

The Invention of “Traditional” Circus at the Turn of the 21st Century

Practices of innovation, aesthetic codes,
and the myth of “contemporary” in circus arts

Raffaele DE RITIS

rderitis@hotmail.com

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Graduated in Film History and Criticism from the University of Rome, he is a theatre and circus director, having conceived numerous large-format shows in the United States and Europe for the most renowned companies in the last three decades. He is teacher of Economy of Creative Industries at “D’Annunzio” University in Pescara and of Art Direction at ISIA University of the same city. He seated in the Commission for Circus Arts at Italy’s Ministry of Culture and was circus programs consultant for RAI, Italy’s state TV. Author of books and papers in several languages, his *Storia del Circo* (2008), is considered a worldwide reference. He founded the Funambolika circus festival in Pescara, where he is also artistic director of Società del Teatro e della Musica. Independent researcher. Raffaelederitis.com.

Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, circus was the performing art form most affected by identity changes and the shift of aesthetic codes. After 2000, the artistic practices of circus started to challenge their defined identity as a performing subgenre.

Whereas circus, as a cultural institution, is conventionally rooted in the late 18th century (like most “modern” performing arts), its accepted “classic” structure was codified later, within the shaping of Western cultural identity after the Industrial Revolution. This path followed the rise and fall of the equestrian performance (circus’ own defining element), the advent of the music hall industry, the spread of athletic performances, the trade in wild animals, the confrontation with the rising cinema, and other socio-artistic phenomena. The model that emerged from the crossing of those influences, based on a circular space and a modular combination of mostly independent human and animal performances, developed codes of resistance roughly between 1870 and 1980, thus shaping a readable “classic” circus model. Its later post-WWII phase would be recognised after 2000 as “traditional circus”. The term (not without a critical sense) emerged in opposition to new transformative forms of circus, concretely recognisable by the late 1970s. Those forms appeared related to the wide democratisation of practices (circus schools and courses, also connected with the spread of physical theatre pedagogy) and a poetic, if not ironic, distance in the aesthetic of new-born circuses, even with an imagery still related to the idea of “tradition”. By the early 1980s, the term “nouveau cirque” indicated a progressive dramatisation of performing circus practices; around 2010 the consequent idea of “contemporary circus” started to define the attempt at codifying a new subgenre, in the wave of postdramatic theatre, toward a radical deconstruction not only of the “classic” circus codes, but also of organisational modes, shifting from popular entertainment to the cultural industry. This generated a critical appropriation of “new” when, in reality, the innovative traits have been a constant part of circus history across the centuries.

The aim of our research will be to demonstrate that the historical curve of circus was never a “traditional” model but rather a constant movement of transgressions and innovations on given codes (space, performance structure, business model, organisational and social forms). We will also attempt to demonstrate that the “dramatisation” of circus performance existed constantly from its origin, as did its profound ties with other artistic genres; and that access to circus practices was never restricted to a micro-society of nomadic communities but, on the contrary, was nourished by leisure and sport practices of urban middle classes. And, de facto, “contemporary” circus, after two intense decades of existence, is fully codifying a new form of “tradition”. This article is sourced from the circus historiography, the recent field of circus scholarship studies, as well as the social studies related to the concept of tradition (such as in Howsbawm and Bakhtin), with a final attempt to differentiate “classic” from “traditional” in the circus field.

Keywords: circus, contemporary circus

Raffaele DE RITIS

The Invention of “Traditional” Circus at the Turn of the 21st Century

Practices of innovation, aesthetic codes,
and the myth of “contemporary” in circus arts

Welcome, welcome, welcome!
Here, on the border between dream and reality.
The hour of transformation has reached this tent.
Nothing is impossible if we swear to it strongly enough!
Fire, water, earth are subject to us.
The scream, the tears, the rapture, the laughter, the irrationality,
the anarchy of poetry awaits redemption through our desires.
What you shouldn't experience in the next few hours eludes you,
because you don't believe in it.
Gentlemen, in a few seconds, in fractions of a second
the time has come: the show begins.
It'll be a circus.¹

At the end of the 20th century, circus seemed to be the performing art form most affected by identity changes and the shift of aesthetical codes. From the year 2000, the artistic practices of circus started to challenge their defined identity as a performing subgenre.

Whereas circus, as a cultural institution, is conventionally rooted in the final decades of the 18th century (like most “modern” performing arts), its accepted “classic” structure was codified later, within the shaping of Western cultural identity after the Industrial Revolution. This path followed different phenomena, both social and artistic: the rise and fall of equestrian spectacular performance as a defining element (1770s-1870s); the advent of music hall and/or “variety” theatrical industry (1880s-1930s); the spread of athletic performances within the world of the performing arts (by the 1870s); the trade in wild animals (1880s-1910s); the disruptive or creative confrontation with the rising cinema (by the 1900s), and other socio-artistic phenomena. The model emerging from the crossing of those influences spread through a circular space and a modular combination of mostly independent human and animal performances. This model, as “circus”, maintained some basic enduring codes roughly between 1870 and 1980, thus shaping a readable “classic” circus model. Such model generated a canon universally recognised as the circus performative codes. With few major variations, this circular format knew at least two subsequent different definitions of space: the theatrical frontal stage (both in the European “variety” form and the American “vaudeville” model), and the three-ring/hippodrome as in the North-American

1. Opening lines of the show “Circus Roncalli”, 1976. Cit. in SEILER, Christian, *André Heller...*, 2012.

travelling circus set up. A later post-WWII evolution of the model was recognised after the year 2000 as “traditional circus”. This term (not without a critical sense) emerged in opposition to new transformative forms of circus, which expanded in the mid-1970s and became concretely recognisable by the late 1980s. Those forms appeared related to at least two phenomena: the wide democratisation of specific artistic practices (circus schools and courses, also connected with the spread of physical theatre pedagogy), and a poetic, if not ironic, distance in the aesthetic of new-born circuses, even with an imagery still related to the poetic idea of “tradition”. By the early 1980s the term “nouveau cirque” emerged, indicating a progressive dramatisation of performing circus practices and an awareness of the immersive specificity of the form in the audience experience.² Around 2010, the consequent idea of “contemporary circus” started to define the attempt at codifying a new subgenre, in the wave of postdramatic theatre, toward a radical deconstruction not only of the “classic” circus codes, but also of its organisational modes.³ By 2024, “contemporary circus” seems to have finally shifted from the popular entertainment industry to the cultural subsidised sector.⁴ It aims to be defined as a genre in itself, and mostly in contrasting forms,⁵ also through attempts of legitimisation by means of somehow elusive philosophical tools, such as “circus dramaturgy” or “circus writing” (Métais-Chastanier, 2014; Philippe-Meden, 2020; Moquet, Saroh and Thomas, 2020; Trapp, 2023).

Conflicting between the two distinct concepts of evolution and/or emancipation, the notion of contemporary in circus has generated a critical appropriation of “new” when, in reality, innovative traits have been a constant part of circus history across the centuries.

History (as for any art form) shows that the historical curve of circus itself never responded to a “traditional” model, but to a constant movement of transgressions and innovations on given codes (space, performance structure, business models, and organisational and social forms). Even the theatrical “dramatisation” of circus performance constantly existed from its origin, as did its profound ties with other artistic genres, for centuries before the contemporary movement reasserted the otherwise spontaneous aspect of “contamination” as an identitarian concept. Moreover, access to circus practices was never restricted to a micro-society of nomadic communities but, on the contrary, was nourished by leisure culture and sports practices generated within the urban middle classes, specifically by the spread of Industrial Revolution society. And, de facto, “contemporary” circus, after two intense

2. “Depuis quelques années, j’ai le sentiment d’assister à la naissance d’un nouveau style de cirque qui me fait penser à la nouvelle cuisine (...)” (Mauclair, 1983).

3. The related critical literature is copious, if mostly from a French perspective. Cf. GUY, Jean-Michel (ed.). *Avant-garde, Cirque !...*, 2001; MALEVAL, Martine. *L’émergence du Nouveau Cirque...*, 2010; HIVERNAT, Pierre; KLEIN, Véronique. *Panorama Contemporain...*, 2010. A useful source with a wider international perspective is LAVERS, Katie; LEROUX, Louis Patrick; BURTT, Jon. *Contemporary Circus*, 2020.

4. “Contemporary circus is basically this: a political creation that is usually unsound because it relies on the demagogic argument that the circus is ‘in itself’ a popular art, but was soon overwhelmed by the results” (Guy, 2023).

5. A specific study involves some influential creators in conversation in an attempt to define the genre through four forms of “contestation”: apparatus, politics, performers, and new work: “Contemporary Circus” (Lavers, Leroux, Burtt, 2020, op. cit.).

decades of existence, is fully codifying a new form of “tradition”. At the same time, the industry still codified as “classic” circus continued to develop examples of theatrical sophistication in a sort of “popular art circus”.⁶ This neoclassic creative wave is iconically identified with Cirque du Soleil and its worldwide spread by the mid-1990s, but after 2000 with important examples also in the most traditional segments of the international circus industry.

Paris and Manhattan: a flashback to 1975

There is a suggestive black and white photo from 1975. An endless abandoned piece of land at the far edge of the island of Manhattan: in the background, the silhouettes of the Twin Towers, and, in the middle, a tiny, shabby tent. It is among the first images of an experience called Big Apple Circus, which after a few decades became an institution of New York cultural life, as well as an influence on the renewal of the circus world.⁷ The people who had set up this crooked tent with little experience (who knows how) were a group of street artists, two of them the founders of the project. Paul Binder and Michael Christensen had previously been in Paris at the circus school of Annie Fratellini and Pierre Étaix (the first and longest-running in the Western world), and then returned to New York wanting to bring the intimate spirit of European tents to America.

So how is it possible that a small tent, in the homeland of gigantism, managed to trigger such a revolution that, from that day on, circus was considered an art in America?

The Big Apple Circus, inspired by recent European experiences, had understood two fundamental aspects of circus: the simplicity of the classic and the intrinsic ties of circus to other arts (such as music, writing, and design). At that moment, in the mid-1970s, the paradox of innovation was not that of a concept from scratch, nor of cutting roots: its meaning was to recognise continuity with the past and to use the classical rules in a modern form. What does modern form mean?

We need to go back a few years, to Paris. At the end of the 1960s, Annie Fratellini (1932-1997), a musician with origins in circus clown aristocracy, and her husband Pierre Étaix (1928-2016), Oscar-winning filmmaker and circus clown, had sensed the difficulties of the circus world, out of sync with an era of innovations and effervescence throughout the artistic world. Their vision was to guarantee continuity to the form by opening a circus school, in which old circus masters could teach but along with education in the other

6. Here we attempt to outline the relevance of that neoclassical form of circus which, while maintaining the integrity of the acts and classical codes, is based on a creative process, a coherent compositional quality of the artistic elements, and a popular destination. Historically, it was codified in modern form between 1974 and 1984; that is, from the emergence of Cirque à l'Ancienne Gruss in Europe until the first maturity of Cirque du Soleil in North America. One of the attempts at definitions used in France is that of “cirque traditionnel de création”, as a filiation from the initial movement of the “nouveau cirque” (Barré, 2004), and in Italy “circo di regia” (De Ritis and Serena, 1998). In the United States the term “contemporary circus” has been used (although its meaning is obviously opposite to the European definition of contemporary circus) to indicate the forms of neoclassical creation and their filiation to the Soviet method, particularly in the works of Ernst Albrecht (1995 and 2006).

7. The most studied critical-historical analysis of the Big Apple Circus is by Dominique Jando (2023; 2024) and Paul Binder (2013).

arts: music, dance, pantomime, etc. (Monteaux and Fratellini, 1977; Fratellini, 1989; Jando and Fratellini, 2022). In the same years, another very ancient French family, that of experienced equestrian master Alexis Gruss Jr. (1944-2024), came into contact with the world of theatre, transforming their circus into *Cirque à l’Ancienne*, a term which did not indicate, as is often believed, some vintage style or the setting of the show, but a system of knowledge and performance codes that referred, on the one hand, to the classical grammar of equestrian circus, with the centrality of the ring, and, on the other, to the ancient artistic “troupe” mechanism of theatrical life and creative modes at the origin of the modern Western performing arts (more or less as rooted in *commedia dell’arte*’s organisational and aesthetic practices).⁸ Added to this was the novelty of the theatrical processes of creation: initially limited to an organic aestheticisation of lights, costumes and rhythms of the show, and then gradually in the following years towards “themed” productions. Hence another paradox: the first “contemporary” circus in history was called the “old-fashioned circus”.⁹

This approach, also common to other European and American experiences of the time, was the basis of what was then called “new circus”, generating different variations, such as the aforementioned “contemporary circus” movement.¹⁰

It should be remembered that the creative and dramaturgical methods of theatre were already part of circus between 1820 and 1900, and that this system had been inherited and amplified by Soviet circus.¹¹ But in the Western circus of the 20th century, this approach had almost disappeared in favour of the typical sequence of acts, as in variety or music hall, with the ringmaster marking the rhythms.

The Big Apple Circus in New York therefore took up the Parisian model and with it the theatrical construction of “themed” shows. These, in Paris and New York, are the first examples in the world with which the circus enters the “cultural system”.

The old-fashioned modern in the 1970s: the paradox of *Le Cirque à l’Ancienne*

How did circus, a simple and immediate form, achieve a universally recognised artistic complexity today? How was a genre considered “minor” able to gain cultural status?

8. “C’est le cirque de l’ancien temps, celui qui est imaginé, pratiqué avec le coeur, celui fraternel de la rue, avec sa fraîcheur, sa pureté, sa poésie”, FLÉOUTER, Claude. “Le Cirque réinventé”, 1974.

9. The origins of the project are witnessed in Noël Devaulx (1977) and in the memoirs of Alexis Gruss (written with Joëlle Chabert, 2002). The historical path is reconstructed by Natalie Petiteau (2018).

10. A detailed theorisation of the origins of the “new circus” in the roots of traditional forms is illuminating in the collections of newspaper articles by two very attentive critics of the performing arts: Jacques Richard in France (2018) and Jordi Jané (2013) in Spain.

11. The historical precedents of directorial creation practices applied to the circus are found in the periods 1820-1840 and 1880-1910, which culminated in the experience of the Soviet circus in its golden age (1950-1980) and in some European experiences between 1950 and 1970 (De Ritis, 2002).

Each new form arises from a stratification of experiences, and, in the case of current circus, the starting point is largely in the spirit of so-called “traditional” circus, although this may seem opposed. As in all artistic forms, there is a system of knowledge and practices, a root that allows us to generate increasingly more modern experiences.

It is a kind of paradox: we tend to think that certain innovative circus experiences are the opposite of tradition when they are often actually a product of it. This is not without recalling Eric Hobsbawm’s seminal theories of “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

Traditionally, circus has been mostly extraneous to the normal artistic circuit. The circus arrived in a city, took a public square, or paid for a free space, put up posters, and waited for the public to arrive. Just as happened in the 16th century, with the *commedia dell’arte*. However, over time the other arts have developed a system of circuits and theatrical venues. Even circus, in truth, from the mid-19th century to the first decades of the 20th century, was part of this system: but only in urban societies equipped with permanent circuses or multi-purpose theatrical spaces. The 20th-century form bearing the characteristics of the traditional travelling circus, under the big top, was instead born functionally to rural and suburban cultures, devoid of places and opportunities for culture. Until it became, in parallel with the extinction of the permanent urban circus, the dominant circus form throughout the 20th century.

Therefore, while the cultural system was one made of subscribers, of knowledgeable audiences and artistic seasons, with critical apparatus and media attention, circus remained an anarchic system, marginal in its own way. This is also a reason why it fascinated large masses of the public, as a paradigm of freedom and mystery, indeed remaining the most attended performing art form ever, with enormous flows of spectators.

So how does circus enter this “cultural system”? In those early 1970s when street theatre and related transgressions were also born, seeing the small Gruss tent being set up in the courtyard of a museum was a stimulating cultural provocation. But what was the artistic idea? The Gruss circus was a family of about ten people, who with some surprise accepted the invitation of the theatre world (thanks to Sylvia Monfort’s proposal).¹² The Gruss’s artistic awareness was limited to the ordinariness of routine acts: from juggling to equestrian acrobatics, from the clown playing the trumpet to the fake cowboy with whips. But Sylvia Monfort, as an experienced theatre director, made them discover the intrinsic richness of this simple heritage, and the immersive potential of a venue like the small tent. It was a charge of atmosphere and emotion in years when both circus and theatre were being more and more predictable. And so critics in France discovered the “modern” circus show because it was done by an “old-fashioned” family; the audience success rewarded it; international theatres and festivals

12. Sylvia Monfort (1924-1991) was one of the emblematic figures of the French theatre of the second half of the 20th century, prominent actress of Jean Vilar’s TNP, and later influential theatre director. In 1972, in the Marais district of Paris, she gave life to a multidisciplinary cultural project, in which she attracted the Gruss family, generating the first cultural and institutional impulse in the West towards the circus world.

invited them abroad. After a few years, the Ministry of Culture coined the title “Cirque National” to institutionalise the Gruss company and its productions.

Today, from around the 2010s, some companies of the “contemporary circus” circuit have opted for a big top (such as in Spain, with pioneering Circ Cric, and later mostly in France or Italy): when the show is immediate and sincere enough, the potential is similar to what happened in the Gruss decades before. The audience becomes attached to other human beings: those same people who go on stage and become characters. Perhaps this was the intuition of a new/ancient way of doing circus, in Paris and in New York. The rediscovery of humanity by distancing itself from the “colossal” spectacle could equally generate experiences of “great” entertainment as well as “high” culture.

Recreating a past that never existed: the “traumzirkus” poetics of Circus Roncalli

In France, Italy or Spain there were many circuses and many families with the same potential as the Gruss family. They had created circuses that were almost always successful for decades, although that secret of “artistic awareness” was missing. Also missing were similar external personalities of the art milieu such as Monfort and Étaix, with a passion for circus and capable of bringing out the essence of existing circus families, coaching them to remain an art of its time. In Italy, the great masters Vittorio Gassmann, Giorgio Strehler, Federico Fellini, Dario Fo and Franco Zeffirelli knew and frequented Italian circus performers. However, the only exchange was to nourish their respective forms of cinema, theatre, opera, or to use their big tops. The Gruss family, on the other hand, had learned from the world of theatre to simply be themselves; by giving up fictional names after years, they had highlighted the strength of a small family that did everything without the need to hire external artists or dancers or to use the ringmaster as the only constructive element. And they created from all of this a form of dramaturgy that was not necessarily narrative. Being yourself is the only way to start going somewhere: if you are yourself, you will emerge with something unique that no one else can do.

In 1976, in Austria and Germany, an experience emerged in parallel to those described, but of a different nature. A young designer from Austria, Bernhard Paul, in love with circus since childhood, started to conceive a travelling circus, basically inspired by the golden age of interwar German circus, based on a real profound knowledge of circus history and imagery beyond predictable clichés, and filtered by childhood memories, dreams and idealised images. Paul met the popular Austrian avant-garde poet and chansonnier Andre Heller, influenced by the world of Fellini and the surrealist movements. They created “Circus Roncalli – The Greatest Poetry in the Universe”, premiering in Bonn. It was aimed at an adult audience as an immersive experience, much closer to an avant-garde poetry happening than a predictable circus show, while keeping the classic big top, sawdust

ring, wild animals, and acrobats.¹³ These were the years when the German stage was finding consistent post-dramaturgic alternatives in theatrical sub-cultures: expressive physicality (as in the spread of *tanztheater*), pop culture (the theatre of Peter Zadek), and the foreign import of circus-inspired pop theatre forms with traits of derision or psychedelia (Jango Edwards, *Le Grand Magic Circus*). After a difficult start and a break of a few years, Paul carried on the project by himself, making it a real travelling circus.¹⁴ He restored antique carriages, working with an orchestra on a global soundtrack, inventing unusual costumes. He booked classic artists, transforming their acts into fantasy creations.

Circus Roncalli added something that their circus contemporaries did not have, namely “poetic support”, a circus built like a mirage, through its transfigurations in the collective and artistic imagination.¹⁵ It found its niche pioneering the subgenre of “traumzirkus” (dreamed circus). Can a circus performer play himself as a character? Being an imaginary figure doing real things? This was a part of Roncalli’s challenge. With the added “obsession” with the decorative aspects that did not exist in any of other circuses in the world, in a kind of aesthetic meditation on the past that other circuses did not value.

Unlike the aforementioned examples such as Fratellini, Big Apple or Gruss, Roncalli’s prerogative was to also renew another form of circus spectacularity: decorative pomp. Where for the other pioneers there was a theatrical force of subtraction of the superfluous, Roncalli still maintains the energy of intimacy but enriches it by emphasising, with art and taste, the decorative culture stratified by the history of circus, thus restoring a reference aesthetic that the circus world was losing.

Another form of upheaval brought about by Circus Roncalli was the influence of street theatre. The arrival under the tent was preceded by a real party in honour of the audience, including the throwing of confetti or applying dots of lipstick to audience members’ nose tips: a rite of initiation into the realm of fantasy, for an all-encompassing experience beyond simply watching a show.

Roncalli underlines the experiential recovery of circus as a spectacle for the five senses: in addition to sight and hearing, smell (from the fresh sawdust on the ring to the sweat of the horses, from the scent of popcorn to that of caramelised apples), and taste, with the reconstruction of the stands of delicacies typical of the vanished fairground world.

13. “It was time to create a circus that corresponded to a wide horizon of experiences: a spectacle, combining facets of all disciplines translated into performance: humor and amazement, romance and horror, depth and effect, heartbeat and wit. Heller could like a song by the Indian singer Yma Sumac as a trio from “Rosenkavalier”, a poem by Mayakovsky, the movements of an Indian *katakali* dancer or the tap dancing of Fred Astaire, Le Corbusier’s pilgrimage church in Ronchamp or clay palaces in Mali, Brancusi’s sculptures as the figures from the Pacher Altar in St. Wolfgang, Fellini’s films or the wind of an artful fart. He had a pretty sure sense of qualities of different origins” (Seiler, 2012).

14. The first historical phases of Circus Roncalli are described by various authors (Köhler and Labonte [eds.], 1997).

15. “I took the pre-war glorious circus and started from where it abruptly had stopped (...). I didn’t want to be part of the zeitgeist but to become it (...). I saw my circus as a transfiguration of my childhood (...) but also inspired by the vision of Federico Fellini, in a sort of holistic circus performance” (Paul, 2022).

These different experiences of “old-fashioned” recovery to generate a “new” circus reached the peak of success in the first half of the 1980s, when their influence paved the way for the decisive step in the innovation of the popular art circus.

Here comes the Sun

What we know today as Cirque Du Soleil was born in Quebec in around 1983, from a participatory experience that combined celebration, urban theatre, circus practices and lots of music, but without real connection to any type of circus culture.¹⁶ The founders were soon fascinated by the two European circus experiences of Roncalli and Gruss: in the first case, through the ability to create an immersive circus experience and, in the second, the strength of a show based on a company spirit and with a subtly narrative pretext; and in both cases, with a consequent aesthetic unification, without necessarily telling a complete story or giving up the classic acts. Of the two models, the strength of a fundamental constructive element is also understood: live music. The 1985 show of the Circus Alexis Gruss in Paris, titled “Paris-Pekin”, was conceived as a journey, characterised by a common thread of fairy-tale characters to guide the spectator through the various acts, and uniting, for the first time in the world, Chinese and Western circus cultures. The creators of Cirque du Soleil found the trigger, the key, for their first sophisticated shows by 1986.

The early years of Cirque du Soleil unfolded in parallel with a curiosity to explore the circus cultures of the world. Those Canadian pioneers discovered the rigour and minimalism of the Chinese school, the mechanisms of creation of Russia and Eastern Europe, the classic essentiality of the Swiss national circus Knie and its extraordinary logistical ability in assembling and moving what Soleil sees as a fixed point: the big top. They therefore create a synthesis of all this, adding the North American entertainment culture: the sound and lighting technology, the musical and sartorial production, the choreographic perfection, the cinematic approach to live show editing, the production and marketing support, and the smooth addition, to the circus artists, of other performative genres and performers. In short, for the first time in the world, a circus was born with a perfectly competitive approach compared to the standards of the entertainment industry, and with one foot in the “cultural” sector.

Cirque du Soleil managed to carve out an extraordinary market niche: between the popular circus audience, the fans of musicals, the crowd of sophisticated theatre, and the world of live entertainment. And it demonstrated that in a popular model it is possible to overcome the visual reference of the circus by creating other aesthetic universes but without giving up the classic canons and codes of an artistic genre.

16. From the dense bibliography on Cirque du Soleil, the genesis analysed in Tony Babinski and Kristian Manchester (2004) is exhaustive. Among the most valid subsequent studies on aesthetic contents we find Katie Lavers (2014), Katie Lavers and Louis Patrick Leroux (2018), and various chapters of Leroux and Batson (2016).

The Spanish-Italian way

It is possible today to identify a common thread in what was happening in the 1980s, with experiences that were so different in various parts of Europe and America: a generation of the performing arts had approached circus, had understood its classical codes and made them an art of its own time. They worked for an audience that had stopped going to the circus. In some cases those "new circuses" stuck with references (with art and experimentation) to the visual (or sound, even olfactory) mythology of circus, in others they surpassed it completely.

But the key revolution was in the fact that the idea of circus, with a big top, a round ring, live music, its acts of clowns, acrobats, and the eventual equestrian art, could be a theatrical art and at the same time an entertainment form of its time. It could once again interest the press, social elites, public powers and sponsors, as much as a dance foundation: but at the same time it could interest the great masses as much as a pop music tour.

In the same years, the great traditional European and American circuses had not yet grasped the extent of this phenomenon. If in the 1980s Gruss and Roncalli were viewed with curiosity by the circus industry, even admired, Cirque du Soleil was still hardly known. In their own way, most traditional circuses had from time to time approached forms of choreographic or thematic production to package their shows, but rather following the legacy of theatrical "revue" or synthetic forms of operetta. They had therefore developed forms of creation more toward spectacular themed pageants or ballet interludes: the pioneering influence came mostly from Spanish impresario and designer Arturo Castilla (1916-1996). By 1963 he started to import in Italy his concept "Circo Americano", in association with members of Italian circus dynasty Togni (De Ritis, 2018); this quickly inspired the Italian circuses of the 1970s. In an even more sophisticated way the circus of the Orfei brothers Liana, Nando and Rinaldo brought together some of the greatest design and staging talents of cinema and television,¹⁷ while Moira Orfei conceived an ice circus version with the contribution of international creatives from music-hall and revue.¹⁸

In an Italy where both the proletarian and middle class had an educated access to culture (thanks to television or workers' circles), these shows were like unfolding live movies, and the emphasis was above all on opulence: the model came from the United States and was that of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, the worldwide dominant company in the circus industry in the 1970s and 1980s (for which the Cirque du Soleil was slowly building an alternative model until reversing its leading role towards the 1990s).¹⁹

17. See also Liana Orfei (2021).

18. For a chronicle of this artistic period, see Roberto Pandini's series "La grande stagione del circo italiano". *Circo*, nos. 3 (pp. 16-21), 4 (pp. 18-23), 5 (pp. 18-23), XIX (1987) and Roberto Pandini "Circhi italiani tipo esportazione". *Circo*, no. 6 (pp. 18-23), XIX (1987).

19. See Albrecht, 2014.

In Italy, a young director, Antonio Giarola, had attempted in 1984 to create a “poetic” circus encouraged by the experiences of Gruss and Roncalli, entitled Clown’s Circus.²⁰ Despite the short but recognised duration, the experience opened up a question within the Italian circus tradition. The consensus of the audience and the press questioned the possibility of models parallel to those consolidated in the peninsula. It should not be forgotten that in 1981 the Venice Biennale had invited the big top of the Gruss show to the lagoon city, complete with horses and elephants, with enormous attention from theatre critics.

The only circus performer in Italy to attempt a change towards the new neoclassical influences was Livio Togni in the early 1990s, with his own circus Darix Togni. Over the years, his show slowly, almost unconsciously, shifted from the Italian circus-revue format to a sophisticated immersive model that would become a global reference, “capable of reconciling with circus an audience disappointed by other experiences with the circus” (Richard, 1989). Togni captured the decline of a certain type of large Italian circus to revisit the models of Gruss and Roncalli with style: in the light of a Fellini-like sincerity of a single-family circus, of an intimate troupe, but amplified by sophistication of the decorative apparatus; and by a new poetic emphasis on the major presence of exotic animals. The spontaneous development, which since 1990 has taken the name of Florilegio,²¹ was successful in numerous countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. Unlike the various art circus reference models, in the Florilegio the creation process took place not with structured planning but by osmosis, by superimposition of suggestions, people, roles, and occasions, so much so that it could even vary from one evening to the next. The curious strength of the project was in a peculiar creative mentality: grasping an environmental inspiration before the content itself. The manufacturing of the environment (tents, caravans, accessories), according to a given decorative idea, generated the performative content. It was a circus of energy entertainment, a process based on five generations of crafting an art; in a sense, opposed to the notion of scenic writing, yet extremely theatrical in the tension between spontaneity and artifice.

The Togni family, with Il Florilegio, had simply expressed the need to diversify their circus from similar models. Therefore, perhaps for the first time, a circus family achieved an aesthetic and ironic detachment from its stereotypes. Even without a methodical creative project, Il Florilegio became a continuous play on all the clichés linked to circus, both positive and negative (the word *florilegio*, for those who cannot pronounce it, becomes in Italian *fuorilegge*/outlaw in some cases), enhancing the mystery and paradox of circus life.

20. The phenomenon is studied in Jamila Attou (2021).

21. *Florilegio* is an Italian word meaning “a chosen anthology”, from the medieval Latin *florilegium*.

Towards the new millennium: codifying a “traditional circus”

In the period between the 1990s and 2000s, the mass circus had seen the maturation of new and current reference models, while the more niche “contemporary” circus began to develop others, still not yet easily codified.²² In both cases, it was complex for family-based circuses to decode, and possibly follow, these transformations. It is in this tension, in recent years, that the paradoxical definition of “traditional circus” was born. It seems a reaction to mark opposing identity needs: on the one hand, understood as defensive towards what emerges from the outside; on the other, as a distancing to mark one’s nature from what precedes a current experience.²³

The popular forms of circus thrived in an enormous limbo for which every category remains insidious.

The surviving force of the circus, and probably that of other forms of entertainment as well, lies in the change as continuous energy.²⁴ In the field of circus, a secular and biodegradable art, innovation works more with the progressive transformation of models than with creation *ab nihilo*. We have seen above how the strength of a dominant model like Cirque du Soleil comes from a reflection on the roots. The usual categorisation of Cirque du Soleil as an emblem of “contemporary circus” should be rethought in a counterintuitive way, finding much greater points of belonging to a tentative category of “classic circus”.²⁵

Major artistic transformations occur in conjunction with strong social tensions, leading to increasingly shared forms of knowledge and culture. As an example, in the second half of the 20th century, circus had at least two decisive factors of transformation. The first, after 1968, the mentioned democratisation of circus practices outside the art families (a phenomenon at the roots of the models described here); the second, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the contamination with the creative methodologies and acrobatic techniques codified in the Soviet countries: here circus art had been scientifically developed in a vision of public heritage on initiative of political power and State support.²⁶

Circling the ring: contemporary tradition and traditional contemporaneity. Les Folies Gruss and other cases

Around 2020, popular forms of circus seemed to be wavering, almost disintegrating, for apparently different reasons. On the one hand, the cultural class chose the trend of “contemporary circus” as a circus model:²⁷ an

22. An early international scientific synthesis regarding the cultural plurality of the circus arts is expressed in the proceedings of the conference “Il Circo e la Scena” (Serena and Cristoforetti, 2001).

23. See also Barré (2002) and Rosenberg (2004).

24. Important recent attempts at a historical-critical arrangement of circus studies on a global scale are the anthologies edited by Arrighi and Davis (2021) and Tait and Lavers (2016).

25. The reflections of the famous volume by Salvatore Settis (2004) are applicable here.

26. For further information on these aspects, see De Ritis (2007).

27. For an anthological study on the internationality of the phenomenon, see Laver, Leroux and Burt (2020).

ideal performative subgenre in theatrical circuits and public support, thus no longer linked to classical codes, repertoires and spaces. On the other, several “traditional” big tops survive worldwide, but, paradoxically, are themselves too distant from classic codes: the almost total extinction of equestrian arts, the weakening of clown art, the superficial contamination of television models, the focus on children, the use of animals that is often only secondary (although increasingly rare), and the overall staging or concept of the show as rudimentary. Although all this is now far removed from the founding characteristics, circus operators claim the form as “traditional circus”, where it instead reflects elements of mere custom.²⁸ Conversely, the identity characteristics of “contemporary circus”, stratified over two decades, can today reflect a legitimate form of circus tradition.

The founding experiences, described above, underwent various transformations. The dominant company of the 20th century, Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus, although always capable of transformation in its history, closed in 2017 after a 146-year run, more than symbolically decreeing the historical end worldwide of the circus’ leadership as a dominant mass spectacle (Standiford, 2021; Hammastrom, 2007 and 2011). It reopened in 2024 as “Ringling!” rebranded as a Gen-Z targeted arena spectacle, without the word circus and avoiding some otherwise basic key elements: animals, classic clown, and the visual imagery expected from the form.²⁹ Cirque du Soleil imploded, with risky business moves weighed down by the pandemic, but managing to recover in 2022.³⁰ The Big Apple Circus, as a non-profit foundation, declared bankruptcy in 2016 and then attempted episodic revivals in the following years under various private companies. Florilegio Togni, in the hands of the fifth family generation, is going through an artistic and corporate mutation, achieving success in the Middle East and Africa. The Roncalli Circus, never beyond its thriving Austro-German cultural market, capitalises on the removal of animals in the media, partially transforming its target.

The mutation of the Alexis Gruss Circus is interesting; in some ways, it is the founding experience of a “popular art circus”. In 2024 it seems the only circus in the world that manages to preserve all the classic founding elements (equestrian arts, family knowledge, spirit of the “troupe”, round space and sawdust) in combination with the arts of the stage (creative process, live music, technology, production design, and aesthetic conceptualisation) and a sophisticated marketing department. Although it is perhaps the only circus in the world to base an entire show on four generations appearing in the ring at the same time, varying the show every year, a paradox of its transformation was the renunciation of the word circus in favour of the label Les Folies Gruss. With an activity of 50 different yearly show creations (equal to no other circus reality) and the revisitation of hundreds of classic techniques,

28. See the theories of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

29. “Audiences are encountering a human-focused spectacle with a Gen Z tilt that might leave it unrecognizable (...). Over the course of two hours, 75 performers run through 50 acts while the music, action or lighting shift every 3,5 seconds to hold the attention of audiences used to the quick cuts of social video. The center stage is a rotating turntable equipped with screens designed to magnify performance details” (Abrams, 2024).

30. This phase is documented by Daniel Lamarre (2022).

the Gruss company can be considered both the oldest and the most modern among those in existence.³¹

In the meantime, circus families expanded the classic codes: prestigious Circus Knie, Swiss National Circus, after its 100th edition in 2019, turned toward a blend of family equestrian art, pop music, concert-style effects and cabaret comedy; Germany's legendary Circus Krone, founded in 1905, in 2019 turned to the creative team of avant-garde choreographer Bence Vagi, while keeping lion acts and exotic animals. Other circus industry players have amplified the boundaries of the classical artistic system with slight hybridations: the Spanish company Productores de Sonrisas, with the brands Circo de los Horrores and Circlassica; the adrenaline-driven, post-industrial aesthetic shows of German company Flic-Flac; the French way of Cirque Phenix and its highly spectacularised mass shows about circus "world cultures"; all those shows faithful to the tent or to the modulations of a ring/floor. Other forms of a creative mass circus have also been successful in the stage format: the international Circus 1909 tour project; the Canadian collectives Cirque Eloize and 7 Doigts de la Main, which, although linked to the theatre circuit, have somehow distanced themselves from the subsidised contemporary scene, entering the commercial and popular circuits. Not to mention the genre of "resident shows", with a global leadership of the Franco Dragone Entertainment group in the first two decades of this century (mostly in the Middle and Far East), completely revising the spatial and environmental notion of circus building, in an extreme connection between human performance and technology.

Interesting evolutions on the model of classic mass circus are happening in China and Russia, where a rich generation of talented directors and creative teams are developing elaborate productions using the basic codes towards new identities.

Conclusions

The actual transformation processes of circus arts have been barely anticipated by COVID-19 and its repercussions on live entertainment. Today, the "contemporary" circus research scene is very rich but middle class oriented, far from a popular audience; the "traditional" circuses under the big top are thriving, although their identity has gradually been remodelled. In particular, the gradual disappearance of animals and the anachronistic nature of the clown element question the essence of such a "tradition" (Bouissac, 2021).

There is a major void in the field of popular "art" circus: one in which innovative models of creation were based on the classic codes of the circus; the one formed between the 1970s and 1990s when an unpretentious naive cultural generation met with enlightened circus performers in a golden age, and managed to make circus the art and industry of its time.



31. On the cultural mutation of the Alexis Gruss company, see the trilogy of conference proceedings edited by Natalie Petiteau (2017; 2018 and 2019) for the University of Avignon.

Bibliographical references

- ABRAMS, Jonathan. “A New-Look Circus Sends in the Clowns, but Loses the Face Paint”. *The New York Times* (2 March 2024).
- ALBRECHT, Ernest. *From Barnum @ Bailey to Feld: The Creative Evolution of the Greatest Show on Earth*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014.
- ALBRECHT, Ernst. *New American Circus*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995.
- ALBRECHT, Ernst. *The Contemporary Circus: Art of the Spectacular*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006.
- ARRIGHI, Gillian; DAVIS, Jim (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- ATTOU, Jamila. *Clown’s Circus: storia, memorie e arte – Il circo, una festa: un nuovo modello drammaturgico*. Verona: Equilibrando, 2021.
- BABINSKI, Tony; MANCHESTER, Kristian. *Cirque Du Soleil: 20 Years Under the Sun - An Authorized History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004.
- BARRÉ-MEINZER, Sylvestre. “Le cirque classique, entre tradition et récupération”. *L’Annuaire Théâtral*, no. 32 (autumn 2002), pp. 93-106.
- BARRÉ-MEINZER, Sylvestre. *Le cirque classique, un spectacle actuel*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004.
- BINDER, Paul. *Never Quote the Weather to a Sea Lion*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013.
- BOUISSAC, Paul. *The End of the Circus: Evolutionary Semiotics and Cultural Resilience*. London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2021.
- DE RITIS, Raffaele; SERENA, Alessandro. *Dizionario dello Spettacolo del Ventesimo Secolo*. Milan: Baldini + Castoldi, 1998.
- DE RITIS, Raffaele. “Aux origines de la mise en piste, 1935-1975”. In: WALLON, Emanuel (ed.). *Le Cirque au risque de l’art*. Paris: Actes-Sud, 2002.
- DE RITIS, Raffaele. “Le Circo Americano et sa genèse. Pour une mythologie européenne du cirque 1946-1976”. *Le Cirque dans l’Univers*, no. 270 (September 2018), pp. 28-32.
- DE RITIS, Raffaele. *Storia del Circo*. Rome: Bulzoni, 2007.
- DEVAULX, Noël. *Le Cirque à l’ancienne*. Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1977.
- FLÉOUTER, Claude. “Le Cirque réinventé”. *Le Monde* (31 January 1974).
- FRATELLINI, Annie. *Destin de Clown*. Lyon: La Manufacture, 1989.
- GRUSS, Alexis; CHABERT, Joëlle. *Rêver les yeux ouverts*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002.
- GUY, Jean-Michel. “Circus does not exist”. In: TRAPP, Franziska (ed.). *360° Circus. Meaning. Practice. Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023.
- GUY, Jean-Michel (ed.). *Avant-garde, Cirque ! Les arts de la piste en revolution*. Paris: Autrement, 2001.
- HAMMARSTROM, David Lewis. *Inside the Changing Circus: A Critic’s Guide*. Albany: BearManor Media, 2011.
- HAMMASTROM, David Lewis. *Fall of the Big Top: The Vanishing American Circus*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2007.

- HELLER, André; PAUL, Bernhard. Opening lines of the show "Circus Roncalli", 1976. Cit. in Seiler, Christian. *André Heller: Feuerkopf. Die Biografie*. Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2012.
- HIVERNAT, Pierre; KLEIN, Véronique. *Panorama Contemporain des Arts du Cirque*. Paris: Textuel, 2010.
- HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence (eds.). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- JANDO, Dominique; FRATELLINI, Annie. *Singer, Actress, Clown, Circus Director, Circus Teacher*. <http://www.circopedia.org/Annie_Fratellini> (Accessed: 20 February 2022).
- JANDO, Dominique. *Big Apple Circus - New York's one-ring wonder*. <http://www.circopedia.org/Big_Apple_Circus> (Accessed: 20 February 2024)
- JANDO, Dominique. *Big Apple Circus: 25 Years*. New York: Big Apple Circus: Odyssey Guides, 2003.
- JANÉ, Jordi. *152 volts de pista: 1999-2012*, 2 vol. Tarragona: Arola Editors, 2013.
- KÖHLER, Werner; LABONTE, Edmund. *Circus Roncalli - Geschichte einer Legende*. Hamburg: Hoffmann-Campe, 1997.
- LAMARRE, Daniel. *Balancing Acts: Unleashing the Power of Creativity in Your Life and Work*. New York: Harper/Collins, 2022.
- LAVERS, Katie. "Cirque du Soleil and Its Roots in Illegitimate Circus". *M/C Journal*, 17(5), 2014.
- LAVERS, Katie; LEROUX, Louis Patrick. "The multiple narratives of Cirque Du Soleil". In: SELLERS-YOUNG, Barbara; MCCUTCHEON, Jade Rosina. *Narrative in Performance*. New York: Red Globe Press, 2018, pp. 111-131.
- LAVERS, Katie; LEROUX, Louis Patrick; BURTT, Jon. *Contemporary Circus*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- LEROUX, Louis Patrick; BATSON, Charles R. (eds.). *Cirque Global - Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries*. Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016.
- MALEVAL, Martine. *L'émergence du Nouveau Cirque : 1968-1998*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010.
- MAUCLAIR, Dominique. "Le Cirque Nouveau est arrivé". *Le Cirque dans L'Univers*, no. 128 (1st quarter 1983).
- MÉTAIS-Chastanier, Barbara. "Écriture(s) du cirque : une dramaturgie ?". In: *Agôn - Dramaturgie des arts de la scène*, HS 2. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014.
- MONTEAUX, Jean; FRATELLINI, Annie. *Un cirque pour l'avenir*. Paris: Le Centurion, 1977.
- MOQUET, Diane; SAROH, Karine; THOMAS, Cyril. *Contours et détours des dramaturgies circassiennes*. Châlons-en-Champagne: CNAC, 2020.
- ORFEI, Liana. *Romanzo di vita vera. La regina del circo*. Milan: Baldini + Castoldi, 2021.
- PANDINI, Roberto. "La grande stagione del circo italiano". *Circo*, nos. 3, 4, 5 and XIX (1987).
- PANDINI, Roberto. "Circhi italiani tipo esportazione". *Circo*, nos. 6 and XIX (1987).
- PAUL, Bernhard. "Meine Reise zum Regenbogen. Die Autobiographie des Roncalli-Gründers". Vienna/Munich: Brandstätter Verlag, 2022.
- PETITEAU, Natalie. «Introduction». In: GRUSS, Stephan and GRUSS, Firmin. *Ex Ducere*. Avignon: Éditions Universitaires d'Avignon, 2017.

- PETITEAU, Natalie. «Introduction». In: GRUSS, Stephan and GRUSS, Firmin. *Se Ducere*. Avignon: Éditions Universitaires d'Avignon, 2018.
- PETITEAU, Natalie. «Introduction». In: GRUSS, Stephan and GRUSS, Alexis. *Ex nihilo*. Avignon: Éditions Universitaires d'Avignon, 2019.
- PETITEAU, Natalie. *Les bâtisseurs de l'éphémère. Histoire de la Compagnie Alexis Gruss, dès ses origines à nos jours*. Nîmes: Print Team, 2018.
- PHILIPPE-MEDEN, Pierre. "Vous avez dit dramaturgie circassienne?". *La Pensée d'Ailleurs*, no. 2 (2020).
- RANGER, Terence; HOBBSAWM, Eric J. *The Invention of Tradition*. Turin: Einaudi, 2002.
- RICHARD, Jacques. "Darix Togni, fantaisie italienne". *Le Figaro* (10 May 1989).
- RICHARD, Jacques. *Trente ans de cirque en France (1968-1997): Chroniques de Jacques Richard journaliste*. Edited by François Amy de la Bretèque and Philippe Goudard. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018.
- ROSENBERG, Julien. *Arts du cirque. Esthétiques et évaluation*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.
- SEILER, Christian. *André Heller: Feuerkopf. Die Biografie*. Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2012.
- SERENA, Alessandro; CRISTOFORETTI, Gigi (eds.). *Il Circo e la Scena*. La Biennale di Venezia: Marsilio, 2001.
- SETTIS, Salvatore. *Futuro del Classico*. Turin: Einaudi, 2004.
- STANDIFORD, Les. *Battle for the Big Top: PT Barnum, James Bailey, John Ringling, and the Death-Defying Saga of the American Circus*. New York: Public Affairs, 2021.
- TAIT, Peta; LAVERS, Katie (eds.). *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- TRAPP, Franziska. "Reading circus: dramaturgy on the border of art and academia". In: TRAPP, Franziska (ed.). *360° Circus. Meaning. Practice. Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023.