



Metamodern
Festival 2023

The

Metamodern Circus

Friday May 26th

NoFit State Community Circus, Four Elms Road,
Cardiff

Let's immerse ourselves in an exploration of circus art, workshops and talks to deepen our understanding of the times we're living in!

Book your free ticket via Eventbrite.

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Intro Zine...

Circus hit the peak of public recognition in the modernist era of the twentieth century. Since the 1990s, experiments in 'contemporary circus' have embraced the postmodern. Some cultural theorists now describe our era as 'metamodern', bringing together elements of thought and feeling from both the previous zeitgeists. Important aspects of metamodernism include postirony, reappraisal of craft, reconstruction of authenticity and a renewed sense of spirituality (Van den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen 2017).

Inspired by this relatively uncharted territory, we present: The Metamodern Circus. This festival brings together circus practitioners and scholars of metamodern phenomena to explore how the two perspectives intersect. We invite anyone with an interest in arts, culture and philosophy to join us, and hope this zine can whet your appetite for the types of conversation that we could have!



These pages begin with some notebook style musings on how studies of circus performance can draw on metamodernist thought, followed by two short academic essays. Filmmaker Clara Kleininger-Wanik documents a key circus institution of Bucharest with Iona Ramsay, and metamodern scholar Thom Hamer offers his take on clowning in the 21st Century. These diverse approaches suggest just a few of the varied ways we can consider circus in relation to the times we live in and the cultural trends we're experiencing.



Join us in May for more! 😊

Insert something you're excited for

By Katharine Kavanagh

As an emerging cultural moment in Western societies, metamodernism and its theories can be used as a frame through which to analyse any number of cultural phenomena. As an emerging field of cultural scholarship, circus studies is in many ways behind the fields of other performing arts in theory and academic research. Here then, is an opportunity to look forward, and imagine where circus studies can travel to next, using the metamodern frame as a leaping off point.



Source: — <https://www.deviantart.com/trainboy452>

I come at this opportunity from the perspective of a theatremaker-turned-circus-critic, whose PhD research investigates circus audience experience in the UK immediately pre- and post- pandemic. In these introductory pages I want to share some quotations that have got me excited about the potential application of metamodern theory to studies of 21st Century circus performance and production. (And some notes on how I see that potential application taking shape).

“metamodernist [writing] incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier cultural moment.”
(James & Sheshagiri, 2014:93)

“metamodernism reconstructs things by joining their opposing elements in an entirely new configuration rather than seeing those elements as being in competition with one another.”
(Abramson, 2017:np)

“the prevalent sentiment is one of irreconcilability; of the awareness that one position is irreconcilable with another in spite of one’s need to occupy them both at once”
(Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2015:np)

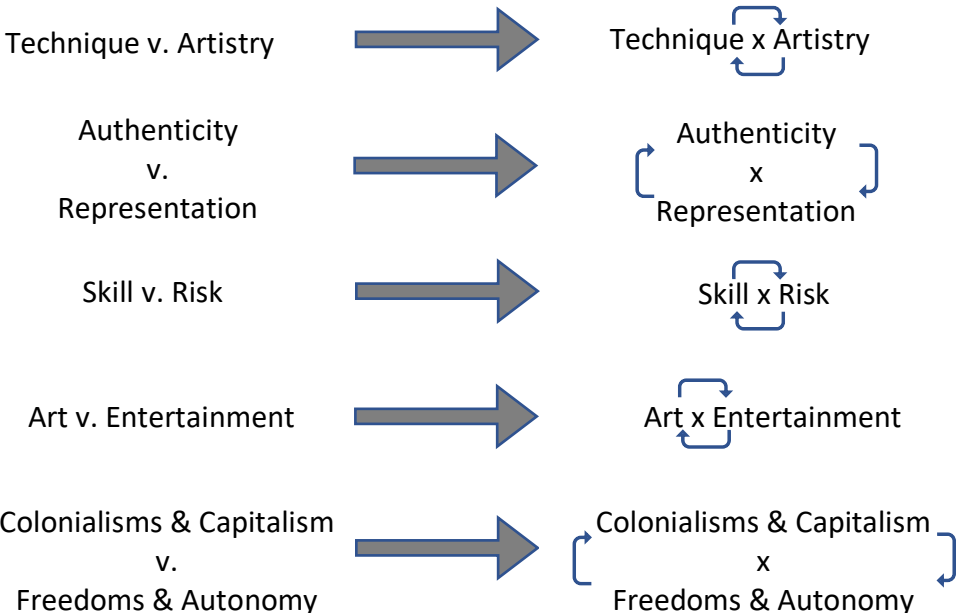
“Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. Aporias are ubiquitous. But it is time to move on from the long rearguard action which insists that reality is definite and singular.”
(Law, 2003:11)



“Both / And thinking”

A key feature of metamodernism, from my perspective as a circus scholar, is the oscillation between seemingly oppositional positions or perspectives. Circus discourse often

highlights supposed binary paradoxes of co-existing oppositions. Reframing these so-called paradoxes as oscillations - disrupting the binary - seems a more fruitful way of interrogating these relationships to achieve deeper understanding: *How* do opposing elements of experience co-exist to create the practices and experiences we understand as circus?



“generative paradoxes”

One practice-based approach to metamodern circus is that of Liza Rose, a North American aerialist, teacher and choreographer. She describes her work in the following email extract:

“In my work, I seek to make the mundane fantastic in an attempt to remind people that wonder, spectacle, and fantasy are a choice. Habits can be elevated to rituals, and that we can make anything extraordinary—even and especially a human body in space. And still, by necessity, as we practice and perform circus we are constantly fighting gravity and entropy, and that must be acknowledged by the artist and the audience in order to have authentic and relevant conversations in contemporary circus. The term “metamodern circus” describes how we theoretically, narratively, and finally physically approach bridging the gap between the spectacle and the struggle - and the ever present fear involved. This approach brings together the traditions and classical framework of circus and the narrative approach to dance or theatre, the artist employing a process of inquiry that results in a story, but respects and acknowledges the unavoidable possibility of catastrophic failure that both the audience and the artist are aware of.”

Elizabeth Rose

www.lizaroseaerial.com

(20/02/2023)

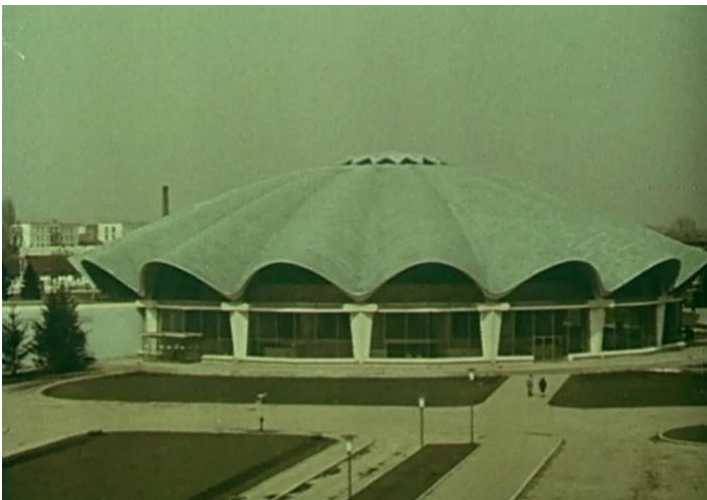


Source: [@thereallizarose](#) on Instagram, shot by [@ravenous_retina](#) for [@flymovementsalon](#)

The Bucharest State Circus: from socialist modernity to post-socialist transition

By Clara Kleininger-Wanik and Iona Ramsay

In 2017 I called my father to ask about what was new in Romania. Remembering my recurring childhood pleas to visit *Globus*, the Bucharest State Circus standing only a few blocks away from where we lived, my father told me there was a public scandal: one of the circus's animal quarters had burned down and the city of Bucharest had hastily decided to ban wild animal shows. My childhood fascination was not about just any circus, but for this mysterious institution in particular: an imposing UFO shaped concrete building in the middle of the city, between rows and rows of square blocks, the animals resided permanently within the urban fabric, behind a thin fence within the *circus park*. It was a state institution, the very opposite of a travelling circus, and had been built by the communist regime in 1960, joining a series of circuses built throughout the Soviet Union and the communist block aiming to establish circus as an official *art for the people* in Romania.



Globus, screenshot from the 1962 Sahia film Old Art in a New House

I already knew that the circus, where not much had changed since the shows of the communist times, considered the wild animals to be their greatest attraction. The artists and management had trouble envisioning what a circus could offer its audiences without them. First intrigued by the relationship that was possible between trainers and wild animals I took my camera and went to visit *Globus*. I spent almost a year there, and the film I was making increasingly turned out to be about change. The circus had hired a new show director and he brought with him a team of capable-looking, Cirque-du-Soleil-trained foreigners. They were to be the face of change and set the circus on a new path. This meant new ways of working, moving, and thinking: a new understanding of the circus show. The attention was shifting from the impressive bodily possibilities of the artists or even their courage to contemporary dance, narrative, costume and stage design. Unsurprisingly, the acrobats (not to mention the animal trainers) found this difficult.



'All animals must go', screenshot from No Elephant in the Room

Some of them were ex-Olympic gymnasts and the free form movements of contemporary dance were anathema to the tense gymnastic control of the body they had been trained in. Bigger and smaller clashes and negotiations ensued at every level, administrative as well as artistic. The film showed what was changing in the lives of Mioara and Adi, the two trainers who

became its main characters, but it also came to mirror systemic change in Romania. The state-funded circus was being asked to be more profitable, attract audiences within a new entertainment market and reproduce the commercial successes of a circus set not entirely coincidentally at the very heart of commercialised entertainment: Las Vegas.



Fetița, Fifi and Bolo, screenshot from No Elephant in the Room

Globus began its life, before the Second World War, as a private circus. Bucharest had seen several of these in the time between its first circus, opened by Theodor Sidoli, an Italian who had settled in Romania, and what eventually became the Bucharest State Circus. Sidoli put great effort into building the Sidoli Circus, which opened in 1888 on the banks of the river Dâmbovița. It stayed a family business and prospered, but in 1918 it took a hard hit: the circus's horses were drafted to the frontline (if they seemed strong. To feed the population otherwise) and by 1934 it had gone bankrupt and was demolished. In 1954 the Krateyl Circus, which was located on the spot of today's National Theatre, in the very heart of Bucharest, was nationalised: the Krateyl family, renowned animal trainers, and other circus artists working for them, were allowed to keep on working at the newly founded Bucharest State Circus, thereby also retaining contact with their animals, who had

become property of the new institution. Soon after, the communist party decided to start building an ambitious new project in one of Bucharest's workers' quarters, resulting in 1962 in the tent-like concrete structure that remains in use to this day.

This decision to create a state circus with its own prestigious showcase building reflected a wider embrace within state socialism of circus as a popular art form, and a wider regional shift in the support for and popularity of circus in Europe. The coordinated construction of new circus buildings across Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century was mirrored by a decline in circus buildings and funding in Western Europe during the same period (Divac, Krklješ, and Milošević 2022:5). Part of the reason for this was the art form's ideological potential: circus, it was felt, could embody – literally – the values that socialist regimes sought to inculcate and promote. In the Soviet Union, for instance, circus skits played an important role in promoting anti-American propaganda (Magnúsdóttir 2018:24), while the athleticism and bravery of acrobatic performers and animal trainers helped promote qualities such as courage, persistence, hard work and physical health (Efremov 2020). Circus buildings drew large numbers of visitors, both through the popularity of shows and through the introduction of organised trips such as school visits, but the influence of circus also extended beyond these venues: circus performances were often broadcast on television to domestic audiences, while international circus tours could help project these images of the socialist world globally.

The effectiveness of circus as a means to promote political messages did not necessarily mean radically altering its traditional form: historians of the Soviet Union have pointed to the ways in which Soviet circus retained its “element of play”, which enabled it to tell different stories and remain popular across diverse audiences. Unlike other cultural forms, such as film or visual art, which lent themselves much more easily to the direct promotion of political messages, circus remained ambiguous and polyvalent in meaning – and yet such a cultural form remained “no less suitable a site for asserting the legitimacy of the Soviet state” (Neirick 2016:217).

The promotion of circus within the broader cultural project of state socialism represented an attempt to display and promote a form of socialist modernity that continued much of the modernizing rhetoric around circus from the nineteenth century, which stressed ideas of innovation and technological advancement (Arrighi 2012). The Romanian state's promotion of the newly opened circus building in 1962 presented it as a "modern temple of an ancient art", emphasising the idea of circus both as an authentic art form of 'the people', and a catalyst for a new socialist modernity. The new building, with its "well-balanced and harmonious" concrete, steel and glass structure, offered "technical means brought to perfection", thereby bringing new dignity to the nation and to its artists, "who would contemptuously be called travelling showmen in the past" (*Artă Veche în Casă Nouă*).

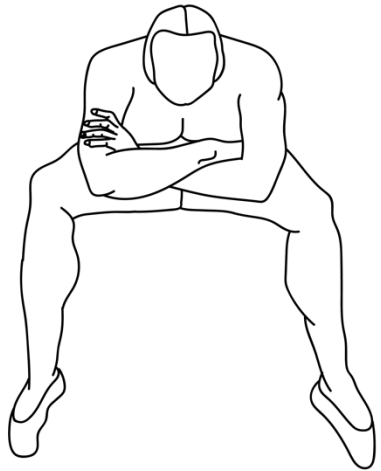
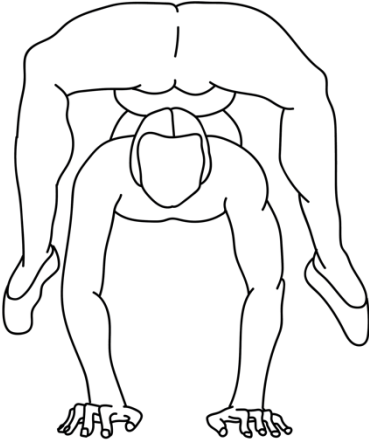
At the same time, however, such state sponsorship of the circus found crossover with alternative visions of the circus produced by Romanian writers and artists who attempted to go beyond these narratives, inspired by alternative readings of the circus rooted in theories of the carnivalesque developed by Bakhtin and others. The "circus humour" of Paris-based Romanian playwright Eugene Ionesco was revived by the filmmaker Lucian Pintilie in 1971 as a way of capturing the spirit of the contemporary world (Ioniță 2019), while circus also became an important theme in the art of Romanian magical realists, depicted not only in literature but also in visual art (e.g. Ștefan Câlția's circus-themed series of prints and drawings).



Globus interior, screenshot from No Elephant in the Room

With the collapse of state socialism and dictatorship in Romania at the end of 1989, the subsequent period of ‘transition’ came to define the country’s ‘post-communist’ condition as one of unfulfillment – a period in which the teleological certainty of political and economic ‘transition’ was confronted with the suspended, uncertain state of being defined by a past that had yet to be worked out. The Bucharest State Circus represented one of the many sites in which these uncertainties and contestations over the future were played out: in its efforts to grapple with its identity as a state institution while recovering its own history, in its uneasy and sometimes unwilling embrace of ‘new’ circus from the West, and in its negotiation of new public attitudes towards human and animal bodies. These efforts to remake the circus in successive eras point not only to its malleability, but also to its potential for re-making cultural imagination. Globus’ long-time artists are tied up within these contested negotiations, as well as remaining circus’s biggest proponents.

Dptych after Pyke Koch
by Thom Hamer



Beyond the Clumsy: The Contours of a Metamodern Clown

by Thom Hamer

(Cardiff University and University of Southampton)

In this article, Thom Hamer explores the post-clumsy clown: a metamodern persona who subverts the comedic expectations of the audience through their motoric excellence. In so doing, the author reveals a peculiar connection between the clownesque and magical realism – both preoccupied with making the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

Why are clowns funny? One important factor is their clumsiness. The motoric functions of a clown flout the expectations of how one normally goes about performing tasks. Problematic implications aside (such as the way in which the clownesque ridicules and ostracizes dyspraxia and other disabilities), this clumsiness is subversive in its very nature. It makes the simple complicated, the ordinary extraordinary.

This trope is visible even beyond the obviously clownesque, beyond the grotesque cosmetics and attire of Joseph Grimaldi's Joey, Bozo the Clown, Ronald McDonald and *The Simpsons'* Krusty (Schechter 2003: 139). Take, for example, Rowan Atkinson's Mr. Bean, whose shenanigans escalate to ever-more grotesque proportions. Going from one task to the next, each arising as a way to make reparations for the inadequacy of the previous one, Mr. Bean surely is the pinnacle of clumsiness. Yet, he needs no exaggerated lipstick, no green mohawk, no size-20s, to embody the clown persona.

MAGICAL REALISM

The ordinary on its head—we find it not only in the clown’s clumsiness, but in the domain of art and literature at large. There is a peculiar connection between the clumsy, on the one hand, and *magical realism*, on the other.

Whether it be in a novel, a painting or a film, magical realism presents supernatural or mysterious phenomena in a mundane setting – and vice versa (Spindler 1993). In Pyke Koch’s final painting, *Tightrope Walker III* (1980), a man walks the tightrope, his face covered by a grey piece of cloth, with a plate and a bottle balancing on his head. The setting is all but spectacular: it is a shabby apartment, ridden with water stains, cracks in the wall, and kitsch pink wallpaper. This is not surreal, for every part of the image is very much possible, but there is an aura of the extramundane amidst the mundane – characteristic of magical realism.

Likewise, in *The Arrival of Joachim Stiller* (1960), Hubert Lampo describes the supernatural and miraculous as though it were the most mundane of phenomena, while at the same time exalting the everyday to magical proportions. Confusion, perplexity and an eerie sense of defamiliarization are at the heart of the book. In his reflections on the nature of the novel, Lampo already alludes to the post-ironic potential that we will discover later: “If you begged me to clarify the vague description of Joachim Stiller, as he appears in my novel, I would ask you to imagine him as I would imagine [renowned comedian] Danny Kaye in an earnest role.” (my translation; Lampo 1973: 143)

In so doing, magical realism alienates the viewer or reader from their ordinary relation to the world. Thus, it manages to evoke a sense of uncanniness. This experience is described by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea* (1938), in which the protagonist is confronted with the enigmatic thereness of the roots of a chestnut tree, stripped from their ordinary meaning:

That root [...] existed in so far that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, repeatedly brought me back to its own existence. It was no use my repeating: 'It is a root' – that didn't work any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a suction-pump, *to that*, to that hard, compact sea-lion skin, to that oily, horny, stubborn look. The function explained nothing; it enabled you to understand in general what a root was, but not *that one* at all. That root, with its colour, its shape, its frozen movement, was... beneath all explanation. (Sartre 1938: 155)

As a result of this confrontation with the barrenness, the world becomes uncanny, estranged from the familiar configurations of meaning – divorced from the realm of common sense. Magical realism discloses the enigmatic nature of existence through uncanny experience (cf. Foster 1993: 62) – or, in the words of magical-realist pioneer Giorgio de Chirico:

My compositions had no sense, above all no common sense. One must picture everything in the world as an enigma. ... To live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness, full of curious many-coloured toys which change their appearance, which like little children we sometimes break to see how they are made on the inside. (Soby & De Chirico 1955: 24)

MAGICAL REALISM, DONE METAMODERN

Metamodernism is characterized, among other things, by its inclusion of postirony: the ironization of irony itself, through which one is able to be sincere and earnest again, as though in a 360-degree turn. Thus, metamodernism is distinguished from its historical predecessor (postmodernism) by means of its double

subversion. When the subversive has become the norm (historically speaking, in the age of postmodern pop culture), a paradox ensues: for, only by resorting to the traditional, the conventional and the cliché can one still be subversive. (Provided, that is, that the subversive has been exhausted and cannot be trumped by more radical subversion.) This is why writers such as Dave Eggers, David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith have embraced a return to sincerity and authenticity (Hoffmann 2016; Konstantinou 2017); why Sufjan Stevens resuscitated corny music (Seigworth 2005); and why directors like Wes Anderson and Michael Schur have made cringe wholesome (MacDowell 2011; Middleton 2013).

In the metamodern transfiguration of magical realism, the subversion of the strange-familiar dichotomy is subverted once again: the ordinary becomes ordinary and the extraordinary extraordinary. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) can be read through this metamodern lens. In this novel, Sethe is haunted, quite literally, by the ghost of her baby child, whom she had killed as a way to save them from the agonies of being born into slavery. When the ghost materializes, turning into a full-fleshed woman, the magical-realist blending of reality and fiction is ultimately subverted through the protagonists' exorcism. This *rerealization* is explained by Josh Toth:

the ultimate effect of Paul D's exorcism – that is, his rejection of the ghost's ambiguous presence – is an equally effective conjuration, the arrival of the ghost as a fully material and undeniably present woman. What was once a fluid, negotiable (or plastic) baby ghost becomes, because of Paul D's utter rejection of all things that haunt, a fixed and undeniable reality." (Toth 2017: 48)

This is, of course, not the same as treating the ordinary and extraordinary (or the real and the fictional) as such from the outset. For, it is only really post-ironic if the familiarity of the familiar is accomplished via refamiliarization – and the converse holds as well, with the re-estrangement of the strange.

THE METAMODERN CLOWN

Returning to the persona of the clown, their contemporary image is rife with contradictions, between outward joy and inner despair, superficial friendliness and latent bloodlust, and so on. The alienated clown in Edward Hopper's *Soir Bleu* (1914) and Stephen King's killer clown Pennywise exemplify this essential ambivalence. It is no wonder, then, that the clownesque lends itself so well to metamodern metamorphosis, in which oscillation between opposites becomes key. The potential here is too manifold to receive a decent degree of exploration within the constraints of this essay. This is why I wish to sketch the outlines of one of the areas of metamodern interest: the *post-clumsy*.

The post-clumsy departs from a setup of the clownesque, the expectation of clumsiness. Even without an explicit or temporally constructed setup, we already harbour expectations of the clownesque. We need only see Rowan Atkinson's goofy gaze and know: something's going to go awry. The subversive has become consolidated, the default of the clownesque.

Now, imagine Mr. Bean, post-clumsily: imagine him nailing every task, socializing in the smoothest of ways, doing everything flawlessly. This reinvention of the clownesque subverts the subversive, inasmuch as the post-clumsy clown has mastered the art of motoric functioning. The simple becomes simple again, the ordinary the ordinary, and perhaps the extraordinary and the complicated too become themselves: extraordinary and complicated.

Intrigued yet?

Want to know more?

Check out our website at
www.metamodernfestival.org

Or get in touch via
metamodernfestival@gmail.com

Hope to see you in May!

