

Article

Nordic Modernists in the Circus. On the Aesthetic Reflection of a Transcultural Institution

Annegret Heitmann

Institut für Nordische Philologie Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, 85304 München, Germany; annegret.heitmann@lrz.uni-muenchen.de

Received: 1 October 2018; Accepted: 31 October 2018; Published: 6 November 2018



Abstract: Around 1900 the circus was not only an important and highly popular cultural phenomenon all over Europe, but also an inspiration to writers and artists at the onset of Modernism. As an intrinsically intermedial form with international performers, it can be seen as an expression of certain important characteristics of modern life like innovation, mobility, dynamics, speed and vigor. Its displays of color and excitement, of bodies in motion and often provocative gender relations were experienced by authors as a challenge to create new aesthetic forms. However, the circus does not only figure prominently in well-known works by Kafka and Thomas Mann and paintings by Degas, Macke or Leger, it is also thematized in texts by Scandinavian authors. When writers like Henrik Ibsen, Herman Bang, Ola Hansson and Johannes V. Jensen referred to the circus in their works, they represented it as an experience of modernity and addressed themes like alterity, mobility, voyeurism, new gender relations and ambivalent emotions. As a self-reflexive sign, the circus even served to represent the fragile status of art in modernity and thus made an important contribution to the development of Modernism.

Keywords: Scandinavian modernism; cross-fertilization; circus; meta-cultural code; modernist aesthetics

Herman Bang, one of the most important late 19th century Scandinavian modernists, was a great admirer of the circus. He regularly visited the performances put on in Copenhagen by the great circus companies Renz and Schumann, but also took an interest in smaller, family-run traveling circuses and their humble lives. Even on his many trips through Europe, he frequently found time to attend the circus, be it in Hamburg, Paris, Ostende or Berlin. His enthusiasm for this institution of popular culture stayed with him all his life and for more than 30 years he reported on performances, artists and animal tamers in newspapers and magazines (cf. [Heitmann 2019](#), in press). His interest coincided with the so-called golden age of the circus between 1850 and 1920, when it was the leading attraction and medial experience in Europa and North America and immensely popular with audiences of all social classes. Why this institution was so attractive and the way in which it influenced not only Bang's writing, but also other members of the generation of early modernists in Scandinavia, is the subject of the following investigation.

My conception of modernism is derived from Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, who already pointed out in 1976 that Scandinavian literature was crucial to the early phase of the larger European movement of modernism: "In trying to pin Modernism down—tentatively and crudely—in terms of men, books and years, attention is first drawn to Scandinavia" ([Bradbury and McFarlane 1976](#), p. 37). Modernism in this sense is a post-naturalist form of cultural criticism that is disconcerted and threatened by the progressive modernization of society with its economic, technological, social and discursive components, offering liberation and alienation at the same time. It included a new perception of this rapidly changing reality and a view of human subjectivity as anomic and threatened, especially as the power of the unconscious and the irrational

became an object of interest. Realization of the gap between inner and outer aspects of subjectivity, and of reality, led on to skepticism about the very status of language and communication. All this finds its aesthetic expression in a wide variety of narrative cleavages, ambivalences, and anti-mimetic tendencies, as well as in narrative austerity or provocation.

The circus, with its focus on showmanship, entertainment and thrill, seems hardly to touch upon the concerns of modernist literature. As such, it generally falls on the low end of the spectrum between high and low art; far from a respectable form of artistic expression, it is simply considered an escape from reality (Simon 2014, p. 16). It is remarkable, however, that this form of entertainment was successful especially during the leap in modernization society saw in the late 19th century (on the following cf. Kirschnick 2012; Simon 2014; Daniel 2016). While traveling jesters and entertainers have always existed, the circus as a specific phenomenon is usually considered to have emerged in 1780, when the English trick-rider Philip Astley (1742–1814) built an arena with stands and a diameter of 13 m that was ideally suited for trick riding. Horses were thus at the heart of the early circus, and even today all large circus companies have acts with horses in the repertoire. As the circus became more popular, and accordingly more professional, artists such as jugglers and tightrope walkers, contortionists and knife-throwers were added, as were—later, in higher buildings and tents—the trapeze acts that made the dream of flying come alive. With colonial trade came wild animals, such as lions, tigers and elephants that were presented either in animal shows or as animal taming acts—those put on by female tamers were particularly popular. Although the training techniques gradually became less cruel, moving away from the ruthless and violent means used initially, these acts nevertheless continued to demonstrate man's superiority over the animal world. A light-hearted—and occasionally self-critical—part of these circus programmes were the appearances of clowns, whose comedic interludes often parodied the circus itself. The clowns' usually silent acts staged not only acrobatics but displayed a world through the looking-glass and the reversal of all norms. At the apex of circus history, when fixed installations and buildings enhanced the possibilities of the circus, grand spectacles known as pantomimes were staged in the ring that re-enacted battles or historical events. Zirkus Busch, for example, staged the Herrmannschlacht (Germanic victory of AD9 in the Forest of Teutoburg) in 1910, a performance that was not merely a technical marvel, but also a political demonstration. Even more spectacular were the water pantomimes staged in flooded arenas with mock naval battles, magnificent waterfalls and illuminated fountains.

"By the end of the nineteenth century", writes Robert A. Jones, "[the European circus] had reached a zenith in its development and, despite an inherent outsider status, had become an integral part of the European social fabric." (Jones 1985, p. 9). Around the turn of the 20th century, the circus was the most impactful medium of popular culture, drawing huge crowds with its colorful and exotic offerings that appealed to people of all social strata. In its international ensembles and itinerant, seasonal character (cf. Carmeli 1988) the circus further reflects the increasing interconnectedness of the world and the growing mobility of its inhabitants. Music, attractive lighting, wild animals, peak physical performances and sparkling costumes appealed to the senses of the audience, creating excitement and spinning the illusion of an entirely different world far removed from every-day life.

Despite its illusion of alterity, this world was, however, engaged in a vibrant exchange of ideas with other media and arts (cf. Jones 1985, pp. 27–40). It would be wrong to strictly differentiate between the circus and the similarly popular forms of cabaret and pantomime, since they too used physical performance art, music and exoticism, as did the forms of free dance en vogue at the time. There was also a certain affinity between the circus and poster art, which developed at the same time and was similarly located somewhere between high and popular culture. On the one hand, the poster served as the circus' most important advertising medium, while on the other, the circus was an important motif for the poster genre. That the circus affected other art forms is particularly obvious in pictorial art, and visible not only in the well-known posters by Toulouse-Lautrec, but also in paintings and drawings by Degas, Seurat and Tissot (cf. Berger and Winkler 1983; Konrad 2012). Many well-known names of impressionist art and post-impressionist aesthetics such as Renoir, Picasso,

Macke, Beckmann, Klee, Delaunay and Chagall engaged with motifs from the circus to develop new forms of expression in form, colour and perspective. The colorful and fast-paced dynamics of the shows and the simultaneity of different circus acts provided a challenge for the two-dimensional and static medium of pictorial art; a challenge that elicited aesthetic innovations. In the words of Robert A. Jones: “It is thus no overstatement to assert that the cultural matrix of the era in question was shaped by the circus and those related forms such as the pantomime, the music hall, variété, cabaret, and revue that borrowed from, as well as contributed to, its form and content” (Jones 1985, p. 38).

This dynamic that challenged pictorial art is analogous to the rapid development modern society was experiencing at the time. The exoticism and itinerancy of the circus offered a reflection of colonialism and an expanding and ever more densely entangled world. The international ensembles of artists and the fact that they attracted audiences from all social classes seemed to give shape to a democratic, international spirit, while the daring performances of female artists and animal tamers gave expression to changing gender norms and a new body image. At the same time, the circus became increasingly commercialized and technologically more advanced, mirroring the dynamics of progressive modernity. The continuous growth of the companies, their pursuit of record-breaking accomplishments and constant innovation went hand in hand not only with developments in technology and society, but also with people’s response to it through increasing restlessness and nervousness. In many respects, the circus can thus be considered a mirror image of modernity.

Paul Boissac has coined the expression “metacultural code” (Boissac 1976, p. 7) in order to stress that the circus refers to the constitutive elements of contemporary culture. Although the milieu of the circus has always been the subject of curiosity and mystification, and its performances are founded in alterity and exoticism, it is impossible to deny its links and references to the world surrounding it (Christen 2010, p. 77). Foucault’s concept of heterotopia may serve to describe that the circus is both in the midst of society and outside it (Foucault 1984). It represents an alternative, looking-glass world that nevertheless echoes many characteristics of modernity and thus brings them out with crystalline clarity: we find dynamic acceleration and innovation, an enterprising love of risk, diversity and international connectivity, a push for equality, and a new physicality and understanding of the body. It will hardly come as a surprise that this looking-glass nature proved challenging not merely to pictorial art, but also the narrative media of film and literature. Some research has been done on the circus as a subject of early film (Joest 2008; Christen 2010). By comparison, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the circus motif in modern Scandinavian literature, even though several prominent Scandinavian modernists, such as Henrik Ibsen and Herman Bang, Johannes V. Jensen, Ola Hansson and Selma Lagerlöf, as well as less internationally renowned (and non-modernist) authors such as Holger Drachmann, Lars Dilling (Dilling 1884), Joakim Reinhard (Reinhard 1882) and Carl Muusmann (Muusmann 1905, 1906), thematized the circus in literary reflections written in the period around 1900. Whenever the circus appears in literary works of Scandinavian Modernism, it seems to operate on two different levels: on the one hand, it acts as meta-cultural code that refers to phenomena and developments in modern society, while on the other, literature is using the mediality of the circus to shape its own poetics. Whereas the first point affects the themes used and stages the circus as a signifier of alterity, dynamic change, nervousness or risk, the second point directs our attention to how this topos was functionalized to inform literary aesthetics. In the following, these two dimensions shall be traced across five very different examples.

A real theme of the circus is not part of Henrik Ibsen’s dramatic oeuvre; in fact, it is more aptly described as a telling gap or omission (“Leerstelle”; cf. Iser 1970). *Samfundets støtter* (1877; *The Pillars of Society*), the first of his ‘dramas of society’, is about the modernization of Norway, about railways and financial speculation, about the labor question and women’s rights. These issues of social history are joined with themes of power and privilege, hypocrisy and guilt, moral norms and double standards. Since the “pillars of society” are concerned on the one hand with profitable innovation,

but on the other with the preservation of their traditional privileges, these developments are discussed using procedures of in- and exclusion. The pivotal scene that—in Ibsen’s typical manner—causes the guilt-ridden entanglements of the past to be brought to light and rattles the strongholds of power occurs towards the end of the first act. From inside the living room of Consul Bernick, the leading representative of this small-town society, we look out into the street and spy a circus company that has come by ship from America: “et helt beriderselskab med heste og dyr” (Ibsen [1877] 2008, p. 182) [“a whole circus company [. . .] with horses and animals”]. While the young son finds this new arrival exciting, the grown-ups immediately agree in rejecting this alien entity: to them, they are “fæle mennesker”, “gøglere af den rette sort” (p. 182) [“horrid people”, “real kind of jugglers”]. The negative terminology used goes hand in hand with a critical appraisal of their external appearance. This is further intensified when a bearded man they consider the director is said to look “som en røver” (182) [“like a robber”]. A woman with a knapsack is judged “direktørens madam” (182) [“the director’s madame”] in a similarly pejorative fashion. A haughty glance down at the foreigners from above is enough to both judge them and produce distance. As ‘travelling folk’ who invade the town with “hestene og dyrene [. . .] og Amerikanerne” (183) [“horses and animals [. . .] and Americans”], they are essentially the threatening “other”, and as such, the window scene ends with the suggestion: “Skulde vi måske trække forhængene for?” (183) [“Should we maybe close the curtains?”]. The dichotomy of inside and out, of above and below, of self and other could hardly be expressed more emphatically. The group is described as “udlændinger” (184) [“foreigners”] and invites moralizing judgment simply due to this assumption: they lack “denne rodfæstede sømmelighedsfølelse” (184) [“this deeply rooted decency”], which is characteristic of the self and they “sætter sig op imod skik og gode sæder” (184) [“oppose traditions and good manners”], even though they have taken but a few steps into town. The mechanisms of xenophobia and exclusion are traced here in but a few lines of dialogue. Members of a circus who lack ‘roots’ are apparently the best example of alterity and the acts of rejection it feeds. Since it would inevitably be founded on prejudice, a portrayal of the circus itself is unnecessary—it can simply remain a blank (“Leerstelle”) in the hierarchies of social power.

The simple dichotomies Ibsen’s dramas seem to construct, however, always turn out to be fragile. The rigid contrast between identity and alterity built up in the scene is undermined by the twists that the apparent circus madam and the bearded director are in fact family members who have returned from America. They stand for “luften på prærierne” (186) [“the air in the prairies”], for enlightenment, change and morality. The action the drama unfolds around this need not concern us here, but it is clear that the alleged alterity of the circus (and the Americans) is exposed as a prejudice. Its exoticism is based on an erroneous assumption and the other is revealed as part of the self. Ibsen thus uses the circus as a topos for perceived alterity that it is deconstructed over the course of the play. The self—the narrow world of the ‘pillars of society’—is ultimately enriched by the invaders, who can no longer be shut out by drawing the curtains. As such, the circus folk also hint at the impossibility of withdrawing from the modern world, at the necessity of opening up to the other(s) that make dynamic change possible by breaking up the encrusted double standards of narrow-minded society. In the aesthetics of Ibsen’s drama, the circus thus signifies two things: first, the invasion of alterity into the narrow world of the self that triggers the dramatic conflict; and second, as the blank space that exposes the mechanisms of ignorance-based prejudice.

This kind of confrontation with the other is contoured even more sharply in Johannes V. Jensen’s Himmerland-story “Wombwell” (1904) with its description of the arrival of an animal show in tranquil Himmerland, based on the historical menagerie called “Wombwell” that visited North Jutland with 500 exotic animals in 1888 (cf. Jørgensen 2016). Both the historical and Jensen’s fictional menagerie are not only exotic but also dynamic and of overwhelming size: “den ene underfulde Vogn tonede frem efter den anden, Slag i Slag” (Jensen [1904] 1933, p. 154) [“one wonderful cart appeared after the other, in quick succession”]—“Karavanen strakte sig tværs paa hele Dalen” (155) [“the caravan stretched out over the whole valley”]. Wombwell’s animal show thus joins otherness with aspects of modernity that in entering into the closed rural community ultimately instils in it an awareness of the wider world.

The confrontation is accentuated by the narrator's irony that brings out the limited point of view of the Himmerlanders by describing the travelers as "vildfremmede Folk" (149) ["completely [literally: wildly] strange people"], whose foreignness is apparent already in the fact that "at de ikke kunne snakke Dansk" (149) ["that they could not speak Danish"]. That all things other are associated with the wild is revealed by the defensive stance evident from the fact that the circus folk are repeatedly labeled strangers, "[som] snakkede som Kværne paa deres gale Maal" (152) ["[who] talked like mills in their wrong language"]. Even their horses are perceived as "paafaldende udenlandsk" (149) ["conspicuously foreign"]. The irony serves to highlight the relational context dependence of otherness (cf. Müller-Funk 2016, p. 16) by establishing the Himmerlanders' perspective as the norm and acknowledging Danish as the only comprehensible language.

The description and effect of otherness are intensified in the encounters with exotic animals described in the following. Here we find processes of acculturation, such as when the North Jutland farmers compare the tiger to "vor Missekat" (179) ["our pussy-cat"] and are particularly taken with the Zebra, because it is similar to their home-grown horses. The wildebeest, however, causes some confusion, since it seems a cow to some, while others are reminded of a horse with horns: "Den Betragtning, at den var et Dyr for sig, der kunde ligne baade en Ko og en Hest, laa ikke nær for nogen" (180) ["The idea that it was an animal in its own right, which might resemble both a cow and a horse did not occur to any of them"]. These understandable efforts at categorizing the unknown thus entail acts of appropriation that do not permit for otherness and even strip it away (cf. Bauman 2003, p. 121). How unwilling the villagers are to open up to the unknown is evident in their encounter with the camels, whom they do not care about at all, since they "syntes dem ellers overdrevne og urimelige af Skabning" (181) ["appeared to them as exaggerated and unreasonable creations"]. The circus animals bring out different experiences of otherness, all of which keep the unknown at a distance and avoid engaging with the experience of difference (cf. Waldenfels 1990, p. 59).

Even before the animal show opens, the Himmerlanders witness the typical tent necessary for such an event being set up. This process confronts them with a dynamic they were as yet unacquainted with, and which encapsulates another aspect of the experiences of alterity and modernity that Jensen associates with the circus in this text. The erection of the tent is primarily characterized by an atmosphere of "Hurtighed, Hurtighed" (172) ["speed, speed"]. Wombwell himself harshly oversees the work with whip in hand "og der var kun et Tempo i ham, Firspring af baade Heste og Mennesker" (172) ["and there was only one speed in him, full gallop of both horses and men"]. The draft horses are whipped, the men "sled, saa det sang i deres Ben" (172) ["toiled so it sang in their legs"], men yell and call to one another, hurtling about; "der arbejdedes som i Feber" (175) ["the work was done like in a fever"] is the general verdict. "Men Wombwell pressede paa. Han vilde Menageriet aabnet i Aften, koste hvad det koste vilde" (174) ["But Wombwell pressured them. He wanted the menagerie opened tonight, at all costs"]. One of the core principles of modernity, that time is money, is given physical expression in this act of putting up the tent. The construction requires effort, strength, speed and "brutal Energi" (174) ["brutal energy"] and when it said that it "lignede [...] et Bombardement, en Sprængning og Beskydning" (174) ["resembled [...] a bombardment, an explosion and a shelling"], the violent connotations of the efforts demanded are revealed. The talk of rope and long poles, of wooden structures and their incredible weight, of "et uhyre Areal af Lærred" (175) ["an enormous area of canvas"], and even of "et Bjærg af Jærn" (176) ["a mountain of iron"], is reminiscent of processes of architectural modernization. Setting up the tent is similar to erecting a new building or an industrial park; the bustle, size and speed all echo the innovation and acceleration of progressive modernity. Even the metaphorical likening of the tent to a "Trobeblomst" (175) ["tropical flower"] or "Arken" (176) ["the Ark"] parallels the descriptions of industrial installations and buildings. From the point of view of the Himmerland villagers, the circus is a sign of the fast-paced, noisy juggernaut of modernity that inexorably progresses with great violence and at any cost. Even the roads and bridges have been reinforced to allow the heavy circus wagons to pass, and so even the infrastructural improvements that went hand in hand with industrialization enter into the text.

While the circus's mobility activates another topos of modernity, it also means that its disturbing alterity is temporary for the region it is visiting. And yet, the story tells of the long-term impact the visit of the menagerie had. Three young boys had bravely gone up to the big wagon and been allowed to sit up on the driver's seat and even take the reins. While their lack of timidity in the face of the unknown was partly due to their youth, it was also due to one of the boys' own existence as an outsider, who goes on to become a hero of sorts later in the story. Bitte-Niels is "et Sognebarn" (161) ["a parishioner"], allegedly an 'orphan', raised by the community because no one wants to acknowledge him. He has nothing to lose and, on this day, up on the coachman's box, he gains not only the admiring glances of the villagers (and various fathers, who can suddenly imagine having been the cause of Mette Skråderpige's secret pregnancy all those years ago), but also an expanded horizon, an awareness of the wider world. Looking into the distance from a hill on his way home from the animal show, he sees the sea for the first time in his life, which will later take him to America. This act literally expands his horizon. For the boy, the circus was thus not associated with alterity, exclusion and fear, but introduced him to new possibilities and opened his eyes to the sheer size of the world. The other people in the small world of Himmerland are also forever altered by their experiences of the alien novelties of modernity; the sheer sight of the vast wagon train "blev aldrig siden glemt, det berørte mange med en Oplevelsens Panik, saa at det gussede i dem" (155) ["was never since forgotten, it touched many of them with a panic of experience, so that they shuddered"]. In this remote region of the Northern Jutland, the arrival of the circus stands for the shock of modernity, characterized by internationalization, technology and acceleration. Aesthetically, the confrontation with alterity and modernity is achieved mainly by means of the narrator's irony that presents the limited perspective of the villagers without comment, suggestively making the reader identify with them and thus intensifying the shocking impact of the unknown. But since the readers know that Aalborg is not "Alverden" (151) ["the whole world"] and English is not a 'false' language, their view of the events is doubled: Himmerland is both core and periphery.

The effects the circus on its audiences, which Jensen treats in a rather sociological manner, are the theme of a poem by Ola Hansson that concentrates on the individual psychological reactions to a performance. The volume *Dikter* (1884; Poems) contains the short poem "På circus" ["In the circus"] that describes the perspectives of two visitors to the circus, "Jag" ["I"] and "Han" ["He"]. The form of the poem with its rhymed, rhythmic four-line stanzas, each with three stressed syllables, evokes—through its regular and forward-driving rhythm—the round ring of the circus and perhaps even the steady trot of the horses' hooves as they canter around it. The rhythm thus alludes to the space of the arena and the playful levity of circus entertainment, to which the poem's two protagonists respond quite differently.

The speaker of the first half is bored, skeptical, melancholic; he snoozes during the performance and finds the acts dull. While other members of the audience applaud a clown's funny act, in which he is towed around the ring tied to a donkey's tail, the speaker of the poem is concerned only with himself: "när sinnet trevar i dimma/och tanken är slapp och slak" (Hansson [1884] 1997, p. 49) ["when the mind is groping in the dark/and the thought is listless and slack"]. He is a typical example of the world-weary fin de siècle generation, a 'tired man', who cannot escape his ennui even in the circus. On the contrary, to him the performance seems nothing more than a portrayal of life: "på livets cirkus tråda/vi alla vid slumpens svans" (50) ["in the circus of life/we all tread on the tail of luck"]. The razzle-dazzle showmanship of the performance equates to his experience of reality, which he tries to evade through his melancholia and ennui.

The spectator in the second part of the poem is his polar opposite: "Han klappar vid mästerstycken/av äkta, ädel sport/och stirrar med lystna blickar/på former av prima sort." (50) ["He applauds at masterpieces/of genuine, noble sport/and stares with lusty gaze/at forms of a super kind"]. He is enthralled by the spectacle of the performances, the words "sport" and "prima" are signals of modernity that attract this circus-goer. Since he watches the performance with a "lusty gaze" and it gives him "[e]n kittlande rysning" (50) ["tingling shiver"], it even has an actual physical

impact on him. It creates excitement and thrill that he can feel in “ben och hud” (50) [“bone and skin”]. This spectator is a voyeur, who enjoys the exhibition of muscles and bodies, experiencing the sensual thrills of the circus like an “eldskur” (51) [“shower of flame”].

The poem progresses from the dozing man of the opening line all the way to “blodfull sinnlighet” (51) [“blood-filled sensuousness”], which are the final words of the last line. It traces two extremes of reception, both contemporary: the blasé, passive flaneur and the engaged, nervous voyeur. Both have their acts in the “circus of life” and the same circus performance serves both ways of life. The poem references contemporary discourses on the body and its nervous system (cf. [Brandstetter 2008](#)) that revolve around energy and its loss, which find their most extreme expression in listlessness and hypertension. The concern is less with (sociologically determinable) alterity and more with (psychologically relevant) emotions. The sensuality of the performances, the music, costumes, lighting and colour, but especially the sensuous display of bodies arouses and satisfies emotions. The poem’s evocative language (“sinnlig skälkning” 50, [“sensuous shudder”], “stigande attrå” 50, [“rising desire”], metaphors (“eldskur”, “blodfull”) and rhythm, as well as onomatopoeic phrases (“musikkens klingklang” 50; [“musical tinkling”]) give form to this affective dimension. Unlike the first two examples, the circus is now not the other, but identical to the self’s experience of modernity as “the circus of life”; and as such, its nature can determine the poem’s form.

The circus’ emotional dimension is given a more intense narrative expression in Herman Bang’s “Les quatre diables”. The novella appeared in 1890 in the periodical *København* and was published as a separate book edition in the same year. The publication of 1895 saw a number of alterations by the author and was given a Danish title, but the following is based on the first edition. The text is about four trapeze artists who have known each other since their grim childhood and have been performing together since. After one of the members of this group, called ‘De fire Djævlé’ [‘The four Devils’], realizes that her trapeze partner has fallen in love with another woman, she causes both herself and her partner to plummet to their deaths during a performance. The anticipation of such a catastrophic fall is what keeps the circus-audience in the suspense—it becomes a cruel reality in Bang’s narrative.

The melodramatic elements of the story (cf. [Heitmann 2011](#)) emphasize the circus’s affective potential: suffering and privations, erotically charged attractions, suspense and thrills, love, infidelity, murder and suicide. The melodrama (cf. [Brooks 1976](#)) is prevented from lapsing into kitsch by the sobering depiction of the circus as characterized by hard work, even violent drill, and of love as mere sexual desire. “Attraa” (Bang [1890] 2010, p. 48) [“lust”] and “den ubarmhjærtige Drift” (35) [“the relentless desire”], or even “den altødelæggende Drift” (46) [“the devastating desire”] are repeatedly mentioned to drive home the animalistic nature of the relationship between the trapeze artist Fritz and the female spectator. Both the depiction of the tryst and the description of the artists’ performances centre on a body discourse that can be brought out particularly vividly in the world of the circus. The trapeze acts are scrutinized using eyeglasses: “Oui, oui, deres Høfter er nøgne . . . ” (12) [“Oui, oui, their hips are naked . . . ”] and the lack of corsets is noted. But this attention to physicality is not limited only to the voyeurs up in the boxes; the text itself relishes in it: again and again we read of “Nøgenhed” [“Nakedness”] and the visibility of muscles: “Som nøgne—hver Muskel saa’s—virkede deres Kroppe” (12) [“Their bodies seemed naked—every muscle could be seen”]. Sweat, effort, strength, tension and “alle Fibrer i deres Krop” (12) [“all the fibers in their body”] are highlighted, as are the effect of the costumes and the razzle-dazzle world of the circus in enhancing the attractiveness of the bodies: “Et Nu saa’ det ud, som om Djævlene fløj gennem en skinnende Stime af Guld, mens Støvet, der langsomt dalede, plettede deres Nøgenhed med tusinde Pailletter, der straalte.” (14) [“For a moment it looked as if the Devils flew through a shining swarm of gold, while the dust that slowly fell, stained their nakedness with thousands of glittering sequins”].

When we are told that “Det var som om de berusedes ved deres egne Legemers Kraft” (27) [“It was as if they got drunk by the energy of their own bodies”], Bang’s portrayal of the bodies picks up a contemporary discourse on strength and vitality that plays an important role in the history of science and ideas around the turn of the century. In his book *Grundriß der Psychologie* ([Wundt 1896](#)),

the German scholar Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) distinguished between so-called sthenic affects that are characterized by the body being under tension, and asthenic affects that manifest as weakness and listlessness (cf. [Brandstetter 2008](#); [Wennerscheid 2014](#)). In Bang's story, the love affair causes the trapeze artist Fritz to lose strength, which seems to threaten his ability to perform: "han følte igen de kraftløse Musklers Svigten" (37) ["he felt again the failure of his feeble muscles"]. Desperately, he tries to regain his usual strength by training. The scene echoes an anxiety typical of the time, a fear of losing strength and energy, that from 1865 was encapsulated in the concept of entropy formulated by Rudolf Clausius. Decadent and Vitalist circles alike feared this loss of vitality, though their responses differed. Since contemporary culture was considered a closed system to which no new energy was being added, one felt or feared that one had fallen into a state of anemic powerlessness. With Fritz's anxieties and efforts, Bang's story contributes a plastic example to this discourse.

The text's focus on physicality correlates with an implied skepticism towards language. The lack of trust in the reliability of language-based communication finds a twofold expression in the circus world. On the one hand, the society of the circus is international and multilingual, while the language of the country it is currently touring in is perceived as foreign: "Det [fremmede Maal] lød komisk, saa de andre kom til; og de begyndte alle—Klowne og Gymnastikere og Damer—at le og raabe og vrænge, højt, hver paa sit Maal" (51) ["The [foreign language] sounded comical so that the others joined in; and they started—clowns and gymnasts and ladies—to laugh and shout and mock, loudly, everyone in their language"]. On the other hand, the work done in the circus is done in silence. The time the four artists spend together is dominated by a curt, French language of command; during their trapeze act, the four communicate using orders, such as "En avant—du courage" and "Ça va, ça va" (27). Beyond that, they hardly speak. We are repeatedly told that they are silent when they are together; after the performance they sit "tause ligesom de andre [artister]" (14) ["silent just like the others"] and "Ingen af dem talte, og stille satte de sig ved Restaurantens vante Bord. Sejdlerne kom, og de drak i Tavshed" (49) ["None of them talked and quietly they sat down at their usual table in the restaurant. The beer mugs came and they drank silently"]. Their silence conveys that they cannot speak about the important things in their lives, be it their traumatic childhood experiences or their uncertain future. Language is not capable of expressing these fears and creating closeness. The often-cited verse of the waltz that accompanies their act, "Amour, amour", is ridiculed by what actually happens in the story. The circus is presented as a world skeptical of language, a world of bodies and illusions.

That the artistic feats are achieved only through hard, inhumane training, as we learn in a flashback to the artists' childhood days, is obscured by music, dazzling costumes, golden glitter and light effects. In Bang, the circus is a world of illusion founded on sublimation and repression. It corresponds to modernity due to its mercilessly competitive mentality, its readiness to take risks, and its illusionist capacities. Trapeze art brings out the 'as if' constitutive of illusions with particular poignancy, since the faux flight of the artists is repeatedly described using 'it was as if' phraseology. The circus world of illusions thereby echoes not only the fictional quality of the text itself, but also metonymically signifies the modern world, with its superficiality and treacherous modernization intent only on stimuli and satisfaction, as Bang observed in *Gründerzeit Copenhagen* (cf. [Zerlang 2007](#)).

If Bang's way of writing draws on ambivalent emotions, while also making use of melodramatic elements in this particular case, it seems to adopt central elements of the circus discourse. The question that follows from this observation is whether the circus is artistically equal to literature, whether the hierarchy of 'high' and 'low' art can at all be maintained. Moreover, the circus with its ambivalence of auratic and commercial elements calls into question the status of art in general. This problem of locating art and literature on a four-dimensional gradient between entertainment, economics, ideas and semanticization is touched upon in Selma Lagerlöf's story *En Herregårdssägen* ([Lagerlöf 1899](#); *The Tale of a Manor*). Lagerlöf's status as a modern author long went unrecognized, not least because her stories are often set in premodern environments and have a naivistic diction adapted to the premodern setting. Accordingly, she also chooses a premodern form of the circus for this text; a small, traveling family company that roams the villages with horse and cart, tight-rope walkers and a blind musician.

The squalor of the company is intensified by the old age of the circus folk and by the fact that their performance is at best a distant echo of former splendor: “[Blomgren] och hans hustru voro gammalt cirkusfolk. Frau Blomgren var före detta miss Viola, och hon hade flugit fram över hästryggen” (11) [“[Blomgren] and his wife were old circus-folks. Mrs. Blomgren was former Miss Viola, and she had flown over the horse-back”]. But the circus had fired them, because Miss Viola had become too stout, and so they now travel the lands as just the two of them. “Man gav pantomimer, man trollade och jonglerade” (12) [“They gave pantomimes, performed magic and juggled”] and portly Mrs. Blomgren blows kisses into the audience.

At the heart of the complicated story, however, is Gunnar Hede, student, violinist and landowner's son, who loses his mind when he tries to save his father's estate with a lucrative deal involving a herd of goats. Henceforth he travels around as a ‘Getabock’ [‘billy-goat’] and peddler without being aware of his identity. It is a story of mental illness, of a split personality and its cure by the power of love. He finally finds solace in Ingrid, the second main character, who had fallen in love with his violin music already as a child. As an orphan, she too suffers mental crises; lack of affection causes her to escape into illness and apparent death, from which she is brought back by altruism, affection and love. Using the naivist means of the fairy-tale and even elements of the horror story, Lagerlöf tells of existential and mental crisis situations and presents the human mind as being comprehensible only beyond the categories of realism. The happy end is produced by humanitarianism, love and the power of art. First, we have Gunnar Hede's violin music which, with the support of Ingrid's love, brings him out of his madness and back into his life and personality: “Och det blev så: för hvarje stycke han spelade, vek det skymmande mörkret en smula” (95) [“And it was like this: for every tune he played, the shadowing darkness disappeared a little bit”].

Secondly, when the Blomgrens and their wretched circus performance reappear at the end of the text, they seem to bring with them the question of the nature and status of art, since: “Cirkus hade förkastat dem, sade herr Blomgren, men inte konsten” (12) [“The circus had rejected them, but not art”]. Although the two old acrobats no longer perform trapeze and tight-rope acts, »De tjänade alltjämt konsten, den var värd, att man var den trogen in i döden. Alltid, alltid konstnärer« (12) [“They were still serving art, it deserved that one was faithful to it until one's death. Always, always artists”]. The value of art and the status of the Blomgrens as artists are emphatically underlined. Ingrid too, who travels with the small circus at the beginning, is said to possess a certain affinity for an artistic existence because she has such sparkling eyes—»Konstnäsögon« (90) [“artists' eyes”]—even though she lacks any talent as a tight-rope walker or acrobat. Her status is further confirmed by the name Mignon later given to her by Gunnar Hede's mother. This reference to one of literature's most famous circus characters suggests that artistry does not have to involve exceptional acrobatic performances, but rather consists in a mentality, an attitude that ultimately saves Hede. A particularly powerful expression of this message that art is a way of life is provided by the little horse that pulls the Blomgren's wagon: “Hästen var en liten, liten en, som hade brukat dra en karussell och därför aldrig ville gå, om han inte hörde music” (88) [“The horse was a tiny little one, which used to pull a carousel and therefore did not want to go when it didn't hear music”]. For this reason, Mrs. Blomgren always plays on her harmonica when they are on the road and whenever she stops, the horse turns his head around “för att se efter om karussellen hade gått sönder” (89) [“in order to check whether the carousel had broken down”]. Being a circus horse has become his identity—once an artist, always an artist: “De vor konstnäsfolk, eldigt konstnäsfolk, de förstodo vad han menade, när han talade om trohet och kärlek” (14) [“They were artist folks, they understood what he meant when he talked about faithfulness and love”].

In this story, art is thus associated with loyalty, reliability, passion and love; entertainment and commerce, which the Blomgrens once used to stand for, are subordinate to these ideational values; an attitude to life that focuses entirely on making profit is rejected by means of Gunnar Hede's failed business venture. That said, this idealism is complicated by the itinerancy of the circus (cf. Carmeli 1988). The little circus horse thus also arouses sorrow and pity due to the illusion it is

subjected to. It stands likewise for the permanent restlessness of circus life that is fundamentally opposed to Lagerlöf's ideal of a settled existence, as is biographically attested in her losing and regaining her family estate of Mårbacka (Edström 2002, pp. 461–71). The two protagonists of the story, Ingrid and Gunnar, have to be released from this itinerant life and at the end succeed in winning back the estate and their settled lifestyle. Art—Ingrid's "artist's eyes" and Gunnar's violin music—have to become part of everyday life and cannot consist only in itinerancy and illusion-making performances. And as such, the old circus couple has to disappear from the story before its end.

Whereas Lagerlöf's circus can be read as a reflection on the author's own artistic pursuits and the significance of art—the text has been interpreted as an allegory on her own writer's block (Holm 1984)—Bang's self-reflexive move concentrates on the circus's illusionist potential. Hansson's poem, on the other hand, reflects on the inherent intermediality of the circus using onomatopoeia and rhythm. The five very different texts discussed in this paper belong to three different genres and derive quite different aesthetic procedures from the characteristics of the circus: Ibsen's blank expresses the workings of rumors and the attribution of otherness, Jensen's irony mirrors the experience of alterity, Hansson's poetic form acts as an expression of the circus ring and its emotional impact, and Bang's melodramatic quality of the text reflects upon the discourse about energy and vitality. Indirectly, the modern experience of a crisis of language plays into all these texts, since the mediality of the circus, which is expressed almost entirely without language and takes effect physically, spatially, aurally and sensually, acts as a foil the texts can reference in their aesthetics.

In literature, the meta-cultural code of the circus becomes a topos that mirrors the experiences of modernity: the feeling of otherness (in Ibsen and Jensen), the sensation of progress, mobility, speed and technological modernization (Jensen), the ambivalent emotions and anxieties of these changing times (in Hansson and Bang), destabilized gender norms and a new physicality (Bang), and a challenge to the status of art and (newly acquired) mobility (Lagerlöf). The circus produces an expanded awareness of the world (explicitly so in Jensen, but latently in all the texts) and signifies the ambivalent values of modernity, such as risk, mobility, speed and encounters with the other. In Scandinavian literature around 1900, the circus does not represent a carnivalesque or reversed world, but a topos of modernity that can be encountered at the very heart of society. Moreover, it posits a challenge to modern writing and provides a model for modernist aesthetics. By revisiting the transcultural institution of the circus and its reflection in European art and literature, these Scandinavian authors thus make themselves part of the modernist movement.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Bang, Herman. 2010. *Les Quatre Diables*. Romaner og Noveller. Copenhagen: Det danske Sprog-og Litteraturselskab/People's Press, vol. 8, pp. 7–59. ISBN 978-87-7055-395-7. First published 1890.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2003. *Flüchtige Moderne*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. ISBN 978-3-618-12447-5.
- Berger, Roland, and Dietmar Winkler. 1983. *Künstler, Clowns und Akrobaten. Der Zirkus in der Bildenden Kunst*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer. ISBN 3-17-007720-1.
- Bouissac, Paul. 1976. *Circus and Culture. A Semiotic Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. ISBN 0-253-31354-6.
- Bradbury, Malcolm, and James McFarlane. 1976. *Modernism 1890–1930*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. ISBN 0-14-021933-1.
- Brandstetter, Thomas, ed. 2008. *Zeichen der Kraft*. In *Wissensformationen 1800–1900*. Berlin: Kadmos. ISBN 978-3-86599-036-5.
- Brooks, Peter. 1976. *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale. ISBN 0-300-02001-5.
- Carmeli, Yoram S. 1988. The Travelling Cirkus: An Interpretation. *European Journal of Sociology* 29: 258–82. [CrossRef]
- Christen, Matthias. 2010. *Der Zirkusfilm, Exotismus, Konformität, Transgression*. Marburg: Schüren Verlag. ISBN 978-3-89472-523-5.

- Daniel, Noel. 2016. *The Circus 1870–1950*. Köln: Taschen. ISBN 978-3-8365-2025-6.
- Dilling, Lars. 1884. En simpel Buket. In *Gjennem Lorgnetten*. Skitser. Kristiania: Alb. Cammermeyer, pp. 153–61.
- Edström, Vivi. 2002. *Selma Lagerlöf. Livets Vågspel*. Stockholm: Natur och kultur. ISBN 9127090159.
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. Of other spaces, Heterotopias. *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5: 46–49.
- Hansson, Ola. 1997. På cirkus. In *Lyrisk och Essäer*. Edited by Ingvar Holm. Sockholm: Atlantis, pp. 49–51. ISBN 91-7486-493-9. First published 1884.
- Heitmann, Annegret. 2011. 'Blodet suser.' Melodrama og emotioner i Herman Bangs 'De fire Djævla'. *Kultur & Klasse* 111: 67–82.
- Heitmann, Annegret. 2019. 'En Verden, som skrev sine egne Love'. Herman Bang I Cirkus. In *Europæeren Herman Bang*. Edited by Morten Dyssel. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, in press.
- Holm, Birgitta. 1984. *Selma Lagerlöf och Ursprungets Roman, Norstedts*. Stockholm: Norstedt. ISBN 91-1-843411-8.
- Ibsen, Henrik. 2008. Samfundets støtter. In *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter*. Edited by Vigdis Åse Ystad, Daniel Apollon, Thoralf Berg, Christian Janns, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, Tone Modalsli and Asbjørn Aarseth. Oslo: Gyldendal, vol. 9. ISBN 978-82-03-18994-4. First published 1877.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 1970. *Die Appellstruktur der Texte—Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingungen literarischer Prosa*. Konstanzer Universitätsreden 28. Konstanz. ISBN 3-87940-003-2.
- Jensen, Johannes V. 1933. Wombwell. In *Himmerlandshistorier*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, pp. 149–84. First published 1904.
- Joest, Birgit. 2008. *Von Fliegenden Menschen, Ratlosen Artisten und Unbesiegbaren. Transformationen des Zirkensischen im Deutschen Film. Genese und Selbstreflexivität*. Remscheid: Gardez. ISBN 978-3-89796-190-6.
- Jones, Robert A. 1985. Art and Entertainment. In *German Literature and the Circus 1890–1933*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter. ISBN 3-533-03507-7.
- Jørgensen, Aage. 2016. Omkring Johannes V. Jensens Himmerlandshistorie Wombwell. *European Journal for Scandinavian Studies* 45: 16–34.
- Kirschnick, Sylke. 2012. *Manege frei! Die Kulturgeschichte des Zirkus*. Stuttgart: Theiss. ISBN 978-3-8062-2703-1.
- Konrad, Verena, ed. 2012. *Parallelwelt Zirkus/The Circus as a Parallel Universe*. Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst. ISBN 978-3-86984-317-9.
- Lagerlöf, Selma. 1899. *En Herregårdssägen*. Stockholm: Bonnier.
- Müller-Funk, Wolfgang. 2016. *Theorien des Fremden. Eine Einführung*. Tübingen: A. Francke. ISBN 978-3-8252-4569-6.
- Muusmann, Carl. 1905. *Løvebruden og Andre Fortællinger*. Copenhagen: Fh. A. Christiansen.
- Muusmann, Carl. 1906. *Det Flyvende Cirkus*. Copenhagen: Fh. A. Christiansen.
- Reinhard, Joakim. 1882. *Fra Cirkus og Andre Fortællinger*. Copenhagen: Schuboth.
- Simon, Linda. 2014. The Greatest Show on Earth. In *A History of the Circus*. London: Reaktion Books. ISBN 978-1-78023-358-1.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard. 1990. *Der Stachel des Fremden*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. ISBN 3-518-28468-1.
- Wennerscheid, Sophie. 2014. 'Close your eyes'. In *Phantasma, Kraft und Dunkelheit in der Skandinavischen Literatur*. Paderborn: Fink. ISBN 978-3-7705-5790-5.
- Wundt, Wilhelm. 1896. *Grundriß der Psychologie*. Leipzig: Engelmann.
- Zerlang, Martin. 2007. *Herman Bangs København*. Copenhagen: Politiken. ISBN 978-87-567-7958-6.



© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).