that artist biopics "highlight intense personal suffering as the outward sign of the creative forces that lay within".[5] For example, in Julie Taymor's film *Frida* (2002), Lent argues that Frida Kahlo's life itself is depicted as a work of art.[6] Operating in a similar vein as these three scholars, the life-as-art and art-as-life dichotomy in Di Giusto's *The Dancer* aims to highlight the queerness of work in both Fuller's performances and personal life, serving a strong agency through a feminist lens.

In researching for this film (by reading many books on Fuller), Di Giusto drew particularly from her autobiography *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (1913). The performer's biographical information resonated with the director, who wanted to become closer to the dancer by depicting "the inhumane, almost destructive side of her style".[7] Di Giusto unearthed memorable and visually evocative vignettes and adapted them – both faithfully and artistically divergent – for film. She was also inspired by Fuller's own personal circumstances mirroring her own: both did not have the typical artistic backgrounds for the projects they pursued.[8] While Fuller initially was an actress before convincing herself to become a dancer, the director found herself outside the privileged circles of Parisian cinema working first in advertising. In comparing *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* to Isadora Duncan's biography, another prominent dancer, the director notes the authenticity in Fuller's clumsy writing style and representations; the interdisciplinary artist was more interested in creating art than in her own physical appearance in real life.[9]

Variété, circus, the Folies Bergère – and modern dance

Performing a skirt dance in vaudeville of Middle America, Fuller wanted to develop her artistry in a place that would appreciate her dances. She wrote in her autobiography: "I wanted to go to a city where, as I had been told, educated people would like my dancing and would accord it a place in the realm of art".[10] Convinced she needed to work her way through Europe before being able to perform in Paris, Fuller started in a Hamburg Altona beer garden (in Germany) around 1892. She then performed in a circus:

> I earned there several hundred marks, which allowed us [her and her mother] to go to Cologne, where I had to dance in a circus between

> an educated donkey and an elephant that played the organ. My humiliation was complete. Since then, however, occasions have not been lacking when I have realised that the proximity of trained horses and music-mad elephants is less humiliating than intercourse with some human beings.[11]

Writing her memoirs in retrospect allows her to critically reflect on her feelings at the time in contrast with her present-day thoughts. Her initial disgrace of being associated with animals is later tamed after realising how humans can be just as animalistic. The circus was, therefore, a learning experience causing her to become more open with her surroundings. In fact, during her own performances, she indeed revels in transforming into other organic beings: fire, a butterfly, a lily, an orchid etc. Although not the same as trained animals, the animalism is not lost on either part. Being associated with this performing circuit allowed her to eventually obtain work at variety theatres – so-called *variétés* – in Paris. She stayed in Paris for four years but still remained staunchly American.[12] Fuller also influenced the Ballets Russes in her multimedia approach to performance.[13] This Russian dance company, which performed modernist ballets, was also in Paris at the same time.

Fuller found her niche in the music halls of the Folies Bergère. While many[14] considered the dances of music hall performers to be trivial entertainment, Claudia Balk and Brygida Ochaim argued that they led the path to (what became) modern dance.[15] Fuller's performances at these venues emphasised the porous boundaries between popular entertainment and experimental forms of avant-garde dance. The short, multifarious *variété* acts sustained the fleeting attention of the audience, and held no unified theme or narrative.[16] The different, visually appealing and colourful acts also switched very quickly to the next with little transition time. The *variété* could be captured in the image of the kaleidoscope: a perpetually changing play of colours.[17] The stages of Paris – *variété* and music halls (music halls renamed their shows "variety" in the early twentieth century; they often included a restaurant or bar and sometimes offered the possibility of dancing) – that Fuller conquered were popular entertainment venues whose aesthetics drew from, referenced and interacted with circus aesthetics (in part because of the interchange of performers).

Freer production guidelines allowed other kinds of dance to emerge in the music hall outside of conventional dramatic theatre practices such as: skirt dance, serpent dance, cakewalk, Cancan, Fandango, polkas and waltzes, *Gymnastik*, erotic dances, juggling and sketches.[18] These gave Fuller the freedom to experiment with her Serpentine Dance; open codes allowed more experimental pieces to be performed under the guise of *variété*. With its beginnings outside the realm of the bourgeois middle class and being deemed as immoral, the variety theatre in Germany, France and England became less of a subculture and moved towards becoming a celebrated part of popular entertainment, according to Edward Ross Dickinson.[19] American playwright Edwin Milton Royle observes that variety theatre, vaudeville and music hall venues provided a "swinging door" with other traditional forms like theatre

and opera,[20] cultivating a "democratic crowd" from all classes[21] because there was essentially something for everyone: "Well! it is YOUR show. It is there because it is what is wanted by the average of you".[22] Investigating the relationship between the circus, the variety theatre and the fascination and experimentation with electricity, circus and performing arts scholar Gillian Arrighi perceives Fuller as an "electrically transformed" body.[23] Furthermore, the Futurist F.T. Marinetti embraced the new entertainment form in "The Variety Theatre" (1913), which maintained complexity, variability, speed, transformation, amazement and record-setting; born out of electricity, variety theatre is also lucky to be decoupled from tradition.[24] And in "Manifest of the Futurist Dance" (1917) he highlights Fuller's dances, which use electrical light and mechanics. For Marinetti, the Futurist dance referenced machines using noises instead of music as accompaniment.[25] Ted Merwin argues that Fuller's practices had an influence on Marinetti's aesthetics because of their contradictory use of human creativity and labour to produce a mechanistic representation.[26]

Even though Fuller's performances were entertaining and sensual, they also maintained intellectual and avant-garde characteristics. Dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter argues that Fuller's arrival in Paris in 1892 began the process of a "radical break" from the hegemonic Western concert dance form of classical ballet into experimental free dance.[27] Fuller was one of many other dancers at the beginning of the twentieth century – such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Vaslav Nijinsky – who adopted their own aesthetic changes. Calling into questions characteristics of ballet – hierarchical roles, codified steps and storybook narratives – dance, like literature, theatre and arts, underwent an "upheaval of the semiotic systems" causing crises in language and representation.[28] This free or modern dance celebrated the emancipation and agency of the individual, serving as an "artistic antidote" to the damage of civilisation.[29] While modernity and the avant-garde are designated as two different historical time periods, Brandstetter notes that these demarcations almost seem to be synonymous in dance because they shared a radical break with traditional ballet and theatrical venues, professed manifestos of a new aesthetic paradigm (Fuller's autobiography, for example) and provoked the viewer to see how dance merges with life.[30] And in Fuller's case, she also experimented and capitalised on new and emerging technologies and sciences like electricity, radium, film, the modern city and advertising.

Circus as queer space

Scholarship has most recently viewed Fuller through a queer studies lens. Theatre studies scholar Penny Farfan interprets Fuller's performance as maintaining an "aura of the uncanny" as a part of queer modernism in her Fire Dance[31] because of its "unsettling indeterminacy".[32] Farfan draws on Freud's notion that the *heimlich* can suddenly and frighteningly become *unheimlich*. More broadly, she argues that queer performance was integral in shaping modernism, modern sexual identities and contemporary queer modernist studies.[33]

She writes that "performance – located, relational, textualized, vocalized, costumed, choreographed – was a particularly vital forum for queer subversions and the activation of queer significations, experiences, feelings, desires, and communities".[34] Using Brandstetter's understanding of modernism and the avant-garde as often being synonymous, I would extend Farfan's characterisation of queer performances as "avant-garde".

Film studies scholar Susan Potter argues that while the disappearance of Fuller's plump body under the fabric created a sense of indeterminacy – since the Serpentine Dance is historically associated with the skirt dance, an erotic form of dancing – it still essentially "recalibrates the experience as erotic" though the abstract form and motion.[35] Furthermore, Potter demonstrates that Fuller knowingly cultivated a homosocial following among women allowing them to explore erotic spectacle and visual pleasure in a veiled and "appropriate" sense at matinee shows, private gatherings and salons.[36] What Farfan and Potter have not explored, which I expand on, are the connection between forms of popular entertainment (such as circus, *variété* and music hall) and the Folies Bergère as essential to the formation of Fuller's queer identity, particularly in her daily life. Di Giusto's 2016 film *The Dancer* (discussed in the following) contributes more to the narrative development and performance art tableaus that represent Fuller's developing queer work.

The exploratory ethos of the Folies Bergère helped cultivate Fuller's intellectual desire for the avant-garde, allowing her to also experiment with the development and understanding of herself as a queer figure both on and off stage. According to circus historian Janet Davis, the circus and music hall scene had historically been a place for "social outsiders" to find refuge in a "nomadic community of oddballs" while providing a liveable income.[37] "These nomadic circus strangers", Davis explains, "helped subvert contemporary norms about gender and the body. Dressed in sleek leotards and wearing closely cropped hair, circus men and women often looked indistinguishable from each other, particularly as they exhibited equally difficult feats of agility".[38] The blurring of these gender lines "flattened sexual differences, and went so far as to challenge the distinction between human and animal".[39] According to performance studies scholar Peta Tait, nineteenth-century aerialists maintained a mixture of physical gendered distinctions: males performed daring feats with grace while females also performed beautiful and courageous movements.[40] Their extraordinary ability alighted them with godliness, "supernatural fantasy figures" and bird symbolism.[41] Fuller's Serpentine Dances certainly maintains the blurred ethos of these circus performers, however using a style with much more voluminous fabric and abstract movement as its primary semiotics.

French studies academic and circus performer Charles R. Batson claims "I've so long already conceived of circus as queer",[42] implying that the category was always there but never overtly theorised. He draws from performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz's ideas of alterworld-making and queer utopia giving minority voices agency and futurity (2009). Batson notices this glaring gap in which being queer – the exceptional, the odd, the outsider, the outcast – lies

at the heart of circus practices and meaning.[43] Batson draws from Jean Cocteau's text "Le numéro Barbette" (1926), which discusses power and risk of the male performative trapeze artist Vander Clyde dressed as the female-coded Barbette. Before a larger discourse on queer theory even began, dance studies scholar Mark Franko's article "Where He Danced: Cocteau's Barbette and Ohno's Water Lilies" (1992) addresses the dangers of hegemonic dichotomies of heterosexual-homosexual and masculine-feminine. Franko posits rather an inbetweenness "outside the tight sexual polarity from which it emerged".[44] Batson visually evokes the physical, spatial and balancing demands of the trapeze artist who is situated between polarities yet takes advantage of these new semiotic meanings and momentums.[45] Emerging from this space Di Giusto takes these visual modes a step further by applying a queer aesthetics of work in a performance art vein.

Franko's later study *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* addresses how work in 1930s America was configured by dance and vice versa. He writes that

> work's actual doing became a subject worthy of attention and artistic treatment, and hence the representation of work and workers by dancers and actors could itself be legitimately valued as labor [...] dance conveyed the physical experience of work in aesthetic and critical terms, bringing laboring bodies into visibility as historical agents.[46]

Franko reads labour as being an action – a process more like a dance than work as a product.[47] Di Giusto portrays Fuller and the other figures in this way, however, their representation goes beyond a dancing aesthetic, into the realm of performance art. Drawing from theatre, dance, visual art and music (but never sitting predominantly in one area), performance art emerged around the 1970s to describe ephemeral, process-oriented work. Retrospectively applied to Happenings and Fluxus events as well, it has always been associated with avant-garde practices, which embraced non-conventional performance spaces using everyday people. Growing out of these veins emerged postmodern dance, which rejected the codes of ballet and modern dance; it favoured everyday or "pedestrian" movement, allowing for the breakdown and porosity between art and life.[48] To this extent, it resembles the aesthetic agenda of modernism and the avant-garde at the turn to the twentieth century. As a result of these blurred distinctions, performance studies scholar Richard Schechner writes that "identity is constructed, not given, contested, not settled, historically and politically evolving, not fixed in 'nature'".[49] Therefore, through the performance art tableaus in Di Giusto's film, we see Fuller's exploration of her queer identity as it correspondingly evolves with her fierce and unrelenting appetite for performance ingenuity.

Opening tableau as performance art

The Dancer begins with a black screen and the opening credits with a variation on a melody of *Spring* from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*; the sounds of an audience

Figure 11.1 Film still from *The Dancer* showing an exhausted Fuller being carried away enveloped in her voluminous costume after a performance. Source: Screen capture by the author.

clapping and cheering can be heard. A sudden cut depicts a subject being carried within a voluminous, off-white fabric enveloping and visually obscuring the body. Only the hair and eyes are shown as if to convey a subdued, meditative or exhausted state. The camera uses a tracking shot to create a sense of urgency as the individual is carried and rushed through two swinging doors by seven men; eager photographers run with the group taking flash pictures of the enigmatic subject from overhead. Another female character leads the men, shooing away the photographers, who try to touch the costume.

Quick shots of the cocooned figure are then juxtaposed with shots panning from a sunny sky to cowboys working outside and an image of a horse's head and finally a calf being let loose at a rodeo. The director seems to have staged a scene from Fuller's autobiography:

> The four dances, with the encores, had lasted forty-five minutes and, despite the stimulus of great success, I had reached the limit of my strength. I looked at the manager and asked: "How about the last one?" "We don't need it. Those you have just danced have been enough to stir the audience up. Don't you hear the cheering?" A moment later we were surrounded by a great crowd and I was almost dragged to my dressing room.[50]

This textual excerpt highlights her arduous tenacity and almost superhuman ability to continue performing for such a length of time. The dynamic, cinematic sequence introduces the viewer not to Fuller's Serpentine Dance at the Folies Bergère in Paris – as she is often depicted in lithographs, posters and sculptures at the time – but rather to an utterly exhausted dancer during the moments immediately following her first performance. While her "performance" here could be viewed in an everyday instead of necessarily aesthetic mode, the two are inextricably linked. Fuller's mysterious body wrapped in

her large gown vacillates between human and abstract object, and bleeds into a stylised dramatisation of her stage life into her real life. The surging mass of seven men urgently carrying Fuller creates its own kind of organic, affective wave just like her undulating stage movements. Di Guisto, therefore, extends Fuller's stage dance to create a performance art piece enhancing and diverging from the aesthetic features of the Serpentine Dance. The musical score also reflects the intersection of art and life and its connotations of rebirth by using Max Richter's *Recomposed* album of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, which contained a reworking of *Spring*. His reimagining of iconic melodies uses repetition and variation in a postmodernist and minimalist vein. Slow-changing pedal tones by most of the strings are contrasted with fast, high-pitched, jovial soloists' playing, giving the score a modernised impression – in the same realm as Fuller's dancing. The scene also serves to disorient the viewer by abruptly entering the film, indicating how Di Guisto will artistically represent Fuller cinematically. Alluding at the end of the sequence to her origins in the American West, the scene also symbolises her birth into show business as a spectacle. As a highly inquisitive and industrious artist, Fuller becomes consumed with research and work related to the development of her dancers and felt more comfortable in the confines of her cocoon-like fabric than in addressing her fans and photographers.

Queer space of the Folies Bergère

As an affective space in the film, the Folies Bergère empowers the intellectual curiosity and artistic innovation of Fuller in a particularly queer manner precisely because it occupies a range of inbetweenness: between the circus and the theatre, between dance/performance and art/technology, between popular entertainment and the avant-garde. This indeterminacy functions as a fruitful gateway and laboratory for Fuller's performance creations to emerge.

In one scene, after having arrived in Paris, Fuller needs to attract the attention of Edouard Marchand, the director of the Folies Bergère. As he and his managing assistant Gabrielle arrive by car, Fuller dons her costume and begins performing the Serpentine Dance in a dark and wet inner courtyard as their car light beams provide the illumination.

Consumed with how to create an unexpected performance outside of the theatre space – as performance artists of the 1960s and 70s conceptualised of Happenings and Fluxus – this cinematic Fuller views this opportunity as her "audition", instead of requesting a normal performance demonstration, in order to distinguish her art form from others at the *variété*. Furthermore, she not only becomes the physical screen for a protocinematic form of film, but also performs her art *for* life: an opportunity to audition for work and to earn money. While both the real and fictitious Fuller did rely on a naïve and pure instinct concerning her art, she also worked incredibly hard to exercise her genius. After Marchand dismisses her for being too old, Gabrielle pics up a concept drawing of Fuller's that had fallen into a large puddle when

Figure 11.2 Fuller's impromptu audition in a back alleyway for the Folies Bergère in *The Dancer*. Source: Screen capture by the author.

she tried showing Marchand her work. Attracting Gabrielle's attention, it depicts lights being shown on her costume from different angles and various colours. During the "audition" in the dark courtyard, which is not depicted in her autobiography but rather staged by Di Giusto, the cinematic Fuller tears her dress and requests to come inside to repair it. While this scene demonstrates how art and life collide and become interwoven, it does not, however, have a corresponding representation in Fuller's autobiography. Life and art intersect as in performance art from the 1960s and 1970s and during the historical avant-garde. The cinematic Gabrielle is a manifestation of Gabrielle "Gab" Bloch who was Fuller's real-life partner and had significantly contributed to the development of stage technologies. While always recognised as a queer figure, only recent scholarship has begun to thematicise its effect of her identity on her artistic production. The film, however, takes artistic license by not depicting their relationship but instead highlighting Fuller's and Duncan's romantic tension. According to Fuller's autobiography, upon coming to audition at the Folies Bergère she saw a poster and the performance of a Serpentine Dance imitator, who had stolen her idea and "borrowed" her money in the US; while watching, Fuller became reassured that she was the superior performer and confidently auditioned after the imitator's performance.[51] This alteration in the biopic demonstrates that Di Giusto intentionally plays with factual events in order to serve her own artistic vision of depicting performance art pieces that reflect and extrapolate Fuller's avant-garde aesthetic.

In the next scene, Fuller follows Gabrielle up the stairs into the Folies Bergère. Wearing a dark dress and her dad's bowler hat – a reminder of her deceased father and also reflecting her queer appearance – the new arrival passes and curiously observes a colourful array of other performers. Using a continuous tracking shot up the stairs to create a lively and panoramic view for

Figure 11.3 Panorama of performers at the Folies Bergère in *The Dancer*. Source: Screen capture by the author.

the spectator, Fuller sees black-skinned individuals in "African" folk or tribal garb, a female performer in a black dress holding a black umbrella, another woman in white petticoat stretching in a standing, 6 o'clock *penché*, an albino-skinned woman with African features and a performer trimming his beard while looking in a mirror. While these characters do not play a major role in the film, they serve as the variety of performers at the Folies Bergère from all walks of life and differing "spectacular" abilities and exemplify Batson's "Circus as Queer Space" (see above).

In the following scene, the director shows a large, high-ceilinged room where jugglers, dancers and aerialists rehearse with their apparatuses. While practicing her dance by whirling bamboo sticks around, Marchand approaches Fuller saying that she will audition in front of a live audience. The protagonist demands electricity and claims to be able to cover the expensive costs. Affronted by the remark, since it has never been done before, the director clearly relays the ethos of the Folies Bergère: spectacle and entertainment. At the time, the use of electricity on stage had not yet become common practice. While he walks away, Fuller mutters loudly that she wants something more. This scene demonstrates Fuller's strong artistic will and grand vision by demanding electricity and essentially stretches the boundaries of stage craft at the variety theatre. In her autobiography, she cites Marchand's characterisation of her: "a queer sort of girl" who incessantly works on her craft at the Folies Bergère and does not explore Paris; at the conclusion of her exhausting dances, she is carried to her private apartment connected to the building so she is not seen.[52] According to Anne Herrmann, describing someone as "queer" in the modernist period still meant "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric" but could also cover for meaning sexually queer – "desiring in ways that make strange the relations between identities".[53] This means that Marchand's characterisation of Fuller as being queer is still ambiguous.

Di Giusto must have been familiar with this or other similar characterisations about Fuller's work ethic and personality. The director thematicises a montage of short scenes lasting three to five seconds each, which harbour a tireless and industrious work aesthetic. The opening of the montage uses a tracking shot from the left showing a green, red and white light on stage, with Fuller's stagehands demanding more from Gabrielle concerning the light staging. Another depicts her writing down and reciting the plan of these changing lights. The next scene is a close up shot of Fuller practicing with her twirling weights, clapping chalk into her hands and performing masculine gestures as a boxer would as if gearing up for a fight. This montage offers a panorama of the activities involved in Fuller's research and preparation to relay a vigorous, persistent and performative will. The emphasis is overwhelmingly devoted to the process of creating the dance and less on the actual performance.

During the performance itself the colourful swirling patterns are intentionally contrasted with close-ups of Fuller sweating and breathing deeply as she arduously manoeuvres her arms. After she concludes the dance to *Winter* (Richter's recomposed version of *The Four Seasons*) and the curtains close, she collapses off the raised stage into the arms of her stagehands. The opening scene of the film is repeated and shown in its context. As she is being taken back by the group of men wrapped in her costume, a voiceover of Marchand begins reading lauding reviews transitioning to the next scene: "A blossoming dream unfurls itself and contemplates. A living poem of a flower raises itself to sing … transient and mysterious. We remain deeply moved within ourselves: ephemeral beauty. She is more sublime than life".[54] Marchand sits at a desk reading aloud as an exhausted and battered Fuller lays listening on a chaise and drinking tea in order to recover. As lilies are brought in as gifts for her, she holds a poster of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's rendering of her. These poetic characterisations completely juxtapose the physically shattered performer who can barely sit up. The beautiful, organic and seemingly effortless performance presented while watching from afar is contrasted with close-ups of Fuller queer labouring and the physical exhaustion. The Folies Bergère offers this important space for the gruelling process and sacrifices to take place in order to create this queer and avant-garde spectacle.

Queer relationship with Louis and Duncan

While the Folies Bergère had provided her with a space to develop her artistic ideas, her queer identity is further formed through her relations with the wealthy French aristocrat Louis and the dancer Isadora Duncan. Louis had initially approached Fuller after her first Serpentine Dance in the US and suggested she go to Paris to perform. Further enabling her success financially, he later offers the protagonist room in his spacious chateau to live and rehearse with her all-female dance group as they prepare for her debut at the Paris Opera. Di Giusto completely invented Louis in order to introduce a male character into a decidedly female cast; according to Fuller's autobiography,

a Romanian orchestra conductor had suggested she try her luck in Paris.[55] Fuller's and Louis's relationship in the film is characterised by intimacy and sensuality but never overt sex. Even though both verbal and visual cues are given, sex is always thwarted either by refusal or momentary lack of desire. Upon first meeting each other after her *variété* performance, he initiates sex and she refuses; he also remarks that her muscles put his to shame. In another scene after Louis steps fully clothed into her scalding bath, she lies down in a dress and lifts her skirt as if awaiting sex; however, Louis disappears.

However, in the film Fuller's queer desire is even stronger for Duncan, who comes as an understudy to Louis's chateau, telling the protagonist how much of an honour it is to be dancing with her. But Fuller soon becomes eclipsed by Duncan, whom the protagonist perceives as the "real" dancer. During a rehearsal at the Paris Opera, Fuller is called away because one of her dancers is causing a "scandal". In this scene, the protagonist wears a large brown overcoat concealing her body while Duncan, the dancer causing a scandal, dances barefoot in a white tunic or slip in front of men in suits, who curiously watch from red sofas and armchairs. Performing to diegetic Beethoven's *Symphony No.* 7, she does a back-*attitude* movement which takes her to standing on a table. Returning to the ground, she curves her spine inward in contractions and c-curves, carving out sharp, pointed hand motions and ending in *attitude a la seconde*. She runs barefoot into another room and dances on the floor. Moving into another salon as men watch and slowly follow her, Duncan takes the black coat from a maid, steps onto a chair in which another man sits and drops the coat. This action symbolises the teasing and even erotic quality of her dance. Running into the first room, she pulls the jacket of the barman closest to herself, lets it go and then takes a drink. Upon seeing that Fuller has been watching her, Duncan stares momentarily as if contemplating her next move and then turns around and presumptuously falls into the protagonist's arms.

Figure 11.4 Duncan dancing on a table in a white tunic in a salon in *The Dancer*. Source: Screen capture by the author.

In this dance, the cinematic Duncan revels in the thought of being the new, young dancer who desires to be seen through her body and dancing. The seemingly improvised choreography mixes modern and contemporary vocabulary with pedestrian and gestural movements, which seem to vacillate between art and lifelike performance art; these are not necessarily the movements from which the real Duncan would have drawn; she usually performed simple jumps, turns and hops. Barefoot dancing, however, was an early twentieth-century dance practice that continued into contemporary dance, and wearing a tunic is quintessential Duncan. Furthermore, performing in a salon – a non-conventional concert space – was *en vogue* and corresponds to the direction in which avant-garde dance wanted to progress. Duncan's gestures point towards a precocious dancer fully aware of her self-image and able to fully interact with her audience, unlike Fuller. By cheekily picking up a man's suit jacket and then dropping it while on a chair as if to mount him but then suddenly retreating or falling into Fuller's arms while smiling demonstrates a persistent titillating flirtation that would never go any further. As much as Duncan falls under the heterosexual male gaze in the salon, she is also subjected to Fuller's queer gaze.

In reality, Duncan found lesbian patronage in Paris through her Greek dancing; however, she denied such associations, likely because of her Puritan roots, which frowned on same-sex attraction. Samuel N. Dorf argues that she "reconfigured and realigned antiquity to suit her needs" by equating nakedness with "authenticity, freedom, and timelessness – a Hellenic primal bodily language – not eroticism or wantonness".[56] While the cinematic and real Duncan did not dance completely naked, the revealing of legs, arms and feet alluded to this. While her written prose posited these ideals, her movements seemed no different from dancers who desired to titillate.[57] Di Giusto seems to represent Duncan in this fashion: highly aware of how she is perceived by society and focused on having a constructed persona. Meanwhile, Fuller can sensually engage with all her outer stimuli evolving in her own queer sexuality and artistic development.

Fuller actively feminises herself through body modification and a shift in dress in order to transform into a figure that Duncan would like; this is undoubtedly as much work as her artistic practice. In a later film scene, the protagonist pierces her ears using a long pin disinfected by a candle. This painful process is no match for all the previous pain her body has already endured. Fuller now wears shaded glasses, which protects her eyes from the damaging lights she had used on stage and dons a light blue-green dress with low neck and backline; a drastic departure from her brown dresses and bowler hat. The protagonist is trying to learn and perform the work of a traditional, heterosexual, bourgeois female body. Fuller's constant work to feminise her body and dress in order to woo Duncan do seem to work to a degree.

After meeting in a bar and ordering alcohol for the first time, Fuller and Duncan run off to a secluded area holding hands. The camera shoots them standing underneath a stone gateway with arms outstretched. The protagonist initiates more contact by coming to Duncan's side, and Duncan removes

Fuller's glasses before they kiss. Trying to get under Duncan's long skirt, Fuller is asked to disrobe first. She lets her dress fall, undoes her corset and slides off her petticoat – releasing her from her previous work and nineteenth-century bodily strictures. Duncan then starts kissing Fuller, pushing her back to the other side of the stone gateway Duncan then wraps her white scarf around Fuller's neck, smiles and runs off leaving the protagonist naked with her clothes around her ankles. Duncan does not come back into the film or Fuller's life, and the protagonist becomes distraught and depressed. As Duncan's dance in the salon had indicated, her intimate time with Fuller may have proved too intense for Duncan, who teases the protagonist with a mere shawl to cover her body. While Duncan's dance resembles more of a performance art ethos (with its impromptu nature in the non-theatrical space of a salon), Fuller's work to feminise her own body and fashion shows an equal amount of unexpectedness and "firstness".

Popular entertainments and particularly the open and queer space of the circus and Folies Bergère play a central role in allowing the protagonist to experiment relentlessly with her costume, stage craft and lighting. Di Giusto's *The Dancer* focuses less on Fuller's performances and more of the "performance" and development of her queer intellect and sexual identity through her daily interactions. Both aspects are characterised by an aesthetic of perpetual, tireless and experimental work assuming an avant-garde performance art vein which blurs the line between art and life. This aesthetic takes note of unexpected timing and untraditional concert spaces such as Fuller's audition for the Folies Bergère in a dark alleyway, and her being raced off the stage after her first performance there in her enveloping costume and Duncan's intriguing dance in the salon. These representations expand the concept of queer dance beyond the stage and into the everyday by showing "the pleasures *and* difficulties of moving between multiple, layered identities"[58] as a result of the music hall setting and association with popular entertainments.

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Part V

Circus and avant-gardes reimagined since the late twentieth century

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12 Political clowns, strong women and animal-free

Circus reimagined through 1970s avant-garde political theatre

Jane Mullett and Peta Tait

The radicalism of the social movements of the 1970s was evident in the arts and expressly in innovative theatre that co-opted the circus form. This development created contemporary circus, from Circus Oz to Cirque du Soleil. This chapter provides an account of how the political concepts of radical avant-garde theatre forged a new type of circus in Australia during the 1970s that exemplified what was happening internationally. The anti-war, pro-worker and feminist politics embedded in 1970s avant-garde theatre were reimagined in circus action that differed from the practices of traditional circus. The 1970s' circus replaced feminine sequins and animal acts with the excitement of political clowning, which included humans as animals and highlighted strong women. It suggested a radical break from the practices of the past. But were these theatre performers attracted to circus for its performance practices and touring life or for its aura of thrill and excitement in the popular imaginary?

The pioneers of the 1970s' alternative circus companies in Australia, the United States, Canada and France can be traced back to an association with an alternative theatre troupe.[1] This chapter focuses on Australian circus and draws out one strand of Jane Mullett's extensive research into the origins of contemporary circus in the 1970s, which encompasses four countries and reveals the common patterns across countries. Mullett was an early member of Australia's forty-year-old political contemporary circus, Circus Oz, and her research reveals that in addition to an association with avant-garde practices and political theatre, there was a less-known crucial connection with traditional circus in the development of the 1970s' alternative circus. Performers repeatedly sought the skills and knowledge of circus performers, and in this way, the contemporary circus was influenced by the traditional circus. The reimagined acrobatic circus – with muscular women and without live animal acts – was often raucous, mutinous and irrepressible, but it was also dependent on the skills and knowledge derived from the disciplined traditional circus. It is argued, however, that avant-garde political activists were attracted to physically embodying political ideas and they satirised circus as much as a theatre with their comic acts.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-17

Political avant-garde

Theatrical performance combined political values and aesthetic developments when it co-opted elements of the circus form into experimental avant-garde practice. David Krasner explains that the term "avant-garde" in theatre history involved "a self-conscious exploration of new dramatic forms" from 1890 to the 1930s that were political in their "radical anti-establishment modernism" and rejection of conventional morality.[2] Avant-garde art rejected convention, and the theatrical movement in particular created "excitement amongst artists".[3] Julia Kristeva describes how an experience of newness characterised the literary avant-garde to create new discourse and subjects within an ongoing process of violent "rejection" that was central to the modernist "avant-garde text's essential purpose".[4] This was a modernist rejection of the past, and of existing artistic practices as well as the discarding of social and political conventions. Importantly, Kristeva recognises the "primacy of practice in knowledge" as having a significant influence on the political ideas of the avant-garde.[5] She suggests that laughter becomes a practice in this avant-garde artistic revolution that rejected the past and "lifts inhibitions by breaking through prohibitions" and by featuring the "clown" who refuses to accept that reality is tragic.[6]

The avant-garde performance offered a radical form of practice and it located its values in comic twists. The aesthetic concern with new forms was combined with satires of the social world so that avant-garde performance was socially exciting and dangerous in the practice. In emphasising sexual dynamics and the effects of technological progress on workers' lives, the early avant-garde drama was particularly prescient about major social issues emerging in the twentieth century.[7] Accordingly, the areas of gender and worker politics that became central to the social activism of the 1970s and in its experimental avant-garde theatre – also termed "alternative theatre" – generated offshoots in street performance and a new type of circus. While avant-garde ideas of danger and perceptions of danger in the circus coincide, circus exemplified a popular art form associated with the working class and this ensured a direct appeal to left-leaning, radical political activists during the 1970s. The politics of the avant-garde were informed by a Marxist-inflected dialectic and its strategies.[8] At the same time, circus was also associated with the excitement of physical risk-taking and with laughter and thrills.

As Nicola Shaughnessy explains, the avant-garde theatre of the early twentieth century and that of the 1960–1970s were connected by social activism and their efforts to influence audiences with political ideas.[9] She states that artistic approaches that were "radical" and "interventionist" – associated with the avant-garde – created challenges to artistic boundaries and institutions. Artistic practices of the 1970s that "emancipated art from galleries and theatres" were orientated to "social change", even "revolution".[10] Theatre groups performed outdoors and outside theatre buildings, with, for example, the Bread and Puppet Theatre performing in the streets in the USA and the Welfare State in the UK touring communities.[11]

The 1970s picked up on what Clare Bishop explains were the "Proletkult theatre and mass spectacle" elements in the Russian state-sanctioned avant-garde, after the 1917 Revolution that was particularly theatrical, and less pre-occupied with aesthetic quality.[12] In her exploration of avant-garde visual art traditions, Bishop demonstrates that themes of "collective authorship" and "working-class popular modes of expression" can be traced back to the 1920s movement, and continue in twenty-first-century "contemporary socially engaged practices".[13] These ideas could be realised in circus.

Importantly, the avant-garde rejection of formal theatrical practices created fluid forms that reached out to circus as a vehicle for radical political values and appealed to young performers because of its strong women and working-class associations, as well as its ability to reach a larger and more inclusive audience than radical theatre. In Australia, as Denise Varney articulates, the counter-culture of young people and anti-establishment values that emerged in the 1960s (especially following the uprising of protestors in 1968 France), inspired theatre that was "a particularly active site of radical creativity and political activism" in an "emergent globalization" of cultural values and artistic ideas.[14] Varney explains that there was "daring and extravagance" created by theatres; in particular, by the Australian Performing Group (APG), based in Melbourne.[15] This avant-garde theatre significantly influenced the artistic shift to creating circus-like shows in Australian theatre and to founding circuses.

Alternative theatre in the 1970s

Early alternative theatre groups turned away from existing theatre structures and conventions, defining them as stultifying expressions of the "dominant complacent middle-class society".[16] They embraced a chance to "reinvent the symbols and gestures that shape social life".[17] The leading precedents internationally were set by artists such as Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Julian Beck and Judith Malina.[18] They believed that the power of performance – unleashed from the constraints of acting within the twentieth-century theatre to work directly on the spectator – could literally change the world.

The alternative theatre set out to engage directly with its audience, discarding the primacy of the position of the playwright in theatre in favour of the openness of group creation. New work was inspired by contemporary stories that came from the performers' own experiences and about experiences of class, gender, sexual and racial identity. While the link between the alternative theatre and alternative circus has been made for the United States[19] and France,[20] this link was also of central importance in Australia, the UK and Canada.[21]

These characteristics of the alternative theatre were transferred to the emerging alternative circus. The radical theatre groups in question used physical skills traditionally associated with circus and street theatre, such as fire-eating, stilt-walking, juggling, acrobatics and human pyramids. Some groups went further in the practice of circus skills, performing on the low tight-wire or the slack

rope and eventually on aerial apparatus such as trapeze. They used a variety of popular performance techniques including puppetry, mime, melodrama and *commedia dell'arte*. While not all the groups were politically radical – their politics ranged from radical left-wing to liberal supporters of the status quo – they were, without exception, interested in working outside the established mainstream theatre, in performance that was raw, physical, popular and immediate. The performance groups were looking for ways to speak directly to their audience about current concerns, or to simply engage their audience in an immediate theatrical experience.

The alternative performance groups that flourished in Australia in the early 1970s included the Great Stumble Forward (operating from 1973 to 1974), New Circus (1974–1976), New Ensemble Circus (1976–1977), Popeye Puppets (1974–1976) and Soapbox Circus (1976–1978). These groups were influential in this context of connecting with circus because they nurtured the founder members of Circus Oz. But they were not the only ones that led to the development of alternative circuses in Australia. The Women's Theatre Group (1972–1977) was one of the first groups to draw on circus. These groups – with the exception of New Circus and New Ensemble Circus, both from Adelaide – were part of the explosion of radical performance work connected with the APG that was set up in an old pram factory in Melbourne.

The Great Stumble Forward, Popeye Puppets and their successor, Soapbox Circus, were inextricably linked, through a core of performers involved with each of these groups. The main difference was that Soapbox Circus and Popeye Puppets were formal projects of the APG, while the Great Stumble Forward was only loosely affiliated with it. Together with New Ensemble Circus from Adelaide, they forged a new type of contemporary circus practice in Australia.

The Great Stumble Forward and Soapbox Circus

The Great Stumble Forward was formed by performers who had already worked in different alternative theatre groups in Melbourne, including the APG and Tribe.[22] Members of the Great Stumble Forward were interested in street theatre that used large-scale physical performance with an overt political message. The work was anarchic, with a dry sense of humour that referred to international as well as local political concerns. Jon Hawkes captures the feeling, the intensity and the commitment of the group in the following description:

> We'd invent shows twenty minutes before we'd do them … it was seriously on the street … [We were interested in] how to create mass spectacle that had a political edge. [During] that whole period from the late [19]60s to the early [19]70s there was a whole culture of people trying to come to terms with how they could be seriously committed politically and off the planet mentally … The Great Stumble Forward was our answer.[23]

The group's members practised indoors and outdoors in the parks. Robin Laurie explains that this training was built on a practice that had already developed from the street theatre performances during the early anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, which had been focused around the Australian alternative theatre space, La Mama.[24] "We used to put mattresses down in the Carlton Gardens and practise forward rolls and standing on each other's shoulders … in 1969".[25]

The Great Stumble Forward formed an ongoing relationship with a Moroccan tumbler who taught the group acrobatics. Alan Robertson says:

> Graham Isaac and Michael Price were working at a rock'n'roll gig with a Moroccan tumbler, Ahmed … Graeme struck up a friendship with him … and that [became] part of our tools … little pyramids or little tableaux and things … Ahmed put kids out of the audience into great big walls, thigh stands, double thigh stands … it was great [I thought of it] as shorthand for a style like parlour tumbling. It was the things you could do in the lounge room.[26]

Tumbling and the use of human pyramids in ensemble physical performance were central to the group. They worked in a broad physical manner. The group was short-lived, but its key members continued their work in Soapbox Circus.

Soapbox began with the aim to take the work of the APG out to different communities in Melbourne – particularly to make the work accessible to the multi-cultural mix of working-class people in the city.[27] It included musicians from the Captain Matchbox Jug Band and performers from Tribe and Popeye Puppets, as well as the Great Stumble Forward. It developed into a strong touring show, appearing on the rock and roll university campus tour circuit that had been part of Captain Matchbox's livelihood, and the arts circuit that had been developed by the trade unions. The group carried with them a thrust stage for the performers that was placed in front of a normal band stage for the musicians.

The show was hugely energetic and loud, with a clear political message that commented on events in Australia and in East Timor during 1975–76, and notably, it included humans as animals in comic action. According to their publicity material, Soapbox Circus performed approximately 350 times to a total live audience of 150,000 people over its life span.[28] It was a show that consisted of discrete acts. These acts included group juggling, political satire, acrobatics, human pyramids, animal puppets and comedy, and there were up to 18 performers including the band.

The group's interest in circus skills increased and Robin Laurie describes the physical elements of a show:

> We did comedy duos … comic ditties … We had a group juggle of four or five people … We did hoop diving, [with] bamboo hoops, [which]

> we held … The skills were still very informed by the theatrical … We had the Revolutionary Suicide Chorus who wore army great coats and some of them had crutches and were swathed in bandages with a Mao cap and we'd sing Greek and Italian songs. We had a [human] camel and the [human] elephant and the [human] bufo marinis [the cane toad] … We had a [human] kangaroo that was the first kangaroo [act].[29]

The show was backed by rock music and eccentric tunes written by the band. Music was significant in the definition of youth sub-culture and thus it was very important to the alternative circus founders and as a defining feature of political art. Robin Laurie describes Soapbox Circus as being equally interested in music and physical performance because "the music had carried so many of the ideas and the feelings [of the time], the sense of resistance and revolt. It was really powerful".[30] Travelling shows included large-scale touring rock concerts with roadshows, and this link with the touring lifestyle was embedded in contemporary youth culture. The circus was also appropriated by this culture; the Rolling Stones made a film in 1968 called *The Rolling Stones Rock n Roll Circus*, which was filmed in a circus tent and featured the Rolling Stones and other well-known groups, such as The Who, integrated with circus acts that included fire-breathing, trapeze, clowning.[31] Touring rock bands and large-scale music festivals also constructed temporary stages with sophisticated lighting and sound rigging that influenced the staging of the alternative circus.

The entire membership of Soapbox Circus went into the first show of Circus Oz in 1978. As a result, Circus Oz was adopted as a project of the APG and backed by its established administrative support in its initial development phase, as well as having access to the APG's premises for training, rehearsal and building activities. Soapbox Circus performers brought with them their political values, experience in touring and a range of physical skills and performance characters that were immediately transferable. They also brought a strong belief in community arts and the power of live performance. The company actively wanted to provide the spectator with a transforming experience that was participatory. Jon Hawkes writes:

> As with most forms of popular entertainment, the skills involved are relatively simple (singing, acrobatics, juggling, and broad comic techniques) and easily passed on. We actively wish to break down the mystification surrounding the performing arts and demonstrate to our audiences (both through performance and workshops) that they too can put "art" to use in their own lives.[32]

Soapbox Circus had a great deal of experience as well with group process and collective living. Furthermore, they brought a sophisticated understanding of the government's arts bureaucracy that they used to their advantage. The foundations of the long-running Circus Oz were present and the twelve-member company would become one of the major contemporary circuses

internationally over the next four decades, touring in parts of England, Europe, Asia, South America and the USA.

Strong women

The Women's Theatre Group in Melbourne started as a project of the APG in 1972 and was revived in 1974 with shows that were written, directed, produced and performed by some of the women members of the APG. Women's Theatre Group members were interested in physicalising images of women, exploring women's experience and exploding stereotypes of gender identity.[33] The performances centred on a series of sketch-like cabarets until the group separated from the APG and became an entity in its own right after 1975. By 1976 it began to produce more radical work, both in terms of content and performance style. The group-devised work was politically and personally experimental. The commitment to feminist politics within this group appears to have been much more marked than in other alternative theatre groups that fed the alternative circus groups.

Members of the Women's Theatre Group who sought to overturn stereotypical ideas of the female body and became part of Circus Oz also influenced the founding of the first women's circus. The women from Circus Oz were joined by the women from Desperate Measures to create the Mighty Wacko Bonza Women's Circus.[34] It was short-lived but was apparently the first women's circus operating in the world. Renamed as the Wimmins Circus, it consolidated into a strong performance ensemble that operated between 1980 and 1981.[35] It used the gender confusion generated around the image of the strong woman in the circus to "present images of women that challenged stereotypes".[36] It influenced Donna Jackson and the founding of the long-lasting Women's Circus in Melbourne. A little later, in France in 1981, Barbara Vieille established the next women's circus, Cirque de Barbarie. The first show was simply called *Cirque de Barbarie* and it included ten women performers and opened in July 1982 at the Festival Off d'Avignon.

As with Cirque de Barbarie, the Wimmins Circus created political meaning with circus action through contextualisation. For example, the fire-breathing routine was done as a comment about the pressure on women to conform to fashion by shaving their legs. The firebrands were run up and down the performers' arms and legs to an accompanying humorous commentary.[37] The performers both respected the tradition of strong women in the circus and used it to their advantage in contesting conservative feminine stereotypes. The feminist values developed by the Women's Theatre Group and the Wimmins Circus were sustained from 1978 over the decades within Circus Oz.

New circus

Circus Oz was formed through the amalgamation of members of the aforementioned groups from Melbourne and from two groups originating in Adelaide.

The New Circus and the New Ensemble Circus gained skills through direct relationships with the traditional circus. The four founding members of New Circus toured with the long-running Ashtons (Ashton family) Circus for the best part of nine months in 1973.[38] They drove trucks and provided labour for the tent put-up and pull-down. They also worked with the Zacchini Brothers – the Ashtons Circus clowns – as the circus moved towards Adelaide during the summer of 1974.[39] Mervyn Ashton was tent boss and head flyer at the time. He says:

> They were all good, clean-living young fellows … In those days [their attitude] was anti-establishment … everybody was on that binge … [The point is] they did things that didn't hurt people … [They learnt] how to knock in pegs. We all knocked in pegs … They were always willing to offer an idea … They'd just go ahead and [do the work] they were intelligent and very cooperative.[40]

By the summer of 1975, after also working with the traditional Swiss Circus Royale, New Circus was ready to tour. They had fitted out trucks and caravans, built a 30-foot-high high-wire rig, seating for 500 and made a set of side-walls. The group's first summer road tour followed the coast through the southern states of Australia, performing in 25 South Australian suburbs and country towns. It then toured the Victorian coastline and through the suburbs of Melbourne. There were at least 30 people on the tour, of whom 15 were in the show, and they all lived off the proceeds.

New Circus dissolved in 1976 and three members of the company travelled from Adelaide to Melbourne as the New Ensemble Circus.[41] John Pinder engaged them for his theatre restaurant, The Last Laugh. Two additional traditional circus artists, Pixi and Jim Robertson, joined them and together they mounted the show *Waiter, There's a Circus in My Soup* in the main dining room of the theatre restaurant. Pinder then proceeded to broker a meeting with Soapbox Circus, which led to a merger of the two groups and the creation of Circus Oz in 1978.

Trained by traditional circus

As the training of the performers in the New Circus reveals, alternative circus performers learnt directly from traditional circus artists. Jane Mullett recounts learning an enormous amount from the six months that she spent working with Swiss Circus Royale based in Australia. Manuella and Frank Gasser, the owners of Circus Royale, put her in the air on aerial apparatus and taught her enough to keep her there safely. She recalls that she loved the experience. Circus, and especially aerial performance, seemed to be a perfect combination of artistry, practical physics, manual labour and politics, in an in-your-face, girls-can-be-strong, feminist fashion.

There is a common misconception, however, that alternative circuses sprang up disconnected from the traditional circuses, partly because traditional

circuses grew to be less supportive as the new circuses became more economically successful and gained access to arts funding. The extent of the help provided by the traditional circus to the first alternative circuses tends to be underestimated or even ignored, which is surprising given the level of support that traditional circuses contributed. They were important for all training. Circus schools, which have transformed the nature of contemporary circus training, were often set up by traditional circus performers or, at the very least, traditional circus performers were the first teachers in these schools. Circus schools began in Russia in the 1920s, reached Europe in the 1970s, Canada in the 1980s and Australia in the 2000s. In the absence of circus schools, young alternative circus aspirants went straight to the traditional circuses and signed up, receiving, in effect, an informal apprenticeship.

Turning to the traditional circus for knowledge about tents, equipment rigging and how to run the whole circus plant, alternative circus performers also learnt specific circus acts that could not be found in other places. Unlike juggling – a skill that was openly available through the busking circuit and practised in alternative theatre circles – aerial performance and acrobatic technique and clowning acts were clearly passed on from the traditional circus to the alternative circus. This transfer of specific knowledge points to a shared set of work practices, which in turn indicates the prospect of a shared structure and meaning to the work. Although the traditional circus and the alternative circus were different in their initial aims, they shared experiences that were specific to the circus form. Shared practice does not have to link participants in a simple way, and relationships can be diverse and complex.

The circus represented social and physical freedom and social non-conformity. Projected onto the ideal of a romantic, non-fragmented world is an imagined world where one is free to be oneself; an ideal life within the ideal family. Clown, Annie Fratellini from a family of European circus performers describes why she thinks young people were drawn to circus in the 1970s:

> I think that the attraction comes from the freedom that they imagine. "The travelling people" is an expression which carries the weight of freedom; false, naturally, because the circus is first of all discipline, rigour, obedience even. But it is still a marginal life, still redolent of independence. To go with the circus is to go with adventure.[42]

The situation that the alternative circus artists found themselves in reflected the values of the youth sub-culture in that they rejected being part of conventional families and society and the capitalist system. It is an interesting irony that the family – a construct resisted in youth sub-culture – should figure so largely in the determining ideology of the alternative circus. Critical of the nuclear family, circus pioneers created their own collective or cooperative group that was like an extended family. Robin Laurie states this very clearly:

> We were influenced by [American] the Living Theatre who were trying to live as a work and life group together, and Bread and Puppet Theatre were

> doing the same thing … We wanted to be able to live in a larger group, in an extended family of some kind, and with hindsight that's exactly what a traditional circus is like.[43]

This romantic, extended family of the alternative circus was amorphous and inclusive. Thus, the pioneers of the alternative circus were interested in alternative forms of family, and initially many functioned as economic collectives or cooperatives that could also be described as extended families. Some of these actual relationships were explicitly celebrated in performance, as in the Pickle Family Circus, but it was the fabricated family that was a strong motif in the alternative circus. There were, however, traditional and non-traditional family relationships within these groups that became more marked with time.

Radical sexual and work politics

The critique of the nuclear family led by the feminist movement was broadening women's social roles. Women in the circus, however, had always had a wider range of work options open to them than in general society, which makes for a more complex situation around gender roles in circus despite the orientation to "family". The alternative circus allowed women with feminist ideals to attempt to live them out both in the ring and while undertaking technical and machinery maintenance roles outside the ring. Women in the traditional circus were not completely free of the limitations imposed by the patriarchal society, but there was greater tolerance for a wider range of behaviour than in society at large.

Women, for example, managed family circuses at the time when alternative circuses were being established. In Australia in the mid-1970s, the public face of the management of Ashtons Circus was Lorraine Ashton, and for Sole Bros. Circus, the public face was Jean Perry. Interestingly, these were the circuses – along with Swiss Circus Royale – that supported the development of the alternative circus. For example, Sue Broadway, a founding member of New Ensemble Circus and Circus Oz, spent six months on Sole Bros. Circus in Australia refining her web act. Earlier, there was the legendary Mrs Bullen and, before her, Mrs Fitzgerald. Women in Circus Oz acquired aerial skills, truck-driving skills and rigging skills as part of the circus team. This was mirrored in other alternative circuses.

Feminists were also attracted to the alternative circus because of the collaborative way that shows were developed. Generally, the alternative circus show was developed with considerable input from the performers and, although there was often a director, the performers were able to devise their own material within each act. There were a number of options for women to express strong and interesting characters within the alternative circus. Broadway was drawn to:

> The physical base of circus … and the connection with the audience, doing a show without the fourth wall, the immediacy of it … and [the

> fact] that you could make up your own material … You didn't have to do some script where your choices were to play a barmaid or a [housewife].[44]

As indicated, the founding women of Circus Oz had been founding members of the Women's Theatre Group with the APG and with the New Ensemble Circus. The pattern of reframing the characteristics of the traditional circus to contest the conservative ideology of the era is seen continuously in the work and life of the alternative circus. The time frame for alternative circuses was short and the period of development of alternative circus that Mullett's research covers can be interpreted as a watershed that led to a greater diversification of the circus form.

The alternative circus pioneers shared a dream to live in a collective, cooperative environment while making circus shows that were exciting, funny, challenging and accessible. The popular nature of circus performance enabled pioneers to link their aspirations of making contemporary, politically relevant performance to a tradition, which was accessible to the majority of people. If the circus can be claimed to suggest a liminal space with the suspension of social rules and regulations, it was a socially dangerous one because of its potential to challenge status quo values, in spite of the high level of physical regulation.

Physical forms are embedded in popular performance, and circus involves extreme bodily action.[45] There is a characteristic sensory experience and the visceral bodily impact that is associated with the circus. Further, there is a curious slippage between the performed persona of the circus artist and the artist. But the traditional circus was careful to reinstate socially acceptable gendered differences. Tait observes the performance of femininity at the beginning and end of the muscular female aerialist's trick and the absence of this gender-defined action during the trick.[46] Thus, in the traditional circus the recognition of gender identity was accorded gesture and choreographed into the staging.

The circus is a celebration of the potential of the human body, which is on display in the performance. The basic elements of the traditional circus acrobatic act can be read like a text.[47] A display of bravery or cunning or intelligence may play a part, but the basis of the circus is the triumph of the artful human body testing the limits of physical skills. The element that differentiates circus from sport is that it is not a contest between bodies; rather, it is a physical challenge through a performer's high attainment expressed through circus arts. The alternative circus, however, produced shows that were intimate and immediate, drawing directly on the experience of alternative theatre and busking. They revitalised the relationship between the circus artist and the audience.

The politics that led the artists to adopt the circus form were largely expressed indirectly in the shows, although these also included some spoken commentary. They were embedded in the physicality and action of performance and the presentation of the acts. Often the performance of the acts was irreverent and funny – an approach that included a self-conscious awareness in an ironic sense of parody. A commitment to character performance led to

the inclusion of comic characters, and lighting and staging were modernised while live, contemporary music was reinstated. The alternative circus used group devising processes, improvisation, theatrical framing of set circus pieces and contemporary choreography. The circus skills that had been reworked by political perspectives were infused with new energy.

Risk, animal parody and clowns

It is widely assumed that alternative circus groups were unanimous in their objection to acts that included animals and that no animals appeared in the alternative circus. Yet, a few significant alternative circuses did have horses, dogs and other animals. Moreover, in an interesting development, all shows seemed to represent animal identities in their performances. While this was an indication of the strength of the link with traditional circus and its close association with animal acts, it was also about challenging that association. In the 1970s, when the alternative circus was emerging, domestic and wild animals regularly featured in the shows of the traditional circus. By the late nineteenth century, circuses had been presenting animals such as elephants, lions and tigers that were trained and these trained acts became signifiers of the modern circus, although troubling issues of modernity, including colonialism with the colonial origins of animals.[48] By the mid-1970s and with the advent of an animal liberation movement, comic human acts with animal identities reflected changing attitudes to society's relationship to exhibited animals. The alternative circus was interested in clowning and animal acts were ideal targets.

There was, and is, physical danger in the traditional circus. In the air, flying acrobats risk injury – if not a crushing fall. There was threat in the wild animal cage, where trainers were exposed to potential attacks from their charges. There was some physical risk associated with most of the circus's acts and it is interesting that two acts clearly associated with the traditional circus in the 1960s and 1970s – aerial performance and wild animal training – had the most risk. New circus, however, parodied the animal act, rather than replicated it. The crimson human kangaroos became a perennial act over decades in Circus Oz.

Yet, the actual risks taken were not necessarily the ones that an audience perceived, nor were they the risks that the audience was directed to see. Within the traditional circus, the potential risk to a performer was often signalled by hyperbole related to the glorification of danger – the theatrical drum-roll, the portentous announcement, "ladies and gentlemen, never before attempted, the extremely dangerous".[49] Sometimes audience attention was directed towards genuine risk that the performer was subject to, and sometimes it was directed to a perception of risk where there was none, even directing attention away from actual danger.

The relationship that the alternative circus had with risk-taking was complex. The alternative circus did not mimic the traditional use of hyperbole to heighten an impression of danger and initially appeared to reject the competitive

physical risks taken and glorified by the traditional circus. But it did not initially parody risk either – that would come later; rather, alternative circus parodied identity in circus. This was partly a result of rapidly changing social attitudes to physical risk. For example, in the early 1980s in Australia, there was an increase in government rules and regulations dealing with the circus, particularly those governing safety features for temporary structures. The use of safety lines in performance, as opposed to the restriction of their use to training and rehearsal, came with this shift in values that operated within the circus and society.

There was the risk of laughter, expressed through the ability that comedy has to be subversive. One of Robin Laurie's favourite byline's at the time was, "We laugh at death".[50] It was through humour that the alternative circus tended to communicate with its audience. Thus, the traditional character of the masculine, high-status ringmaster was generally either replaced with a character of a more humorous attitude and more flexible status within the ring or else was removed completely. Strong comic characters that became the presenters of the circus show can be seen in images of Circus Oz, Cirque Aligre, Cirque Bidon, le Puits aux images and Pickle Family Circus. Parody in the circus could be considered a deconstructing device, a way of commenting on the form, a self-conscious ironic comment about the traditional circus show.

The role of the circus clown was transformed in the exploration of a variety of comic characters used in different ways within the show. This transformation superseded the traditional European clown entrée, which had become generally formulaic, and the American three-ring form of clown gags by numerous clowns at once, relying on physical exaggeration to fill the huge circus arenas.[51] The political clown, a "union of clowning and politics against questionable authority",[52] was seen on the stage throughout the twentieth century and also figured largely in alternative and political theatre in the 1960s. Furthermore, performance schools and mime schools began to focus on the clown as an acting tool. Renewed interest in the clown in the alternative circus was also influenced by the depiction of the tramp character in silent films. The individual clown character fitted with the aspirations of the new circuses and reflected a theatrical tradition of the clown. There were, of course, clowns in the Australian circus that drew from the reservoir of traditional circus clowning as well as invented new modes. The longstanding Circus Oz performer, Tim Coldwell, spent time with Philip Zacchini, a traditional European clown working at Ashton's Circus, and learnt skills from him. Coldwell's clown Happy is clearly influenced by Zacchini, but also by the great cinema clowns, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton. Yet within Circus Oz two women performers were breaking new ground and inventing female clowns. Sue Broadway's clown "Frou Frou" reconstructed traditional male costuming to parody a feminine character. Robin Laurie's clown "Joannie Spagoni" carried over from Soapbox Circus and spoke directly to the audience, harnessing Laurie's rapier wit during her act with Alphonso Spagoni (Jon Hawkes), revitalising the classic comedy duo of big dumb male and little, talkie smarty-pants female (like film comic Lucille Ball).

The 1970s' circus greatly expanded the comedy of the traditional circus of the second half of the twentieth century, where it was generally confined to the clown entrées and some physical skilled acts that were performed comically. The majority of acts in a 1970s' alternative circus show could have a comedic sensibility. The 1970s' circus also used comedy and parody as devices to declare their relationship to the circus. This was particularly the case in the early days when the skill level of alternative circus artists was generally not as high as that of traditional circus artists. Instead there was a focus on comic skill that provided an attitude from which to launch the alternative circus show. It has underpinned Circus Oz shows for over four decades.

The circus based on working-class politics, gender politics about strong women and no live animals appealed to social activists as did an aura of thrill and excitement. These circuses reflected the social activism of the 1970s as much as the milieu of avant-garde artistic approaches. In merging theatrical performance with circus, political values received direct expression, but the co-opted circus form undermined its avant-garde association since performers obtained skills and knowledge from the traditional circus. Avant-garde values in theatre were the founding impetus but not the sustaining force behind what became contemporary circus. The interdependency of the 1970s' circus illustrated how the circus form periodically changed and adjusted to current social values. Circus itself was, and is, continually involved with processes that revitalise its form with innovative acts and new ideas.

Notes

1 Jane Mullett, *Circus Alternatives: The Rise of the New Circus in Australia, the United States, Canada and France* (PhD thesis, La Trobe University Library, 2005).
2 David Krasner, *A History of Modern Drama* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 216.
3 Krasner, *A History of Modern Drama*, 216.
4 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Walker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 186.
5 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 199.
6 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 244.
7 Krasner, *A History of Modern Drama*.
8 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 199.
9 Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15.
10 Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance*, 15.
11 Joel Schechter, *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002); Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw (eds.), *Engineers of the Imagination: The Welfare State Handbook* (London: Methuen, 1990).
12 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2011), 45.
13 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 45.
14 Denise Varney, *Radical Visions 1969–2008: The Impact of the Sixties on Australian Drama* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 18.
15 Varney, *Radical Visions 1969–2008*, 17. For a history of Australian theatre, see Geoffrey Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited* (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2004). For a recent history of the Australian Performing Group, see Gabrielle Wolf, *Make It Australian: The Australian*

Performing Group, the Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre (Sydney, NSW: Currency Press, 2008).

16 Theodore Shank, *American Alternative Theatre* (London: B. & A. K. King, Modern Dramatists series, Macmillan, 1982), 1.
17 Elin Diamond (ed.), *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.
18 See Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968); Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973); Julian Beck, *The Life of the Theatre* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1972).
19 Ernest Albrecht, *The New American Circus* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995).
20 Martine Maleval, "L'Épopée du nouveau cirque," in *Avant-garde, Cirque!,* ed. Jean-Michel Guy (Paris: Les Éditions Autrement, 2001).
21 Mullett, *Circus Alternatives*.
22 Tribe was an experimental theatre group from Melbourne that was established by Doug Anders from Queensland. See Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited*.
23 Interview with Jon Hawkes, co-founder Circus Oz, by Jane Mullett, 17 August 2002.
24 La Mama, which opened in 1967 and is still operating, is an alternative theatre in Melbourne that was inspired by its namesake in New York (Milne 2004). It acted as a centre for experimental theatre groups like Tribe and the people who subsequently formed the APG.
25 Interview with Robin Laurie, co-founder Circus Oz, by Jane Mullett, 30 August 2002.
26 Interview with Alan Robertson, co-founder of Circus Oz, by Jane Mullett, 5 November 2002.
27 The group was particularly interested in the large Greek and Italian migrant populations of Melbourne.
28 Soapbox chronology (personal collection of Jon Hawkes).
29 Interview with Robin Laurie by Jane Mullett, 17 August 2002. Laurie also noted that the show was influenced by the company's interest in Meyerhold's biomechanics, interview with Robin Laurie by Jane Mullett, 6 May 2005.
30 Laurie describes Soapbox Circus as being equally interested in music and physical performance, because "the music had carried so many of the ideas and the feelings [of the time], the sense of resistance and revolt. It was really powerful." Interview with Robin Laurie by Jane Mullett, 6 May 2005.
31 TV Special recorded on 10 & 11 December 1968. It was directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg and produced by the Rolling Stones. The special was never aired. The CD & VHS was released on 15 October 1996, and the DVD was released on 12 October 2004. Although the video was not officially released until 1995, it was available as a bootleg copy before that.
32 The Soapbox Circus: Material for Access, 18 February 1977 (personal collection of Jon Hawkes).
33 Peta Tait, *Original Women's Theatre* (Melbourne, VIC: Artmoves, 1993).
34 Desperate Measures was an alternative theatre group in Perth, that operated between 1977 and 1982.
35 Peta Tait, *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre* (Sydney, NSW: Currency Press, 1994).
36 Ollie Black, "Circus and Physical Theatre in Australia: An Introduction," in *In Repertoire: A Guide to Australian Contemporary Performance*, eds. G.K. and V. Baxter (Strawberry Hills, Sydney, NSW: The Australia Council, 2001), 41; Tait, *Converging Realities*.
37 Interview with Ollie Black by Jane Mullett, 29 April 2005.
38 Ashtons Circus is the oldest touring traditional circus in Australia.
39 Interview with Tim Coldwell, co-founder of Circus Oz, by Jane Mullett, 16 August 2002.
40 Interview with Mervyn Ashton by Jane Mullett, 11 October 2002.
41 The three members were Tim Coldwell, Sue Broadway and Jack Daniels.
42 Fratellini quoted by Jean Monteaux, "Annie Fratellini: Un cirque pour l'avenir," in *Les Interviews*, ed. J. Duquesne (Vendôme: Le Centurion, 1977), 142–143.

43 Interview with Robin Laurie by Jane Mullett, 17 August 2002.
44 Interview with Sue Broadway, co-founder of Circus Oz, by Jane Mullett, 1 October 2002.
45 Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005).
46 Tait, *Circus Bodies*.
47 Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), 25.
48 Peta Tait, *Fighting Nature: Travelling Menageries, Animal Acts and War Shows* (Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press, 2016).
49 Hughes Hotier, *Cirque, Communication, Culture* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1995), 126.
50 Interview with Robin Laurie by Jane Mullett, 17 August 2002.
51 John Towsen, *Clowns* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1976), 271.
52 Joel Schechter, *Durov's Pig: Clowns, Politics and Theatre* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 1.

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13 Avant-garde gestures and contemporaneity in today's circus

Louis Patrick Leroux

The avant-garde, as other authors in this collection have stated and defined, basically means "at the forefront". In other words, the avant-garde is expected to be novel, innovative and not yet seen as the norm. Simultaneously, one uses this notion as an aesthetic and historical marker. One could argue that the avant-garde – as it was studied in transnational detail by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (2015 and 2017) – goes well beyond the Dadaists and the Surrealists, with its historical origins in the initial "Moderns against Ancients" oppositional context; this provided some early modernist innovations, such as the institution of the "Salon des refusés" exhibitions of art rejected by the Academies.[1] There is honour in being rejected, and electing instead to be part of a "salon of the rejected" – that of the unconventional, the innovators. Joyeux-Prunel defines the avant-garde sociologically: "To be in the avant-garde in the arts, between the 1840s and 1960s […] is to affirm that one is disrupting artistic reputational positioning".[2] In other words, the artist's work and impact are clearly in dissonance with the socio-aesthetic expectations. The term lends credence to any current disruptive artistic experimentations, yet one must consider which milieu is being tested and disrupted. In an international context, one country's avant-garde practices and traditions might be seen as merely quaint or *dépassée* by another country. Yet, given the internationalisation of circus and the constant circulation of circus artists, one can expect certain globalisation of trends. Circus audiences, aside from the festival crowd, tend to remain rooted in their own collective experience and receive art based on their expectations and criteria.

This chapter will explore the intersection and complicated cohabitation between conceptions and understandings of the contemporary and the avant-garde in current circus practice and reception. It will first define and contextualise contemporaneity in today's circus, then it will propose a dialectics of contemporary circus and conclude with enactments of the avant-garde and how they relate to our current understanding of circus.

Untangling the avant-garde from the contemporary in circus

The term "avant-garde" came from the military and was co-opted by politicians in the nineteenth century before evolving into a term used in art criticism.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-18

Curiously, to mention the avant-garde today is to evoke an earlier, nostalgic era stemming from *Belle-Époque* France to the ludic Dadaists (the actual "historical" avant-garde according to Peter Bürger),[3] while also channelling vivid images of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Constructivism and other such aesthetics from over a century ago. In discussing art or literature, the avant-garde is essentially an anachronism, an emulation of a political stance questioning a system. That is not to say that avant-garde positions cannot be taken by current circus artists, but they will inevitably be emulative.

Can circus truly aspire to avant-garde experiences while retaining its basis in tradition and practice? There are examples on the edges, where circus and dance, burlesque, performance art, non-acting and political engagement coexist. Circus ranges far and wide and we can rapidly identify a few contemporary avant-garde practices of circus, ranging from unjuggling or juggling light and space (as Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne do in their ethereal and digital manipulations of light and matter), to questioning the permanence of matter and identity (through Phia Ménard's work on transitions). Most of the avant-garde practices find a place of honour at international festivals. Therefore, they are not outside of the norms, they set them; they are not paradoxical and they do not remain at the forefront very long before they are simply considered *contemporary* circus. Perhaps this is where a discussion of our era's historical avant-garde resides in the circus.

The contemporary is not necessarily *of* the avant-garde, but defining the contours and ethos of circus's contemporaneity will help further explore its manifestations of the avant-garde. The term "contemporary circus" is not universal; countless explanatory labels have been used to describe and rethink contemporary circus practices and discourse. Other monikers include "circus without animals", "acrobatic theatre", "extreme dance", "aerial performance", "*circo social*", "*cirque actuel*", "post-national circus", "off-circus", "cirque-style circus", "*not* cirque-style circus", "artistic circus", "circus of creation", "circus next", "*arts de la piste*", "circus arts". As can be expected, contemporaneity resides in time and place and each locality's own relation to circus history and current state. Any circus being produced today is *contemporary*. However, contemporary circus, while drawing on many traditional practices, apparatuses and a number of their spectacular conventions, tends to side-line animals and, rather, emphasises the performance of exceptional human acrobatic feats, ingenuity or spectacle, often employing counter-intuitive inventiveness and drawing on contemporary forms of performing arts, computer programming or even immersive experiences.

The contemporary – as it is understood in other art forms and as it is theorised (from Agamben to Okeke-Agula) – is about a movement outward to the periphery, onto exiguous spaces and practices. In principle, it shows openness to a greater diversity of practices and discourses. "To ponder the contemporary is to cease thinking that there is an actual object to consider, but rather to understand that there are multiple realities to reveal".[4] Recent cultural studies-inflected readings of the circus have caused readers to dig deeper into the ethical

implications and meanings of periphery, otherness and difference, including a series of conferences on *Circus and its Others* (Montréal, 2016; Prague, 2018; UC Davis, 2021). Paradoxically, the periphery is constantly finding its centre in the (contemporary) circus.

In the 2000s, artists and scholars have been intensely pondering the contemporary. Lionel Ruffel, in *Brouhaha: Les mondes du contemporain* (2016), charts the past 20 years of questions on the contemporary in artistic and philosophical circles – from *Zum*'s serial issues asking "Qué es lo contemporaneo?" in Argentina to Giorgio Agamben's own *What is the contemporary* (first in Italian, then in English in 2009).[5] Identifying the contemporary is essentially recognising what is both *in its time* and *of its time*. More than a mere historical marker, the contemporary acts as "meta-word of historical conscience that accepts contradictory significations and allows for great self-reflexivity".[6] Thinking and naming the contemporary allows for a "synchronization of multiple temporalities"[7] into a single concept. In other words, the contemporary, or more precisely contemporaneity, is *co-temporal* and carries with it the ethos and the aesthetic of that very co-temporality: hybridity, layering of senses and references. The contemporary circus is *in its time* meaning that it is happening now, but it is also *of its time*, given that it captures its epoch's *zeitgeist*, its essence. Beyond a mere epochal understanding of the contemporary, one can certainly see a socio-aesthetic discourse emerging from a self-conscious, self-referential take on contemporaneity.

What will become of today's contemporary circus? The French have already moved onto *cirque actuel* ("current circus") and *les arts de la piste* ("ring-based arts") as broader categories to include a greater variety of forms. One can imagine a later categorising of types, falling under labels such as post-historic, neo-traditional, post-act, proto/post-circus, danced circus, commercial spectacle and so on; this is in precisely the same way theatre, dance, music and other art forms with an established critical apparatus nuance socio-historical, aesthetic, political, national, post-national and ideological trends within their fields.

Simultaneously, practitioners and researchers preoccupied with form, poetics and sociologically-driven edgework[8] have been actively investigating questions of aesthetics and training in a contemporary setting.[9] These recent allusions to scholarly contexts are not unexpected as contemporary circus is engaged in discourse and embodied meaning-making. Research and practice have coexisted; now they are coalescing, challenging researchers in their methods and assumptions and giving agency and intellectual responsibility to artists. In his introduction to the 2001 special issue *Avant-Garde! Les arts de la piste en révolution*, Jean-Michel Guy wrote of the *emancipation* of circus through the term *circus arts,* allowing for each of these disciplines, forms and traditions to have their specificity and autonomy recognised.[10] Other scholars unpacked the emerging field of contemporary circus in the larger context of circus and performance history – calling for circus "risking art"[11] or, rather, taking the risk of positioning itself as art-making – discursive and socially relevant.

Defining and contextualising contemporary circus and its research

Philip Astley's circus in the second half of the eighteenth century was resolutely "modern" but became, over time, an early, synthetic example of "traditional" circus. In the nineteenth century, Barnum repurposed and spectacularised circus, offering his contemporaries the *zeitgeist* of their assertive, expansionist era, until both that form of circus and the very idea of Empire were deemed inappropriate. *Nouveau cirque* ("new circus") retains its temporal title, in spite of its explicit historical emergence in France in the 1970s, its later commercial version in Québec in the 1980s with Cirque du Soleil (whose second show was titled *Circus Reinvented*) and the Montréal-based artist collective Les 7 doigts de la main ("The 7 Fingers"). Traditional circus persists in the 2000s, especially in Central Europe, Brazil, Chile and America; neo-traditional forms are emerging in Western Europe. There is a persistent presence of *nouveau cirque* aesthetic and theme-based shows co-existing with more radical forms of self-proclaimed contemporary circus. Can all of this circus be considered *contemporary*? Or has circus simply drawn common terms for edgy, experimental forms working beyond the established repertoire from theatre, dance and music, thus offering a short-handed reference to its own newfound artistic integrity and maturity?

For the time being, there is disagreement in journalists' and scholars' assessment of what constitutes contemporary circus, but there is consensus on a few dates, places and names. Firstly, the early "re-founders" of circus emerged in the 1970s and professional circus schools were established in the 1970s and 1980s (most notably in France, Québec, Australia and Brazil). Then, there was an inevitable passage from *nouveau cirque* to the contemporary in 1995–1996, with Josef Nadj directing *Le cri du caméléon* at Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC); its national tour made a large impact. And, finally, in 2001–2002, circus was legitimised, institutionalised and recognised by the State in France and Québec; its funding was increased and its programmes stabilised under government-funded programmes for the arts.

In the early 1970s, two tandems worked simultaneously in Paris: Annie Fratellini and Pierre Étaix (L'École nationale du cirque, later Académie Fratellini) and Alexi Gruss and Silvia Montfort (L'École au Carré) sought to revitalise the form by creating professional schools and developing new approaches to traditional circus, reinventing its aesthetic resonance around a single theme. Montfort's company was named *Cirque à l'ancienne* ("Old-Style Circus"), but that did not stop her from wanting to "re-found" the circus practice. These early instigators of change led to nouveau cirque and their historical significance still looms large.

In 1995–1996 – after well over 20 years of nouveau cirque in France – the production of CNAC's graduating class, *Le cri du caméléon*, started its national tour. Audiences were spell-bound by the juxtaposition of circus ability and a fine choreography of constant disruptions. The show, inspired by the monstrous and romantic ideas of freakery, was particularly prominent to critics raising

awareness that a new era of circus was percolating. The influential left-leaning Parisian paper, *Libération*, ran a rave review stating that "[a]fter traditional circus and new circus, we must henceforth consider the emerging contemporary circus".[12] Contemporary circus had arrived, it was therefore inevitable.

In 2001, French Minister of Culture Catherine Tasca inaugurated *L'année des arts du cirque* ("the year of circus arts"), proceeded to increase the budget allocated to artistic circus by 42%, and paved the way for dedicated funds for touring, equipment and infrastructure, artistic residencies and the creation of (what would become, by 2010) a series of 12 fully funded regional and national circus centres (so-called "pôles nationaux de cirque") across France. Additionally, a national unemployment insurance for circus performers between contracts was eventually created, thereby funding otherwise "lost" moments conducive to exploration and experimentation, allowing for the emergence of a "state-sanctioned market" for innovation. These national *pôles* are networked; they checker the country with regional objectives to encourage the production and touring of contemporary circus as well as structuring the circus profession and offering cultural mediation to regional audiences.

Institutional mentoring – first under the *Jeunes talents cirque* (started in 2002), then renamed *Circus Next* – offers funding for artists, a platform to foster innovative talent, and access to European producers and programmers, who are involved with the creative process from ideation to production and touring. This particular European context, favouring exploration and creative pursuit, has allowed circus to become heterogeneous and based on individual artistic vision, constantly challenging assumptions from above a financial and moral safety net allowing risk-taking. It has also attracted artists from all over Europe and South America to move to and create art in France. The emergence of a French institutional model – despite its unique funding streams and politics – is a good example of the conditions required to create space, time, resources and a market for experimentation; this includes the fundamental interdisciplinary and postmodern awareness of a coherent artistic dialogue, including its preceding forms and expectations.

Conclusive histories of nouveau cirque have emerged; most notable among them is Martine Maleval's 2010 socio-historical record *L'émergence du nouveau cirque, 1968–1998*. Maleval identifies moments of contamination and convergence between the arts that gave rise to a new form of circus. She also clearly presents the institutional and socio-cultural context in which the emergence of the nouveau cirque was possible. Her take is that this form of circus, in aspiring to a high art status, naturally integrated the artistic codes from theatre and dance, but it was, in turn, fundamentally affected by evolutions that have brought circus elsewhere.[13] Circus artist and scholar, Marion Guyez, later contends that this apparent lack of curiosity and understanding of circus's history – combined with nouveau cirque's desire to establish itself as a major art form and the rapid and expansive institutionalisation of the field – have all led to the current state of contemporary circus as we enter the 2020s. She explains that there is great artistic richness, but years of ideological disengagement with

traditional forms of circus have contributed to a generation of artists who cannot consider different ways of conceiving and practising circus outside of these conventions of constant discontinuity.[14] Postmodernism retains its connection to modernity by challenging it as much as it feeds from it. What, then, can amnesic self-centred circus draw from?

Tomi Purovaara, along with other Scandinavian scholars, offers a Nordic *Introduction to Contemporary Circus* (2012) which concurs with the French origin story of contemporary circus emerging with CNAC's *Le cri du caméléon*. Nouveau cirque looms large in its relatively young history. Touring companies such as Carrera and Bidon's Archaos, Montréal's 7 Fingers and the minimalist "poor circus" (read: Grotowskian) acrobatic troupe founded by French and Canadian circus artists (*Un loup pour l'homme*) are identified as major influences in many early Nordic contemporary circus scenes. These companies' tours in other regions around the world had a similar impact. For instance, Archaos's visit in the 1990s of Bristol's Fool for Time Circus School – a forerunner of Bristol's Circomedia and London's Circus Space – confirmed their own "new circus" direction in which theatre, dance, performance and circus disciplines allowed students to tap into their own diverse styles.[15] Those students went on to found companies as far afield as Circo Minimo in Sao Paolo (Brazil) and Ockham's Razor in London, further extending and perpetuating that influence.

In *Contemporary Circus* (2019), Katie Lavers, Louis Patrick Leroux and Jon Burtt develop an inductive critical theory of the various manifestations of contestation that inform current circus practice, through in-depth conversations with international circus creators from Sweden, France, Canada, Switzerland, England, Wales/Italy, America, South Africa, Samoa and Australia, many of whom draw on avant-garde principles or postures. This contestation is both discursive and applied through art-making, and social and ethical choices. These artists' voices have not been part of the field's theorising until very recently. There is very little explicit talk of institutions, networking or policy. These creators are mostly looking forward to new challenges while reflecting on their own trajectories. In their contemporary circus, they focus on practical concerns and transformative ideals, resistance and integrity through explorations of the *apparatus* (exploring "new understandings of what may constitute circus apparatus, and the ways in which the idea of mastery over the apparatus is being problematized"),[16] *politics* (exploring "ways in which the normate is being contested in politically-driven work within the field"),[17] *performers* (in which "the presentation of bodily prowess in circus is being contested")[18] and the development of *new work*. The latter brings to light current trends that challenge the choreographed circus act. Artists, with their new work, have been questioning the very structural unit of circus, as well as emerging techniques that are replacing the traditional circus act, cirque nouveau narratives and thematisations.

The particularly early, progressive stance of the Australian circus engaged many early influential theorisations of space, gender and embodiment

– including noted scholars such as Peta Tait, Gillian Arrighi, Katie Lavers, Jon Burtt and Kristy Seymour. In Australia, Circus Oz and other companies have been inventing a form of the progressive circus that addresses questions of gender equity and representation and social justice. Circus Oz is striving for gender parity on stage and actively seeks strong women to act as porters in hand-to-hand acrobatics. Scholarly consideration of these progressive approaches leads to a richer reading of the contemporary circus.

And finally, beyond scholarly contributions, the impact of contemporary circus cannot be underestimated for an entire generation of youthful circus performers. For example, 7 Fingers toured extensively with its youthful and urban-smart piece *Traces* (2005) – reaching over one million spectators in 1800 performances across 200 cities around the world,[19] with impressive acrobatics, fast-paced direction and integration of basketball, skateboarding and individualised speaking parts. The omnipresence of Cirque du Soleil's multiple touring shows and performance vocabulary have been references – through its strong visual signature and dramaturgy of spectacle as well as its well-established social circus training programmes – in contemporary circus practice in Asia and South America.

As has become quite clear, contemporary circus encompasses a great diversity of forms, postures and artistic asperities. Outside of the commercial and entertainment-driven realm, the artistic ambitions of the contemporary circus have been infused by the aforementioned desire for artistic freedom, and clear social and artistic modes of contestation.

Dialectics of contemporary circus

Recognising and *identifying* contemporary circus is a relatively simple exercise, but to *define* and *classify* it precisely remains a challenge, given its multiplicity of forms, discourses and practices. Before honing in on today's particular forms and enactments of the avant-garde, we can clearly identify six dialectical axes that emerge from its self-awareness, assumed aesthetic posture and increased social concerns. The dialectic spans a number of antithetical axes with two contrary, idealised positions pulling away from each other, but also sometimes co-existing in mutually exclusive, yet complementary, streams.

Contemporary circus strives for the following antipodes:

1) Institutionalisation (structure and support) and atomisation (greater autonomy and distinction)
2) Internationalisation (for growth and recognition) and national/regional hubs (for local support and pertinence)
3) Professionalisation (and its standards) and contestation (of the normate)
4) Social acceptability (recognition and legitimisation of circus) and otherness (assumed and celebrated difference)
5) Aesthetics (poetics) and social awareness (ethics)
6) High-level technicity/skill and authentic/singular artistic expression

While these six dialectical axes offer insights into, but do not necessarily inform us of, avant-garde practices, they certainly offer the themes, tropes and tensions that will frame the avant-garde's traditional and expected positionality of socio-aesthetic protest and dissent. The axes offer current forms of contemporary circus – those which translate the ongoing polarities of an evolving form and industry – permeated by some avant-garde *postures* and *presuppositions*. These are notably recognised through (1) a clear movement towards transgressing expectations, (2) a questioning of embodied identities and bodily integrity and (3) attempts at (de)professionalisation by high-level acrobats resisting apparent virtuosity. Finally, such avant-garde enactments are made possible by the existence of new markets (either private or public) for experimental art-making that requires time and expertise. Interestingly, the very overt presence of these dialectics potentially reduces the shock and impact of avant-garde gestures in a milieu that does not resist its paradoxes and doubts.

As a whole, contemporary circus negotiates these dialectics with increasing awareness of the issues of sustainability – ecological, disciplinary and individual/professional. The younger generation is asking itself whether circus practice is actually sustainable in its current state. Are there ways to reduce one's carbon imprint in a touring-heavy profession? Are there ways to sustain oneself and each other in an environment prone to excess and risk-taking, in which artists regularly test the limits of physical prowess and resilience? Is this where today's avant-garde finds its opening? Actual disruptive practices are not easily integrated into every circus environment – especially the non-funded market-driven ones. Nonetheless, they find their place on the margins or as totemic references.

The avant-garde paradigm

The avant-garde is a historical paradigm associated with precise moments in history that allowed for socio-political and aesthetic resistance to the normative forms of the day (as seen throughout this book). In theatre, for instance, it covers the effervescent early twentieth century's overlapping forms of protest and dissent – for example Dadaism and Constructivism – and later embraces forms of paradox and absurdity that violently reject bourgeois norms. At the same time, it clearly establishes a hierarchy of artistic value and recognition, separating artistic experimentation from commercial normative forms. Circus has not always had the luxury of distinguishing those forms so clearly.

The avant-garde can also be recycled as a *continuously iterative* paradigm of newness and experimentation, drawing on modern tropes of the *unmaking* or *unravelling* of classic, or even current, socially accepted and applauded forms. Consequently, the avant-garde in its current iterance is associated with self-referentiality, heterogeneity of form and style and the fragmentation of narrative. The case of circus is a particularly complex one, given its fundamental interdisciplinarity and integration of new themes and tricks within a longer, deep-rooted tradition of technique, prowess and embodied knowledge. In

other words, circus *expects and immediately absorbs newness*, it *fosters technical innovation* and *promotes socio-aesthetic representations of singularity*. How can it promote truly avant-garde gestures before they are immediately integrated into an ever-evolving vocabulary of embodied exceptionalism? Through unjuggling, minimalist contortion, a variety of vaguely shocking themes? Production and reception contexts determine what forms of avant-garde gestures (towards assumed "artification")[20] will be recognised as such.

The rupture with current circus practices is not universal, nor does it exactly translate in every nation or circus-producing environment. It would be presumptuous to assume that a uniform ethos of the avant-garde is clearly defined everywhere in the same manner. The avant-garde in Australia will not necessarily translate into avant-garde practices in France, nor will the Taiwanese have the same understanding or desire to invest in the same avant-garde tropes as we find in America today. With this in mind, we can nonetheless see trends emerging throughout international and local festivals, schools and touring companies, creative teams and networks, scholarship and conferences, that draw on a romantic ideal of the avant-garde and that bring necessary tension and innovation to their respective circus scenes; they are resolutely international. Thus, despite its national and regional particularities, industries, economy, training and creative milieus, circus artists are incredibly mobile and constantly introduce exogeneous ideas to their new environments. Consistent themes include the transgression of expectations, the embodiment of identity and bodily integrity, (de)professionalisation and limits of virtuosity, and new markets for art-making.

1. **Transgressing expectations**

   The avant-garde shocks and awes, and offers necessary social transgressions through unexpected art-making. Archaos's punk-infused performances of explosive aerials had that effect in the 1980s, with exploding ATVs, fire, impossible juggling, motorcycles and, later, spectacles of conquistadores in the shape of metallic cars, trucks and motorcycles (in *Métal Clown*). Much later, the avant-garde also quietly shifted expectations by revealing the inevitable, as we have seen in the 2010s with La Volte's *Chute!* – a philosophical systematic demonstration of how (not) to fall through the auspices of a scientific and poetic conference on … falling (with up-close physical tumbles). In the spirit of Dadaist tongue-in-cheek conferences, such understated performances pedagogically undo and unravel common expectations. In the same spirit, juggling and tightwire virtuoso Johann Le Guillerm – in *Le pas grand chose* (*The Nothing Much*) – proceeds with a Pataphysics conference on manipulation of objects, numbers and words of extravagant and absurd thought processes that defy artistic genres, and transpose Le Guillerm's virtuosity from the technical and demonstrative to the conceptual and performative. Today's transgressions in circus are not loud, nor death-defying; they are subtle, thoughtful, engaged. Their violence is against preceding forms and aesthetics, against assumptions, not against the audiences themselves.

2. Embodied identities and bodily integrity

The body politic, as theorised by Foucault, had a nefarious, normalising effect on difference, on dissent and resistance. Interestingly, the body in today's racially-charged discursive environment has become political precisely because of its singularity. A number of artists have brought into question the perpetual display of lithe, athletic bodies and performative excellence. Mike Finch (Circus Oz), Jennifer Miller (Circus Amok), Kim "Busty Beatz" Bowers (Hot Brown Honey), Tilde Björfors (Cirkus Cirkör), Phia Ménard (Compagnie Non Nova) and Fez Faanana (Briefs) have all articulated their clear political choices in casting and addressing audiences head-on with uncomfortable topics. In a sense, they offer their own utopian scenarios on how circus can matter most: through assumed difference, proud distinction, singularity. For instance, Phia Ménard metonymises her own transition from male to female body by juggling unstable matter – constantly melting ice, transforming one form of water into another – in *ICE: Injonglabilité Complémentaire des Éléments* (*The Complementary Unjugglablity of the Elements*).

The contemporary circus also spectacularises intimacy and risk but manages to downplay difficulty and prowess while constantly increasing the technical level of performance. This creates fascinating dissonances in both artistic execution and audience expectation. As Canadian contortionist and director Andréane Leclerc reminds us, circus is one of the rare arts in which the spectator usually cannot *do,* and therefore cannot fully understand, what they are seeing. This lack of embodied physical literacy is compensated by expectations and conventions based on a variety of codes: some hark back to the traditional circus, others are rooted in a postmodernist rhizomatic sense of circus as a rapidly evolving form. By espousing a forward-looking hybridity with other forms (from theatre, dance and performance arts at the top of the cultural capital scale, to more edgy popular forms such as neo-burlesque, hip-hop, *magie nouvelle*), circus has exposed itself to aesthetic tropes and debates that were not its own until its performances began to be understood in the genre, and gender, -bending, cross-over context.

The work of Alexander Vantournhout (in collaboration with director and dramaturg Bauke Lievens) – most notably in *Aneckxander* (2015) – was based on the artist's exacting physical challenges exploring his body's particularities and limits. Following this fully embodied research, he then moved to conduct dead body research in *Raphaël* (2017). Vantournhout states that in order "to fully understand movement, you need to do non-movement. To fully understand circus, you need to do non-circus, you need to 'whisper' circus".[21] This passage from mastery to its aspirational transcendence is a recurring theme in a number of artists who have trained at extremely high levels of physical accomplishment; as active resistance to the spectacularisation of their exceptionalism, but also as a way to

distinguish themselves and to demonstrate that their mastery is deeper than its performance – it is integrated into their very gestures and creative beings.

3. **(De)Professionalisation and the limits of virtuosity**

Fundamentally, the truly experimental expressions of the avant-garde rely on a mastery of the embodied skill or its conscious resistance and subversion, and a conceptually sound framework for the artful demonstration. There is no bluffing avant-garde virtuosity. Yet, there has been a subtle shift from physical mastery over objects to more complex and nuanced forms of interactions. Adrien Mondot asserts that he does not ask himself what innovative new juggling sequences he can imagine, but rather, by using projections and technology: "Can I juggle with time? … Can I juggle with abstractions? How do you do that?"[22] The preliminary answer, of course, is to be found in many of his pieces, including *reTime* (2006) and *Cinématique* (2010) (with digital artist and designer Claire Bardainne). We have seen examples above – including recent work by Alexander Vantournhout, Phia Ménard, Andréane Leclerc and Yohann Le Guillerm – but these European and Québec-based artists were already well-established in their environments, pushing the logic of their physical training and artistic ideals to the next inevitable and acceptable avant-garde propositions. They remain, for the most part, established, and what they propose has cultural currency.

Meanwhile, a return to the cabaret form in major cities such as New York, Montréal and Paris has allowed for an "off" scene to develop, drawing from burlesque, drag queen, dance and performance milieux, progressively promoting a great variety of representations of LGBTQ+ individuals, experiences and tropes. Interestingly, despite the theme and highly stylised *osé* gestures and allusions, these cabarets often offer unconnected act-based evenings of relatively conventional circus. Those particular performances are not about the displays of virtuosity or avant-garde inventiveness, but rather about creating a shared space of acceptance that permeates the mainstream with new codes and expectations, refocusing value on authenticity and singularity, and away from mere skill.

4. **New markets for art-making**

A rejection of the commercial model and its aesthetic exigencies nonetheless requires an alternative form of support. For the avant-garde to take hold and to thrive it must have a healthy marketplace of ideas and appropriate funding, or a context allowing for experimental forms to emerge. The avant-garde tends to thrive in independent, collective groups that benefit from a burgeoning parallel industry and/or philanthropic context. In other words, art that rejects commerce usually thrives because of a healthy commercial context to both draw resources from, and to react against. The French subsidies and networks of theatres that present avant-garde forms of circus enable a creative impulse and establish an expectation of artful, stunning, deep circus. Elsewhere, cities in which there is thriving

commercial circus activity, such as Montréal and Las Vegas, create conditions that attract circus practitioners and educated spectators, as well as financial support, for experimentation and unexpected collaboration. Short forms emerge, beyond the traditional acts, as do newly invented apparatuses. In other industries, this would be called research and development; in circus, these alternative spaces are incubators. Interestingly, the new markets for experimental art-making – while situated at opposite ends of the circus value chain (from commercial entertainment to "high" art) – each offer exciting conditions, financial and material support and, especially, peers for collective momentum.

The correlation of the contemporary and the avant-garde is one that is easily conflated in most art forms. Their timelines intersect constantly and the effect of the avant-garde's *newness* is usually staggered over time. If the contemporary circus is both *of its time* and *in its time*, the avant-garde *questions timeliness* and contemporary assumptions and forms. While avant-garde forms and aesthetics can be fetishised and fossilised, at its core, it rejects current forms and offers new models. The avant-garde's action is doomed to be recuperated and promptly integrated into contemporary forms. It must constantly reinvent itself through inventive disruption. Yet, as we have seen, contemporary circus currently finds itself in a dialectic of creative and social tension. The experimental disruption against an essentialist need for stability and continuation is a fundamental catalyst for circus's movement away from nostalgic fixed forms and towards its expected evolution as an art form. While what constitutes today's avant-garde is expected to be made redundant by the next wave of contesting creativity, the very principle of an avant-garde ethos is a necessary model for innovation and reinvention.

Contemporary circus as an art of contestation or an act of consolidation?

We have seen that any discussion of contemporary circus requires historical, social and geographical context, despite its global nature. We have also seen a variety of assessments of the level of contemporaneity that has been expected from circus scenes worldwide. Circus has always attracted multiple disciplines, each evolving along their own trajectory; it has also tended to have a transnational constituency of creators and performers, while having often been framed and celebrated in national or explicitly global contexts and recuperated as cultural capital. We have alluded to the ongoing dialectics of contemporary circus as a de facto series of expected tensions in an art form that simultaneously discovers its transgressive potential but also remains fragile without strong institutional support (whether from the state, industry or a combination of both).

Contemporary circus, in its current incarnation, is a hybrid form drawing from theatre and dance, both commercial and revolutionary. For example, truly distinct, hybridised circus practices emerging from the Global

South have found ways to interpret and contextualise their difference in the new institutional setting. An example is Cie El Nucleo, created by Colombians in exile training (in France) as a way to harness their difference in a generous consolidating institutionalised setting; only as a French-based company have they been able to tour the world with their show (*Somos*) on Colombian solidarity and resilience. These hybrid forms pull towards a steady internationalism and institutionalisation while permeated by increasing forms of contestation. It is what is happening *now*, in postmodern, and simultaneous, dialogue and rupture with its predecessors, modern/traditional circus, street spectacle, burlesque and nouveau cirque. It draws on circus training, practice and legacy while bringing into question many of its foundational tenets. Paradoxically, its discursive positionality on the relative margins also comes with an expectation of institutional support and international networking relying on a variety of hubs of circus activity to promote this constantly renewing form, ready to challenge and to be challenged. In a sense, defining contemporary circus – framing it in both its socio-aesthetic and socio-political realms – allows for a clearer sense of how the avant-garde circus comes to define itself.

This *post-contemporary* circus is undoubtedly upon us, already having integrated and somewhat "normalised" avant-garde codes and gestures. The pandemic brought on by COVID-19 in 2020–2021 has been the ultimate *disruption*. Not a single circus company (big or small) or artist was left unaffected by the sudden international darkening of stages and clearing of public spaces. The disruption was widespread and externally imposed. Artistic response, in this case, has not been to oppose one disruption with another, but rather to construct, to solider on, to democratise access for artists on digital platforms, to reconnect with the street when possible. The guiding instinct has been to connect and to rebuild a social space that is fuelled by performance and this has led to an emergence of short forms, solo pieces, unexpected collaborations across distances and media. It has allowed new talent to percolate and perhaps gain confidence with newfound viewership. The conditions seem ripe for a renewal of much of the contemporary circus scene with more modest, less commercially-minded artistic propositions gaining momentum. Many will be tempted to replace some of the previous existing dominant companies, emulating their pre-pandemic formulas. One can expect others – not yet realising that they are the avant-garde – to move in with alternative approaches to circus-making.

If history is any indication of what might emerge, we can expect expertise and prowess to be questioned (with apologies to Tristan Tzara): "take an act, take some scissors, cut it up and take out the pieces one at a time, the act will resemble you".[23] We can expect resistance to our current bourgeois rationality and unsustainable existence and new alternate venues (tomorrow's Cabaret Voltaire of the circus). The avant-garde is now in tow; contemporary circus has caught up with it, momentarily, until the new, ludic and essential transgressions push the form into new uncharted territories.

Notes

1 The "Salon des refusés" was an exhibition of art refused by the jury of the official Académie des Arts Salon in Paris in 1863, which included then-rejected artists such as Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, James Whistler and Édouard Manet. The initiative was encouraged by Napoleon III who found the judging too harsh. This would be the inaugural "Salon des refuses" of many over the following years.
2 Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1848–1918: Une histoire transnationale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 22.
3 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
4 Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha: Les mondes du contemporain* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2016), 206.
5 Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary," in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
6 Ruffel, *Brouhaha*, 8.
7 Ruffel, *Brouhaha*, 9.
8 Stephen Lyng, "Edgework and the Risk-Taking Experience," in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, ed. Stephen Lyng (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17–49.
9 Examples include the annual Concordia seminars on contemporary circus in Montreal that I have led since 2016; the Münster seminars, starting in 2018–19, led by Franziska Trapp; the Ghent artistic research "Circus Dialogues" led by Bauke Lievens, 2016–2020.
10 Jean-Michel Guy, "Avant-Garde! Les arts de la piste en révolution," *Autrement* 209 (2001), 15.
11 See Emmanuel Wallon (Ed.), *Le Cirque au risque de l'art* (Arles: Actes Sud-Papiers, 2002) and Philippe Goudard, *Le cirque entre l'élan et la chute: Une esthétique du risqué* (Saint-Gély-du-Fesc: Éditions Espaces 34, 2010).
12 Marc Lamaumonier, "Nadj, nouvelle piste pour la danse," *Libération*, 15 January 1996.
13 Martine Maleval, *L'émergence du nouveau cirque, 1968–1998* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 280 (paraphrased by the author).
14 Marion Guyez, *Hybridation de l'acrobatie et du texte sur les scènes circassiennes contemporaines: Dramaturgie, fiction et représentations*. Université de Toulouse (PhD dissertation, 2017), 143.
15 See Bim Mason, "Foreword," in *Flying High. New Circus in Bristol*, ed. Monica Connell (Bristol: Tangent Books, 2011), iv–vii.
16 Katie Lavers, Louis Patrick Leroux and Jon Burtt, *Contemporary Circus* (London: Routledge, 2019), 3.
17 Lavers/Leroux/Burtt, *Contemporary Circus*, 4.
18 Lavers/Leroux/Burtt, *Contemporary Circus*, 4.
19 See "The 7 Fingers," accessed 24 August 2021,s https://7fingers.com/shows/creations/traces.
20 One can argue that while Contemporary Circus continues to draw on traditional technique, disciplines, codes and showmanship, a growing self-awareness of the genre has also brought an "artification" of circus. The term comes from CNAC director Bernard Turin, who, in the 1990s, keenly engaged in a programme to reform and rejuvenate nouveau cirque by inviting guest directors from theatre (François Cervantès) and dance (Josef Nadj and Philippe Decouflé) to offer narrative and thematic substance to CNAC's year-end shows that inevitably toured France and, as we have seen, had a substantial impact on defining the field.
21 Bauke Lievens and Alexander Vantournhout, *Is There a Way Out of Here?* (Ghent: Not Standing VZW and KASK School of Arts, 2017), 21.
22 Lavers/Leroux/Burtt, *Contemporary Circus*, 44.
23 See Tristan Tzara's iconic hundred year-old "Pour faire un poème Dadaïste" ("How to Make a Dadaist Poem") first publicly read as part of his *Manifeste de Dada sur l'Amour Faible et l'Amour Amer* at the Galerie Povolozky in Paris in December 1920 on the occasion of the vernissage of Francis Picabia's exhibition, and later published in *La Vie des lettres* (No. 4) in 1921.

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14 "Today for the last time"?

On the cultural meanings of circus and the avant-gardes – some final provocations

Mirjam Hildbrand, Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Aiden Essery

Throughout this volume, the unpredictable, elusive term "avant-garde" is associated with playfulness, genre-twisting innovation, (formal) experimentation, striking juxtapositions, blurring boundaries and iconoclastic attitudes towards convention. "Avant-garde" is linked to, and intertwined with, simultaneity and multiperspectivity (as opposed to singular or linear narratives); politically subversive, counter-hegemonic and utopian positions; while also challenging rigid notions of the body and gender normativity. "Avant-garde" also appears in the form of abstraction and constant change, inner mobility and even as a state of mind. Historical and contemporary avant-gardists question social norms and bourgeois cultural institutions; they leave established structures and tread new paths, work from a marginal position (at least temporarily) and adopt critical outside perspectives. In doing so, they seem to shape innovation and generate novelty.

Since the early twentieth century, artists and scholars alike have been fascinated by the historical avant-gardes – their conceptual ideas, their practice and their artistic products. The term "avant-garde" is highly charged with this fascination, and avant-garde endeavours have become a projection screen, a looking glass, a *dispositif*,[1] a prism for their own ideas – and an idea in and of itself. This idea shapes our understanding and notion of art today (that art must be critical and create something new). Contemporary circus arts often (and most often unconsciously) draw on and participate in this understanding of art (in contrast to "traditional" circus). However, "avant-garde" in this context is merely an attitude and a gesture, or an "ethos" (Chapter 13).

Historical avant-garde artists associated the circus with "poetry and joie de vivre" (Chapter 5). They saw it as an incarnation of freedom from human constraints in space and movement (Chapter 8), admired its "ways of exhibiting the body as a subversive, radical presence" and its non-intellectual spectacle (Chapter 9); they were fascinated by the circus's potential to act as a bulwark against questionable authority (Chapter 12). As Eisenstein wrote, circus for the avant-garde "was characterised above all by physical, not imitative and illusionistic performance" (Chapter 3), and it appeared to be free from the increasingly narrow constraints of the moral and literary conception of "conventional" theatre (Chapter 2). Avant-garde artists, it seems, perceived circus

DOI: 10.4324/9781003163749-19

as a performance format characterised by the absence of narration, which is reflected upon *and* questioned in this volume.

Circus and the culture of narration

As shown in this volume, historical material – in the form of circus posters, playbills, newspaper reports and reviews – reveals that early twentieth-century-circus performances were comprised of more than just individual circus acts devoid of any connective narrative. In both Western European and Russian cultural contexts, circus companies drew on current or historical events or well-known figures, motifs and characters from dramas and operas, and, indeed, used them to create individual narrative scenes and, often, full-length plays with narrative dramaturgies (circus pantomimes, Chapter 2). The mobility of not just artists, but also themes, in the performing arts at the turn of the century is remarkable; they moved between genres and beyond legal regulations and social valuations to appear in different stage formats and on different types of stages. Crossovers in content between different genres and formats in popular entertainment have a tradition – they shaped earlier popular theatre productions, as theatre historian Jane Moody describes in her study of so-called "illegitimate" British theatre practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

> Indeed, one distinctive feature of illegitimate practice was the incorporation of plots and narratives (not to mention images, songs and even Napoleonic cuirass) borrowed and stolen from a variety of Newgate tales and Hogarth engravings, illegitimate theatre delighted in second-hand cultural property. Moreover, these eclectic thefts and adaptations gleefully confound any assumptions we might have about the subjects of high and low cultures and their ostensibly separate audiences. One of the fascinating aspects of illegitimate production is the unexpected variations these dramas often play across narratives and plots not of their own making.[2]

The audience's exact modes of reception around the turn of the century are difficult to trace in detail today. However, it can be assumed that the audiences of the time did not only consume one specific cultural format; they were familiar with the numerous and multifaceted forms of entertainment that were popular in their time, such as panoramas, moving image shows, circuses, theatres and museums (see Chapter 6); as well as with widely distributed visual cultural products, such as illustrated magazines, newspaper reports and advertisements. Urban spectators and visitors to circus performances were familiar with, and exposed to, various pop-cultural artefacts, programmes and announcements from their everyday lives, as public space was increasingly characterised by billboards and posters. Film scholar Mark Sandberg speaks of "crossover spectating" in this context,[3] and traces cross-genre mobility back to the beginning of the nineteenth century as a specific characteristic of the popular theatre culture

(unfolding between content, actors and spectators).[4] The genres we now call "circus", "theatre", "cinema" or "art" do not provide an adequate map of the diversity and intertwining of entertainment forms consumed during this period (Chapter 6).

The popular productions of the performing arts at the beginning of the twentieth century did not presuppose any particular educational background. They were aimed at a large, heterogeneous audience that was well acquainted with popular media and shows. Thus, in the circus – in addition to other institutions of popular culture – the audience was able to recognise familiar themes and scenes. Circus performances were popular with audiences not only because of their reference to current and familiar issues, but also because they fulfilled genre expectations. Like other forms of entertainment, they have a serial character and are, thus, also experienced as a variant of the genre.[5] However, the narrative dramaturgies of these historical circus performances did not exactly conform to the narratives and narrative styles of "hegemonic bourgeois culture". For instance, the stories were often shorter and more eclectically composed; they did not correspond to classical (Aristotelian-inspired) narrative patterns or may have even masqueraded as true events rather than fiction.[6] Moreover, circuses were quick to pick up on current issues and events and they gave best-of productions from operas and dramas that were currently in vogue. In other words, they knew how to capitalise on cultural hype: "Circus proprietors who included drama in their repertoire of performance knew they were offering something that would draw audiences back in the successive weeks of their stay in town".[7] Against this background – the diversity of audience experience across different entertainment genres, spectatorial involvement and ubiquitous popular cultural formats – we want to provocatively ask whether it is not time to re-examine the complexity of circus, circus audiences and, in particular, circus reception in relation to what historical avant-garde artists understood, interpreted and conceived as the arts of the ring.

Mapping the (imagined) void between "low" and "high", "pop" and "elite", "avant-garde" and "entertainment", circus fantasy and reality

> There's gonna be times when your show won't really exist nowhere except in your mind's eye, where you can see it. But as long as you can see it, you got a circus.[8]

"No other amusement saturated consumers like the circus at the turn of the century. Neither vaudeville, movies, amusement parks, nor dance halls equalled the circus's immediate physical presence".[9] The modern circus, defined as the circus of the industrialised era (Chapters 2 and 7), contributed to the transmedial culture of narration (as discussed above) and was formative for a "culture of attraction" (see Chapters 3 and 6, cf. Tom Gunning in Chapter 7) – which has also been called a "culture of exhibition".[10] In fact, James Fiurama explains

that Gunning himself "has gestured toward moving beyond this opposition [of "attraction" and "narration"] when he writes that 'the desire to display may interact with the desire to tell a story, and part of the challenge of early film analysis lies in tracing the interaction of attraction and narrative organization'."[11] The modern circus provided the spectator with, at least partially, a narrative; a spectacular, participatory and transforming experience and it provided inspiration for the avant-gardes to create new ways to connect with (new) audiences. For example, through the printing presses of avant-garde book designers, modern circus became "Typocircus" (Chapter 4) and, through the hands of visual artists, a miniature circus – an ensemble of found objects, strikingly simplified and unfamiliar (Chapter 8). Both reach an array of different "elitist" and "non-elitist" audiences. Being unashamedly unorthodox, the modern circus sent a powerful message about the appreciation of diversity that was embraced by avant-gardists.

Avant-garde thinkers and practitioners also saw revolutionary political and aesthetic possibilities in the way circus took hold of its spectator and "broke with" traditions of psychological or dramatic theatre. However, circus – in particular, the circus *attended* by avant-garde artists – consisted of more than loosely sequenced performances or "attractions" and "non-continuity", of *showing* (monstration) instead of *telling* (narration), that merely incited visual curiosity through theatrical display. Circus featured and consisted of narrative scenes (Chapter 2) and was embedded in an overarching multi-medial public "narration" and discourse unfolding across popular media of the time (see above). From this perspective, dramatically speaking, did not much of what historical avant-gardists perceived and interpreted as "circus" seem closer to fantasy than historical reality? If the historical avant-gardists were not primarily inspired by actual circus practice (e.g. Chapters 2 and 4), but by an "idea" of the circus – how can this idea be defined?

The chapters of this volume uncover an oxymoronic logic in the avant-gardes' approach and understanding of circus. Those avant-gardists who praised the circus as a realm of "poetic" improvisation and experimentation, a circular sphere of artistic freedom exploring what lies beyond social and physical constraints (e.g. Oscar Schlemmer in Chapter 1), and as a "democratic" and heterarchical, or even anarchical, space (Chapter 3) seem to have generously suspended the reality that the superhuman virtuosity of circus performers results from strenuous training, that circuses are extremely hierarchical and competitive institutions aimed at the mastery of bodies and machines – and profit (Chapter 7) – rather than poetry. By celebrating the circus as the source and origin of their multi-layered "liberation scenarios", some avant-garde artists seemed to prefer their own fictionalised circus history to the fact that circus, seen through a different prism, is a world in which human and non-human physicalities are tamed for the sake of staged artificiality[12] and the entire venture is a capitalist show selling a profitable, extravagant narrative.

Indeed, the hiatus between fiction and reality is an essential part of the narrative that the modern circus itself has cultivated. Around the turn of the

century, circus was not only very popular in fictional literature[13] but it was also a "media phenomenon": circus agents and journalists published about the latest show delivered "behind the scenes" reports, circus (auto)biographies and newspaper reviews. These circus stories (and circus historical sources, more generally), are to be studied with care, since "objective" reports and information about circuses (especially in newspapers) were frequently – even before P.T. Barnum, the master of humbug and creator of the largest circus in history (Chapter 7) – written by circus personnel, and then leaked to publicists or copied by journalists. Their depiction was highly manipulated, which is why many "competing narratives" about historical circus events coexist, seamlessly intertwining fact and fiction in a way that is difficult to unravel.[14]

From this critical perspective on historical circus authenticity – where it is seen as a highly constructed, medialised reality – Barnum's use of the press to enhance (show) business also applies to some facets of modern circus: "[i]f this was realism, it was a form of realism understood as thoroughly flexible, provisional, and uncertain – a realism whose specific outlines emerged only through relentless public speculation and equivocation".[15] To market its shows, for example, the modern circus manifested itself in various media as an experimental space, where "bodies and physicalities […] are out of the ordinary, and its hyperbole exploited ideas of extraordinariness".[16] The victory of the human and non-human body artist over their own physical constraints (as explored, e.g. in daring aerial acrobatics) exhibited the (over)stretching of the real, as well as its aesthetic spectacularisation as an aesthetic feat. Circus-goers consequently gave their obolus to an institution in which acrobats, clowns and other performers stretched cultural boundaries on their behalf. The narrative of the "travelling performer" – propagated by the circus community to market their performances – is another example of a highly constructed, media-driven "circus reality". Through circus novels published in newspapers and newspaper reports, the nomadic existence of travelling circus performers, who did not perform in the permanent circus buildings of metropolitan cities, embodied for the majority of the audience a paranormal "exotic" state of peripatetic adventure, "at best remotely comparable to their own holiday trips", and contributed "to the fact that the circus as a whole is understood less as work than as a form of life with a permanently increased density of experience".[17] Or, in other words: "Showmen were shrewd, worldly, clever, and too adventurous to be confined to a single location, regular work hours, or the rest of the trappings of conventional life".[18] It seems that it was that exact narrative of the non-conventional, out-of-the-ordinary and density of experience that were carefully cultivated by the modern circus itself, and the ontological dubiousness of that "circus narrative" stimulated creative productivity and the transposition of the circus substrate into avant-garde art. Circus history served avant-garde artists for circus placebogenesis.

A powerful cultural icon of progress – embodying, among other things, cutting-edge technologies and "mobility mania"; national expansion and infrastructural development[19] – modern circus also served as a refuelling station

for "a tired civilisation indulging in the thrill of a lost wildness", which put avant-garde "imagination on heightened alert".[20] However, at the same time, by celebrating and interpreting a common reservoir of motives with transcultural, if not transnational, identity – for example, the attics and eccentricities of the cultural archetype of the clown (see Chapter 10; clowns belong to the anthropological constants that exist in all cultures[21]) – avant-garde engagement with circus also reflects the presence of a timeless past in a present. Thus, the avant-gardes' creation of (new) meaning through the circus can also be read as a rebellion against the modern idea of time itself – the time of history and progress. Or, in Svetlana Boym's words, it can be read as nostalgia: "Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals".[22] To what extent is the avant-garde circus of the early twentieth century, the expression of technology-induced desires to retreat, or the search for a decelerating moment in accelerated life, or an experimental reconstruction of a pre-modern, pre-industrialised past in the form of mere possibility? In this sense, the circus could be understood as compensation or revocation of what has been forgotten, although it also offers "designs" without precedent and patterns for its illusionary dismantling. Again, circus for the avant-gardes seemed to signify both the projection of alternative worlds *and* the refashioning of deficiencies arising from the constraints of their factual culture – and it continues to do so.

Still admired as a thrilling assault on the senses, nerves and conventions – and as an expedition into the unpredictable and an incubator of innovation – circus as the "unity of diversity"[23] rarely seems to irritate audiences now; instead, it evokes familiarity. Is circus now a "stage" of history on which the progressive story is performed for the spectator, where our own cultural past is conjured up in the form of the once sensationally extraordinary? Has the extraordinary and avant-garde "other" become the revenant of our own cultural memory?

Studying "circus and the avant-gardes" runs the risk of studying circus backward through later (e.g. contemporary) conceptions, including avant-garde perspectives. This can influence circus theory and even serve to marginalise "the actual practices of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular entertainments and the modes of spectator experience they encourage".[24]

LaborARTories: modern circus and popular avant-gardes

What has been little considered in this book, but deserves more attention, are the fine lines of mutual parody and persiflage that add yet another dimension to the circus–avant-garde connexions. On the popular stage, for example, comic performers (in)famously parodied avant-garde and modernist artists. For example, by the early 1890s music-hall and variety performer Little Tich (Harry Relph, 1867–1928), who was called "the most famous midget comic of the period",[25] became a leading figure within British music hall and comic theatre, and was one of the highest-paid artists of his time. He was compared with internationally successful stars such as the dancers Loïe Fuller and Isadora

Duncan, which is unsurprising since Tich caused a sensation as an eccentric dancer as well as a character comedian. As Little Miss Turpentine (one of his most celebrated stock characters), Little Tich developed a comic version of Loïe Fuller's 1890's Serpentine dance that is still vividly remembered.

Fuller's radiant and exquisite dance, which was itself an adaptation of dance practices of the fin-de-siècle stage (Chapter 11), is regarded as one of the earliest manifestations of modernist performance, defying the overpowering ballet tradition by creating a new dance style.[26] Little Tich's parodistic take on Fuller featured him "wearing outsized shoes", and engaging in hilarious, romping fights with his dress ("yards of fabric around a tiny frame").[27] His dance, a fascinatingly multi-layered performance of an excess of (fake) femininity, was alluding to, and mocking, the little natural grace that Fuller herself is said to have had. Tich's performance is a reworking of a reworking, considering that Fuller performed in light dramas and musicals (also in a number of cross-dressed boys' roles).[28] Popular performances of the Tich ilk – with their genre-twisting intertextual relationship with live avant-garde art, burlesque and eccentric comedy (similar to wrestling, Chapter 9; cf. Chapter 10) – can be read as a version (or even "queering"?) of what (in other contexts) has been described as "popular modernity" – a cultural domain that is distinct from modernity in an elite or aesthetic sense.[29] And even more fascinatingly, Tich inspired modern choreographers and dancers in turn. For example, one of the aristocratic friends of the ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev recalls that one of the two English words known to the star dancer of the Ballets Russes, Vaslav Nijinsky, was "Littler", by which he meant:

> Little Tich, an eccentric dancer, celebrated in London and Paris … He wore boots with exaggeratedly long feet, and one of his turns was to bang his forehead on the floor from an upright position. "Littler" Nijinsky would say inquiringly each time he arrived in London, and if his idol was performing, seats would immediately be booked and he and Diaghilev would sit gazing spellbound.[30]

No wonder Tich was soon copied by imitators (in Austria, for example, by a dance comedian called Little Pich),[31] which adds another layer of meaning to the crossovers and interconnections between "pop" and avant-garde stages. All this also raises another set of questions: modern dancer Nijinsky admired and idolised avant-garde inspired comic popular performances, but what "idea" of "avant-garde" did Little Tich – and his Little Piches and similar clones – actually promote through their popular stage shows? To what extent did these fractured, prismatic "popular avant-garde" performances – which moved between countries with their travelling performers – contribute to the "plurality of global modernisms",[32] and thus to the disruption of the canon of modernism? And do avant-garde artists who used the format of the circus to satirise and persiflage *themselves* not come close to these "popular avant-garde"

performances?[33] A series of circus scenes presented by Xanti Schawinsky in 1924, featuring the entire "Bauhaus stage equipage", is an example of this, in which:

> Bogler appears as a school rider and gracefully steers a horse that only moves its legs, a flat figure behind which Kurt Schmidt is hidden. In another scene, the flat figure of the beast – Herbert von Fritsch is behind it – stands opposite the tamer Schawinsky, who wears a rigid round plastic costume […] and commands the beast's expressions such as roaring, rolling his eyes, snapping his mouth and wagging his tail. Meanwhile, his top hat is raised and lowered to the beat of the accompanying music, which obligingly guides the entire performance. Hans Bär as the clown and Kurt Schmidt as the stableman complement the performances of the "Circus", using brooms and shovels to spread manure made of rubber balls.[34]

In what ways, if any, has this kind of reception of circus performances by the avant-garde helped to shape our idea of circus? Again, these phenomena highlight that popular entertainment forms and the "late century theatres of entertainment as specific constructs or sites of modernity […] in a popular modernism" were not "the dynamic complement to that of the avant-garde",[35] as Bailey recognised, but a genuine organ within the avant-garde body. Schawinsky's circus series also exemplifies how circus-cum-avant-garde projects became part of cultural "institutions" (in this case, Bauhaus). Bridging "elite" and "pop" and "low" and "high" culture by means of comic performance; both "avant-garde" artists exploring popular formats and popular performers mocking avant-garde art (like Little Tich) transformed what was new in art into public knowledge.[36] Thus, there was an insinuation that the avant-garde of today is tomorrow's mainstream. This raises the question of whether the "real" avant-garde positions are not far more likely to be found in other pulsating, genre-synthesising and cross-stylistic experimental spaces, in art spaces beyond the artistic mainstream and the dominant concept of art – spaces in which, for example, dazzling artists such as Le Pustra (Chapter 10) perform today. Or, in other words, do we even need the term "avant-garde" anymore?

Notes

1 Michel Foucault defines the *dispositif* as "a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements." (Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," in *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings: Michel Foucault*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194).

2 Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London: 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.
3 Mark Sandberg, "Effigy and Narrative: Looking into the Nineteenth Century Folk Museum," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Vanessa Schwartz and Leo Charney (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 321.
4 See Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, 6.
5 See Hans-Otto Hügel, "Ästhetische Zweideutigkeit der Unterhaltung: Eine Skizze ihrer Theorie," in *Lob des Mainstreams: Zu Begriff und Geschichte von Unterhaltung und Populärer Kultur*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Köln: Halem Verlag, 2007), 13–32.
6 See James Fiumara, "Electrocuting an Elephant at Coney Island: Attraction, Story, and the Curious Spectator," *Film History* 28:1 (2016), 45.
7 Jacky Bratton, "What Is a Play? Drama and the Victorian Circus," in *The Performing Century, Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 255.
8 Michael Raleigh, *The Blue Moon Circus* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2003), 28.
9 Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 13.
10 Fiumara, "Electrocuting an Elephant at Coney Island," 48.
11 Fiumara, "Electrocuting an Elephant at Coney Island," 48.
12 Anna-Sophie Jürgens, *Poetik des Zirkus: Die Ästhetik des Hyperbolischen im Roman* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016).
13 See Jürgens, *Poetik des Zirkus*.
14 Steve Gossard, "The Fallibility of the Historical Record," in *Manegenkünste*: *Zirkus als ästhetisches Modell*, eds. Margarete Fuchs, Anna-Sophie Jürgens and Jörg Schuster (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 153–164.
15 James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 121.
16 Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 138.
17 Matthias Christen, *Der Zirkusfilm: Exotismus, Konformität, Transgression* (Marburg: Schüren, 2010), 88.
18 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 83.
19 Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10, 12. See also Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "Circus Matters: Engineering, Imagineering and Popular Stages of Technology – Introduction," in *Circus, Science and Technology: Dramatising Innovation*, ed. Anna-Sophie Jürgens (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2.
20 Kyung-Ho Cha, "Karnevaleskes Tier-Werden: Das Ende des Menschen in Thomas Manns 'Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull'," *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* (special issue on "Tiere, Texte, Spuren") 126 (2007), 236.
21 See e.g. Constantin von Barloewen, *Clowns: Versuch über das Stolpern* (Munich: Diederichs, 2010).
22 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi (cf. xv).
23 The description of the circus as a 'unity of diversity' (or 'concordia discors') is a prominent term in German-language circus historiography, dating back to a 1931 text by Yevgeny Kuznetsov; however it does not appear in the Russian original but was penned by the translator (see Katalin Teller, *Geschichte in der Zirkusmanege, Das Geschichtsbild von Manegeschaustücken* (Postdoctoral thesis, manuscript 2021), 55). This is another wonderful example of the above-mentioned 'dubiousness' of the 'circus narrative' and the pitfalls and promises of circus historical material. See also Marshall Berman on the "unity of disunity" as the essential paradox of modernity ("a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal", quoted in Peter Bailey, "Theatres of Entertainment/Spaces of Modernity: Rethinking the British Popular Stage, 1890–1914," *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 26:1 (1998), 6.

24 Fiumara, "Electrocuting an Elephant at Coney Island," 50. This idea is inspired by recent critical scholarship around Gunning's 'cinema of attractions', highlighting the need to study in detail what 'attractions' are according to the historical popular cultural record and material. See also Joseph Garncarz, "The European Fairground Cinema," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, eds. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac and Santiago Hidalgo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012).

25 Rae Beth Gordon, "From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema," *Critical Inquiry* 27:3 (2001), 534.

26 For a description of the effect of her performance, see Susan Potter, *Queer Timing: The Emergence of Lesbian Sexuality in Early Cinema* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 107.

27 Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 62. The dance is online, see "Little Tich: Loie Fuller," accessed 17 July 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfZ9dQ9Umqs.

28 Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 17, 23. Regarding Fuller's missing grace, Jean Lorrain commented: "With the gestures of an English boxer and the physique of Oscar Wilde, this is a Salome for drunken Yankees." (quoted in Garelick, *Electric Salomé*, 99) For a more extensive discussion of Tich's performances and what the practice of 'female clowning' in the early twentieth century looked like, see Anna-Sophie Jürgens, "Lady Clowns: Clown-Ballerinas, Dancing 'Clownesses' and Female Clowns on the Popular Stage around 1900," in *Touring Performance and Global Exchange 1850–1960: Making Tracks*, eds. Gilli Bush-Bailey and Kate Flaherty (New York: Routledge), 2021 (in press).

29 Looking at the US popular cultural space from the nineteenth century onwards, in *Popular Modernity in America: Experience, Technology, Mythohistory*, Michael Thomas Carroll, for example, refers to the period that combined consumerism with an advanced technological matrix and entertainment with information and technology as "popular modernity".

30 Duff quoted in Hanna Järvinen, "Comedy Ballet as Social Commentary: Till Eulenspiegel (1916)," *Dance Research* 32:2 (2014), 158.

31 See Jürgens, "Lady Clowns."

32 Claire Warden, "Foreword," in *Dance, Modernism, and Modernity*, eds. Ramsay Burt and Michael Huxley (New York: Routledge, 2020), xii.

33 The fact that the Dada costume created by Sonia Delaunay and worn by Tristan Tzara (Chapter 10) was called an expression of "popular cubism" can add to this discussion, see Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 3.

34 Dirk Scheper, "Schawinsky und das Theater," in *Xanti Schawinsky: Malerei, Bühne, Grafikdesign, Fotographie*, ed. Peter Hahn (Berlin: Nikolai, 1986), 48. Translated by the authors.

35 Bailey, "Theatres of entertainment/spaces of modernity," 6. See also Robert Heynen, according to whom Tom Gunning characterised *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which showcases the fragments of commercial culture and fairground spectacle, "as a form of popular modernism" because it influenced the later filmic avant-garde, "but more importantly because its aesthetic innovations were intrinsically modernist and, unlike much of the avant-garde, had a broad social base." (Robert Heynen, "Cultures of Confinement: Health, Illness, and Madness in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Magic Mountain*," *Modernism/Modernity* 25:4 (2018), 36.)

36 See Sally Everett, "Searching for a Post Modern Avant Garde," in *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, ed. Sally Everett (London: McFarland 1991), 273.

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