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Research Methods  
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### Preliminary Research Proposal

In the last decade, there has seemed to be a shift in the performing arts world to a certain form: circus. Circus companies and schools are popping up in major cities across the United States and Canada with more and more people interested in learning the art form for recreational, fitness, or artistic reasons. Furthermore, other art forms such as ballet, symphony, and theatre are drawing on circus and circus-like acts to supplement their own performances. For example, the current Broadway tour of the musical Pippin was reimagined to heavily feature aerial dancing and other tumbling stunts ("Pippin the Musical," 2015). Circus is even getting media attention. Catton (2013), from the Wall Street Journal says, "Like it or not, it adds up to a movement – complete with an advocacy group. When circus takes over the performing arts, it won't be hard to figure out what happened here."

But just what is the circus? The umbrella term of "circus arts" seems to encompass a wide range of different kinds of performances from aerial arts, to gymnastics, to fire spinning, to, in some cases, performing with trained animals. From many accounts, it is clear that circus is experiencing a huge boom in the modern day with the ever-growing popularity of giant international circus organizations like Cirque du Soleil and the Shanghai Circus, but the boundaries of what is and isn't circus are growing ever more amorphous.

For my research, I propose to look for a definition of the contemporary circus. This could include analyzing the organizational structures that allow circus to take place, from giant businesses like Cirque du Soleil, to tiny groups of people

doing it as a hobby, to freelance individual performers. It could also consist of a survey of contemporary circus performances with a special emphasis placed on common performance themes and practices. I know from my reading that there is no agreed upon definition that exists in literature, but using literature as context supplemented with scanning the current field for data, I could come closer to a more organic portrait of what the contemporary circus landscape consists of.

To start getting background information on defining the circus, I first turned to the national circus advocacy group, Circus Now, which has some philosophical definitions on their site. These include phrases like, "Circus is art. Circus is a vehicle for beauty, meaning, self-expression, and social commentary, unique from dance, theater, or any other form," and, "Circus is practice. Circus is a unique combination of creative physicality and performance, open to anyone of any age, background, or physical ability" ("About Circus Now," 2015). From this, I can see that some general terms that help define circus are "physicality and performance" and the idea that it is separate from dance and theatre, though these definitions do not help when it comes to especially experimental performance art or modern dance: are those circus as well? Even circus historians cannot agree on what to include as "circus" for the purpose of their own research. Stoddart (2000) says that, "the glorious and diverse array of acts...we may find on vaudeville stages, street corners or country fairs, can be argued to belong to the circus because their performance in some way embodies a characteristic circus energy or aesthetic" (p. 4). Speaight (1980), on the other hand says that, "entertainment of human bodily skills and trained animals that is presented in a ring of approximately 13 metres in diameter...is the essence of

Circus” and that other forms do not count (p. 8). From this, it is clear that some definition is needed for all parties involved.

To research the circus trying to find an organic definition of what is currently happening in the field, I have settled on three different methods that could help me: a historical analysis through literature reviews and historical documents pertaining to the circus (advertisements, playbills, etc.), surveys of current circus practitioners and/or administrators, and performance analysis of a wide range of contemporary circus performances.

The reason that historical analysis is so important in defining the contemporary circus is that it gives background and context to what is currently going on as well as an insight into circus definitions of the past. Of all of my three chosen methods, this is the one that I have researched the most to gain understanding of the forces that influenced the art form through the more than a millennium that it has existed. For a general timeline, circus can be traced back to ancient Roman circuses, which were reminiscent of what many people currently associate with the word circus: acrobatics, clowning, and animal stunts. This form evolved over the centuries to a model of traveling minstrel groups that performed many of the same feats, which began to really catch on in Europe, and especially England, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but was snuffed out by the English Civil war of 1642 (Speaight, 1980, p. 15). After that, it took to street fairs. Concurrently – and importantly – trick horse riders called “master riders” were developing their craft. It wasn’t until Philip Astley, a master rider considered by many to be the “father of the circus” in 1768 thought to combine the practices of his equestrian shows with the

kinds of acts found at street fairs that the circus started to get widespread recognition. More than a decade later, a competitor of Astley's named Charles Hughes coined the term "circus" for this style of performance. From there, the practice proliferated Europe and spread to the United States, where it experienced huge growth over the next century thanks to the advent of the American railroad. Circus impresarios like P.T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, and the Ringling Brothers used the railroad to significantly grow their businesses while also pioneering a model of touring performing arts groups. Circus's popularity only grew until the advent of the television and cinema, which became a huge competitor, and by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had largely become irrelevant due to the tired three-ring structure, the high commercialism, and the growing concern for animal rights. Then, in the mid-1970s a European man named Alex Gruss began to define the circus to something more representational and theatrical without using animals, and some important American and Canadian circus leaders followed suit, creating the Big Apple Circus and Cirque du Soleil, among others. Since that redefinition, circus's popularity has grown and grown and the big organizations like Cirque du Soleil have experienced great successes (Wilson, 2002, pp. 27-31).

There are some large issues to keep in mind as I continue to research circus history. The main one that many circus historians have cited is that due to the nature of circus advertisements in the past, so many documents contain a huge amount of exaggerations and lies that it is hard to get a good handle on what was really going on. Falsities notwithstanding, these advertisements will still give a good feel of the circus, which is also important even if the data they contain are not

accurate. Another consideration is that there is simply not as much written about circus history as there is about the history of other art forms like the ballet or the symphony. Jando (1977) expresses this frustration, saying, “circus has a history, like dance, theatre, or cinema, and it is unjust that those who popularized circus arts are only too rarely freed from the dungeons of the past” (p. 7). Still, with the growing popularity of the circus, more and more works about its history are being published, and we’re in a much more informed age than either Speaight or Jando.

However, there is another concern to consider as I approach historical analysis, and that comes from circus’s universality. Circus arts exist in some form on all of the continents (except Antarctica, of course), but because the art form varies so much depending on which culture is performing it, I will have to be very clear about a geographical scope of historical scanning. It would be incredibly interesting to research how circus made its way to Africa or Australia, but if I want to focus on the North American contemporary circus, those accounts might not be the most useful to my research. I will have to note its international presence, though, because North American circuses modeled their current practices off of Gruss’s European model for example; the interplay between countries can be important. Luckily, I already have a good idea of general circus history, and I can now center on a certain location, as my research focus grows clearer.

The second method that I could use – surveys – is the one that is most dependent on what my research focus will end up being. Circus Now did its first annual “State of the Circus” survey in 2014 to see who all was practicing the art. Many aspects of their survey were problematic, including the design of some of the

more open-ended questions, but it did give a good amount of base demographic data as well as an example of the wide range of circus practices from the popular aerial silks to the more uncommon practices like hoop diving and knife throwing (Woolley, 2014). Because of this survey, I think it would be redundant to scan the field and see what apparatuses people practice. I see fruitful surveys going in two different directions, depending on what I want my focus to be.

The first direction could be more of an organizational scan of the circus field. I could model my survey off of similar projects like the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture's (NAMAC) Mapping the Field project, which scouted organizational information about media organizations including budget, staffing, income streams, and focus area. A similar scan of circus organizations could be an interesting way to get a good look at the frameworks that support the contemporary circus field. From my own experience, I know that circus performances can be supported by any number of different kinds of organizations, from registered nonprofits or for-profit businesses to small groups of friends who get together to put on a one-time show. There is also a large amount of individual "freelance" circus performers. If I were to survey these organizations, I could ask questions like "How many people do you have doing administrative work?"; "How many people do artistic work?"; "What budget do you work with for the average show?"; "How many performances do you put on per year?;" and "How much money do you make on ticket sales for the average show?" The main issue that I would run into with this survey method is that because all of these organizations are so different, it would be hard to ask questions that are broad enough so that all of the organizations could

meaningfully answer them, but specific enough so that it is easy to see the breadth of different kind of organizational structures. Because of that, it would probably be necessary to design a “smart survey” that presents different questions to different people based on how they answered certain previous questions.

The other direction that I could go with surveys is a more artistically focused direction. I already know from the Circus Now survey a general spread of what specific forms people practice within circus, but I don’t have information about what kinds of performances people do. These could vary from abstract artistic performances to story-based performances for children to ambient background performances at corporate events to skill expositions that have no narrative grounding. With surveys, I would have to create these categories, or let respondents self select categories with some guidance, like asking, “What is the main type of performance you participate in? (e.g. Children’s show, skill exposition).” I think this route would be more difficult than the previous one simply because it is less well defined. Anyone can easily say how much money they spent putting on a certain show, but saying what kind of show it was is much more subjective. Additionally, because this area is more personal, I could unintentionally ruffle some feathers. I have already begun doing some outreach to circus performers in Oregon about this project and one said to me:

Are you going to differentiate between tent and stadium circuses and indie companies with a similar aesthetic but no budget and/or contemporary companies that work in theatrical spaces with performance goals beyond “wow” and “sparkles”? I feel like many modern circus performers might wrangle (sic) at being caught under a definition that seats them next to something they artistically oppose” (Powers, 2015).

This is completely legitimate concern, and one I will have to figure out how to reconcile.

No matter which route I go, though, a general parameter that I will have to decide on will be geographical again. I cannot say that I am representing the North American Contemporary circus field if I only survey people who live in Portland. Plus survey design, implementation, and analysis all take time and I need to take my timeline into account and let that help me determine my scope, because I will not have time to go through a thousand survey responses.

The final method that I could implement to help me come to a definition of the circus is performance analysis. This would accomplish a similar goal as my second possible survey path, though I would be able to interpret the data myself from the beginning. An advantage to this method is that I could let the performances largely speak for themselves as I look for common themes. I also feel that observing the art itself is a more organic way than many to get a definition of the art form. Of course, I will have to keep in mind the fact that any analysis that I place onto the performances will be informed by my own biases and experiences, but that is the advantage and the burden of the researcher.

Due to the current age we live in, researching performances is much easier now than it ever was. Countless circus performances and recitals from across the world have made their way online to platforms like YouTube. Additionally, bigger shows like Cirque du Soleil's exist on Netflix, which will allow me to see a range of different styles. There is also a proliferation of circus groups in both Seattle and Portland that offer regular performances, and I could attend many of these in



person, which would be even more engaging and allow me to get the full experience of the performance. Before observing all of these performances, though, I would have to be very clear with myself about what exactly I was looking for in them. I could approach them like my second survey area: categorizing the performance based on pre-determined indicators. Another option is looking for common themes or skills that a wide range of performers represents. On an even more basic level, I could look for “best practices,” or what non-performance elements they all have in common like costuming, audience interaction, lighting, etc. The options are endless and it does come down, again, to what I want my focus to be for the project.

With this method, like the other two, the main question is scope. If I choose to limit myself to the Pacific Northwest, then the performances that I watch and attend will be a lot easier to choose. However, if I want to go much broader, then I will have to be much more intentional about why I choose which performances. For example, if I want to do a performance analysis of the United States, how would I choose to include a circus organization in New York over one in Texas, and how would I make sure that I’m getting the most varied and representative performances of the whole country? With YouTube and Netflix, my options are very open, but that doesn’t mean that I should go as wide as possible. Also, an important reason to temper my scope is the fact that many of these performances could be longer than an hour and half, and watching too many of them with very close analysis would be a huge burden on my research and writing time.

From all of this, it becomes clear that I have some major questions before I can really settle on a focus for my topic. The first question is a question of

geography. Because circus arts are such an international art form, there is no way I am going to be able to research its various forms as they manifest in different countries and cultures. Where, then, should I place my lens and tighten my focus to make my research more manageable and meaningful? The second question centers on my focus area. In looking for a definition of the contemporary circus, I could be looking for an organizational definition to see the frameworks that support modern-day performances, an artistic definition to find unifying practices and themes that span the wide range of circus performances, or maybe even a personal definition like Circus Now to get a sense of who the practitioners of this form are. What do I care most about within the circus field, and what will be most useful to my educational and professional goals to research? The final question is more of a philosophical one. From its inception, circus has been an art form that has defied definition. In many eras of its history it served as a place on the fringe of society, where those who were somehow contrary to the mainstream could present some part of themselves. Would I be doing the art form a disservice, and is it artificial to try to define something like this that might just be indefinable?

Even though these questions are daunting, I know that I at least have the base passion to be very interested in this general topic, and now that I have selected some possible methods I can start to think about it from a differently informed, and hopefully more useful, perspective.

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