


Circus as idée fixe and Hunger

Anna-Sophie Jürgens
University of München

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Anna-Sophie Jürgens,
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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

Circus as *idée fixe* and Hunger

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, Bethlem 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, asylums 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 2,700 visitors a year, outstripping 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). Whether for amusement 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 asylums' 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 244lb cannon by force of her teeth, see Merkert 87, 139), and loony circus acts as "Die Autoblindfahrt -- 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 traveling 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 Cortázar'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" (Cortázar 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 numbers that had been secretly treated previously with valerian, 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 Cortázar's *Hopscotch* is that the protagonists are actually bored in the circus, usually pointed out as sphere of superhuman 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 roof hole of the circus tent and the elevator shaft 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 family 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" animal trainer of the "Benzini 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 Feu Follet by trying to poison the novel's protagonist. Michaela, an equestrienne in Guy des Cars'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 caractéristique de la démence. Michaela se croit, de plus en plus, princesse de sang royale! Princesse régnante de je ne sais quel royaume imaginaire, dominant une cour fantôme" (101).

Michaela, the megalomaniac, follows her *idée fixe* within the context of a circus, a sphere often itself 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 manifestation of a fanatically 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 misapprehension 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 possessed 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 part of the *idée fixe* itself. An *idée fixe* is characterized by intensity, exclusiveness, 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 modification.

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 ... *omnivalent* ... 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 thought and becomes "une pensée qui torture un homme échappé aux conditions de la pensée; 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 Balzac'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 synonymously), recognizes that the *idées fixes* in Melville's oeuvre function as anchors against the arbitrariness 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 Haxby's Circus in Katherine Susannah Prichard's 1930 novel *Haxby's Circus*, who drills and trains his son mercilessly 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 another impressive example of whom it is said: "Ein Pyromane und Sadist war er von Natur" (155). Flametti is prone to violent overreactions 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 originated by Lewis Tully, an exceptional 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 problems -- "The Lewis Tully I remember would find a way around those obstacles" (11) -- and an unmis-

takable instinct for quality 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 elaborate history of 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'd lost in the fall of 1919, when he'd gone through accident and injury, stock lost to hoof-and-mouth or pneumonia, defections and a great paper tower of bills he could no longer pay; then the washout, a grey wall of river water taking his wagons, equipment, the tent" (26). Moreover, his circuses withstood severe struggles with "townies" and rival enterprises (80, 147, 259, 273), with escaped animals (243), and even survived manifold acts of sabotage (86). Lewis was aware of all this, as is typical for bearers of an *idée fixe*, before creating the Blue Moon Circus: "Without willing it, he saw in his mind's eye all that could go wrong with a small, poorly financed show, all the many ways a circus could come apart, all of them troubles he had known: bad weather and fire, poor transport, sick people and sick animals, injury and even death to one or both. Hostile towns and poor ones. Competition from bigger circuses -- hell, they were all bigger circuses. And old, old enmities" (12). Nevertheless, even after the destruction of the Blue Moon Circus, again by a fire, a continuation of the circus cycle is a *perpetuum-mobile* (324). Driven 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 nowhere except in your mind's eye, where you can see it. But long as you can see it, you got a circus" (28).

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 spectators 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-fulfillment in showing excessive circus-frenzy exercised by a clown. Here, the *idée fixe* is no longer focused on the circus as a complex microcosm and business venture per se, but on the art of circus itself, on a refined and virtuosic circus act. Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* elucidates to what extent such a rapturous focus on one's own 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 Breon 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 323) 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 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 has to fast so 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 conditions 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 related 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, psychological stability and self-esteem only become possible in a hermetic exclusion of reality from the imagination (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 interest 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 being in full control of his hunger, in short: "Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting!" (*A Hunger Artist* 254). 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*.

Van Zuylen diagnoses a "desire for validity" as essential for individuals having a disposition for monomania, and *idées fixes* could be added to this list: "Whether perceived as pathological, perverse, or poorly disguised maneuvers to counteract *horror vacui* 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 universe, from elephant guide ("bullhand") to vendor of souvenirs ("butcher") 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 fails 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 canvas. I wanted to eat that too" (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 controllable spaces that protect these characters from the full range of life's shocks and disorders, 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 Zuylen 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.

Note: "Circus as *idée fixe* and Hunger" is based on Jürgens, Anna-Sophie. *Die Poetik des Zirkus. Die Ästhetik des Hyperbolischen im Roman*. Doctoral Diss. München: U of München, 2015. Copyright release to the author.

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Author's profile: Anna-Sophie Jürgens conduct research at Australian National University where she is a Humboldt Fellow. Her interests in research include modern and contemporary circus fiction, the history of (violent) clowns, aesthetics and poeologies of knowledge, and science in fiction. Jürgens's recent publications include the single-authored book *Poetik des Zirkus. Die Ästhetik des Hyperbolischen im Roman* (2016), the edited volume *Patterns of Dis/Order* (Ed. with M. Wierschem, 2017), and the article "Clownesque Zirkuskunstfiguren. Zu Wandel und Werken des Zirkus-clowns in der Literatur," *Über den Clown. Künstlerische und theoretische Perspektiven* (Ed. Richard Weihe, 2016). E-mail: <anna-sophie.jurgens@anu.edu.au>