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**Organizing the Circus:  
The Engineering of Miracles**

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## **Organizing the Circus: The Engineering of Miracles**

### **Abstract**

This paper defines the circus as an institutionalised questioning of forms of stability and classification, and then enquires as to how such effects are produced. I begin with the cultural representations of the circus, and then move through sections on community, movement and economic organization. This order is intended to illustrate that the production of mystery is a complex affair, and that cultural and economic descriptions of this particular form of organization are necessarily entangled. Focussing on one at the expense of the other leads to either a culturalism which lacks an understanding of production, or a business model which is incapable of understanding miracles.

### **Keywords**

Circus, fair, festival, carnival, mobility, cultural economy.

## The Pitch

‘Once every hour, ladies and gentlemen, Hubert’s museum proudly presents none other than Professor Heckler’s trained flea circus. In this enclosure you’re going to see dozens of real, live trained performing fleas. Fleas that juggle, jump through hoops, play football, tiny little fleas hitched to a chariot, they actually run a race. But the predominating feature of the entire show is little fleas dressed in costume dancing to the strains of music. It is without doubt the most fascinating sight you will ever see. Now, the Professor is on the inside, ready and waiting to give the performance. There will be no show out on these stages until it is all over. If you would like to go, there is a small admission. We do not apologize, it is only nine cents. Fleas that juggle, jump through hoops...’

Bobby Reynolds, whilst pitching at Hubert’s Museum in New York City in the 1940s, in Hartzman 2005: 207

A few years ago, I was driving from Stoke to Leicester in the English Midlands, on the long flat ribbon that slumps south of Derby, when I started to pass a fair in transit<sup>1</sup>. First a big truck, with a trailer carrying some kind of collapsible ride. A car and oversized caravan, a brightly painted truck, then another, and another. I passed about thirty vehicles, spread along ten or fifteen miles, most emblazoned with the name of the owner of the fair. An organization then, on the move, following the money.

Many organizations aren’t very mobile. Universities, for example, tend to be solid things that grow themselves into the ground with ivy and, leaving the virtual aside, are clearly located in one or two places. Other organizations might be multiple, but still sedentary, such as banks, shops, factories and so on. And then there are some organizations that can move. They fold themselves away, and roll away, later to unfold somewhere else. Some of the simpler ones don’t unfold much, like mobile libraries and ice cream vans, others decant themselves and their bags into new spaces, like hairdressers or plumbers who visit you in your home. More complex nomadic organizations often require a ready-made site that they can hook up to, such as a travelling production arriving at a theatre, or a sports team at a stadium. These latter examples remind us that organizations are often necessarily entangled with other organizations. So when the Formula 1 grand prix arrives in town, the organization that runs the race-track becomes merged with the organizations that run the cars, and the one that own the franchise. (As well as a host of other organizations that pitch up and sell hot dogs, run the security, send the pictures, organize the hospitality and so on.)

The odd thing about circuses is that they are, by and large, complex organizations, but that they appear to require only permission, space and an audience<sup>2</sup>. Everything else they bring – the ticket booth, the generator, the tent, the candy floss, the performers. There are over 1000 circuses worldwide, with Italy and Germany having particular concentrations, and India having some of the largest (Stoddart 2000: 43; Cottle 2006: 119). According to the Association of Circus Proprietors, in 2008 there were about thirty circuses touring the UK. Not everything will necessarily be carried by the circus – the mobile toilets might be sourced locally for example – but everything has to be moved. Afterwards, all they leave is flattened grass and tyre tracks, and bag mountains of litter to be taken to the local dump. As the US saying goes ‘nothing left

but wagon tracks and popcorn sacks' (Ogden 1993: 338). This spatial mobility is structurally and materially unusual then, but what makes it even odder is that it seems to be aimed at making all sorts of categories become mobile too. Circuses are places where bodies do extraordinary things, and extraordinary things are done to bodies. The voice, whether talking or singing, takes second place to more visceral forms of sensation and expression – the scream, the roar, provoked by the sight of something awe-ful or amazing. Humans do things that only animals can do – balance, fly, carry heavy weights - human bodies are subjected to inhuman treatment, and animals show human intelligence. Food is excessively large or sweet, noises are loud and painful, smells are intense, colours are bright, and insincerity and violence are masked by a red nose.

In this paper I am interested in the circus as both an excessive organization, and a mobile one, and I want to understand something about the relation between these two features. I will explore the ways in which the circus is a powerful cultural representation of a form of otherness, of an irreducible strangeness, but also that it is also a business that makes money by moving people and things around. The arrangement of the paper is intended to show how magic and miracles are produced through economic and institutional mechanisms – that disorganization requires organization and *vice versa* (Cooper 1990). I will begin with the magic, and then pull the curtain aside to see the machine that systematically produces disorder. This paper certainly isn't a detailed history, or an ethnography, or a systematic literature review, but a speculative exploration of one of the many places where culture and economy coincide, and where a particular organizational form is produced. Though most of the paper is concerned with the circus, I will also necessarily mention fairs, carnivals and freak shows. At different times, and in different places, the four forms have been related, and it is difficult to make a clear distinction between them. Finally, most of my examples are from the US and UK, which reflects my pitch and my ignorance. There are plenty of circuses in other parts of the world, and I do mention them occasionally, but they are not under the spotlight here.

## **Representing the Circus**

‘The circus is a jealous wench. Indeed, that is an understatement. She is a ravaging hag who sucks your vitality as a vampire drinks blood – who kills the brightest stars in her crown and who will allow no private life to those who serve her; wrecking their homes, ruining their bodies, and destroying the happiness of their loved ones by her insatiable demands. She is all of these things, and yet, I love her as I love nothing else on earth.’ (Henry Ringling North, in Feiler 1995: 9)

Whatever we say about the circus as an organization, about its economics or its anthropology, it is hard not to notice its strangeness. A social scientific description of the circus might somehow miss the myth, would fail to catch the very weirdness that it welcomes. Consider, for example, Rudy Horn, who would balance six cups of tea on his head whilst riding an unicycle, flick the sugar cubes in with his foot, and then finally flick the spoon into the top cup (Cottle 2006:8). In a Mexican circus, Hickman reports seeing four boxing chimps looking like old men, but with babies' nappies underneath their boxing shorts (2001: 36). In 1792 there are mentions of an act involving someone riding around in a wig made from bees (Stoddart 2000; 90), whilst

in 1972 Freddy Knie Jnr presented a tiger riding on a rhinoceros. Or Schmarlowski the animal trainer, who dresses a woman in a fur coat that suddenly dissolves into dozens of live polecats with a fox playing the part of a collar (Stevens 2004: 9, 22). This is the stuff of dreams, of surreal juxtapositions and motivations hidden by greasepaint.

What makes it even stranger is that this is also a work organization which became a standard setting for wholesome ideas about childhood too. Rather like cowboys and pirates for boys, and horse riding schools and ballet companies for girls, the circus was a place for stories (and toys, comics and lunchboxes) which were exciting but moral too. In children's fiction and television, such as Enid Blyton's English circus books, or the US TV show *Circus Boy*, baby elephants go missing, tents are threatened by storms, and children ensure that the show goes on. Here, the circus was a community, in which clowns can be kindly uncles and lion tamers have mysterious pasts. More widely, the circus provided a comprehensible backdrop for characters, plots and songs that were simultaneously exotic and homely. TV shows such as *Circus of the Stars*, films and plays such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Barnum* and *Dumbo* could be realised in an immediately recognisable way and provide plenty of opportunities for someone brave and pure of heart to save the day.

This rather sanitized version of the circus was certainly encouraged by circus owners from the late nineteenth century onwards. Partly to counter the various moral and gender panics that accompanied the organization in its wanderings, the marketing often stressed the intensity of the physical discipline required, as well as the family nature of the circus as an entertainment (Davis 2002: 35). Yet despite the successful construction of the sawdust and sequins, its more troubling side never went away. Many work organizations have been represented in rather 'gothic' styles at various times (Parker 2005) and, for at least the last 150 years, the circus has just as often been depicted as a dangerous, excessive and secretive place. In Dickens' *Hard Times* of 1854, it is counter-posed to the grim industrial city but suffused with an otherness that is often a little frightening, partly because it is a space of freedom, but also of mystery and difference. By the late nineteenth century, sensationalist English novels such as Amy Reade's 1892 *Slaves of the Sawdust* were presenting the circus as a place of coercion and fear for women and children. The book contributed to the passing of legislation which announced that only men could engage in dangerous performances, hence preventing cruelty to children and unbecoming behaviour in women (Stoddart 2000: 74).

By the twentieth century then, the circus has two very different lives – one as a happy place for children, and another as a place of monstrosity. As an early example of the latter, in the cult film *Freaks* (1932) Tod Browning produced a movie about a group of sideshow circus performers who turn violent and monstrous, but which was banned in the UK for thirty years on the grounds that it was simply too disturbing. Later in the century the circus films of Federico Fellini use the brightly lit ring and its outer darkness to manifest psychological interiors, in the same way that the haunted house came to be used in many horror films. In literature, Ray Bradbury's novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, originally published in 1963, provides us with a demonic railway circus which sweeps into an innocent mid-Western town. Its sideshows whisper of temptation and fear – 'Mademoiselle Tarot', 'The Dangling Man', 'The Demon Guillotine', 'The Skeleton', 'The Illustrated Man' and so on. The hall of

mirrors, the merry-go-round and the discordant scream of the calliope, together with the psychotic leer of the clown, have been used in many thriller and horror films since. Twenty years later Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* plays with the same cast of characters, but turns them into a feminist baroque, in which strong men discover their emotions, tigers dance with tears in their eyes, the monkeys negotiate contracts, and a clown gradually goes insane, provoking the audience to laugh even harder.

Yet the circus is a secular organization. There are no ancient gods or scented candles being invoked and the performer escapes injury and death through their own skill. Not through divine or demonic intervention, or tradition, but through the machineries of reason and training. Chaos is prevented through discipline (Stoddart 2000: 13) or, as Carter puts it, this is a celebration of 'the triumphs of man's will over gravity and over rationality' (2006: 121). Of course, the knowledge of the fall, the knife hitting the assistant or the lion's jaws closing must always haunt every successful performance. Order and disorder, organization and disorganization, the light and the dark, are in close relation, with one seeming to invite the other as a precondition of being there in the ring. Other separations are blurred too. Whether it involves flying people or hats made from bees, the act performs an event or thing that could belong in at least two different categories. So something normal is performed upside down, or on a high wire, or boxing monkeys blur culture and nature, animal and human (Carmeli 2003). Being shot from a cannon, putting your head in the mouth of a lion – these are all things that no rational person would attempt, but that are performed as demonstrations of the extension of reason, not the love of god or the devil.

The circus is a place of anomalies. Unlike the neighbours and shopkeepers you saw yesterday and will see tomorrow, this is a gathering of transients who can not be entirely understood or trusted. Both their mobility and their ostentation present problems to the settled locals. The word 'mountebank' (like *banquiste* and *saltimbanco*) comes to us as a way of describing someone who stood on a bench or table to entertain, and would often be regarded as a disreputable character. This is someone who draws attention to themselves, but may not be the person that they pretend to be. The deception might be cold-eyed and driven by cash, but could also be tragic, as when we refer to the tears of a clown, and the sadness behind the painted smile. In Katie Hickman's account of a Mexican circus, Mundo Bell performs as a clown just after hearing that his father has died in a caravan behind the tent. 'But, ah!' Mundo says, 'If you are not *del circo* it is almost impossible to explain it. Perhaps I should not even try. (...) Even though the tears were running down my face, the next moment I was out there, out in the ring as usual.' (Hickman 2001: 242, see also Davis 2002: 99, for a similar story). Pretence is at the heart of such performances. The clown, coming from the old English for clod, clot or lump, so a clumsy or stupid bumpkin, has to pretend stupidity in order to earn a living; just as the *aerialiste* has to make strength seem effortless; and the lion tamer ensure that the half blind and toothless big cat growls convincingly. These are people who are 'dressing in spangles yet living in tents and trailers' (Hoagland 2004: 3). Circuses trade on things not being what they seem, and make inauthenticity and transience into a way of life.

The circus has been theorised as an example of both prohibition and transgression (Adams 2001, Davis 2002). Like the carnival, the idea of the world turned upside down, (Bakhtin 1984, Stallybrass and White 1986), the key issue seems to be the

question of whether the circus, freak show and fair are forms of entertainment which simply propagate ideology, or whether they simultaneously question it. Transgression is not a particularly helpful word here, however fashionable it has become, because any 'transgression' could be taken to both mark the boundary that can not be crossed, at the same time that it shows that it can be crossed. Witnessing an act which transgresses a cultural or material boundary does not necessarily make the audience into either dupes or subversives. 'Reading' the circus is more complex than this. We can admire the discipline that allows someone to have a hat made from bees without ourselves wanting a hat made from bees. The phrase 'don't do this at home' can be understood as both stern prohibition and seductive invitation, or another version of the necessary relation between order and disorder. The circus, it seems to me, neatly shows us that disorder has to be organized, and hence that any boundary crossing is also a boundary marking.

Take, for example, the ways in which the circus presented what Rachel Adams calls the 'ethnographic freak'.

'Framed in pseudoethnographic language by showmen who called themselves "doctors" and "professors", anthropological exhibits at the freak show often provided American audiences with their primary source of information about the non-Western world.' (2001: 28)

By using the legitimacy of the academy, as well as the endless restatement of words like 'true', 'genuine' and 'authentic', entrepreneurs like Barnum hoped to bring new middle class customers to their entertainments. A century ago, circuses, museums, zoos and sideshows were all potentially places to find knowledge, and all were capable of deploying ideas about nature and evolution in order to justify exhibiting animals, human-animal hybrids as well as scientifically curious human beings<sup>3</sup>. Bronx zoo exhibited an African Batwa called Ota Benga in a cage with a trained orang-utan; Barnum a 'What is it?' supposed to be half man and half monkey; whilst the Yahi Indian Ishi lived for a while in the University of California Hearst Museum of Anthropology, and was studied by Alfred Kroeber (Adams 2001: 31-56, see also Davis 2002: 131). Exhibits like this travelled with circuses, displayed as part of the 'midway' that led to the big top. For Adams, all were trading on the idea that the 'wild man' allows us to identify civilized man, and hence to position the audience as part of the geographical and historical superiority of the white northern peoples. In other words, the circus was selling the myths of racism and imperialism, and perhaps could therefore be safely filed as part of the ideological apparatus.

This seems to be a critique of many of the exotic aspects of the circus - of the juggling Italians and balancing Indians who are closer to nature than the civilised audience. Adams, here relying on the work of Judith Butler, also 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 hence who we are not (2001: 6, see also Goffman 1963, Bogdan 1988). Davis argues that women growing beards or sewing with their feet, midgets dressed as royalty and people swallowing swords, all invite the viewer to question normality, not simply reinforce it (2002: 27). Audience is also important here, as when the North American customers might have been recently freed black slaves, paying to stare at people rattling spears or wearing head-dresses. Some of the exhibits may have been born elsewhere, but most were just as likely to be poor US blacks themselves, paid to snarl and tear at raw meat (Adams

2001: 166)<sup>4</sup>. This second argument concerning transgression shows us that we are all freaks. If we apply this to the circus rather than the freak show, whilst it is certainly true that circuses tend to trade on an idea of learned skill rather than pre-existing difference, this is itself not a historically durable classification. Elephants used to be freakish, tattooed men have become freaks and circus performers have often been seen to be outsiders. Even women performing physical feats could be seen as a form of transgression because it depends on the historical context.

Indeed, growing out of the ruins of the railroad circuses, the 'new circus' of the 1970s onwards often seemed to articulate a counter cultural sensibility. They tended to be smaller, more community oriented, collective in decision making, communal in living practices, and co-operative in structure. Club juggling routines might satirise assembly line speed up techniques, and a bohemian sensibility would shape aspects of the show (Albrecht 1995: 22, 26, Hartzman 2005: 236 *passim*). The new circus was much more explicit about its transgressions, with bearded lady stand up comedians making jokes about patriarchy; freaks who are using surgery and tattoos to turn themselves into lizards or cats whilst the sideshow sells books by Baudrillard, Ballard and Virilio (Adams 2001: 219). By the early 1990s, groups like 'Archaos' and 'The Circus of Horrors' were self-consciously aiming to shock, as well as aiming at a younger audience (Cottle 2006: 249). Using what might be described as a 'metal gothic' aesthetic, they featured exploding cars, roaring motor bikes, scrap yard pyromania, and a female clown who bit the heads off raw mackerel and spat them into the audience (Albrecht 1995: 90). This seemed to be a circus which was challenging conventions, perhaps even self consciously engaged in ideology critique, and not simply reproducing the dull routines of racism or sexism.

The circus can not be staked once and for all for or against a particular politics, but perhaps it can always be understood as an institutionalised questioning of stability and classification. It necessarily relies on the prior existence of assumptions about gravity, animals and cannons in order to do its work, and it must simultaneously confirm and deny what we assume in order to produce amazement. If we didn't make assumptions about human bodies, then we could not be amazed by a small black person with a spear, or someone with no legs who walks on their hands. If we thought that humans could fly and animals could reason, the *aerialiste* would leave us uninterested and the educated pig seem stupid. Stunts will only work if our understanding is stunted, if our imagination is constrained and our prejudices in place. At the same time, the existence of the anomaly produces a space into which doubt is invited. In Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, the central conceit is that the *aerialiste* has wings and can really fly. So if women can perform athletic feats like this, what else could they do? If chimps can box, might they be like us? The circus demands that we see disorder from the viewpoint of order. At the beginning of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche describes man as a rope stretched between 'beast and Superman'. The rope is the human, a crossing which he, in typical fashion, describes as perilous and trembling. Presumably, for Nietzsche, we begin as dull beast, and might end as Superman, if our nerves are strong enough. Leaving such humanist heroism aside, the materialist point is that the tightrope joins things that we might think are separate and allows the wire-walker to demonstrate both gravity and its overcoming. It joins the earthbound animal and the sequined angel.

## Community

The circus is represented as a place of danger, dissimulation and confusion. But, as I suggested above, it is also possible to find accounts of circus that treat it as a community, with all the positive virtues which that implies. Ron Beadle, for example, has used the circus as a way of suggesting that this is a life which is substantially an end in itself. In Alasdair MacIntyre's terms, it is a community aimed at the excellence of the practice which sustains the community (Beadle 2003). Beadle's account provides a philosophical gloss for the idea that the circus is not only a machine for questioning categories, but also a way of life. Like other isolated or intense occupations, the story then told is one that stresses cultural distinctiveness. This produces a kind of anthropology of practices, superstitions, and argot (Cottle 2006: 91). For example, Harry Crews gives an account of 'Carney' - a language made by deliberately inserting extra syllables into English words so that beer becomes bee-a-zeer and so on (2004: 54). It seems that the point of using Carney, as well as the many specific and exclusionary terms commonly used in the circus, is to demonstrate something about being 'us' and being 'them' (Parker 2000). In most cases, those excluded are the slack jawed crowds - 'the "lot lice", the Elmers, rubes, towners, hayseeds, hicks, yokels' (Hoagland 2004: 2). It is their dumb stupidity that justifies their exclusion, and perhaps also means that they deserve to have their credulity exploited and their pockets picked. Most of all though, it is their immobility that condemns them to boredom, and allows the circus performer to laugh at them behind his hand. 'Eat your heart out, rube, was part of his message. We'll be gone tomorrow. We'll see Chicago. We'll be in Florida. You stay here and milk your cows!' (*op cit*: 10).

Yet mobility is not the only axis of difference that can be deployed, because it is also common to distinguish circus people from the fair, or the carnival. As Gerry Cottle, a circus owner himself, puts it fairs have a less settled workforce who tend to be 'younger jack the lads who have joined for the girls' (Cottle 2006: 79). According to Cottle, in the UK, there is no love lost between the 'Association of Circus Proprietors' and 'The Showman's Guild' which represents fun fairs, in terms of the control of pitches and routes (Cottle 2006: 237). Compared to carneys, circus people are professionals. Internal to many circuses is another 'us' and 'them', that of the family. The idea, both as a metaphor and a description of actual kin relations, is very common indeed (Davis 2002: 72; Feiler 1995: 100). Being outside the family, being a 'jossor' (Beadle 2003), however long your relation with the circus, was a category that could be deployed to explain or exclude. Even for circus owners (Cottle 2006: 33), ethnographers (Carmeli 2001), and participant observers (Feiler 1995, Hickman 2001), the warmth of being accepted is always haunted by this ineradicable difference.

Bruce Feiler describes the circus he stayed with for a year as unified against others, but also internally divided because of its 'fundamentally liberal' ethos. He depicts a community that was remarkably diverse and tolerant, but that gossips about everything in quite vicious terms, and in which people ultimately survive by minding their own business (1995: 237-9). There is some evidence for this view of the circus as a libertarian community. Gay and lesbian relationships, often long term ones, appear quite often in accounts (Feiler 1995: 122, Cottle 2006: 69, 84) as do stories about male transvestites performing as women (Davis 2002: 115). Circuses were also routinely ethnically diverse workplaces, with 'exotic' ethnicities being marketed as

positive features – even if they sometimes had to be manufactured with stage names. Compared to other labour markets, there was even a relative parity of reward between male and female stars, and even non-white and disabled performers being able to command income and prestige which would have been denied to them in the immobile world (Stoddart 2000: 50).

‘An alligator girl can’t be a waitress, or a receptionist, or a nurse, or a babysitter. How many job opportunities are open to Siamese twins? How many personnel managers are looking for monkey-faced boys? Would you climb into a taxi driven by a dwarf with a pointed head, or a guy nine feet tall?’ (Dick Best, a freak show booking agent, in Hartzman 2005: 5)

Of course the myth of the community of outsiders is only partly true, because we can also find accounts of racism and discrimination (Feiler 1995: 186, Crews 2004: 58). In Ogden’s dictionary of the circus, there is a story about a prostitute who was running a ‘line up joint’ in which workers queued for sex when the circus was raided by the police. Instead of admitting to prostitution, she claimed that she had been raped by four black workers, and they were all immediately lynched, and hung from the light poles on the showground (Ogden 1993: 234). But even if the circus is never isolated from the brutalities of the outside world, it is still seen as a place where people can go and be different. For an US author such as Feiler, this means that the circus exemplifies the American liberal melting pot and ‘a dream to do what they wanted in a place that was free, a desire to carve out a little corner of the world where they could be themselves’ (Feiler 1995: 270). Stripping the westering ethnocentrism from this account, we are left with a version of the circus as a place where the romantic outsider can find fellow travellers. The grey stabilities of normal life can be escaped, and a life lived with danger and authenticity. Even Marx was seduced by the image–

‘When we see the back of an individual contorted in fear and bent in humiliation, we cannot but look around and doubt our very existence, fearing lest we lose ourselves. But on seeing a fearless acrobat in bright costume, we forget about ourselves, feeling that we have somehow risen above ourselves and reached the level of universal strength. Then we can breath easier.’ (in Albrecht 1995: 8).

## **Movement**

‘Please do not under any circumstances try to find me. I have gone forever. I have joined the circus. You do not understand me. You are not listening to me. I do not need O levels where I am going. I am going to join the circus. I have gone.’  
(Cottle 2006: 1)

The idea of the circus as a place of communitarian social relations appears to be very much related to the key structural feature that I began with, its mobility. When the fifteen year old Gerry Cottle ran away to join the Roberts brothers circus in 1961, he left the sad little note above. All our accounts of circuses are predicated on this sense of flight. Of endless movement across and between, and necessarily leaving somewhere called home. Perhaps this involves escaping from prejudice and history, and into some sort of tolerant community - a place where there will be no credit

checks, qualifications, or drug tests. So the travelling circus brings to mind refugees, a straggling line of the dispossessed, at the same time as it is a romantic gypsy caravan.

‘In one way or another the circus is full of the enchanted: many come here for love, both girls and men; others are orphans, runaways, or simply nomads, such as myself. Our presence occasions neither comment nor surprise: it is expected, because it has always been so.’ (Hickman 2001: 16)

Perhaps for performers and audience, there is a ‘shared illusion of escape’ (Feiler 1995: 176). So in *Hard Times* the vitality and spontaneity of the circus is contrasted to the repetitive narrowness of industrial experience, whether at school or at work. In some sense, the golden age circus makes sense only in distinction to stable times and places, and its appearance coincides with urbanization. The circus moves between towns, and settles in marginal places, appearing and disappearing overnight. In England the first tents were made by sail makers with masts for poles (Stevens 2004: 15), all held under tension in order to mimic the action of the billowing wind. Even the very work of circus people seems to be like play, happening during high days and holidays, perhaps looking like the sorts of things that children might do, provoking the gasps and laughter not found in the boredom of the factory or office.

Though circuses are mobile, they are not quite temporary. The idea of a temporary organization is usually one that is brought together for a specific project, and hence takes the form of a coalition made to build a skyscraper or make a film (Bryman *et al* 1987; Kenis *et al* 2009). Though in the long term all organizations are temporary, project organizations usually announce that they will wind themselves up into their constituent parts once a particular goal has been achieved, and are hence probably best characterised as ‘multi-firm temporary networks’ (Kavanagh 1998) in which the component parts have a degree of permanence that the whole doesn’t have. This isn’t quite true of the circus, since it usually assembles its singular organization once a year, for the touring season, employing various people from a network of performers and labourers and adding them to a core of people who are the same from year to year. There are echoes here of the dissolution of permanence augured by terms such as post-Fordism, clusters and networks, but are probably best characterised as a seasonal numerical flexibility. The ‘rolling show’ (Davis 2002: 16) raises questions of both space and time, with a sort of cyclical connection to both – repeating its dissolution and assembly between a series of places, and also annually as it re-paints and re-stitches for next year.

The idea of the circus as a caravan of Bohemians doesn’t really fit with the history of the institution. Like their ancient antecedents, the first modern circuses were not originally mobile, but were one element of the static entertainments of the industrial city. What is normally defined as the first circus in the UK dates to 1768 and in the USA to 1793, but both were based in amphitheatres, circular parade grounds, and it wasn’t until 1825 that the first mobile tented circus started to perform in the US (Davis 2002: 16, Feiler 1995: 38), and in the 1840s in England. The early circus was essentially a display of the disciplined mobility of the horse, and the skills of the rider, sometimes combined with military or historical pageant. An 1827 poster for Astley’s circus in London notes that the ‘unpractised eye’ might not appreciate the ‘scientific management of the Rein’ that was being deployed in the show (Stoddart 2000: 68). That the move from hippodrome to big tent happens first in the USA might reflect the cultural influence of the medicine shows with attached performers, as well as the menageries and rodeos which were already moving across the expanding territories by

this period. The golden age of mobility again really begins in the USA with the train circuses that haltingly began in 1856 and, by the close of the century, had become in size and complexity 'the city that moves by night'.

For these giant circuses, the contrast with the modern sense of the word circus as chaos and disorganization is rather remarkable. A commentator in *The Times* writes about Phineas T Barnum's 12 thousand seat 1889 show in London in the following way.

'Things being ordered on such a scale, one reads without surprise in the programme that the establishment comprises no fewer than 1,200 "people" and 380 horses. In all its branches the great enterprise (...) works with a smoothness implying a high degree of departmental organization and efficiency. It consists of almost as many departments as the United States Government itself...' (in Cook 2005: 229)

The scale itself seemed to become part of the spectacle. According to the Ringling Brothers Golden Jubilee programme in 1933, the show travelled over 20 000 miles in over one hundred double length railroad cars, with 1 500 employees, 735 horses, six herds of elephants and 1000 other wild animals. The circus had its own lawyer, doctor, dentists and detectives, and the kitchen served 4 800 meals a day, cooking 10 thousand pancakes for breakfast (Wood 2002: 215, see also Davis 2002: 38). It is said that the US army and Kaizer Wilhelm were observing the logistics of circuses from the 1890s onwards (Davis 2002: 78; Feiler 1995: 55). The production of a mobile fantasy required a considerable degree of planning.

### **Economics and Organization**

The modern circus was produced by a combination of entrepreneurial capitalism, mass marketing, urbanization and mass transport. When Barnum visited an English fair at Greenwich in 1844 he expressed disgust at the disorganization, the noise, the crowded public transport – 'an English "fair" in these degenerate days is the most *foul* place a man could easily get into.' (in Cook 2005: 64). In the same year, he visited Franconi's summer circus in Paris, and was impressed with the neo-classical design and size, and the pricing of the 6000 seats (*op cit*: 72-3). By the 1870s he is touring his own 'Greatest Show on Earth', a gigantic consolidation which he confidently expects will force smaller 'one-horse concerns' to 'hide their diminished heads in the cross-roads and back woods' (*op cit*: 148). 'P.T.Barnum's Grand Travelling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, and Circus' travelled by rail to large towns and trumpeted its arrival as noisily as possible in order to ensure that ticket sales covered its huge expenses. These shows became part of a global supply chain which needed to source animals and people for acts was doing frequent foreign tours, had franchises, agents and acts around the world and, by the time he died in 1891, had a staff of thousands.

The contemporaneous coining of the words 'Barnumize', or 'Barnumism' reflected the general sense that a new kind of hyperbolic puff was emerging (Stevens 2004: 12). To a certain extent, the need for the puff was driven by risk. The more Barnum spent on his shows, logistics and supply chain, the more he had to spend on marketing in order to bring the punters crowding in. For all the big circuses, the majority of the marketing was print based and involved covering towns with posters. As the circus developed there were also increasingly sophisticated efforts to gain local media coverage through PR exercises and strategic sponsorship. This required that every

large circus ran a timed series of advance railroad cars with a staff who engineered publicity, as well as sourcing supplies and local labour, arranging accommodation and licenses, disbursing bribes, as well as putting up the posters (Davis 2002: 43). Competition with other shows was fierce. The advance parties would also try find out about the movements of other circuses, attempting to arrive in town a week before their competitors and, if needed, 'night riders' might deface or post over existing publicity<sup>5</sup>. If another circus had already posted, 'Wait' paper might be posted on top, usually simple white sheets instructing the reader to 'Wait for the Big One' and not to waste their money on the earlier competitor (Odgen 1993: 362).

For all the circuses, there was also a general need to counter bad publicity, given the wide spread perceptions of small scale criminality and immorality that were associated with its arrival. Janet Davis writes about the social panics associated with circuses, and the moral decline that they were seen to inaugurate, particularly in terms of gender and the partly clad female performer (2002: 30, 85). Hence, there was a clear need to market the respectability of the circus and to assert its role in nation building, tradition and some sort of childlike innocence. The expenses of size and the marketing of a wholesome product to families were certainly implicated, but so too was the need for efficient disassembly, transport and re-assembly. Because of the sheer scale of the daily audience needed for these organizations, movement was necessary since the local market was quickly exhausted, however intense and effective the publicity. The more rapidly the big show could move, the more efficiently it could harvest profits from many different towns. Connecting this necessary mobility and size back to marketing was the marketing of mobility and size itself. Circuses would parade through town on arrival, often for hours, and encourage locals to come and see the big top being erected, as well as circulating puff which stressed the sheer scale and variety of the attractions on offer. Size, mobility and advertising were all entangled in a necessary relation in order to ensure that the circus could continue to roll.

Less visible was the complex division of labour within the circus which allowed for a tent to be erected, candy floss to be sold and a show to be performed. Like many organizations, circuses were sites of complex formal and informal hierarchies. For example, the larger circuses used numbered identity badges, and different colours of uniform, in order to identify different categories of worker (Davis 2002: 41). Workers, and performers, were also paid different wages, depending on their position in the hierarchy. Even freaks were paid differently depending on their relative freakishness and rarity (Adams 2001: 256). Spatially, there were codes that determined the position that a performer had in the dressing tents (Davis 2002: 65), very commonly with clowns segregated into a 'clown alley', aerialists deemed higher status than equestrians, and so on. The same sort of arrangements determined where people sat in the cookhouse, or whether you ate in the cookhouse at all (Odgen 1993: 114), as well as the luxury of your sleeping compartment. Feiler, reporting on his year in a contemporary US circus, even writes about the invisible hierarchy that took your caravan away from the noise of the generator, or divided heavy lifting labour from the more glamorous ringside props labour (1995: 55, 250).

Perhaps mindful of these divisions, in the large US circuses there were attempts at constructing early organizational culture programmes, pretty much at the same time that Ford and others were worrying about the morals of their workforce (Beder 2000).

There were specified rules for behaviour, alcohol consumption and dress, and even organized sports, picnics and recreation seemingly aimed at instilling loyalty (Davis 2002: 76-77)<sup>6</sup>. At the bottom of the hierarchies, and perhaps the real subject of these behavioural controls, were the roustabout labourers who hauled ropes in the middle of the night, and slept three to a bunk on lice infested mattresses in the noisiest part of the train. This was hard labour for hobos. Sometimes, the circus could even get locals to work for nothing, or next to nothing, with promises of tickets to see the show. This was commonly called ‘Chinese labour’, with the derogatory terms ‘punk pusher’ or ‘kid worker’ being applied to the people who hired them (Ogden 1993: 73, 224). For a century, the pay and conditions of the roustabouts provided the cheap muscle that allowed the circuses to be mobile and profitable. There was little stardust involved at this end of the hierarchy.

‘People are juggling themselves, hand-to-mouth, in brassy penury, in the circus, not just tossing torches or chancing an awful clawing. Then they’ll live in back-street rented rooms during the winter until they can take to the road again.’

(Hoagland 2004: 3)

In the US, there were attempts at unionization from the American Federation of Labour from the late 1930s onwards, but they were all unsuccessful until the standoff between the Teamsters, the American Guild of Variety Artists, and the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus in 1956 (Davis 2002: 229; Ogden 1993: 295). The union victory and announcement that Ringling would no longer travel was widely reported as an example of the destructive power of unions attacking a traditional American institution, though it could just as easily be taken to demonstrate that one element of circus economics was the exploitation of manual labour.

There was also much money to be made selling candyfloss and popcorn<sup>7</sup>, as well as games of chance and tickets to sideshows. The people who ran concessions paid a ‘privilege’ to management in order to be able to set up next to the circus. Though usually they would be selling food or toys, or exhibiting freaks or curios, often enough the concessions would be for grift – shell and card games in which the punter had no chance of winning. Grift could also mean that people were effectively given cover for shortchanging or pickpocketing. The ‘lucky boys’ who ‘got the X’ for a particular concession paid management, and in turn sometimes part of this cash might be used to bribe local officials and police officers in order to turn a blind eye to the complaints of aggrieved punters (Ogden 1993: 183, 377). As well as these sorts of scams for making money off locals, Feiler describes a complex series of economic relationships between people working in the circus. Collectively referred to as ‘cherry pie’, he details how workers augmented their salaries by buying and selling services, work and commodities from each other as well as doing little extras around the site (Feiler 1995: 58-9). The thriving internal economy of the circus was again one of the ways in which low pay could be justified by circus management.

So what might be called the ‘business model’ of the circus relies on a series of complex relations between mobility, size and marketing, as well as a clear division of labour with a star system at the top and exploitation at the bottom. The outlaw swagger, as well as the mysteries and anomalies, are made possible precisely because the circus is such a highly organized place. The greasepaint and sequins might distract us from questions of management, organization and economics, but they are visible enough if you look (Beadle and Konyot 2006). This is a place where miracles are engineered for money.

## Finale

Nowadays, I think the circus is constituted by a certain nostalgia. Like eggs and community, it was better in the old days.

‘Houses were good, it being the tail end of what they call the Golden Age of the Circus, before roads and cars offered people in small towns choices. When we came to town, banks closed, as did all schools and businesses. Attendance was routinely more than 80 percent of the people in any given town.’ (Hough 2004: 288)

Much post golden age writing now stresses the various crises which are facing the institution (Truzzi 1968, Albrecht 1995, Stoddart 2000: 75, Beadle 2003). The rise of concern about animal welfare, together with increasingly interventionist regulatory regimes, means that it is more and more difficult for the circus to use animals, particularly the iconic exotic ones. Criticisms of the use of animals in the circus go back to at least the 1930s (Albrecht 1995: 201), but now mass urbanisation, and hence a general distance from all but a few species (apart from in the freezer cabinet), has resulted in a romanticised welfarism which effectively ends the classic circus in much of the Western world (Albrecht 1995: 222). The same sort of regulatory regimes applied to labour have put up costs, and the same urbanisation has made it more difficult to get a cheap pitch near a large population. Health and safety rules, transportation costs and trade unions hence make the circus more and more expensive, and the fixed theme park a capital intensive alternative. Finally, there is the question of audience, and the idea that people don’t really recognise a good circus anymore. The short film ‘cinema of attractions’ screened in sideshows has grown to become the glittering array of stars that is Hollywood (Stoddart 2000: 27; Adams 2001: 64). Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton made the switch from circus to cinema early, and the growth of the film industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned film stunts into special effects. Now, the attractions of digital gaming, computer generated animation and take away meals mean that the audience is no longer minded to appreciate the secular skills displayed in the ring. Why pay to watch someone jumping around on a horse when you could stay in and watch battles involving mythological creatures, or superheroes flying into buildings?<sup>8</sup>

But perhaps the best circus was always in the past, and the contemporary crisis is nothing that new. In 1919, Lenin declared the Russian circus a national treasure, and his first people’s Minister of Education A V Lunacharsky said –

‘Our primary task must be to wrest the circus away the opportunists who play to the baser tastes of the public. Once it is free of this influence, it will certainly become what it must be: an academy of physical beauty and merriment.’ (in Albrecht 1995: 8).

Elements of the US new circus movement have a similar distaste for the cheapening effects of commercialism on the circus, and stress its community building and family values elements – ‘the inherent honesty, purity and dignity of Circus are perverted by exhibitionism, the easy or dishonest trick, or commercial exploitation’ (Alan Slifka in Albrecht 1995: 50). Beset by alternative and morally cheapening entertainments, the circus must be defended. This myth, whether in the USSR then or the USA now, avoids any account of the economy and organization of the circus, of the labour practices, hyperbolic marketing and routine grift that have accompanied the travelling mountebanks. Barnum’s puff for his ‘Parliament of Peculiar and Puzzling Physical

Phenomena and Prodigies' (in Hartzman 2005: 23) sits uneasily with the idea of the circus as a form of inspirational athletics, a callisthenics for the education of the citizen.

The problem with a nostalgic account is that the sanitised and morally wholesome circus only ever existed in the books where children save baby elephants. The actual circus was always much more complicated, dirtier and much more interesting. Like fairs and carnivals, it is necessarily a highly organized place, otherwise it wouldn't be able to move, or perform after it had moved, or pack itself up and move again. Normally, the organization is supposed to be invisible to the audience, who are expected not to want to see the machinery in operation. Sometimes, of course, it is seen. One English review of the Barnum and Bailey circus in 1889 complained that – 'the spectator feels himself oppressed by the variety of efforts made for his entertainment... He will perhaps be constrained to imagine himself in some vast factory, with its endless spindles and revolving shafts and pulleys.' (in Cook 2005: 231)

Nowadays, 'Cirque du Soleil', with air-conditioned tents, performers green rooms, computerised ticketing and haute cuisine cookhouse, presents the same sort of highly ordered experience of disorder. The fact that it might be sold to management awaydays or corporate events just adds to a sense that the magic has gone. We can't believe our eyes, but we know that an experience has been produced for us using a complex division of labour and advanced forms of technology.

Yet even though these sorts of descriptions are important, the circus is not reducible to a set of economic or organizational relations<sup>9</sup>. In some sense, the circus exceeds its machinery, even if we need to understand mobility, marketing and divisions of labour in order to know how the circus is produced. The mysteries that this paper began with, as well as the romantic notion of a mobile community<sup>10</sup>, are produced as a result of economics and organization. Yet, in an oddly non-reversible way, the economics and organization cannot explain them away. Indeed, the paradox is now built into the very word. 'Circus' is now often used as a term for something chaotic, multiple and incapable of meeting its ends. That is the trick, because if you can see behind the curtain to the economics and the organization, the effect is harder to produce. Theoretically, the point here is that what Carmeli describes as 'a precarious and precious modern dream' (2001: 163, 2003) is produced as durable through the meticulous planning of time and space. The very possibility of disorder, disorganization - of the opening of categories of human, normal, gravity, reason – happen when the temporary institution has been built (Cooper 1990)<sup>11</sup>.

'That's what we try to do, isn't it? Keep rolling, keep juggling and strutting our stuff, honouring our gods; then take a bow and exit smiling? But magic seldom happens unless a structure has been erected – whether a church or a tent – that is hospitable to it.' (Hoagland 2004: 8)

The questioning of natural and social 'law', of tradition, of common sense, that makes the circus work doesn't come from nowhere. It is the production of a complex mobile assembly which asks questions about stability in order to make money. The flea circus that Bobby Reynolds was pitching worked because a lot of time and effort had gone in to constructing the illusion. Even if there were real fleas in Professor Heckler's circus (because sometimes magnets and mechanisms were used), the illusion was often produced by gluing fleas to the ring, and then fastening things to the fleas. The application of heat to the underside made the fleas struggle to escape. Any circus,

perhaps any form of culture, requires that the machinery is partly hidden, because if we can see the economics and the organization too clearly, the miracle begins to look like mere trickery.

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<sup>2</sup> The same is also true of music festivals. The links between festival and circus are suggestive, particularly in terms of the rock and roll celebration of nomadism and excess, but they are not the focus of this paper. Trains, planes and cars are as often the subject of songs as drink, drugs and sex.

<sup>3</sup> Just as medical photography, and the hospital and the asylum, began to produce a form of knowledge about mutants and the normal human body.

<sup>4</sup> Forms of stereotyping which Helen Stoddart identifies in a 1989 Ringling Brothers circus programme too, with acts brought from the 'Dark Continent of Africa' and so on (2000: 104)

<sup>5</sup> In the UK, there are even accounts of teams sabotaging the route markers left to direct competitor circuses to their pitch (Cottle 2006: 14, 79).

<sup>6</sup> For a similar account of rules at Disneyland, see Van Maanen (1991).

<sup>7</sup> Cottle (2006: 60) appears to suggest that selling product before, during and after the show was all that was keeping his circus afloat at times.

<sup>8</sup> If you were minded, you could add to this a diagnosis of mass production, reproduction and the culture industries. The unpredictable and embodied entertainer gives way to the production of mechanical commodities which are aimed at generating profits for the entertainment industry (Adorno 1991).

<sup>9</sup> For work on the circus from the Business School, see Kim et al (2002) and Cummings and St. Leon (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Again, the comparison with touring rock and roll bands is interesting here.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to compare the sublime possibilities produced by the ramified organization of the Apollo programme with the disorder produced by the order of the circus (see Parker 2009).