

## Horses in Modern, New, and Contemporary Circus

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**Katie Lavers**

**Abstract:** *Circus is an art form that developed around horses and trick riding. Philip Astley, an ex-cavalry man who had recently returned to London after fighting in Europe in the Seven Years War (1756-63), founded Modern Circus when he introduced clowns, musicians and acrobats to cover the changeover in his riding displays. Daring, acrobatic stunt riding remained the central most important element in modern circus. The strong sense of connection developed between a cavalryman and his horse through the sense of shared mortality on the battlefield was an important element informing the presentation of horses in modern circus. Running counter to the widespread exploitation of horses as beasts of burden widely used as machines, modern circus often depicted horses as creatures of passion, linked to Romantic imagery of the sublime. Astley championed a more humane way of training horses, and, in the context of its time, Astley's circus can be seen as acting as a social force to contest pervasive cultural attitudes towards horses as machines.*

*New Circus, which began in the late 1970s, saw a move away from the use of animal performers to the use of human performers only. This can be seen as a response to growing concern about the role of animal performers within circus, and also growing awareness of the rights of animals.*

*The emergence of three new horse circuses in Quebec, Canada, namely Luna Caballera, Cavalia, and Saka, all formed after 1999, is examined in light of this cultural context and the work of Cavalia is discussed.*

**Keywords:** *circus; animal performers; critical animal studies; horses; Philip Astley; Patti Astley; cavalry; stunt riding; Romanticism; Mazeppa; new circus; Cavalia*

The relationship between horse and rider is pivotal to modern circus.<sup>1</sup> Philip Astley, the founder of modern circus, has been described by the circus studies scholar, Marius Kwint, as ‘undoubtedly one of the finest horsemen of his generation’ (‘The Legitimization of the Circus’ 77). Astley was a cavalryman who fought in the Seven Years’ War (1756-63). On his discharge from the Light Dragoons, his cavalry regiment, he was presented with a white charger named Gibraltar. Astley and Gibraltar together performed some of the most dazzling trick riding in London in the 1760s. In 1768, Astley brought in other acts such as juggling, clowning and acrobatics to cover the changeover between the horse riding acts in his trick riding displays, and the genre of modern circus was created.

Two iconic elements in modern circus, the circus ring and the ringmaster, both clearly demonstrate the centrality of horses to the genre. The ring was an innovation specifically developed for circus trick riding in the 1760s and it revolutionized the way equestrian acts were presented. Before the ring was developed trick riding was performed in a straight line. Spectators had previously watched the horse and rider gallop past them, turn round, and then gallop back again. Through the new spatial design of the ring, spectators could now keep the horse and rider in sight at all times. The placement of the circus ring in

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<sup>1</sup> Modern circus is the term used in this essay to designate the circus that Phillip Astley created in 1768. This genre was designed primarily to showcase new horse riding tricks that returning cavalymen brought back with them from the Seven Years War. Their trick riding was displayed in a specially designed circus ring to a paying audience, with the riding acts interspersed with episodic acts such as juggling, clowning and acrobatics. New circus is the term used to designate a form of circus that most French commentators pinpoint as arising out of the unrest in Paris in 1968 (Jacob 11). Seeking to find an art form with the ability to attract large audiences, performers from diverse backgrounds including dance, theatre and performance art started to move into circus in the 1970s. Following on from a wave of widespread interest in the rights of animals that occurred at the time, generally speaking, animals were ousted from circus, with the only animals visible in new circus being the human ones. Many of the iconic elements of modern circus, such as the circus ring and the ringmaster were also often excluded. Contemporary Circus or Contemporary Circus Arts is the term used to describe the continuation of new circus after the year 2000, when the term ‘new’ began to be outdated after thirty years of usage (Jacob 11).

the centre of the performance space created an intense, immersive experience for spectators with the sights, smells, and sounds of the horse and rider positioned right amongst them. Astley experimented with a number of different sized rings. He discovered that the diameter of forty-two feet created the optimal conditions to sustain the centrifugal and centripetal forces necessary to enable horses and their riders to perform increasingly daring tricks. This sized circus ring became the norm and is still the standard in use today. In this way, the actual physical presence and capacity of the horses, and the performance relationship between horses and riders, impacted directly on the development of the circus performance space.

The other circus image, the iconic figure of the ringmaster in top hat and tails and often carrying a whip, dates from the moment when Astley retired as a trick rider, and took up the role of equestrian director. Wearing the riding costume of the day, which was a top hat and tails, and carrying a whip, Astley, as equestrian director (or ringmaster as this role came to be known), directed the proceedings, introducing the different acts and keeping the horses on track around the ring in order to maintain the safety of the acrobats on their backs. Thus the iconic figure of the ringmaster also refers directly to the pivotal importance of horses to the genre.

This essay will examine how the popularity and success of modern circus – the artform created around sensational trick riding – was linked to the pivotal importance of horses to society, and how the popularity of modern circus declined as the central position of horses in society was eroded with the introduction of new technologies.

New circus emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s<sup>2</sup> saw a move away from the use of all animal performers and a focus on human performers only. The development of the three contemporary horse circuses in Quebec, all founded after 1999, will be investigated in light of this cultural context.

## The Origins of Trick Riding in Modern Circus

By 1766, in London, trick riding displays often took place in the leisure gardens. These shows were given by cavalymen recently returned from fighting in the Seven Years' War in Europe. The trick riding was new and thrilling, featuring daredevil horseback acrobatics. The London leisure gardens were packed with people who came to see the ex-cavalymen performing, standing on the backs of the galloping horses, doing headstands on the saddles, or turning somersaults in the air above the horses. These were displays of athleticism, strength and power that showcased the fighting elite of the British cavalry, after victories that had brought into the British Empire vast new territories in both North America and India.

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<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint an exact starting date for new circus. In France, Martine Maleval points to various possible origins of new circus in France including in 1973, when Christian Taguet founded the company Les Puits aux Image which in 1987 became Cirque Baroque, or to 1975 when Paul Rouleau and Pierric Pillot (who later took the name Pierrot Bidon) started touring shows around France in caravans as Cirque Bidon (64). Another departure point involved the brothers Kudlak who were playing in a brass band in 1975 and then went on to found Circus Plume in 1983 (64). Circus Oz was founded in Melbourne, Australia in 1978 as an amalgamation of two already successful Australian groups, Soapbox Circus, founded in 1976, and the New Ensemble Circus, which had emerged out of the New Circus established in 1974. In Quebec, Cirque du Soleil, the multi-billion dollar Quebec new circus company, developed through a process described by the company as 'street performers who began putting their performances under a tent in 1984' (Coté).

As a cavalryman, Astley had gained a reputation as a remarkable horse trainer and a superb rider. He was regarded as a hero having ‘captured an enemy standard in battle; [and] rescued the Duke of Brunswick, who had fallen behind enemy lines’ (Jando). With his white horse, Gibraltar, Astley began offering trick riding displays and riding lessons in a paddock near modern-day Waterloo station. His new business began to make money, attracting audiences because it featured the new daredevil forms of stunt riding, and, as Kwint writes, flourishing ‘because the authorities, who were usually suspicious of popular gatherings, tolerated its robust loyalism and martial overtones’ (‘The Theatre of War’).

By 1768, Astley had built an arena for his performances and was charging for admission. To keep audiences returning and buying tickets to his riding displays, he introduced musicians, acrobats, and jugglers to cover the changeover between different riding acts. He also hired a clown, who ‘filled the pauses between acts with burlesques of juggling, tumbling, rope-dancing, and even trick-riding’ (Jando). With this combination of acts the genre of modern circus came into being. In spite of all these new additions to the circus repertoire, trick riding remained the central element. Andrew Ducrow, Astley’s most renowned trick rider and eventual manager of the Amphitheatre, famously directed his performers to ‘Cut the cackle and get to the “osses”’ (qtd. in Kwint, ‘The Circus and Nature’ 51).

For his first circus season in 1768, Astley developed new types of equestrian acts, setting his trick riding into social contexts by embedding it into everyday situations. ‘Billy Button’s Ride to Brentford’ showed a tailor struggling to control a bolting horse. In a chapbook dating from around 1830, the act is described as,

a novice horseman mounting backwards, losing his book and measures when the horse is startled by geese, threatening to cut off the horse’s ears with his scissors, flying off the horse when it bucks, remounting and being terrified when the horse sets off at full gallop, [and then] tumbling off. (qtd. in Schlicke, 1985, 161)

The act ends with the tailor being chased around the ring by his horse. This act proved so popular that many different circus companies restaged the same act for the next hundred

years.

Astley's sensational ability to train horses, his extreme skill as a trick rider, the specially designed ring constructed for the optimum performing and viewing of trick riding, and the introduction of new trick riding acts imbued with social contexts, came together with the musicians, jugglers, acrobats and clowning covering the gaps between riding acts, to create the entirely new genre of modern circus, a spectacle that had, at its very centre, the body of the horse.

### The Battlefield Connection

Jared Diamond points out that as soon as horses began to be domesticated by humans, in 4000 BC in the steppes by the Black Sea, warfare was completely transformed. Diamond writes that 'the shock of a horse's charge, its manoeuvrability, the speed of attack that it permitted, and the raised fighting platform that it provided, left foot-soldiers nearly helpless in the open' (Diamond 364). The military value of horses 'lasted for 6,000 years, and became applied on all the inhabited continents' (365). In the Seven Years' War, cavalrymen like Astley carried swords and rode into battle on horses as had been done for generations. The new trick riding that Astley and the other returning cavalrymen performed, which emerged as the extreme sport of its time, thus displayed their prowess astride one of the most powerful weapons of the era.

The Seven Years' War marked the first time that Russia had entered a major conflict in Europe. An alliance consisting of Prussia, Great Britain, and Hanover fought against the united power of France, Austria, Sweden, Saxony, and Russia. The cavalry of both opposing forces was vitally important on the field of battle, and both sides contained some of the most skilled horsemen in the world. Seventy thousand Cossacks supplemented the Russian cavalry and Russia also hired around four thousand Asiatic horsemen, including two thousand Kalmuks from the area around Astrakhan, in the Volga delta, and a similar number of other

Asiatic horsemen who included Bashkirs from Serbia. All these horsemen were known for their acrobatic skill in the saddle (Konstam and Younghusband 20-22). The Magyar hussars, who were primarily Hungarian, were horsemen famed for their athletic prowess, and they fought alongside the Austrians. The Russian Cossacks and the Magyar hussars used acrobatic moves developed through long training to increase manoeuvrability and dexterity in battle, including many of the acrobatic tricks that later were shown by the British cavalymen on their return to England.

The equestrians who created modern circus were for the most part former cavalymen whose lives often depended on their horses. The strong bond between humans and horses in modern circus thus had its origins on the battlefield. J. M. Brereton writes that ‘the [cavalryman] came to regard his horse almost as an extension of his being’ (129). Although this suggests that the horse was not viewed as an autonomous subject with its own interests and needs, it does imply that the cavalymen had developed close physical bonds with their horses with whom they shared the heightened and intense experiences of battle.

John Berger, at the beginning of his landmark essay ‘Why Look at Animals?’, first published in 1977, proposes that one of the impacts of industrial society on the relationship between humans and other animals is the loss of a shared sense of mortality. Berger quotes two passages from Homer’s *Iliad*, one of which describes the death of a soldier and the other the death of a horse. Berger writes that Homer expresses each death as the same direct experience of mortality, without differentiating between human and horse (9). Berger argues that after Descartes this sense of shared mortality was lost in industrial society; however, one of the few places where this sense of shared mortality endured for longer was on the battlefield where horses still played an important role up until the end of World War I. In the autobiography of novelist Dennis Wheatley, this sense of shared mortality can clearly be seen in his description of his experiences as a soldier in World War I on the Western Front in 1915: ‘There were dead [horses] lying all over the place and scores of others were floundering and screaming with broken legs, terrible neck wounds or their entrails hanging out’ (qtd. in Simkin). This direct experience of shared mortality and the intense, shared experience of battle underscored the strong relationship that these early

circus riders, these ex-cavalry men returning from war, had with their horses.

### **Attitudes to Horses in Circus**

Astley wrote texts and speeches that can be studied in relation to his attitudes to horses. In ‘Prologue to a Dead Horse’, Astley proclaimed that ‘brutes by heaven were design’d / To be in full subjection to mankind’. In this circus act the horse lay presumably dead at his feet, and Astley would command the horse to rise and serve a well-known general in the recent Seven Years War, ‘Rise Young Bill, & be a little Handy / To rise and serve the war-like Hero [the Marquis of] Granby’ (Kwint ‘The Circus and Nature’ 48), at which point, the horse, which had appeared to be dead, promptly stood up. The accompanying text referred to the relationship between humans and animals as set out in the Christian cosmogony of the time. Erica Fudge describes some of the resonances of this imagery:

Humanity was the final and greatest of God’s creations, and so humans, created after the animals, were given dominion over them. That is, as one seventeenth-century commentator noted, man (and it was *man*) was ‘a petty God ... all things being put in subjection under his feet’. As God had absolute power over Adam, so Adam had absolute power over animals. (13)

In acts such as ‘Prologue to a Dead Horse’ Astley’s horse training skills and the accompanying text presented this viewpoint. However, as well as presenting this position, Astley’s circus also contested it. Firstly, the notion of natural dominion over animals being the male prerogative, as emphasized in Fudge’s commentary on the seventeenth century text, was contested in Astley’s circus, as female trick riders played a vital role. Astley’s wife, who is sometimes referred to as Petsy, Patty or Patti, was a remarkable equestrienne, and was ‘dubbed *La fille de l’air*...[and] danced on a horse’s back as it circled the ring’ (Adams and Keene 5). She was famous for riding around the ring ‘on horseback with swarms of bees covering her hands and arms like a muff’ (Victoria and Albert Museum). Other sources report that Astley’s sister also performed with bees sometimes ‘with as many as three swarms of them flying around the ring with her as she galloped’ (Jay 322). Performing with



swarms of bees is described as being ‘accomplished by a method called ‘caging the queen’. The queen bee was confined by a hair or very fine thread tied around her thorax by which her movements could be controlled. The other bees would follow the lead of their queen and consequently move from place to place’ (115). This circus act demonstrated the skill of female riders, positioning them as having dominion over other species, in this case not only the bees and the horse, but also the horse in close proximity to swarming bees.

Berger points out that it was Descartes’ writing, in divorcing the mind from the body, which eventually began fundamentally to alter the way people connected with animals, ‘[i]n dividing absolutely body from soul, [Descartes] bequeathed the body to the laws of physics and mechanics, and, since animals were soulless, the animal was reduced to the model of a machine’ (11).

Armstrong writes that the ‘attractiveness of Descartes’ comparison [of animals to machines] was that it caught the flavour of modernity, and in particular the preoccupation with technological ... advancement’ (7). This view of animals as machines can be seen in the writing of Robert Thurston (1839), founder of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, who wrote that animals, such as the horse, were prime motors where:

the latent forces and energies of a combustible food or fuel ... are evolved, transferred and transformed to perform the work of the organism itself, to supply heat to keep it at the temperature necessary for the efficient operation of the machine, and for the performance of external work. (qtd. in McShane and Tarr, ‘The Horse in the City’ 3)

Additionally, as Keith Thomas points out, ‘the most powerful argument for the Cartesian position was that it was the best possible rationalization for the way man actually treated animals ... By denying the immortal soul of beasts, it removed any lingering doubts about the human right to exploit the brute creation’ (33). He continues that it had been:

Descartes’s explicit aim to make men ‘lords and possessors of nature’. It fitted in well with his intention that he should have portrayed other species as inert and lacking any spiritual dimension. In so doing he created an absolute break between man and the rest

of nature, thus clearing the way very satisfactorily for the uninhibited exercise of human rule. (33)

Berger claims that Descartes' ideas filtered through slowly and, in parallel with the industrial revolution and the development of productive machinery, these ideas began to affect the relationship that humans had with animals. This can be seen particularly clearly in relation to attitudes to horses.

Before the nineteenth century, Armstrong writes, there was no animal more central to the business of European life than the horse, 'as a mode of transport, agricultural machine, agent of communication, weapon of war and tool of colonization. European states rode to national prosperity and global power on the back of the horse' (8). However, perhaps counter-intuitively, throughout the nineteenth century the numbers of horses increased exponentially with the industrial revolution. The enormous wealth-generating urban centres of the nineteenth century depended on the exploitation of horses. Horses could be seen everywhere, 'working in cities, towns, factories, on farms and frontiers, on streets and roads, alongside canals, around forts, ports and railroad depots ... The numbers of horses grew particularly dense around cities' (Greene 5). The nineteenth century represents the peak of the exploitation of horsepower by humans. Horses were treated as machines and if they even became slightly lame, owners were willing to end their lives immediately, as renderers and tanners paid well for horse carcasses.

In contrast with this prevailing attitude towards horses, Astley created a circus act with his horse, Billy, in which the relationship between horse and human was performed in an altogether different way. This he called the 'Liberty Act'. In this act, which is still performed today, the trainer or equestrian director guides the horse, which has no rider, through a series of tricks without the use of a tether. The 'Liberty Act' was unique at the time and indicates an aspiration to a more empathetic, less exploitative, relationship with the horse. In this act the horse has liberty from the tether and also from the immediate, direct control of a rider. The relationship between horse and human is performed as a partnership, with the horse presented as a willing participant with agency, who is coaxed through the performance with kindness and titbits.

Susan Nance makes an interesting point on the subject of animal agency in circus acts. Although she is writing about elephants in circus, she could equally be referring to horses when she distinguishes between personal agency, and human social and political power in animal acts. She proposes that the animals in circus acts did have agency, that is, ‘as sentient beings acting on their environments as they perceived them, the ... [animals] had agency’ (9). However, Nance at this juncture distinguishes between individual agency, which the animals might have had, and human social and political power, which they did not. Nance resolutely refuses to contemplate ‘any notion that [the animals] understood, endorsed, or resisted the world of human, cultural or business practice’ (10).

At each step throughout the ‘Liberty Act’, the horse has individual agency in that it can act on its environment by deciding whether to perform the next move and receive the titbit, or to refuse and possibly receive punishment later. In the wider context of human, cultural or business practice, however, the horse lacks human social and political power, and has no control over the context in which it is presented (Nance). In this way, although the ‘Liberty Act’ represents a move to demonstrate the animal’s agency to the audience and also actually to grant agency to the horse, this demonstration only functions in a moment-to-moment way and the ‘liberty’ of the horse is limited.

In his *Modern Riding Master* of 1775, Astley also supported the use of a gentler method of training horses that had started to be adopted in the late eighteenth century. He writes that if the horse shows some obedience in the first training session, ‘take him into the Stable and caress him; for observe this as a golden Rule, *mad Men and mad Horses will never agree together*’ (qtd. in Kwint, ‘The Circus and Nature’ 50).

Shortly before the first animal protection act was passed by parliament in 1822, Astley’s Amphitheatre staged a hit show called *The Life, Death and Restoration of the High-Mettled Racer* which traced the downward trajectory of a famed thoroughbred horse who ended up pulling a dray at the Elephant and Castle in London, and then finally was sent off to the knackers’ yard, ‘only to find heavenly reward in a “Grand Palace of the HOUYNMS”[sic]’ (Kwint, ‘The Circus and Nature’ 51). Kwint notes that in order for the pantomime to

convey:

horses [as] a nobler species than the supposedly civilized humans who debased them, the last scene drew upon Jonathan Swift's satirical fantasy novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) where a nation of horse-like creatures called Houyhnhnms stands out as the most rational and sympathetic of all the strange societies that Gulliver visits. ('The Circus and Nature' 51)

Armstrong points out that in *Gulliver's Travels, Book 4*, it is not the *humans* that cultivate reason but rather the horse-like creatures, the *Houyhnhnms*, 'in contrast to the hominid Yahoo, whom Gulliver portrays as the embodiment of irrational carnal appetite' (8). This circus act, in drawing on Swift's book in this way, was contesting the strict demarcation between animals and humans which was widely predicated on the presence or absence of rationality in animals (7).

Cultural historian Martin Meisel firmly attributes the circus to the 'emerging Gothic and Romantic sensibility that captured the imaginations of elite intellectuals and popular pleasure-seekers alike' (Kwint, 'The Circus and Nature' 48). In relation to the powerfully iconic imagery of horses in French Romantic painting, Meisel refers to the 'intensely charged appearance' of the horses in the paintings of Rosa Bonheur and Eugène Delacroix, and writes that the image of horses in the nineteenth century 'apparently spoke to this age with a special eloquence' (216). This fascination with the Romantic image of the horse seems to have stemmed from 'the transfigured quality of the horses which escaped their typical roles as beasts of burden and labour, becoming ethereal and ... appearing almost to fly along with their riders in acts of gleeful freedom and transcendence' (Kwint, 'The Circus and Nature' 52).



Eugène Delacroix, *Horse Frightened by Storm*. 1824.  
Watercolour. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Admiration of a horse and rider joined in an act of ‘gleeful freedom and transcendence’ within the circus ring can be seen in contemporary comments published in *The Theatrical Journal of 1849*, describing Andrew Ducrow’s trick riding:

The mingled grace and gusto of his movements ... the lightning speed ... the miraculous skill with which he took advantage of the centrifugal and centripetal forces that were counteracting each other, to give ... the semblance of a flight through the air, by merely touching the horse with the tip of one foot ... it was one of those cases ... in which ‘seeing is not believing’. (qtd. in Stoddart 168)

Circus riding acts such as this one of Ducrow’s described above, presented a Romantic image of horses through which the widespread cultural view of horse as machine was contested. Meisel also proposes that the development of circus into longer narrative sections seems to have been directly connected with the Romantic intensity of feeling inspired by the horse (124). This new form of narrative and dramatic circus came to be known as the hippodrama (124).

## Hippodramas: Plays of Blood, Thunder and Love

In one of the cuttings that Astley snipped from contemporary newspapers – now housed at the British Library – is a description of hippodramas as ‘thrilling plays of blood, thunder and love’ (Stoddard 166). These mighty spectacles of the nineteenth century were focused around the horse; even the name literally means ‘horse drama’ as the Attic Greek word for ‘horse’ is *hippos*. Hippodramas, sometimes also referred to as quadruped dramas, often presented battle scenes depicting campaigns that had recently taken place, acting as a means of conveying current affairs vividly in a pre-television era: ‘Revolution and war now provided the script for [performances] of peril, danger and spectacular illusion’ (Moody 28).

As an ex-cavalary man, Astley was in a perfect position to create physical enactments depicting current battles and events. Through Astley’s choreography, the productions *Tippoo Saib or British Valour in India* (1791), *Tippoo Sultan, or The Seige of Bangalaore* (1792), *Tippoo Saib, or East India Campaigning* (1792) and *Tippoo Saib’s Two Sons* (1792) presented dramatized events from the campaigns against Tipu Sultan in the Third Mysore War (1789-92), a war in South India between the Kingdom of Mysore, and the East India Company and its allies. Historian Daniel O’Quinn suggests that these productions ‘generated intense fantasies of imperial supremacy through the enactment of imperial discipline in an enclosed viewing space’ (241). Astley’s staging presented the imperial conduct and discipline of the British forces in contrast with the choreographed chaos and disorder on the Mysorean side.

In 1793, on the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars, Astley, aged fifty, re-enlisted in his old cavalry regiment as a horse master. Astley sent regular dispatches from his campaigns back to his son, John, who had taken over as manager of Astley’s Amphitheatre. John Astley immediately dramatized these dispatches into productions for the stage and in the ring. In September 1793, London audiences were presented with a dramatized version of the siege of Valenciennes, only just over a month after the town fell.

In this way, Astley and his competitors in circuses such as The Royal Circus, and in theatres such Sadler’s Wells, became major suppliers of information on recent conflicts. This

way of representing current affairs as staged spectacles featuring the horses and the cavalry in action lasted for much of the nineteenth century (Kwint, 'The Theatre of War').

Astley experimented with staging, so that between 1804 and 1841, multilevel constructions with different floors above each other reached right across the entire width of the stage. These levels enhanced the trick riding as the platforms could accommodate 'galloping or skirmishing horsemen, and be decorated to represent battlements, heights, bridges, and mountains' (Meisel 214). The movement of action between stage and ring allowed for smaller scenes of a more intimate nature to be performed in between the immense battle scenes. These smaller scenes included 'a great deal of private domestic drama among soldiers and sweethearts, invaders and native patriots, and anecdotal vignettes of the great historical figures' and were interspersed with 'leaps, perils, explosions, centaur feats and climactic mass battles carried out in intelligible manoeuvres' (214).



*Horace Vernet, Mazeppa and the wolves. 1826.  
Oil on canvas. Calvet Museum, Avignon, France.*

Other hippodramas presented the Gothic and Romantic sensibility in circus. The most popular and widely played hippodrama of them all was Astley's production of *Mazeppa*, based on Byron's poem in which a young lowborn hero, a Tartar, falls in love with the wife of a Count. His punishment for their affair is to be lashed naked to the back of a wild horse and sent galloping off across the steppes.

There was widespread contemporary interest in Byron's poem which had previously been realized in dramatized versions in both England and France before Astley's Amphitheatre created its own version in 1833. The poem had also been rendered in paintings by Romantic artists such as Géricault, Delacroix, Boulanger and Vernet. As Meisel points out, the image of Mazeppa lashed to the back of a runaway horse may have had different personal and psychological resonances for each of its viewers, but in its political and historical implications it stood firmly against the image of the mounted figure of the man in charge of his own destiny (216). The true Romantic potency of the image lay in reading 'the steed... [as] a metaphor for the restless forces of history that had been unleashed by revolution, and [as] a true embodiment of the sublime' (Kwint, 'The Circus and Nature', 49).

In a production of *Mazeppa*, directed by Astley's prodigy Andrew Ducrow in 1861, the central role was played by Adah Isaac Menken, a skilled equestrienne and actress who rose to become an international celebrity – the highest paid female performer in the world. Although other women had played the role of Mazeppa before her, Menken was the first performer to attract widespread interest in the role: 'Adah dueled, declaimed, and rode a "wild stallion" up a four-story stage mountain – while stripped apparently naked ... the crowds went wild over this man/woman performance' (Gulotta).

Adah Menken presented a complex image that resonated with contemporary audiences. As Meisel points out, the sight of Mazeppa lashed to the back of a runaway horse would have had different personal and psychological resonances for each of its viewers, but when considered in relation to 'the long-standing convention that a man on horseback represents reason reining in the passions' (Armstrong 8), this performance inverted that motif, presenting in its stead a Romantic image of reason overcome by the passions.



## The Day of the Horse is Doomed

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a period often referred to as the heyday of modern circus, horses still had a ubiquitous and central presence in society. During this period audiences flocked to see the circus, the genre which had been created around horse-riding acts and in which horses were a central element. However, as the effects of the technological revolution or the ‘second industrial revolution’ began to be felt, with the development of electricity, the internal combustion engine, the gasoline engine, and the patenting and building of the first mass-produced cars, the usefulness of the horse-as-machine began to be called into question. When in 1895, Macy’s Department Store in New York City used an imported Benz automobile to deliver some of its goods, *Expressmen’s Monthly* reported on it, noting, ‘The day of the horse is doomed’ (qtd. in McShane and Tarr, ‘The Decline of the Urban Horse’ 174).

Soon the steady increase in motorized road traffic meant that horses began to be seen as hazards on the road, portrayed in newspapers as wild brutes endangering both pedestrians and passengers alike: ‘scarcely a day passes that someone is not killed or maimed by a wild outbreak of this untamable beast [...] These frightful accidents can be prevented. The motor vehicle will do it’ (qtd. in Greene 262). As McShane and Tarr point out, in America, the speed of the changeover from horse drawn streetcars to electric streetcars was astonishing, taking a little over ten years between 1888 and 1902. In many ways, ‘horse cars seemed too old fashioned for cities that prided themselves on their modernity’ (McShane and Tarr, ‘The Decline of the Urban Horse’ 172).

In conjunction with the overturning of horses’ essential role in transport, the nearly 6000-year-old notion of horses as powerful, lethal weapons essential to any military campaign was also soon destroyed. By the time World War I broke out in August 1914, Britain and Germany each had a cavalry force that numbered around 100,000 men and an equivalent number of horses. In the first month of the war, a battle near Mons in Belgium marked the first engagement between British and German cavalry forces. For the first time

the cavalry faced machine guns, mazes of trenches, and barbed wire. Trench warfare was clearly demonstrated as rendering cavalry attacks impossible, as horses could not survive the terrain, especially when under fire from machine guns.

However, as mechanized military transport was still rare, and also inclined to break down, horses continued to be used to transport materials to the front. *War Horse*, the 1982 novel by Michael Morpurgo, was inspired when the author saw an oil painting of a horse trapped in barbed wire on a battlefield. The story follows the central character Joey as he travels across the battlefields of France during World War I in search of his much loved horse that had been auctioned off to the army by his father. *War Horse* was turned into a play, performed by the National Theatre and Handspring Puppet Theatre, and eventually made into a movie directed by Stephen Spielberg. In her review of the stage play, Lynda Birke notes that *War Horse* serves to remind people of the often overlooked fate of horses in World War I: 'Countless numbers of horses were killed, one estimate for the number of horses killed in the Great War of 1914-1918 is eight million, approximately a million from Britain alone [...] They have no graves, and few memorials' (Birke).



*Battle of Pilckem Ridge, 31 July-2 August, 1917. A pack horse with a gas mask being loaded up with wiring staples and other equipment near Pilckem. John Warwick Brooke, The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) 31 July-10 November 1917.*

The era of the military might of horses as lethal weapons was finished. The role of horses as an essential mode of transport and vital source of power in industrial and agricultural society had also been challenged. Horses had lost their centrality in people's lives. The image of the horse no longer spoke to people with particular potency. As horses became increasingly irrelevant both on the battlefield, and in urban life and industry, the popularity of the circus also began to decline. This occurred in concert with the development of new media including cinema and radio that competed with circus as a form of popular entertainment.

Although big cat tamers managed to keep drawing crowds for a few decades there was a growing opposition to wild animal acts in circus. In an article called 'The Gentle Art of Training Wild Beasts' which appeared in 1912 in *Everybody's Magazine*, Maurice Brown Kirby attacked the hypocrisy of the rhetoric surrounding wild animal training, especially the

metaphor of the trainer as teacher, saying the wild animals were not taught; rather they were ‘pushed and shoved and mauled and whipped and dragged and choked and tortured in tricks’ (qtd. in Joys 285). Jack London, the novelist, socialist and animal lover became incensed reading this article by Kirby. London wrote, ‘what turns my head and makes my gorge rise is the cold-blooded, conscious, deliberate cruelty and torment that is manifest behind 99 of every 100 trained animal turns. Cruelty as a fine art has attained its perfect flower in the trained animal world’ (2). London recommended that all men, women, and children become familiar with animal training methods, and that they join, or, if necessary form, humane societies to stand against the cruelty of wild animal training (3). What became known as Jack London Clubs started to spring up all over the United States. Members of these clubs would get up and silently leave any performance when animal acts appeared. When the animal act was finished they would come back in and take their seats again. Membership of the Jack London Clubs kept growing by as many as 4,000 per month to a total of 206,000 in the USA by the end of 1921. The movement also began to grow in Canada and England (Joys 285).

For a few decades, celebrity lion tamers such as Mabel Stark and Clyde Beatty managed to keep drawing crowds in to the circus to see the wild cat acts. However, with the growing strength of opposition to the wild animal acts along with the enormous success of *Born Free* (1960), a book, later turned into a film (1966), which told the story of the affectionate relationship between the Adamson family and their adopted lion cub, the whip-cracking acts of the lion tamers came to seem outmoded and increasingly objectionable. In her book, *Wild and Dangerous Performances: Animals Emotions, Circus*, circus studies scholar Peta Tait investigates the range and complexity of the emotions surrounding wild animal acts in circuses and documents the development of opposition to ‘training for feats from those concerned about the psychological wellbeing of animal performers’ (Tait 9).

The birth of new circus in the late 1970s came on the back of continuing intense and heated controversy about the treatment of animals. New circus turned away from the use of animal performers. Although various reasons are cited for this by people within the circus industry, with, for example, Chantal Coté, from Cirque du Soleil describing it as ‘happenstance’

(Coté) and Jane Mullet, one of the founders of Circus Oz, putting it down to ‘economic reasons’ (Mullett), in the climate of heated political debate about animal rights at the time, this action can be read as profoundly significant, reflecting increasing social concern about the rights of animals.

It was in tune with the emergence of the writings of the Oxford Group, a collection of intellectuals, artists and writers based at Oxford University. In 1964, Ruth Harrison of the Oxford Group published *Animal Machines*, which was deeply critical of factory farming. In 1965, the writer Brigid Brophy published her book *The Rights of Animals* and her article of the same name made the front page of *The Times* newspaper in England, triggering intense debate. The rights of animals became a hot political issue. In 1969, Peter Singer, an Australian philosophy student, went to Oxford University to study and he became strongly influenced by the Oxford Group. His landmark book *Animal Liberation* was published in 1975. Singer states that this book is about the tyranny of human over non-human animals:

The tyranny has caused, and today is still causing an amount of pain and suffering, that can only be compared with that which resulted from the centuries of tyranny by white humans over black humans. The struggle against this tyranny is a struggle as important as any of the moral and social issues that have been fought over recent years. (Singer, ‘Animal Liberation’ ix)

Singer purposefully linked the liberation of animals to other liberation movements. This link, which became clearly drawn between civil rights and animal rights, surfaces later in the comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory’s comment, ‘When I look at animals held captive by circuses, I think of slavery. Animals in circuses represent the domination and oppression we have fought against for so long’ (Gregory). The animal rights movement flourished and Singer’s ideas have become ubiquitous, including his position on the use of animals in circuses:

Attempts to defend amusement parks and circuses on the grounds that they ‘educate’ people about animals should not be taken seriously. Such enterprises are part of the commercial entertainment industry. The most important lesson they

teach impressionable young minds is that it is acceptable to keep animals in captivity for human amusement. That is the opposite of the ethical attitude to animals that we should be seeking to impart to children. (Singer, 'Free Tilly')

Berger's essay 'Why Look at Animals?' was the first of an array of written works on the subject of the 'symbolic uses of animals in popular culture and art, zoological displays of animals and animal performances, and the literal place of animals in contemporary life, which now constitute the emergent interdisciplinary field of animals studies' (Chris xvi). Animal studies and media scholar, Cynthia Chris, observes that it was at about the same time that animals began to appear in new and unexpected ways within visual arts and performance art contexts. One example of this is Beuys's 1974 performance with a live coyote, *I like America and America likes me*. In this performance, Beuys, who saw art as a means of effecting political and social change, shared a space in the René Block Gallery in New York with a wild coyote over the course of three days. Beuys viewed the coyote as a symbol of the human impact, in America, on the environment and on the animals. Beuys pinpointed this performance as touching on a point of trauma in American history: 'You could say that a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted (qtd. in Kuoni 141).

One example of how these new ideas in performance art impacted on new circus can be seen in the work of Hilary Westlake, the English theatre and circus director, who founded a new circus company called Circus Lumiere in London in 1979. Semiotician and renowned circus scholar, Paul Bouissac, discussing Circus Lumiere's act 'Liberty Horses', writes, 'The Liberty Horse Act was rendered by a female trainer in dominatrix attire who was controlling eight men, harnessed like circus horses, who were made to cavort round the ring and mimic whatever circus horses do' (66). Horses had been banished from the ring and, in their place, the female rider had harnessed and used a group of men to carry her. This powerful image, aside from its obvious sexual and sado-masochistic overtones, can be read, in the context of the intense debate around the issue, as an act questioning the treatment of animals, and intended to ignite further debate around the issue of rights of animals. In this context the name of the act 'Liberty Horses' can be read as a word play

referencing the traditional ‘Liberty Horse’ act, but also a provocation, with a deliberate referencing of liberation movements of the time such as women’s liberation and gay liberation, to align the rights of animals with the fight for human civil rights. Hilary Westlake continued this engagement with animal rights issues with the program for the Circus Lumiere and Sons show featuring a provocative image of an enormous rabbit using its mouth to pull a tiny man out of an enormous magician’s hat. This surreal image reverses the normal roles in magicians’ tricks and poses questions about the power dynamics of the animal/human relationship.

Although some circuses, including Circus Knie in Switzerland, Billy Smarts in England, Ringling Bros. Circus in America and Circus Krone in Germany continued the tradition of performing with horses and wild animals, new circuses without animal performers have achieved widespread commercial, popular and critical successes, in particular Cirque du Soleil in Canada, Circus Oz in Australia, Cirque Invisible in France, plus the contemporary circuses such as Montreal’s The 7 fingers and Cirque Éloize, and also Circa from Australia, all of which feature a strong ‘human-animal only’ policy.

## The Horse in Contemporary Circuses

Into this politically charged landscape stepped three new horse circuses, all formed in Quebec: Luna Caballera directed by Marie-Claude Bouillon, founded in Quebec City in 1999; Cavalia directed by Normand Latourelle; and Saka by Gilles Ste. Croix; the latter two directors both being original founders of Cirque du Soleil.

Given the background of new circus, with what can be read as its repudiation of the exploitation of animals in the ring, plus the financial and critical success of the human-animal only policy of most contemporary circus, this was a puzzling move, especially considering that horses have now almost completely disappeared from the urban environment. Except for the occasional ceremonial appearance in parades and the occasional use of police horses,

horses lack much direct relevance to most contemporary urban lives.

This vanishing of the horse is part of a more general disappearance of animals from many people's lives. In 'Why Look at Animals?' Berger notes that this disappearance of animals is foreshadowed in Romantic paintings: 'The treatment of animals in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic painting was already an acknowledgement of their impending disappearance. The images are of animals *receding* into a wildness that existed only in the imagination' (17). Akira Mazuta Lippit takes Berger's point about the disappearance of animals one step further, pointing out that now 'everywhere one looks one is surrounded by the absence of animals [...] Modernity sustains [...] the disappearance of animals as a constant state. That is [...] animals [...] exist in a state of perpetual vanishing' (1). Lippit suggests that nowadays most of our notions of animals come through the technological media and cinema, and that the presence of animals can be described as *spectral*: 'In supernatural terms, modernity finds animals lingering in the world *undead*' (1). In the show *Cavalía: A Magical Encounter Between Human and Horse*,<sup>3</sup> the audience is presented with dream-like spectral images of white horses projected large-scale onto long falls of water. The images shift and shimmer presenting an *undead* image of the horse that is magical and ethereal, and which stays in the mind long after the show has finished.

Berger points out that the cultural marginalization of animals is a much more complex process than their mere physical marginalization: 'The animals of the mind cannot be so easily dispersed ... sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions, the language itself recall them' (15). Furthermore, he observes that these 'animals of the mind, instead of being dispersed, have been co-opted into other categories so that the category *animal* has lost its central importance' (15). The categories into which these animals of the mind have been co-opted are the 'family' and the 'spectacle'. *Cavalía* certainly draws on these categories. The horses in *Cavalía* are presented in a way that fits the category of 'spectacle', with forty-two

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<sup>3</sup> The author attended a performance of the show *Cavalía* at the Entertainment Quarter in Sydney in May 2013.



horses presented throughout the show, with acts often incorporating large numbers of horses and riders. The horse is also presented through the show as a close companion, a member of the circus ‘family’. Animal studies scholar Tanja Schwalm points out that many circuses performing with animals ‘promote the idea that they represent a suspension of the “natural” hierarchy between humans and animals, as defined in natural historical taxonomies and popular belief in an “evolutionary ladder” ’ (86-87). Schwalm gives the example of Circus Krone who ‘proclaim on their webpages dedicated to circus animals: “They are our partners, our friends and of course they do belong to our huge Circus-Krone-family” ’ (87). *Cavalia*, too takes part in this trope. A textual narrative runs throughout the show and traces the age-old friendship between humans and horses, with a Liberty Act showing a woman walking around a pool of water in close harmony with her horse. As the *Cavalia* website itself states, ‘horse and human . . . as friends, partners and inseparable performers . . . will lead you on a journey to another world – a world of dreams’ (*Cavalia*).

Berger states that animals in zoos ‘constitute a living monument to their own disappearance’ (26), and the horses in *Cavalia* seem to take on the same role. The physical presence of the actual horses in *Cavalia* is in danger of being co-opted, either becoming spectral through cinematic images or disappearing into the categories of ‘animals of the mind’, that is either as ‘family’ or ‘spectacle’.

As Jean Baudrillard writes, ‘When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity’ (12). Through the mode of presentation, together with the narrated text concerning the history of the relationship of horses and humans, in *Cavalia* the horses are co-opted into a simulacrum, a ‘resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared’ (12).

Meanwhile, contemporary thinking about horses has become confused and complex. *Wild animal*, *livestock*, and *companion animal* are the delineated categories that Western society commonly uses to group, and to ethically justify, differing treatment of animals (Philo and Wilbert 92-94). Horses are one of the few animals that straddle all these groupings. There

are still substantial wild horse populations in North America and Australia. At the same time, in both countries, horses are also legally classified as livestock, whilst actually being considered by many as a companion animal. The confusion that arises with this crossing over of the boundaries between these categories is becoming increasingly controversial.

In June 2013, at exactly the same moment as *Cavalía* was performing its equestrian circus shows presenting the horses as ‘family’, in Sydney, Australia, *The Australian* newspaper reported ten thousand wild horses culled, or to use a less euphemistic term, killed, on Tempe Downs Station, in the Northern Territory in Australia (‘10,000 wild horses’). There were also plans in discussion in North America at that same time to cull fifty thousand wild horses who had been corralled by the government.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2013 shows how this high level of uncertainty about the classification of horses led to a confrontational situation near Reno, Nevada. Twenty-three wild horses removed from public rangeland outside Reno by state officials were placed in pens ready for auction to the public (Glionna). The journalist describes the situation writing, ‘The gate swings open and the wild mustang rushes into the auction pen. Yearling by its side, the big mare paces the muddy floor, neck craning, nostrils flaring’ (Glionna). The article points out that these horses, which had never been tamed, had now become commodities for sale:

In the crowd are so-called kill buyers scouting product to ship to a foreign slaughterhouse. Also on hand are animal activists who, check book in hand, plan to outbid the kill buyers. The mood is prison-yard tense, with armed state Department of Agriculture officers looking on. (Glionna)

Currently, the law in America and Australia recognizes horses as livestock, but many people wish horses to be re-categorized as companion animals. The American Association of Equine Practitioners argues that horses should remain classified as livestock because the government is better able to regulate the horse industry, and thus the welfare and overall treatment of horses (American Association of Equine Practitioners). A lot of money is at stake. Horses categorized as livestock can be taken to slaughterhouses and their carcasses sold for animal

food, or exported over the border to Canada or Mexico where human consumption of horseflesh is legal, whereas if they were to be classified as companion animals they would have to be euthanized, which is expensive. Also, tax breaks and federal funding in times of emergencies are available for livestock but not companion animals.

The ethical confusion about the classification of horses is spelt out in vivid terms in a blog by Equinezen:

Horse meat is very lean and protein rich [...] perfect for people in third world countries. I don't think I myself could ever eat horse meat because my love and connection to these wonderful creatures is so deep that it would be like eating a family member! (Equinezen)

In *Cavalía*, considerable effort is expended in public relations in order to present the horses as companion animals, as the website says, as 'friends' and 'partners' (Cavalía). Despite this, these horses are enclosed in small stalls and only allowed outside for one hour a day. All forty-seven of these horses are male, and are kept in conditions that are uncomfortably reminiscent of a high security men's prison. The majority of Cavalía's horses have also been gelded, or castrated, to make them more docile. A tension exists between the presented image of the horses as friends and partners, or companion animals, and the physical reality of the conditions they are kept in.

Discussing circuses, Jacques Derrida writes of 'an animal trainer having his sad subjects, bent low, file past' (422), and the horses in the performance of *Cavalía*, seen by the author in Sydney in 2013, were continually brought into submission and required to kneel to the human trainers and to roll over on their backs into a submissive position. The audience is presented with a succession of tricks demonstrating the mastery of one species over another, the mastery of humans over horses. The demonstration of the 'natural' dominion of humankind over other animals is performed, just as in Astley's day. The difference now, more than two hundred and fifty years later, lies in the way that humankind's relation to nonhuman animals has fundamentally changed. An extended discussion of the nature of this changing relationship between humans and other animals in modernity and post-modernity is

beyond the scope of this essay, (see Franklin (1999), Fudge (2002), Armstrong (2008)). However, an estimated 65 billion animals are now slaughtered every year in the industrial food complex, many wild animals are now becoming extinct, and companion animals as pets or extended members of the human family are neutered or ‘spayed’ and isolated from their own species.



*Cavalía, Odyseo. Spectacle Odysséo de Cavalía, Laval, Québec, Canada. 12 March 2012.*

## Conclusion

Astley’s circus, driven by cavalymen returned from war, and the special bond they had developed with their horses on the battlefield simultaneously presented and contested the biblical position of the natural right of ‘man’ to have dominion over other animals. Modern circus also challenged the rationalist exploitation of horses as machines, often instead presenting horses as creatures of passion, linked to imagery of the sublime. Through the creation of the ‘Liberty Act’, modern circus presented a more humane way of interacting

with horses, allowing them more moment-to-moment agency. Astley himself in his writings also advocated a gentler way of training horses. Astley's Amphitheatre's show *The Life, Death and Restoration of the High-Mettled Racer* in its last scene drew on Swift's satirical novel *Gulliver's Travels*, to present horses as 'a nobler species than the supposedly civilized humans who debased them' (Kwint, 'The Circus and Nature' 51). This is not to romanticize the position or the treatment of horses in early modern circus, but merely to point out that, in the context of its times, modern circus could act as a social force to contest pervasive cultural attitudes towards horses who were commonly thought of as beasts of burden and as machines.

The complex cultural attitudes surrounding horses today, in which horses straddle the categories of wild animal, companion animal and livestock, are in the process of being renegotiated. In light of this, the potential exists for these new Quebecois horse circuses to research and develop new performance approaches, and begin to explore the changing complexities of the current relationship between humans and horses. These circuses have the chance to develop innovative performance that draws on some of the emerging thinking in animal studies. In light of this social, political, and ecological climate, the lack of renegotiation of the interaction between humans and horses in *Cavalia* seems a missed opportunity, and leads to a show that can be read as intellectually timid and nostalgic, a simulacrum of earlier times.

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