Marginal Body and Bourgeois Cosmology

The British Acrobat in Reference to Sport

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ABSTRACT

Both modern sport and the traditional circus were crystallized in the context of the 19th century's new industrial order, its class structure and its predicaments. This paper explores the significances of an acrobatic act performed in the late 1970s, in a British circus, by alluding to sport and to 19th century dynamics. It suggests that while modern sport involves the body in play, the circus entails a textualization of the body. While in sport, bourgeois order and cosmology are naturalized, in a circus they are illusionarily transcended through the spectators' experience of "authentic" selves. The paper also deals with 1970s circus as an encapsulation of the nostalgic attitude, and points to the conditions of the traditional circus in the post-modern age.

While watching the performance of travelling circuses in Britain in the late 1970s, an outsider would have been struck by the similarity between circus acrobatics and performances within gymnastics' halls. The circus trapeze performance bears great resemblance to gymnasts' rings and trapeze exercises. Likewise, the circus trampoline act is similar to the gymnast's trampoline routines; wire walking in the circus (especially low wire walking) is similar to balancing on a beam; the circus spring board act is similar to gymnastics; and the tumbler's tricks in the circus are similar to the gymnast's ground exercises.

Apparent as these similarities have seemed to an outsider's eye, they were, however, entirely irrelevant to the local public seated in the circus tent. For them, circus and sport are worlds apart.

Sport has long been a serious matter in Britain. Thousands of people take part as amateurs, and millions as spectators. Its part in the total consumer expenditure is constantly growing (Hargreaves, 1986: 132), as is the amount of newspaper space and time on radio and television devoted to sports (Hargreaves, ibid., chs. 7, 8; Mason, 1988: 46-58). For many people, sport is "one of the central, if not the

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central source of identification, meaning and gratification in their life” (Dunning, 1986: 205).

Circus is different. The circus performance itself is confined to isolated, esoteric travellers, and is not regularly practiced by others. The circus is hardly presented in newspaper columns and only seldom on television programs. A circus show will be attended perhaps once a year when it comes to town, and is watched in the already traditional television program on Christmas morning.

That a circus performance can sometimes be combined with elements of sport is known to the public from their acquaintance with Eastern European performances. “Russian” athletes and acrobats visited London in 1979, and other Eastern European gymnastics on television also integrated some circus elements. However, these hybrids were considered “Russian” and experienced as alien. The circus’ prominence is indeed in children’s book and toys and is a subject of folklore as well as a metaphor in daily language.

Circus is considered as irrelevant to sport not only by the public in the circus tent, but also by the circus travelers themselves. In the “Jimmy Brown Circus” with which I travelled, sport was not considered a threat. The circus performers were sure that they were playing to a different public. In addition, there was not even one case of a circus losing a performer to sport and no sportsperson trying to join performing circus travellers in the late 1970s.

Given the similarities between acrobatics and sport, what is it that makes circus acrobatics so distinct and apart from sport in the eyes of the British public, and what is it that differentiates the world of the acrobat from that of the gymnast? And, given the variability of circus framings (e.g., the Russian example), what are the wider contextual conditions in terms of which the separation of circus acrobatics from sport and from the rest of society in Britain can be understood?

The first purpose of this paper is to contribute to a long-ignored field of circus ethnography and the analysis of the significance of circus body presentation. I illustrate most of my argument through one acrobatic act presented in Jimmy Brown’s Circus in Britain during the late 1970s. Sport (the body engaged in gymnastics in particular) is suggested as a comparative reference due to similarities in performance. Beyond a description of the acrobating body and its uniqueness, this paper alludes to body presentation as a perspective for its context, that is, the codes and processes by which its significances are reproduced.

An attempt at approaching context through circus has been suggested by Stallybrass and White (1986). Drawing on Bouissac (1976, 1982) and on Bakhtin (1984), circus is interpreted within Bakhtin’s concept of the world of the marketplace and the carnivalesque (and see also Featherstone, 1992). However, a Bakhtinian perspective emphasizes a world of representations, an order punctuated by periodic anti-structural liminal moments, a framed rebellion and tension release. A Bakhtinian perspective