Book Review


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In *The End of the Circus: Evolutionary Semiotics and Cultural Resistance*, Paul Bouissac brings both academic curiosity and personal passion to the care and analysis of this most populist of performance genres at what would appear to be a critical cultural juncture. Before the show even starts, so to speak, the preliminary acknowledgments offer a glimpse of how direct encounters with circus practitioners can furnish human context for scholarly discussion on such a topic. The book unfolds as a call and response within the writer himself, between diligent researcher and dedicated individual, for whom circus has knitted to heart, mind, and spirit.

Organized under chapter titles that liken the study to a work of classical music, the book begins with an ‘Overture,’ rehearsing in advance the major themes to come: cultural ambivalence toward the itinerant cultures from which circus derived; the move away from animal acts, especially those described as ‘wild’; challenges for clowns and their comic traction within today’s popular culture; and the performing body as risk-taking spectacle in the era of safety in the workplace. Bouissac announces at the start: “The purpose of this book is to confront these cultural changes both in terms of evolutionary semiotics, that is, the way in which general systems of meanings and values are transformed over time, and in terms of the particular impact these changes have on the individuals and families who experience them from inside, so to speak, as moral frustrations and economic losses” (p. 7).

It might be appropriate to acknowledge up front that this book covers a fair amount of territory, however provocatively, which might remain on the fringes of interest for the core readership of a journal in humor studies. Clowns and clowning would, of course, represent a natural connection to the field, and circus as one of their home habitats might well be of general interest. The book, however, winds its way through a much broader argument that chronicles changing global and local contexts, turbo-charged in the era of the internet and social media, which have left insufficient oxygen for a circus spirit that flowered in a history prior to the latter twentieth century.

In the first chapter, subtitled, ‘The Time of the Gypsies,’ Bouissac furnishes comprehensive consideration of the circus’ emergence through nomadic cultures –
first from the Asian continent, then later from Eastern Europe – introducing its forms, practices and, indeed, its exotic mystique for western Europeans. He emphasizes throughout the cultural biases of settled societies and their pre-emptive distrust of circus folk as such. More to the point, Bouissac endeavors in some ethnographic detail to impart the degree to which inherent elements of nomadic culture formatted the lifestyle, yearnings, and cultivated skills that readily served to generate what we now know as the circus (pp. 24–25). He suggests that a certain romantic allure of circus life comes from something of a mystical, soul-refreshing taste of release for the audience’s primarily sedentary clientele, a visceral taste of vigorous life unfettered by earthbound concerns and constraints.

The context retains a strong focus on the ethnic outsider status to which these traveling entertainers were assigned, and the pointed, if not antagonistic othering they have faced through contemporary times. Interestingly, Bouissac supplies a counter-slant to the traditional story of Sergeant Major Philip Astley presiding over the birth of the modern circus in the 18th century. Astley is conventionally portrayed as the upright cavalry horseman to whom we attribute the circus’ establishment of architecture and entertainment, while Bouissac proposes plausibly that Astley might himself have emerged from a British Gypsy culture, which he considered advantageous to obscure in the service of self-promotion to the general ticket-buying public.

As in Bouissac’s previous work, notes and recollections (stretching back to childhood and including first-hand experience with the circus and its folk) from his personal archive provide an invaluable perspective on historical practice, observed with a scholarly circumspection and subjective sensitivity. Through witness statements, probing research and no small amount of appreciation for the realities of traveling life – often referred to in the book as Romany – he provides vivid sampling of the human soil from which circus has grown.

In the book’s second chapter, subtitled, ‘Animals,’ Bouissac applies a similarly rich evolutionary contextualization, fleshing out the changeable, sometimes hair-trigger relationship between humans and wild animals owing to a fluid mélange of hunger, fear, life-and-death aggression and tentative, mutually beneficial acceptance. It was, he observes, against this backdrop of viscerally loaded subtext that animal acts made their way into the thrills and chills of circus performance – what it means for dramatic conflict between an untamed animal and humans in areas where such a ‘wild’ animal looks and fights for its survival. He goes on to scrutinize various semiotic facets of ‘wildness’ and their changing refractions in thrall to historical shifts in cultural thought. The book includes reproductions of period circus posters to offer illustration of the strategic sign manipulation, evidence of semiotic significance mined through costume, cultural
association, and the naming of animals, by way of imparting military stature, exotic danger, and symbolic identification, respectively.

Bouissac renders a sense of how circus in the mid-twentieth century traded on a palpable sensory tightrope negotiated between animal and trainer between instinctual, deadly aggression and a capacity for domesticity if not bottom-line trust between living beings. There will, ultimately, be no attempt here to weigh in on the contemporary debate and its presiding current regarding the ethics of wild-animal displays and animal training in the circus. Suffice to say that Bouissac seeks to problematize through examples and their analyses, what he calls the ‘creeping notion of personhood and civil rights attributed to animals in the cosmology of the contemporary urban population’ (p. 84), which has led to the erasure or denial of the wild animal kingdom as a seminal building block of circus performance.

Although Bouissac acknowledges that with changing cultural and social contexts, these close encounters with potentially deadly animals no longer hold the same psychic sway for many an audience within the contemporary range of semiotic systems, he proceeds to observe: ‘The radical changes we witness in the twenty-first century call for an inquiry into the fundamental cultural evolution that is currently taking place and undermines the meaningfulness of the traditional circus among many other aspects of the forms and values of human existence’ (p. 118).

The third chapter focuses upon what Bouissac regards as the waning legacy of the circus clown, serving as synecdoche for the traditional circus. With a rueful allusion to the generic clown’s fall from grace in contemporary society, he previews attention to ‘the issues raised by this semiotic undoing in which the external signs of the trade such as stereotypical makeup, slapstick, gags, and narratives persist through the force of inertia but keep losing their capacity to produce meaning (or meaningful nonsense) that can engage people and make them laugh’ (p. 131).

The discussion tracks the circus clown’s origins as a ‘norm-breaking character’ across many countries and cultures, with an interesting emphasis upon the semiotic implications of the clown’s makeup as mask affording license and signaling power for comic interaction with an audience. As in the case of Astley, above, Bouissac revisits the conventional citing of Joseph Grimaldi as a father of clowning within its evolutionary sweep of popular performance practice. He goes on to sponsor Charlie Chaplin as a transcending touchstone for modern clowning, noting that his mother was a British Gypsy and his father a traveling performer: ‘Like the historical Joseph Grimaldi, the mythical Loki, or the ritualistic Vidûshaka, he embodied in his productive artistic life a cultural icon whose haunting presence is still perceivable in the twenty-first century’ (p. 144). He notes Chaplin’s feted film, The Circus (1928), which leads to a further teasing out of the relationship amongst clown, circus, audience and culture as a primordial nexus of social communication. Indeed,
readers with an inclination toward humor studies may wish that Bouissac had gone more deeply into several of these threads for discussion.

There is perhaps a fair airing of some modern clown ‘teaching’ contexts Bouissac sees as skirting cultural appropriation through institutions or prospective practitioners exploiting the trappings of clown heritage and embodied repertoire for superficially commercial purposes. He also revises from past eras a reliance upon the comic currency of racist power vectors.

The third chapter thus unfolds as a forensic dissection of ways that the circus clown has declined or at least resisted acclimation and reinvention and he sometimes seems to suggest these ‘reinventions’ function as betrayals of some original circus spirit. For all its acknowledgment that traditions do change over time (p. 154), changing sociopolitical sensibilities are proffered as having somehow spoiled the fun of classic circus in its forced alterations to clown acts. But by acknowledging the distinction between targeting of timeworn stereotypes for comic ridicule and the defamiliarization of cultural conventions for edgy laughter, Bouissac would appear to muddy an issue quite relevant to humor studies and worthy of more nuanced dissection. As elsewhere in the book there emerges a sense of lament that ‘political correctness’ lies behind the inability of the clown (and therefore the circus) to remain as it ever was, blaming audience and zeitgeist rather than the performer’s recognition that humor remains radically context sensitive wherever and whenever it is attempted.

The fourth chapter, then, examines the human body and its capabilities rendered as spectacle under the spotlight of the circus ring. Again, Bouissac carries out a fascinating excavation of the acrobatic circus performer’s life and ethos, including personally collected testimony from some of the death-defying greats. From a performance studies perspective there is detailed attention to issues surrounding performers who devote themselves to the cultivation and maintenance of body, thought, and spirit for the professional purpose of putting them all on the line for the thrill of the spectator. He articulates for the reader the at once exhilarating and terrifying effects of high-wire and other danger-based acts and their confounding of a line between actuality and representation. At its penetrative best, there are glimpses afforded by Bouissac of the semiotic sleight-of-hand discernible in what has come to serve any culture’s constructions of what we call reality.

Throughout the book Bouissac elaborates his discussion through research, anecdote, testimony, analysis and a diligent treatment of historical, cultural and semiotic contexts, including valuable testimony or reporting thereof from illustrious practitioners. He summarizes the couching of his critical position “in the context of semiotic evolution, that is, the way in which the processes of meaning-making shift over time as the forces at play in the social and physical environment undergo
transformations that impact human life” (p. 216). It is, of course, contended throughout and conveyed through the book’s title, that symbolic capital invoked by association with circus can be seen to have fallen from grace in contemporary times. As has been mooted a few times above, Bouissac occasionally betrays an underlying resentment toward developments in western culture to which the ‘end of the circus’ is attributed. Aside from such periodic distractions, the book remains a fascinating, deeply felt examination of a seemingly eternal popular genre that foregrounds visceral response in a genuine exchange between performer and spectator within a fairground spirit – and which continues to invite interest for humor studies through clowns and clowning.