Circus as idée fixe and Hunger

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Abstract: In her article "Circus as idée fixe and Hunger" Anna-Sophie Jürgens discusses circus fiction in which characters often display extreme, intense psychological traits. They are for example irascible, pyromaniac, sadistic, or megalomaniac. Particularly striking are protagonists with alternative psychological attitudes in fictional circus texts of the twentieth century such as Franz Kafka's hunger artist, Michael Raleigh's ringmaster Lewis Tully or Richard Schmitt's aerialist Garry, who can be seen as incubators of circus-related idées fixes. These literary circus characters develop fixations on circus that manifest themselves as a physical sensation of desiring circus like food, in other words: in circus fiction, circus-fixation appears and is realized as hunger. Jürgens explores this "voracious" circus enthusiasm that consumes so many protagonists of twentieth-century novels by drawing on related arguments such as the long tradition of showing (off) the deviant in mental asylums and circuses as sites of the "other" based on psychological explanations of idées fixes and monomania.
Anna-Sophie JÜRGENS

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The presentation of circus as a "sort of disease," a stubbornly pursued idea leading towards catastrophe, is a recurrent theme in circus history: "Showmen were shrewd, worldly, clever, and too adventurous to be confined to a single location, regular work hours, or the rest of the trappings of conventional life... They used expressions like 'circus fever' and 'sawdust in my blood' to indicate that being in the amusement world was more than an occupation, it was an addiction, something only those who were 'with it' could understand. As one showman put it 'Circus is sort of disease. Few men, once victims, are very permanently cured'" (Bogdan 83). Thus, it is hardly surprising that in circus novels and circus-related short stories, protagonists are so devoted to their circuses and their respective acts that they fight fanatically for their circus' survival (see, e.g., Raleigh's The Blue Moon Circus), give up a sedentary life (see, e.g., Prichard's Haxby's Circus) and, in the majority of cases, risk their own life in the pursuit of their art (see McLean's Circus or Kafka's A Hunger Artist). These circus people -- ringmasters are especially prone to this -- are incubators of circus-related idées fixes. They develop fixations on the circus that manifest themselves as a physical sensation of desiring circus like food. In other words: in circus fiction, circus-fixation appears and is realized as hunger.

Attracting up to 96,000 visitors a year, Bethlehem Royal Hospital, called Bedlam, was one of the most popular tourist attractions in London throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century (until 1770): "It was commonly regarded less as a hospital than as a kind of zoo, with a fine, permanent exhibition of human curiosities" (De Porte 3). In this sense, it was a common pastime to first visit the lions at the London Tower and then Bedlam. In America, asylum were also popular tourist destinations for day-trippers who would bring picnic lunches to eat in the park grounds and would also stop to chat with doctors and patients. And "virtually all of the great travel writers of the day -- from Charles Dickens to Harriet Martineau -- felt that no account could be given of the national character without a stop at a lunatic hospital. In its first decade of existence, the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica averaged 1,000 visitors a year, and in 1818 there were 3,000 visitors in a year; the nearby Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, a leading tourist attraction (Reiss 12). Michel Foucault described the display of mentally ill persons as a long and widespread tradition, beginning in the Middle Ages and reaching a pinnacle in the eighteenth century. The comparison with animal displays, menageries, and later circuses is ubiquitous: "In France, the excursion to Bicêtre and the display of the insane remained until the Revolution one of the Sunday distractions for the Left Bank bourgeoisie. Mirabeau reports in his Observations d'un voyageur anglais that the madmen at Bicêtre were shown 'like curious animals, to the first simpleton willing to pay a coin.' One went to see the keeper display the madmen the way the trainer at the Fair of Saint-Germain put the monkeys through their tricks. Certain attendants were well known for their ability to make the mad perform dances and acrobatics, with a few flicks of the whip" (66).

During this time, people with mental illnesses were considered to have animal-like natures, and what Foucault identifies as historical methods of 'safe-keeping' resembles dressage more than it does therapy (66). At a time when Bicêtre and Bedlam attracted record numbers of visitors (see, e.g., Hillen 26), Philipp Astley created his first riding school in London (in 1768). The circus-like performances that took place there laid the foundations for an extraordinary, worldwide expansion of the arts of the circus. Circus sideshows with their typical Freak Shows, which blossomed during the second half of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century, are particularly relevant when comparing the circus to eighteenth-century asylum-tourism. As Rachel Adams recognizes, "ironically, both performed the work of normalization by establishing standards for segregating the deviant from the normal" (Adams 15) (Reiss 19). Whether for animalisation or edification, both operated in a distinctly performative, if not theatrical setting: freaks and lunatics appeared as actors who were often coerced to display themselves to 'norms' because of limited life options. But while freaks emphasized their deviance in showing their disabilities, the asylum's inmates acted out a kind of script focused on healing and reconciliation as they had to show how they overcame their deviant states and prepared to return to a state of civility; to be cured thus was to go through an elaborate stage show, and sanity was revealed as the mastery of artifice (see Reiss 14). Also many circus acts can be read as 'crazy', 'insane' or 'mad', that is as abnormal behavioral patterns, or even as manifestations of manipulation and transgression of (social, physical and biological) norms. Examples include performers becoming a danger to themselves or others (cf. animal trainers sticking their head into lion's jaws or jugglers such as the cannon queen Claudia Alba, who, hanging upside down on a trapeze, holds a 244 lb cannon by force of her teeth, see Merkert 87, 139), and loony circus acts as 'Die Autobindlfahrt -- Mit verbundenen Augen am Steuer eines Omnibusses' (Krug, Winkler, Winkler 91). Throughout the twentieth century, insanity and circus are most apparently combined in the 'wild man,' a sideshow performer who typically appeared in public roaring and grunting, sometimes in chains exhibiting behavior identified as 'crazy' (see Bogdan 105). Nowadays, in Europe's most famous traditional circus, Circus Krone, the acrobat 'Crazy Wilson' regularly works on a large rotating apparatus called 'The Wheel of Death,' and even Cirque du Soleil attracts its audience by promising an exquisite bath 'in a sea of madness' (see Krone and Cirque du Soleil), just as with the travelling nature of the circus, i.e., its absence, ogling at madness and its promotion is part of the show.

A prominent example relating both "madhouses" in fiction is Julio Cortazar's 1963 novel Hopscotch in which a circus and a mental asylum, called "nuthouse" (268 [314]), act as catalysts for existential questions. Here, the ringmaster of the circus Las Estrellas takes over a psychiatric clinic figuring as doubling of the circus, where the circus crew including the protagonists had to 'getting used to the substitution of schizophrenics for sword-swallowers and ampules of insulin for bales of hay' (Cortázár 308). In the most charming way, the circus is described as hyperbolic sanctum: "Everything was per-
fect in the circus, a spangled fraud with wild music, a calculating cat who reacted to cardboard num-
bers that had been secretly treated previously with varnish, while ladies were so moved that they
made sure that their offspring noticed such an eloquent example of Darwinian evolution” (264). The
fascinating part of Cortazar’s Hopscotch is that the protagonists are actually bored in the circus, usual-
ly pointed out as sphere of superfine endeavors pushing the envelope. No wonder that Talita, one
of the protagonists, thinks: “the clinic was an idea of fear, of the unknown, a hair-raising vision of
raving maniacs in nightshirts chasing her with razors and grabbing stools and bed-legs, vomiting on
their temperature charts and masturbating ritually” (285). Nonetheless, Oliveira, her friend, is inspired
by both the Brockley of the nurse’s wing of the mental asylum leading towards the morgue, to reflect on (his personal) horror vacui and self-definition (see Jürgens 133). But circus in
fiction not only functions as intellectual catalyst, but also as a heterotopic asylum that offers a fami-
ly to the parentless, a home to the homeless, and a loophole to the psychologically transgressive (see
Christen 89; see also Foucault, Of Other Spaces). For example, August, the “paranoid schizophrenic”
aminal trainer of the “Benzeni Bros Most Spectacular Show on Earth” in Sara Gruen’s 2006 circus novel
Water for Elephants is identified as mentally ill and potentially violent: “August’s a funny one, and I
don’t mean funny ha-ha. You be careful” (104, 314). Other examples include Roxana, a pyromaniac in
Peter Carey’s 1994 circus dystopia The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith who fluffs the chance of a new
life in the circus-theater Feul Follet by trying to poison the novel’s protagonist. Michaela, an equestri-
enne in Guy des Car’s 1962 circus novel La Dame du cirque is another example, a circus equestrienne
which turns into a megalomaniac “princess” after an accident: “l’idée fixe est la première caracté-
ristique de l’hystérie. Michaela se croit, de plus en plus, princesse de sang royale! Princesse ré-
elle au monde est l’amour du cirque” (101). 

Michaela, the megalomaniac, follows her idée fixe within the context of a circus, a sphere often it-
self identified as a nucleus of many idées fixes. In this sense, Michaela’s ringmaster, Kier, is just one
of many characters who see the circus as the last thing to hold onto in life: “la seule chose qui me
reste au monde est l’amour du cirque” (156). In circus fiction, often this love for the circus is a mani-
festation of a fanciful pursued idée fixe. Idée fixe, defined in connection with monomania, is a
chronically persevering thought, an idea domineering over an individual, imposing itself permanently
upon its subject, irrespective of whether or not it is true. It is not necessarily the same thing as a mis-
aprehension or compulsive idea, and can be discussed in the sense of obsessive-compulsive disorders
(see Hagen 25; see also Bleuler 51, 57; Davis 10, 78; Nipperdey 13). In general, the person pos-
sessed by an idée fixe behaves reasonably as long as the critical subject remains untouched; however,
the (subjective) conviction that this specific idea actually could be true -- i.e., a certain obfuscation of
the sense of reality -- can be a part of the idée fixe itself. An idée fixe is characterized by intensity, ex-
clusiveness, and imperturbability, whereby according to Eugen Bleuler the difference between this
kind of idea and a very intense conviction of a mentally robust nature is not easily identifiable (52). Peter
Haffner defines idée fixe explicitly not as an early stage of psychosis, medical term or pathological
disorder, but as an elaborated spleen, as a “Stachel und Lust des Lebens” (7). For the purpose of this
article I follow his definition and understand idée fixe as a persistent, often visionary and vigorously,
uncompromisingly pursued preoccupation of the mind that resists modifications.

To what extent such an idea can be referred to as “fixe” is discussed by Paul Valéry in his dialogical
1934 L’Idée Fixe: “I allow for ideas that are ... favored ... above the normal ... for ideas ... characterized
by abnormal frequency, for ideas so easily stimulated that all other ideas, all sensations and events --
everything else, in fact -- become, to a degree, errors, infringements ... this obsessive -- but not fixed
-- idea is ... omni-valent ... attaches to everything ... Or: everything attaches to it” (28-29). An idée fixe
is characterized as a parasite on thought, as a torturing thought that slips away from the conditions of
time and becomes “un autre qui veut ... qui je dis devient un autre, un parasite” (14). Cervantes’s Don Quixote, for example, is infested with such a
parasitic thought process, he is a “head-in-clouds fantasist, obsessed by his idée fixe” (see Close, 106)
and a similar case is that of Melville’s Ahab (see Haffner 12; for idées fixes in Frankenstein and Bal-
zac’s Le Père Goriot see Davis 76, 63). Also Marina van Zuylen, who analyzed different manifestations
of monomania in several literary protagonists (using monomania, idée fixe and obsession synonym-
ously), recognizes that the idées fixes in Melville’s oeuvre function as anchors against the arbitrar-
iness and futility of life: “Haunted by the fear of a purposeless existence, they pledge their lives to a
plan, a project, or a person who becomes their sole raison d’être” (2). Thus, it is not surprising that
Wolfgang Lange calls such precarious states of mind the “Schubkraft, Motiv und Stilprinzip poetischer
Rede” (41).

In circus fiction, most of the ringmasters are extreme, egocentric characters, potentially dangerous
in one way or another. Ringmaster Kier in Des Cars’s La Dame du cirque for example presents himself
as "Kier ... Hermann Kier ... Le cirque géant Kier ... Le mien!" (12) and Dan Haxby, director of the Hax-
by’s Circus in Katherine Susannah Prichard’s 1930 novel Haxby’s Circus, who drills and trains his son
merlessly until he dies in an accident, is described thus: “he was only selfish and careless, like most
men, only a bit more” (137). Likewise, Hugo Ball’s Flametti, director of a troupe of performers, is an
other impressive example of whom it is said: “Ein Pyromane und Sadist war er von Natur” (155). Flametti
is prone to violent paroxysms that even involve knife attacks (27). However, at its furthest extreme
the circus itself as a ringmaster’s idée fixe is pursued in the 2003 novel The Blue Moon Circus
by Michael Raleigh, a novel following the genesis, development and ruins of the “Blue Moon Circus
and Menagerie,” the final circus project of a myriad of prior ones originating by Lewis Tully, an excep-
tional businessman of the circus’s “peripatetic form of commerce” and predestined for the profession
of ringmaster, as “there are a lot of men who can train horses and damned few who can run circuses” (10).
In all aspects of his life he demonstrates both an outstanding capacity to deal with serious prob-
lems -- “The Lewis Tully I remember would find a way around those obstacles” (11) -- and an unmis-
takable instinct regarding circus acts (13, 21, 306). Although at the beginning of the novel (the story is set in 1926), he feels too old for another circus undertaking, having already endured an enor-
mos. Yet, after the setbacks and breakdowns, Lewis cannot resist his idée fixe: he is driven to create
ever new circuses. He rebuilds his circuses after devastating floods (1), breaking dikes (25), and even
disastrous fires. They are the leitmotiv of his life: "The fire in Nebraska in 1917 had been something
else again; a total loss of a brand new tent and half a dozen of his wagons, and it had killed his show
for the rest of the season. Neither experience had cost him what he "shows a circus performer as
more precisely, his understanding of it, in a kind of "fetishized self-sacrifice" (Beicken 232)
that his keepers declare him mentally ill. There is an element of deception in his devotion to fasting, in his "embodied"
performance, a hint that this may be an obsession and compulsion instead of a circus "art" (see Kurz 79). Hunger
"art" in itself is a controversial topic and by no means does there exist a clear definition. His art of
food refusal does not culminate in the realization of an idée fixe, but in its fatal consequences. Here,
the afore-mentioned aspect of idées fixes and the obfuscation of the sense of reality leads to a sad
climax: "The obsessive individual finds an order, a modus vivendi, that simulates the sheltering condi-
tions of artistic production. The idée fixe, when it offers a life altogether wed to an idea, is a great
way of escaping from reality" (Van Zuylen 193).

The hunger artist's fixation on his artistic diet can be read (in part) as a symptom of an illness re-
lated to a form of autism, as shown for example by Bleuler who identifies the genesis of psychological
disorders in the individual concerned withdrawal from the world into "autistic" realms of imagination by
neglecting all relationships with others (53). Once the experience of this personal, autistic view of
reality grows more and more painful, Bleuler argues that the inner tension reaches a threshold which,
once exceeded, makes it impossible for the person to even perceive reality in itself. Finally, psycholog-
ical stability and self-esteem only become possible in a hermetic exclusion of reality from the imagina-
tion (53). Kafka's hunger artist as a type of narcissistic maverick (see Fuest 64) does not suspend reality and
communication completely, for example he still recognizes the public's fading interest in hunger art. In A Hunger Artist the audience's lack of understanding regarding the art of hunger increases continually as highlighted already by the first sentence: "During these last decades the inter-
est in professional fasting has markedly diminished" (243). Thus, the hunger artist is both unable to
follow the spirit of his time and incapable of integrating himself into it; he remains askew, painfully
aware of his position as a "personified anachronism" turning the lack of food into the plenitude of be-
ing in full control of his hunger, in short: "Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting!" (A Hunger
Artist 234). The only way he can get a grip on reality, is by holding out his anachronistic, hermetic art to
it, namely as slightly "autistic" idée fixe.

As is the case with Tully, Henry Miller's clown in The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder follows his all-
consuming ideal of enriching and delighting the audience with his art: "he wanted to endow his spec-
tators with a joy which would prove imperishable. It was this obsession which had originally prompted
him to sit at the foot of the ladder and feign ecstasy" (5). Miller's text tells of utopian dissociating,
transcendence, and self-fascination in stylin-egyptian style by a clown who feels too old, too sick,
too ancient, to see it. But long as you can see it. But long as you can see it. At any rate he would
sustain his hypercultivated circus act can develop into self-
harassment and finally lead towards death, because "by its intensity, the idée fixe blocked out the
haphazard elements of everyday life, restoring focus and meaning" (Van Zuylen 193). According to
Beiron Mitchell, Kafka's short story -- which has already been intensively discussed in the historical
context of circus and sideshows and that charts the protagonist's fanatic dedication to fasting, his
constant attempts to overcome (his own) records, his long public career in the major cities of the
world, and his subsequent fade-out -- is based on the life story of the hunger artist Giovanni Succi
(244; see also Kurz 79; Kruschwitz 152; Neumann). Irrespective of any possible historical references,
A Hunger Artist shows a circus performer as "martyr of himself" who is tyrannized by his own circus
art, or, more precisely, his understanding of it, in a kind of "fetishized self-sacrifice" (Beicken 232)
that becomes pathological. Obsessive and limitless hunger is the primary focus of his mind, constantly
proliferating into hunger-related sub-thoughts: "He had held out for a long time, an illimitably long
time; why stop now, when he was in his best fasting form, or rather, not yet quite in his best fasting
form? Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the
record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record
by his obsessive circus-enthusiasm, Tully pursues a parasitic idea that is an idée fixe as neither personal
experience nor instruction can change his mind (see Bleuler 52). In addition, in the novel the circus
itself is recognized as visionary idea: "There's gonna be times when your show won't really exist no
where except in your mind's eye, where you can see it. But long as you can see it, you got a circus" (28).

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form? Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the
record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a
performance beyond human imagination, since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for
fasting?" (The Hunger Artist 247; The hunger artist declares himself "mentally ill. There is an element of deception in his devotion to fasting, in his "embodied"
performance, a hint that this may be an obsession and compulsion instead of a circus "art" (see Kurz 79). Hunger
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Van Zuylen diagnoses a "desire for validity" as essential for individuals having a disposition for melancholy, and idée fixes could be added to this list: "Whether perceived as pathological, perverse, or poorly disguised maneuvers to counteract horror, violence, and depression, these idiosyncratic obsessions are powerful weapons that enable individuals to resist the tyranny of the everyday, the dictatorial nature of materiality" (6, 8). Overcoming a similar existential void by means of excessive training on the high wire is the aim of Garry, the protagonist of Richard Schmitt’s 2000 circus novel The Aerialist. Garry ended up in the circus more or less by coincidence: "I went with it because it was the easiest thing to do, because it was what I always did" (7). Garry performed many different roles in the circus under the guise of a vendor of souvenirs ("bent" by his tastes) until he finally makes his breakthrough as an aerialist with giant swings on the high wire. When he finally decides to retire from the circus and settle down, he suffers a breakdown. Garry is painfully aware of his homelessness and yearns to belong, be it to the nomadic world of the circus or in the sense of a conventional, sedentary life. However, he falls in both. His only experience of fulfillment and meaning lies in constant frenetic exercising. As with the characters discussed previously, his circus-fixation, circus art seen as idée fixe, fills an existential void and "lures the subject into a sense of agency" (seen Van Zuylen 6, 8). In this particular novel, this process seems to be specific to all circus artists, a collective phenomenon: "They’d think of a new act, run it by the old folks, spend a bunch of money on rigging, practice for a year or two, take it on the road only to become dissatisfied almost immediately and return to work on something else. They seemed to be addicted to practice" (164). Garry is hell-bent on his circus, a feeling he describes as a sort of (ravenous) appetite: "I ran for the tent, slipped under the sidewall, my face on the c" (151). His taste and craving for the circus and the lure of the high wire’s sphere of influence brings him together with Elaine, his long-term partner, and is also connected to the physical sensation of desiring food: "I wanted her history and understanding and experiences. I wanted to belong to the circus the way she did. And she must have needed the one thing I had: hunger. I was starved for what she’d had all her life, what was old to her now" (166). Like Kafka’s hunger artist, Garry is a loner: "Even in my partnership with Tino I worked alone. Tino knew that" (227). But he is conscious of both the paradoxical and treacherously dangerous element of that circus hunger: "And there was the danger. The comfort of practice, the constant repetition, the minute improvements, and a strict routine all had a lulling effect. I was hooked, addicted, to the lot, to the place I knew best. Practice was a safe place like wardrobe had been. A place like home yet not home because practice is not performing, and performing is the reason for practice" (166). Not able to find a true home in the circus, he quits, but continues to be tormented by memories and circus nostalgia. Since "nostalgia is death" (284), one thinks of the hunger artist, Garry leaves his real life behind in the circus, and continues living without life.

The discussion of circus as hunger thus offers an actualization of notions of the individual human body and life in circus fiction. But in the nineteenth century, it could be argued, the idea of running away with the circus attained inflationary dimensions and also became something of a collective idée fixe: "The richest, the noblest women, those with the highest titles, beautiful or bold, have a single idée fixe, a single ambition! to strut upon the stage, the strollers’ platform or even on the tightrope, or to descent into the circus ring or the hippodrome track, to rival professional actresses, bareback riders and acrobats in the sporting of glad-rags for hired applause, for the admiration of journalists; they even fight over lovers at drunken parties!” (Jones 150).

In conclusion, a particular penchant, or voracity, for circus happens not only to affect circus admirers, but also circus performers themselves. In circus fiction, their circus enthusiasm can easily be more than “a bit,” more than a simple tic or “regular” fascination. Instead, it becomes an idée fixe as they “introduce us to lives that have been radically shaped by a double project: to construct controllability over their bodies, to escape the limits of normal and to find a set of indestructible norms that guarantee that somewhere still lies the promise of permanence” (Van Zuylen 3). The protagonists in the texts I discuss are enraptured by the circus, which seems to give meaning to their lives and helps them to resist repeated breakdowns (like Lewis Tully) or changing times (A Hunger Artist). Spellbound by the circus, they oscillate between their specific idées fixes and less domesticated forms of psychological alternatives. Thus, these texts elucidate that any kind of circus “obsession, even though it ends up consuming one’s life, is a poisonous delight” (Van Zylen 24). Circus-fixated literary protagonists experience their idées fixes as an all-consuming domination as hunger and thus as a physical sensation that seems adequate to the circus itself, which after all is a cultural phenomenon that demonstrates the apotheosis of the body.


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