

'Dresse-toi!' Perspectives on the (Re)Valorisation of Nonhuman Animal Performers in Contemporary Circus

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Abstract: It is the aim of this article to critically assess the (re)valorisation of nonhuman animals in contemporary circus. Though contemporary circus has declared itself to be an 'animal-free' artform, animals have been increasingly reappearing in contemporary circus performances over the past few years. In opposition to traditional circus, neither the presentation of the talents of nonhuman animals nor the demonstration of human power and dominance are the objective, rather, contemporary circus attempts to create critical and experimental artworks that function as social commentaries on the relation between humans and nonhuman animals.

This article is divided into three parts. The first provides an overview of the staging strategies of nonhuman animals in traditional circus, as well as a contextual map of the renewed interest in animal performances in contemporary circus. The second is an analysis of the contemporary circus performance *Dresse-toi* (2018) by Cie Equinoctis, which sets out to counter the human dominance of animals in performance through the lens of the nonhuman turn. The third part reflects on further ways to decentre the human being and the anthropocentric telos in circus.

Keywords: circus, non-human turn, anthropocentrism, dominance, decentre, relation, companionship

Introduction

'NO ELEPHANTS' is the title of a festival for contemporary circus arts in Freiburg, Germany, which was first held in May 2023. The festival aims to enhance the public visibility of contemporary circus in Germany, where the circus image is still highly connected to emblems of traditional circus. The title thus underlines one of the central tenets of contemporary circus demarcating it from traditional circus, namely, the absence of animals.

To declare the contemporary circus completely 'animal-free' (Leroux 3), though, is inaccurate for several reasons. Two of the leading contemporary circus schools in France include animals in their pedagogic program: the Centre National des Arts du Cirque offers a 'Certification en arts équestres' and the Académie Fratellini, in collaboration with Le Moulin de Pierre, teaches equestrian art as a circus discipline. Furthermore, animals have been increasingly (re)appearing in contemporary circus for some years now; for example, Cie Baro d'Evel (FR) performs with dogs, horses, and pigeons; Cie Sacékripa (FR) performs with a cat; and Théâtre de Zingaro (FR), Théâtre de Centaure (FR), Cavalia (CA), Cie Horsystèmes (FR), and Cie Equinoctis (FR) perform with horses on stage and in the ring. Their works are presented at internationally renowned contemporary circus festivals and venues such as Circa Auch (FR), Cirqu'Aarau (CZ), Les Halles de Schaerbeek (BE), and Scène Nationale Chalon-sur-Saône (FR), among others.

Although these companies only work with horses and other domesticated animals, thus acknowledging the contemporary unease with using wild animals to entertain, the development is still highly paradoxical in view of circus history. Since the modern animal rights movements began in the early 1970s, the presence of animals in the ring has been harshly criticised, which caused an increasing number of European countries, cities, and communities to prohibit shows with animals. This development brought about on one hand, the substantial disappearance of small family circuses, and on the other, the emergence of the new circus as well as the ensuing contemporary circus.

The increasing number of animal performances in contemporary circus is indeed surprising given recent countermovements in traditional circus. Particularly in the last five years, several renowned traditional circuses have created new forms of animal representation, such as the holograms in 'Storyteller' by Circus Roncalli or 'Écocirque' by Cirque André Joseph Bouglione. Omitting animals from these performances has become a marketing strategy. Cirque Bouglione, for example, references the current ecological discourse in its advertisements, 'Plus qu'un cirque... L'écocirque. 100% humain' (Bouglione 2022). Roncalli's decision to perform without live animals was even lauded ethically in newspapers, 'Hologramme im Circus Roncalli – Applaus für die neue Tierdarbietung' (Gensel).

Why have many contemporary circus companies now decided to include nonhuman animals once again in their performances? How do nonhuman animal performances function in the context of the challenges we are facing in the twenty-first century? The commonality among contemporary circus companies working with animals is that their objective is neither to showcase the animals' talents nor human dominance but to produce critical, experimental artworks that comment on society and the relations between humans, animals, and technology. At the same time, though, it is worth noting that the training and performing skills are based on traditional disciplines: in the case of the equestrian arts, for example, they practice the haute école act, dressage, the liberty act, Roman riding, and vaulting. It is therefore important to address the question concerning the differences between the nature of animal performances in traditional and contemporary circuses. The article thus critically examines the (re)valorisation of nonhuman animals in contemporary circus.

In 2022, I conducted a year-long research project, financed by the French Ministry of Culture, at Cie Equinoctis, a French contemporary circus company which lives, trains, and performs with twelve horses. We collaborated in order to examine how to create new kinds of animal performances. Our objective was to reject the common image of animals as reified, passive entities and instead explore their inventive, creative, and active dimensions in the context of contemporary circus. As a theatre scholar and dramaturg, I focused on the staging

strategies used to convey the relations between humans and animals. In this context, I scrutinized the company's previous work in order to inform our discussions and explorations of alternative staging strategies during our collaboration.

A selection of my research findings is presented in the following article. It is divided into four sections. The first section describes the historical staging strategies of nonhuman animal performances in traditional circus. Subsequently, I present a contextual map of the renewed interest in animal performances in contemporary circus. In the third section, I analyse the staging strategies of contemporary circus through the example of the performance *Dresse-toi*. This performance, created by Company Cie Equinoctis, is especially relevant here because it set out to counter the human dominance of animals in performance. Finally, I discuss alternatives to subvert the anthropocentric *telos* in circus. Each section reflects an understanding of circus as an artform that is in continuous dialogue with its historico-cultural context.

Staging dominance – animal performances in the traditional circus

The history of modern circus is filled with animals.¹ Astley's circus, which is mythologised as the first (institutionalized) circus,² was originally an artistic riding school. Its shows, which were dominated by horsemanship and enriched by jugglers and fairground artists, took place in the circular, eponymous ring. In the twentieth century, military horses were accompanied by wild animals such as lions, tigers, and elephants (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances*). In France, due to the omnipresence of animals in shows, circus was assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture instead of the Ministry of Culture until 1980 (cf. Guy). Animals are nearly always present in pop cultural representations of the circus, whether in films (such as 'Water for Elephants' or 'Dumbo'), advertisements (such as 'Gut gebrüllt, Löwe', Amp), toys, or on children's clothing. Because these representations typically refer to the circus of past centuries, the image of a stagnating, outdated genre has pervaded.

The omnipresence of animals in traditional circus performances during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and beginning of the twentieth century is a reflection of the zeitgeist. The modern circus emerged as the equestrian arts, which were formerly only known among military men

and elite riding companies, began gaining popularity (Hodak 30). At the crossroads of the commercialisation of leisure activities and war, (equestrian) circus performances delivered 'propaganda that encouraged the social acceptance of conquering military wars and oppressive practices' (Tait, 'Animals, Circus and War' 128). In 1750, several equestrian artists from London began organising public performances (Hodak 35 ff.) that also travelled to continental Europe (Hodak 115). Among these equestrian showmen was Philip Astley.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the trade with so-called exotic animals and their displays in zoos and traveling menageries experienced a boom, no doubt due to increasing global mobility and faster transport routes (especially the opening of the Suez Canal in 1870; cf. Hildbrand xxxv). With the colonial expansion of Europe in the late nineteenth century, wild animals became integral to traditional circus performances.

How the relations between humans and animals were staged – be they horses, wild, or so-called exotic animals – echoed the predominant ideologies of the industrial revolution, capitalism, and colonialism. The institution of the 'circus' evolved during this period, which can be called the peak phase of anthropocentrism: human dominance over other species (whether human or nonhuman) was the centre of public interest.

In the traditional circus, two main staging strategies were used to accentuate human superiority in acts involving animals. These have been identified by Peta Tait in *Wild and Dangerous Performances* (1). Wild and domestic animals were presented as dangerous. Big cats were trained to roar on cue, horses were instructed to rear, crocodiles were made to open their mouths. Through whip sounds and big gestures, human performers underlined the need for dressage and domestication. This mode of staging, according to Tait, alludes to a complicated emotional dynamic in which 'a big cat trainer describes enacting a persona of nervousness and fear to heighten the act's impression of danger for spectators, while simultaneously performing relaxed calmness towards the animal performers in order to mask any fear of them' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 3). What becomes very clear from Tait's analysis is that these relations in circus are first and foremost staged, provoked by a specific dramaturgy and staging strategy. The actual relation between trainer, presenter, and animal performer is therefore not necessarily visible.

On the other hand, separately from the staging of human dominance, the animals of traditional circus were anthropomorphized: 'Elephants learnt to dance, pose on one leg and embrace each other with their trunks' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 1). In the words of Una Chaudhuri ('Animal Rites', *The Stage Lives of Animals*), they 'are forced to perform us, to ceaselessly serenade us with our own fantasies: I want to walk like you, talk like you'. As Tait points out, the gestures of the humans on stage were downplayed in order to increase the animal's anthropomorphic impression. One must consider 'the process by which humans anthropomorphize [...] [the animals] with and through their emotions. Animal bodies became enveloped in human emotions' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 1). The superiority of the human species here is hence based on an anthropocentric worldview.

Even though Tait argues that 'big cat and elephant acts in the live circus changed in response to shifting social preferences influenced by the cinema and television of the 1960s and by animal rights campaigns from the 1970s' (*Wild and Dangerous* 8), most animal acts in traditional circus performances of the twenty-first century are still aligned with these two strategies. The socio-cultural context, however, has changed.

Contradictory mastery: animal performances in the contemporary circus

Now that the historical background has been filled in, it is possible to examine the ideologies, questions, and interests of the present age. In what way can contemporary circus performances with nonhuman animal performers be read as a response to current discourses and challenges?

According to Richard Grusin, '[A]lmost every problem of note that we face in the twenty-first century entails engagement with nonhumans – from climate change, drought, and famine; to biotechnology, intellectual property, and privacy; to genocide, terrorism, and war' (Grusin vii). Consequently, he demands 'future attention, resources, and energy toward the nonhuman' (vii). This perspective is shared by many thinkers of our time: the so-called nonhuman turn encompasses a variety of ideas, such as new materialism (Barad; Bennett; Coole and Frost), speculative realism (Harman; Bogost; Morton), animal studies (Haraway, *The Companion Species*

Manifesto; Despret), and post-humanism (Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*; Hayles; Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*). These thinkers focus on nonhuman entities, processes, agency, and performativity as a contra position to dominant anthropocentric perspectives.

This turn is by no means limited to academia; it is also evident in the arts. In contemporary circus performances, for instance, diverse staging strategies – such as using nonhuman performers and objects, performing in nature, rigging in a way that underlines the natural powers at stake, and immersive scenographies – are used to subvert the anthropocentric telos.

The reappearing interest in performing with nonhuman animals in the context of contemporary circus could be understood as part of this development.³ The returning enthusiasm to see the interplay between human and nonhuman animals on stage and in the ring is, in my opinion, an important development in the frame of the ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin). Performing with nonhuman (domestic) animals can be a chance to ‘challenge the unthinking anthropocentrism of drama and theatre and ground a growing art practice that thinks humanity beyond the human’ (Chaudhuri ‘Introduction’, *Stage Lives*). What does this mean? On a very basic level, such performances offer a high level of nonhuman presence on stage (cf. Fischer-Lichte). This is also relevant insofar as increasing urbanisation is causing the copresence and cohabitation of human and nonhuman animals to literally disappear before our eyes. In the performance context, nonhuman animals usually enter human cultural spaces (such as theatres), an act which undermines the nature/culture opposition and heterotopias of ‘nature in culture’ (cf. Chaudhuri ‘Animal Geographies’, *Stage Lives*). In the traditional circus, the nonhuman animal was representative of commodification and the domestication of the alien, the exotic, and the natural;⁴ but in the context of the nonhuman turn, conscious effort is made to avoid this very reception. If we turn our attention to the animal gaze during a performance (cf. Chaudhuri ‘(De)Facing the Animal’, *Stage Lives*), we might be confronted with alternative etymologies and ontologies. Through the observation of herds and other forms of animal cohabitation, human communities can be questioned, and new forms of human and nonhuman animal companionship can be created (see Haraway, ‘The Haraway Reader’). Nonhuman animal performances furthermore manifest human and nonhuman relations in a way that transcends questions of

climate change, environmental disasters, and technological advancements, which are ubiquitous in the discourse on the nonhuman turn. Such performances can decentre the human being on stage and open up a space for us to question, problematize, or even subvert human dominance.

However, the mere presence of an animal performer on stage or in the ring does not automatically create a non-anthropocentric focus. On the contrary, as noted in the previous section, animal acts in the traditional circus consciously underlined human dominance, so that they became emblematic of an anthropocentric worldview. In contemporary circus performances with animal performers, there is the paradox that mastery in handling animals is required if mastery on stage is to be problematized or subverted. The practice of mastery in the circus – whether over nonhuman animals or objects – has to be examined closely. As Lavers et al. point out:

One interesting paradox which lies at the center of these new forms of Contemporary Circus is that the mastery of the apparatus is, in and of itself, a pre-requisite – a vital element in the performative process of being able to effectively problematize the notion of mastery. (Lavers et al. 99)

What does this mean? Circus performances are based on skills. Therefore, in contrast to theatre performances of the 1970s, such as Beuys' 'I like America and America likes me' (1974) and Abramovic's 'Dragon Heads' (1990), where artists with no training perform with unpredictable and untamed nonhuman animals, in (contemporary) circus both human and nonhuman performers draw on competences they have learned over the years. Equestrian acts involve a diversity of disciplines, such as the haute école act, 'a style of riding originating in the schools of classical equitation, in which a ridden horse executes complex steps. A contemporary descendant is competitive dressage' (Baston 123). Additionally, there is the liberty act, where 'unridden horses perform complex patterned movements cued by a human performer' (Baston 123); Roman riding, where 'a solo performer rides two (or more) horses standing upright on their backs' (Baston 124); and vaulting, which is 'a fast-paced act in which the performer runs alongside the horse, vaulting over it and performing tricks' (Baston 124). The shared aspect of these disciplines is that the human performer directs the course of action. A circus performance with animal performers is guided by the cues of the trainer, who simultaneously creates an

environment that incites the animal to behave in a specific way. Human mastery is therefore a prerequisite in these kinds of performances.⁵ If we proclaim that contemporary circus polemicises and subverts human mastery, in opposition to the traditional circus, then humans can only be decentred in these kinds of performance by means of specific staging strategies. The decentring is of necessity only staged. Such strategies have become the focus of the subsequent analysis.

In other words, what are the differences between the staging strategies of traditional and contemporary performances involving animal performers? This question will be addressed in light of the performance *Dresse-toi* (2018) by Cie Equinoctis. This particular performance was chosen because it presents many of the contemporary dramaturgic strategies used in animal performances.

Staging strategies in animal performances of the contemporary circus: the example of *Dresse-toi* by Cie Equinoctis

[T]he self-identification as animal lovers that we perform every day in our homes (and on Sundays when [some of us] [...] drag the kids around the zoo) is part of a paper-thin but rock-hard veneer on an animal culture of staggering violence and exploitation. (Chaudhuri, '(De)Facing the Animal', *Stage Lives*.)

An audience is guided at dusk through the park Le Jard Anglais in Chalons-en-Champagne to the performance *Dresse-toi* by Cie Equinoctis. At the centre, one sees a ring that has been divided into several areas. There is a ring curb, an inner ring made of sawdust, a ring of grass, and a sawdust circle, all of which immediately frame the performance's setting: a circus and riding show. In the background, three horses, two white and one brown, are tethered in front of a large white canvas. Surrounded by trees, the scenery is illuminated by various points on the ring curb and by three spotlights from above, casting the shadows of the horses onto the canvas. A middle-aged white man wearing a grey suit and white t-shirt, as well as a plastic neck brace filled with apples, stands between the horses. As the audience is being seated around the

ring, they are invited to witness the joyful and intimate play between a brown horse, fitted with reins, and a dark-skinned woman, who is wearing a little black dress and has a long red scarf blindfolding her eyes.



Figure 1: Furies 2018. Cie Equinoctis. Dresse-toi ©Vincent Muteau

Barefoot, she runs in circles around the ring, while her nonhuman animal co-performer follows her movements and instructions. The horse then lies down in the centre of the ring as his blinded co-performer climbs onto his back. A diversity of horse gaits is presented. After each

successful trick, the woman and the horse share an apple. The man dressed in the grey suit enters the ring, reminiscent of the traditional circus ringmaster. He starts to speak with a strong accent, identifying him as a foreigner and non-native speaker:

Bonsoir, Ladies and Gentlemen. Nous sommes la Cie Equinoctis... Je suppose que vous aimez bien les animaux. Je veux commencer ce spectacle avec un jeu de confiance entre nous, les êtres humains, et les animaux. Je cherche une assistante pour partager un moment. (*Dresse-toi*, 4:25⁶)

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. We are the Equinoctis Company... I assume you like animals. I'd like to start this show with a game of trust between us humans and animals. I'm looking for an assistant to share a moment.

The performance *Dresse-toi* was created and performed by the French Company Cie Equinoctis. Three human performers (Sabrina Sow as equestrian artist, Jakob Vandenburg as moderator, and Victoria Belen Martinez, who pretends to be an audience member [*baronne*]) and four nonhuman animals (the horses Bouboule, Cynique, Babouchka, and Blossom) perform in the ring. Diverse equestrian acts are performed, namely, the haute école act (advanced dressage), the liberty act, Roman riding, and vaulting.⁷ Like the company's other works, the performance addresses the nature of our relations with other beings – be they human or nonhuman.

Dresse-toi initially appears to be a show for the whole family. It portrays a beautiful, playful relationship between human and nonhuman animals based on mutual trust and vulnerability. The human performer's bare feet and blindfold underline her physical vulnerability, which is heightened by the rigor of the horse's hooves and the use of a red scarf. The little black dress, which exposes her brown skin, complements the horse's brown fur, thus aligning their appearances. Their close relationship, which denies any division between human and nonhuman animals, is visualized through the act of sharing an apple. As the sun sets, the performance increasingly becomes a critical commentary on contemporary society, the objective

of which is to confront the discrepancies between human 'self-identification as animal-lovers' and the 'animal culture of staggering violence and exploitation' (Chaudhuri, '(De)Facing the Animal', *Stage Lives*).

By involving the horse in common cultural practices, the nonhuman animal is anthropomorphized and the human animal is zoomorphized. The parallels between human and nonhuman animals and the objectification of human and nonhuman animals are emblematic of the problematic nature of contemporary human and nonhuman animal relations. This article discloses the dramaturgic strategies used to achieve a better understanding of how we relate to nonhuman animals in contemporary society. Can nonhuman animals be revalorized in contemporary circus performances?

***Dresse-toi*: A presentation of common cultural animal practices**

From dressage to cattle trade, house pets, domestication, and eating meat, *Dresse-toi* presents the most common contemporary western cultural practices involving animals. One main dramaturgic strategy in the performance is to apply these practices to interactions amongst humans. Thereby the performance underlines a variety of possible readings, which is already apparent in the title itself. 'Dresse-toi' obviously alludes to dressage (*dresser* means to train (an animal)) but also demands, 'Dresse-toi', which results in a reversal of roles. 'You, human recipient, dresse-toi', means quite literally, to 'stand up'. This command calls to mind evolution and the resulting discourse on human superiority and the upright gait, but it is also an invitation to stand up in protest. This complex sign structure is taken up in every scene of the performance.

After greeting the public, the ringmaster selects his assistant from the public using a rough, cruel tone, which creates the impression of a cattle market. Instead of selecting an animal on the market, he is looking for a 'human' animal:

Désolé on ne peut pas les enfants, les parents, il y a des dangers et des risques. Pas des enfants. Pas des hommes non plus. Je n'aime pas de soleil. Pas des parapluies. Tu connais des chevaux? C'est trop simple. Vous êtes de l'autre côté de la barrière. Ce

n'est pas possible. Une jolie fille. J'ai dit pas des enfants. Combien de fois? Tu es un peu blonde. Non, désolé. C'est difficile. Je n'aime pas des blondes. Je vais choisir moi-même. Madame, tu veux venir sur scène? J'adore des hauts talons. Viens.

(Dresse-toi, 5:40)

Sorry we can't take children, parents, there are dangers and risks. No children. No men either. I don't like sun. No umbrellas. Do you know horses? It's too simple. You're on the other side of the barrier. It's not possible. A pretty girl. I said no children. How many times? You are a bit blonde. No, sorry. It's difficult. I don't like blondes. I will choose myself. Madame, would you like to come on stage? I love high heels. Come.

The reversal of roles not only illustrates the cruelty of the norms that we apply when selecting animals ('best in show'), but also underlines how such selection processes are always present amongst human animals. The rough tone could call to mind military action and more specifically the Social Darwinism of the Second World War and the image of a concentration camp guard. The selection criteria ('une jolie fille'; 'je n'aime pas des blondes'; 'J'adore des hauts talons') refer to the normative image of (wo)men pervading contemporary culture. The moderator's strong English accent likewise turns him into an exotic figure. The cultural practice of cattle markets is thus led *ad absurdum* when applied to interhuman relations and becomes emblematic of contemporary society in which selection processes related to performance, appearance, gender, race, social adaptability, etc., are everywhere.



Figure 2: *Furies 2018. Cie Equinoctis. Dresse-toi* ©Vincent Muteau



Figure 3: *Furies 2018. Cie Equinoctis. Dresse-toi* ©Vincent Muteau

In the second scene, the intimate relationship between one human animal, Sabrina, and one nonhuman animal, Bouboule, is staged in the centre of the ring; the focus is the cultural practice of keeping pets. An 'oedipal vision' (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 169) of the animal, one which 'results in thinking about nonhuman others in terms of validating them by proving that animals, too, can think or feel' (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 169), is presented. The parallels between human and nonhuman animals are underlined insofar as the performer's black dress and dark hair and skin resemble the horse's colouring. The acts of cuddling and sharing an apple show that they are engaged in a meaningful, intimate relationship. The nonhuman animal is strategically anthropomorphized through human-like postures such as sitting (13:00), sticking out the tongue (13:36), and yawning (16:00). These gestures cause the audience to laugh. As Tait puts it, 'In searching for ways in which animals are like us – circus animal acts exploit our predilection for mimetic reproduction of familiar physical behaviour – we seek to confirm that animals' perceptual awareness and emotional relations mirror our own' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 7). At the very end of the scene, the oedipal vision of the animal is led *ad absurdum*. While cuddling intensely, the horse's penis erects visibly. Through the successive focus on anthropomorphism, the erection becomes the key to reading the performance: What began as an entertaining family show has become a critical commentary on socially taboo relations between human and nonhuman animals.



Figure 4: *Furies 2018. Cie Equinoctis. Dresse-toi* ©Vincent Muteau

The third scene addresses our modern western understanding of nonhuman animals as part of ‘the group of discursively colonized “others” – the insane, children, “savages” – upon whom rationalism imposes its hegemony’ (Chaudhuri, ‘Animal Geographies,’ *Stage Lives*). The human performers represent horses: the moderator, Jakob, enters the ring naked (21:19), illustrating the savage, impulse-driven nonhuman animal. Victoria, the actress/*baronne* who has been selected from the audience, clumsily balances on the side of the ring. When falling, she performs elements of contortion. She appears to be drunk, insane, childish, and animalistic all at the same time. This scene is commented on by the nonhuman animal, Bouboule, who shakes his head – an anthropomorphic comment – as the following song is sung aloud by Sabrina:

Qui est la plus noble conquête de l’homme

Qui a toujours été à ses côtés?

Qui pas à pas l’a accompagné?

Qui a porté ses guerriers?

Qui a porté ses enfants?

Qui symbolise la liberté?

Qui est acheté et qui on vend?

Qui est harnaché, soumis, dressé?

Qui faut-il sans cesse surveiller?

Qui ne sera jamais l'égal?

Qui n'est qu'un suppôt du mal?

À qui dénie-t-on toute intelligence?

Qui est trop fou? Qui est trop vain?

Qui doit-on protéger de son manque de bon sens?

À qui rabâche-t-on qu'il vaut moins?

Qui est taxé de rebel, d'indocile?

Qui est maladroit et imbécile?

Qui est une proie dans l'ombre de l'histoire?

Qui va sans rechigner à l'abattoir?

De qui se sépare-t-on car trop âgé?

Qui est-ce qui se cache pour pleurer?

Qui juge-t-on sans cesse?

Qui juge-t-on sans cesse?

Who is man's noblest conquest?

Who has always been at his side?

Who has accompanied him step by step?

Who has carried his warriors?

Who has carried his children?

Who symbolises freedom?

Who is bought and sold?

Who is harnessed, subdued, trained?

Who must be constantly watched?

Who will never be equal?

Who is merely an agent of evil?

Who is denied intelligence?

Who is too crazy? Who is too vain?

Who must we protect from their lack of common sense?

Who is told that they are worthless?

Who is branded a rebel, a troublemaker?

Who is clumsy and foolish?

Who is a prey in the shadow of history?

Who goes to the slaughterhouse without a second thought?

Who do we part with because they're too old?

Who hides and cries?

Who are we constantly judging?

Who are we constantly judging?

The interplay and discrepancy between the bodily movements of the human and nonhuman animal performers with the lyrics impressively illustrate the inconsistencies in the western image of nonhuman animals, especially of horses. Through the lyrics' twenty-three rhetorical questions, we can visualize how horses are used simultaneously as status symbols, weapons, companions, and for entertainment purposes. They are ascribed attributes of freedom, yet are held captive and monitored.⁸ Following the main principle of the overall performance, the lyrics apply these inconsistencies and cruelties in western animal practice to human interaction. By the middle of the song, at the latest, one knows the answer is not only the horse, but might allude also to (marginalised) human beings.

Using the equestrian discipline 'liberty', in which the horse is loose, working without ropes or reins (26:30), the topics of bestiality and domestication are taken up once again. The presenter's input is mostly invisible. Audience members have the impression that they are witnessing a wild and free animal. To reinforce this idea, the nonhuman performer, Blossom, rolls in the sawdust, which illustrates a romanticized idea of how horses behave in their natural environments. As the human performer re-enters the stage, the horse starts running in circles, snorts, rises, rolls, and lunges backwards. The specific staging of these tricks alludes to the bucking horse, or the wild beast, in needs of taming.

The topics of domestication and (in its hyperbolic form) dressage are then applied to the human beings on stage. Victoria, equipped with a whip and dressed in riding clothes – white leggings and a black jacket – rides on the back of the moderator, who is dressed in a fur waistcoat⁹ and hot pants. The moderator imitates the horse's patterns. Victoria jumps on his back, executes vaulting tricks, and uses the whip to keep her co-performer moving. At the end of the scene, the moderator collapses in the middle of the ring and doesn't get up. The performance not only calls to mind the pretend play of childhood, but also becomes a very successful staging strategy. By applying dressage and vaulting to human relations, the absurdity and potential cruelty of these disciplines is exposed. Though horses are commonly disciplined with whips and are viewed 'essentially as a moving platform while the focus is on the equestrian' (Baston 108), these practices appear brutal when transferred to interhuman interactions. The scene therefore brings about an awareness of the power relations of the equestrian arts. This not

only applies to the disciplines of dressage and vaulting, but also to the mere handling of nonhuman animals. When a female human performer is forced to blindly follow the instructions of the moderator and is nearly overrun by a circling horse, we consider the performance to be irrational and dangerous. But why is this not the case for nonhuman animals? Why do we consider human beings vulnerable yet treat nonhuman animals like objects without agency?



Figure 5: *Furies 2018. Cie Equinoctis. Dresse-toi* ©Vincent Muteau

The fifth scene addresses horses in mythology. In a white dress, Sow conducts Roman riding on two white horses, Cynique and Babouchka, equipped with a metallic chain. The white dress flows in the wind that has been created by the circling horses. The ring is fully lit with bright lights that contrast with the dark evening sky. The swirling sawdust causes atmospheric dust, which makes the setting almost mystical. Music is being played for the first time. Bass guitar sounds and the rhythm of the trotting horses create a ritualistic, spherical soundscape. The staging (i.e., the combination of white fur, flowing dress, mythical music, dust) might call to mind Greek mythology. Within this reading, the horses could be reminiscent of Pegasus, and the human performer of Athena, mistress of horses. The scene emphasises the divinity of nonhuman animals and their relation to human beings. The moderator counterpoints the superior appearance of the equestrian artists. He follows his nonhuman animal co-performers and offers his shoulder to the human Roman rider. In doing so, he limps, falls, and crawls out of the ring.

Another reading is possible. By accentuating the femininity of Sabrina through her costume and movement quality, the act alludes to the figure of the *écuyère*, which has become a circus emblem. The act therefore creates a metadiscourse on equestrian circus and its gender politics. While military academies prohibited women from riding, it was the migration of schooled riding into the circus that provided women the opportunity to participate (Baston 112). However, these acts merely exploited women (and horses) as objects of male desire, bringing together “the two most perfect curvilinear forms”, the female rider and the horse’ (Le Roux et al. 121).



Figure 6: *Furies 2018. Cie Equinoctis. Dresse-toi* ©Vincent Muteau

In the sixth scene, techno music is playing – repeating ‘cheval, cheval’ – and the moderator, Jakob, and Victoria enter the ring wearing white aprons and carrying saucepans. The two white horses, Cynique and Babouchka, are grazing peacefully. Sabrina, still wearing her white dress, is doused with blood by the moderator. Knives are sharpened on her skin; the horses are smeared with blood. Sabrina takes off her dress and is left wearing a persimmon bra and black hot pants. She takes a skirt made of sausages out of the pot. Doused with blood, she starts a seductive dance.

This scene reminds us of the cruelties connected to our most common western cultural animal practices, namely slaughtering, butchering, and eating meat. The symbolic value of the colour ‘white’ (horses and costumes), as well as the focus on the divine image of the horse, manifest the truth of Chaudhuri’s quote at the very beginning of this section: our self-identification as innocent animal lovers is just a veneer, underneath which lies an animal culture of violence and exploitation.

This reading was, according to Sabrina, very present in the reception of the performance. Several spectators came to see her afterward to thank her for insisting on the importance of becoming vegetarian or vegan.

But the interpretation of this scene is not at all limited to the critical presentation of the cultural animal practice of eating meat. The sausage skirt might allude to the banana skirt of Josephine Baker, who was a resistance fighter, counterespionage agent, and the first black woman in the Paris Panthéon. The performance illustrates 'how aspects of gender and/or race identity converge with aspects of animal identity in live circus' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 108). It 'delivers a conjunction of gender theory and speciesism' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 8, following Singer) and refers to the close connection between women's liberation and the subsequent animal rights movement (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 8).

We must reexamine not only the relations between humans and nonhuman animals, but also among humans themselves. The performance underlines the political potential of artistic work and the possibility to promote social change through the circus arts – especially while working with nonhuman entities.

***Dresse-toi*: A contemporary staging of human and nonhuman animal relations?**

This analysis focused on the staged methods that are used within *Dresse-toi* to decentre the human being on stage and to focus on the relation between humans and nonhumans, despite the ongoing anthropocentrism of using animals within performances. How do the staging strategies of *Dresse-toi* differ from those used in animal acts in traditional circus performances? Put straightforwardly, they only differ slightly. *Dresse-toi* uses traditional staging strategies insofar as it presents a diversity of familiar equestrian acts, such as the haute école act, the liberty act, Roman riding, or vaulting. However, skills and equestrian techniques occur in a narrative context, so that the performance messaging actually questions human superiority, ability, and dominance. The hierarchical, anthropocentric relationship between human and nonhuman animals is revived to create a critical commentary. By anthropomorphizing the nonhuman animal

and animalising the human animal and objectifying both human and nonhuman animals, the performance references urgent issues regarding human and nonhuman animal relations in our society.

If we assume that the nonhuman turn is reciprocal, which means, on one hand, that the performances, their dramaturgy, topics, and narrative context should change in order to be less focused on human needs, and that, on the other, the audience's perspective also has to be disrupted, *Dresse-toi* contributes a less anthropocentric perspective. By subjecting humans to common, demeaning, western treatments of animals, it also shows that 'in looking at our relations with animals, we might understand how we remake the world around us through our subjective experience of emotions' (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous* 7). It should be noted, though, that the performance does not offer alternative modes to revalorize animals on stage, a point that it shares with the other contemporary circus performance mentioned in the introduction.

In 'Falaise' by Cie Baro d'Evel, for example, the horses and pigeons are used as a means to reinforce the fictional world. In the darkness of steep cliffs, several human protagonists are searching for ways to escape their reality. During their quest, they are accompanied by nonhuman animals. Their staging, however, is first and foremost used to provide 'a context for the social milieu' or 'to enhance the atmosphere' (Fischer-Lichte 102). Regarding this dramaturgical function, 'Falaise' takes up common dramaturgic strategies that have been used by fairground and some theatre performances with nonhuman animal performers since the eighteenth century (cf. Fischer-Lichte 102).

In 'Vrai – Objet Vivant Non Identifié' by Cie Sacekripa the audience is literally confronted with its limited worldview: the stage area is walled off, leaving only a viewing slit placed at the bottom of the stage. A cat appears as a symbol of the isolation experienced by the main character. The main western symbols and images related to cats are picked up:¹⁰ a lonely 'cat person', being as stubborn as a cat, etc. Even though the cat appears to be undressed, and even though it could leave the impression of an improvising nonhuman animal on stage, it functions as a visualization of the inner world of the main character. The nonhuman animal on stage is subject to the anthropocentric telos.

These contemporary circus acts certainly present new narratives in their performances with nonhuman animals, but their techniques and dramaturgic strategies have not fundamentally changed. Therefore, the potential for staging the interplay between human and nonhuman animals on stage and in the ring in the frame of the nonhuman turn is far from being exhausted.

Responding to the nonhuman turn? Further reflections

Are there other ways to decentre the human being and the anthropocentric telos in circus performances with nonhuman animal performers, despite the ongoing anthropocentrism of using animals in the context of performances? These final paragraphs reassemble a small collection of ideas from contemporary circus artists.

One idea might be to use what is called 'improvisation' in the context of theatre. This strategy has been used in many animal-theatre performances, especially in the 1970s. According to Fischer-Lichte, such performances escape the possibility of ascribing a 'set of meanings and functions to the animals present on stage' (Fischer-Lichte 102) and are therefore interesting with regard to my research question. However, the performances Fischer-Lichte is referring to fundamentally differ from circus performances. In Beuys' 'I like America and America likes me' and Abramovic's 'Dragon Heads', the inexperienced human performers are working with wild, untamed animals. In the circus, however, nonhuman animal performers draw on the performance skills and competences that they have been practising for years. Animals improvising in the circus would not just be 'thrown' into an unknown situation or space; rather, it is the animal trainer's responsibility to teach them 'that performance space is a play space. A space in which each of its proposals is right and there is no right or wrong answer' (Dray, 'Unveil Inter-Species Relationships' 326).

The French researcher and equestrian artist Charlene Dray attempted to train her nonhuman animal co-performers Listan and Luzio to improvise. She stated, however, that her horses use the improvisation space to 'do nothing' on stage. One dramaturgic strategy could be to allow the horse to passively resist taking part in an improvised section. But watching a nonhuman animal on stage do 'nothing' fundamentally contradicts our viewing habits –

especially in the context of circus. This might also be the reason why Dray feels the need to transfer the 'nothing' into 'something' by dramaturgical means (See Dray, 'Unveil Inter-species Relationships'). Dray has implemented, for instance, an onboard sensor system to transpose the horse's movement into sounds:

The 'correspondence' between movement of animal and the sound generated by our device transformed moments of non-activity into musical silence. Each breath, each gesture, each sound became a kind of dialogue without words. Through our device, immobility suddenly takes expression of a gestural intention. In the studio or on stage, the suspension created by our companions immersed us in an active listening.
(*'Unveil Inter-species Relationships'* 327)

Strategies like these – which consider the diversity of human senses when approaching nonhuman entities – are currently also used in object manipulation. Juggler Ben Richter developed the phenomenological method 'The Language of Objects', which is 'designed to facilitate sensitivity to the agency of objects' (Richter). During my collaboration with Cie Equinoctis, we applied this method to nonhuman animals to reduce the associations, anthropomorphism, and metaphors that are connected to our common cultural animal practices, while simultaneously erasing the possibility of an interspecies encounter. Sight, smell, taste, touch, movement, sound, and holding the horse were (re)discovered as we submitted to the idea of 'knowing nothing' (Richter) about horses. But it could be argued that this approach still focuses on human experience and is thus fundamentally anthropocentric. Nonetheless, when 'The Language of Objects' is applied to encounters between human and nonhuman animals, the human *telos* can be subverted and a new perception beyond common western practices, such as oedipal visions of animals or symbolic meanings of animals in culture, can be obtained. The act of approaching nonhuman animals as objects in an effort to dehumanize them could also be scrutinized. The question becomes, 'How can we face the animal Other without either defacing it [...] or entirely effacing it?' (Chaudhuri, '(De)Facing the Animal', *Stage Lives*). One answer might be to focus on the animal gaze (Chaudhuri '(De)Facing the Animal' *Stage Lives*), which would bring to light alternative etymologies and ontologies. In other words, it must be taken into account that we are looking at nonhuman animals who are simultaneously looking at us.

Staging strategies that allow one to focus on the animal gaze often work with new technologies, especially video installations (see, for example, the experiments of Cie Horsystèmes (www.charlenedray.com)). At this time, such staging strategies have only been used in laboratories and not yet turned into (reproducible) performances.

Lastly, I would like to draw attention to the fact that animal performances offer the possibility for interspecies encounters outside of the show, an opportunity seized by Cie Equinoctis. A copresence of human and nonhuman animals is established by inviting the nonhuman animals into the theatre space, the building, letting them walk around the foyer. The company also applies the opposite approach by welcoming spectators to observe open training in the circus tent, where side tarpaulins have been left out, offering a view over the vast grazing areas of the company's residency space.

The potential for interspecies encounters can be broadened while leaving the actual performance context: initiated by Elise Coudurier-Boeuf, Cie Equinoctis is currently creating a permaculture space entitled 'La Bonette', located in Saint-Marcelin de Cray (Bourgogne). On forty hectares, the space has a circus tent, a farmhouse, an artistic residency space, a metal workshop, a yurt for writing residencies, immense grazing areas for the company's twelve horses, a beekeeper, and a home for five chickens. The overall project is dedicated to the realisation of smaller projects and artworks, 'en lien avec le vivant et sortant des processus de domination' ([in connection with the living and coming out of processes of domination] Coudurier-Boeuf). Based on the cohabitation of human and nonhuman animals in the context of art and performance, 'La Bonnette' offers the possibility of questioning human communities while observing herds and other forms of animal cohabitation; it offers the opportunity to create new dimensions of human and nonhuman animal companionship.

Still in the beginning phases, this space – just as much as all other projects dedicated to the subversion of the staging of traditional human dominance in animal circus performances – gives us reason to assume that other modes of performances and artworks (re)valorizing the animal and redefining human and nonhuman animal companionship will appear in the circus. There might be the possibility of finding further ways to subvert concepts of mastery despite the circus' historical dependence on skill. Contemporary animal circus performances might be able

to develop staging strategies that fundamentally differ from those of the traditional circus. While further exploring the possibilities of cocreating, cohabiting, and coexisting with nonhuman animals, contemporary circus performances can contribute to the discourses and challenges we face in the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ See also Stokes; Wemmer and Christen; Arrault, Goudard and Asso; Davis; Dray, 'Unveil Inter-species Relationships', 'Technozoosemiotics'; Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances, Fighting Nature*, 'Animals, Circus and War Re-Enactment'; Baston.

² This myth lives on because to this day there is little critical examination of the beginnings of the modern circus. Instead, the myth surrounding Astley is used to further promote the genre, for example, as part of the celebrations of the 250th anniversary of the circus in the UK in 2018. For further critical inquiries on this topic see for example Hodak.

³ I am referring to the development as such and not to the individual choices of artists and companies.

⁴ In the traditional circus of the twenty-first century nonhuman animal performers also function as nostalgic markers of a (lost) nostalgic idyll.

⁵ I would like to briefly discuss two possible objections. It could be argued that the human impact and element of mastery are not as dominant as I have portrayed. As Donna Haraway points out, the relationship between human and nonhuman animals is never unilateral, 'We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species' (Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* 2). One could claim that animals are trained based on their natural capacities, so that their impact on the performance outcome needs to be highlighted, 'Circus acts used an individual animal's capacity for performance, which prompted the larger underlying question of whether animals perform for their own kind.' (Tait,

Wild and Dangerous 2) And even though both objections are justified, from my point of view they don't affect my argumentation. If we exclude the possibility of nonhuman animal improvisation on stage at this point, the nonhuman animal performances of the nonhuman turn are based on (human) mastery.

⁶ **Recording** of *Dresse-toi* in Chalon-en-Champagne in the context of the Festival Furies. 6 June 2018. 21:30.

⁷ As defined in the previous section.

⁸ A literary textual analysis will be omitted here in order not to go beyond the scope of the article.

⁹ The fur alludes to a further animal practice: fur wearing.

¹⁰ This strategy is also used in passion plays and in court performances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Fischer-Lichte 102)

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Dumbo. Directed by Tim Burton. Performances by Justin Springer, Ehren Kruger, Derek Frey, and Katterli Frauenfelder, Walt Disney Studios, 2019.

Water for Elephants. Directed by Francis Lawrence. Performances by Reese Witherspoon, Robert Pattinson, Christoph Waltz, Gil Netter, Erwin Stoff, and Andrew R. Tennenbaum, 20th Century Studios, 2011.

Companies

Cie Baro d'Evel www.barodevel.com

Cie Sacekripa www.sacekripa.com

Théâtre de Zingaro www.bartabas.fr

Théâtre du Centaure www.theatreducentaure.com

Cavalia www.cavalia.com

Cie HorsSystèmes <http://www.charlenedray.com>

Cie Equinoctis www.cieequinoctis.com

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