A Gap to be Bridged: Communicating the Value in UK Circus Audience Experience

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Circus, as a number of scholars have commented, is heavily mythologized (Kwint; Lievens; Stoddart; Trapp). This influences audience expectations. The field of circus in the twenty-first century, however, is diverse, characterised as rhizomatic (Seymour), manifold (Sorzano) and complex (Mason). The potential this creates for divergence between myth and reality impacts whether audience members are likely to find their expectations met or otherwise. If audience expectations are not met during their circus encounters, a negative cycle of consequences begins for both the audience members and the creators of circus work. This article reports on research that set out to identify and address any such gaps in communication in the UK circus field. The focus of this paper is oriented towards Sorzano's argument for closer attention to be paid to the sense of community that circus can engender, moving towards an understanding of circus that follows people rather than institutional and political meanings. The creation of "informative pretext materials" has been recognised as essential for the construction of audience expectations (Conner 112). My doctoral research, on which this paper reports (Kavanagh "What's So Special . . ."), stems from the question: are the available circus pretexts communicating the same values that potential audience members care about? This linguistic study investigates public promotional texts and audience members' perspectives in the UK, uncovering levels of solidarity or difference in the values expressed. One of the major findings is a gap relating to social, communal experience: audience members valued longer-term interpersonal connections generated through their experience of attending circus productions, while reviews and publicity materials overlook this element to focus on the production object. This paper introduces the methodology and results that produced this finding and interrogates the implications of this value gap. A lack of articulacy is revealed in attempts to express the values found in circus audience experience, consistent with Ivinson's reenvisioning of Bernstein's 'restricted' code. As such, engagement between circus audience members and industry text producers

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in the UK is limited. Ultimately, I argue for a shift in marketing and communication practices that embraces principles of Cultural Democracy; a practice that draws out and draws upon audience values to more effectively build and sustain audience relationships.

Comme l'ont déjà évoqué un certain nombre de spécialistes (Kwint, Lievens, Stoddart ou encore Trapp), le cirque est beaucoup idéalisé. Un phénomène qui influence les attentes du public. Toutefois, les arts du cirque tels qu'on les connaît au XXIᵉ siècle peuvent prendre des formes très diverses. Seymour les qualifie de « rhizomatiques », Sorzano de « multiples » et Mason de « complexes ». Cette richesse crée une divergence potentielle entre mythe et réalité qui aura un impact sur le public. Ses attentes seront-elles comblées ou non? Si le public venu assister à une expérience circassienne n'y trouve pas son compte, c'est le début d'un cercle vicieux qui engendre des conséquences pour l'assistance comme pour les créateur·rice·s de l'œuvre. Cet article expose des recherches menées dans le but d'identifier et de combler ce genre de fossés de communication sur la scène circassienne britannique. Son propos est axé sur l'argumentation de Sorzano selon laquelle il faut porter une attention particulière à l'esprit de communauté que le cirque peut susciter, et qui tend à appréhender le cirque comme une discipline plus proche du peuple que des institutions et de la politique. La création de « supports de prétexte informatifs » a été reconnue comme essentielle pour la construction des attentes du public (Conner 112). Mes recherches de doctorat, relatées dans cet article, ont débuté par une question : les prétextes circassiens disponibles véhiculent-ils les mêmes valeurs que celles portées par les membres d'un public potentiel? Cette étude linguistique enquête sur des textes promotionnels publics et les points de vue d'un public au Royaume-Uni, révélant plusieurs niveaux en termes de solidarité ou de différence dans les valeurs exprimées. Parmi les principales conclusions, on a pu déceler un écart lié à l'expérience sociale et communautaire : chaque personne du public a évalué des liens durables et interpersonnels, générés par le fait même d'avoir assisté à un spectacle de cirque, alors que les critiques et autres supports publicitaires ont délaissé cet aspect pour davantage se focaliser sur l'objet de l'œuvre. Cet article présente la méthodologie et les résultats qui ont mené à cette conclusion. Il interroge également sur ce qu'implique cet écart de valeur. On constate des lacunes en matière d'éloquence dans les tentatives d'exprimer les valeurs trouvées dans l'expérience d'un public de cirque, ce qui vient corroborer le souhait de Gabrielle Ivinson de réinventer le « code restreint » de Basil Bernstein. À ce titre, au Royaume-Uni, les échanges entre le public circassien et les producteurs de textes sur le sujet sont limités. En définitive, je plaide en faveur d'une évolution des pratiques de marketing et de communication pour intégrer les principes de démocratie culturelle. Des pratiques qui mettent en lumière et qui s'appuient sur les valeurs du public afin d'établir et d'entretenir plus efficacement leurs relations.

Introduction

Within twenty-first century Britain, there is a "wealth of often essentially incompatible ideas about, and representations of, circus circulating in our culture" (Barltrop 88). For example, circus is seen as both dirty and sparkly, both honest and illusory, both timeless and steeped in tradition. These co-existing contradictions reflect the complications inherent in the binary nature of much circus categorisation which often revolves around fuzzy distinctions of 'classical/traditional' versus 'contemporary'[1]. In their 2003 report, the then Arts Council of England noted that such oppositional labels were unhelpful in communicating the contemporaneous state of circus which "develops, evolves and defies hard definitions as artists move around the whole spectrum" (Hall 7). The tendency towards dichotomous thinking that has pervaded human cognition for so long (Elbow; Fisher and Keil) still dominates circus discourse today despite a growing recognition that circus, in fact, has a rhizomatic nature ill-fitted to such binarized distinctions (Kann; Kavanagh "Criticism within the Circus Sector"; Mason; Seymour; Sorzano). This can also be seen as symptomatic of arts and culture in our era more broadly, beyond the specifics of circus (Holden). Another dichotomy that circus has found itself subject to is that of 'high art' vs. 'popular art', otherwise characterised as 'art' vs. 'entertainment'. Since the emergence of high and popular distinctions in the Global North in the 1800s (Levine), circus has most often unquestioningly been categorised as popular and excluded from considerations of 'legitimate' culture (Carmeli "On the Margins"; Sorzano). Assessments of cultural value widely foreground established 'high art' codes of theatre and dance while populist 'entertainment' qualities remain unexplored (Harrington; McKee; Reinelt et al.).

For the rhizomatic twenty-first century circus, where distinctions of 'high' and 'popular' art are confused or dissolved, an understanding of how different approaches connect with different audience members must be a vital tool for effective communication between audiences, institutions and artists. Similarly, the historiography of circus that has hitherto centred Western perspectives is now opening up to acknowledge alternative lineages and modes of engagement. Olga Sorzano argues that more attention should be paid to the values she has found attached to circus in Colombia: its international nature, the sense of community it engenders, its difference, multidisciplinarity and diversity (306). She proposes understanding circus by "following artists and people, rather than the nation-state, economic systems, institutions and specific sociocultural political meanings" that have to date characterised British approaches (Sorzano 307). Following her lead, then, the question remains: what do British circus audiences value about their experience? This question aligns with the concerns of those who advocate for cultural democracy within UK arts policy.

Within the current UK system of cultural policy, which predominantly aims towards democratisation of culture (Hadley), the goal is to spread access to culture equally among all citizens while the nature of what that culture should be is determined by the judgement of elites. A growing shift towards advocacy for an alternate, audience-centred perspective is captured in the increasing influence of 'cultural democracy' (Hadley and Belfiore), which has been considered a radical intervention into the approach to cultural policy (Wilson et al.). Within the frame of cultural democracy, it is the very determination of what constitutes culture that is itself democratic. On this principle, advocates of cultural democracy argue for "a genuine cultural pluralism which [sic] the idea of a 'scale of values' is replaced by the idea of many localised scales of values, arising from within communities and applied by those communities" (Kelly 6). Thus, the emerging knowledge has arisen that an effective cultural industry must shift focus towards understanding the values of audience members first and foremost.

Within any cultural form, there is a danger that exclusion of audience values— and the contrasting inclusion of values estranged from audience concerns— creates a hermetic bubble of an elite industry perspective that loses relevance to the public it wishes to attract and influence. One of the starting points for this research is the hypothesis that, whilst there is no inherent disjunct between circus products and audience desires, there is a problem in the framing of what a circus experience can offer its audience members; a problem that is conjured by the most overt and consciously accessed representations of circus systems: its promotional materials. The visibility of promotional materials—in this case, public reviews and publicity texts—creates a sense that the values they present are in some way "proper', in line with Van Leeuwen's model of legitimation. This can logically lead to alienation of potential audience members whose values are at odds with these representations, regardless of whether the text producers had consciously set out to create such an impact. As Horverak writes, "[b]y definition, one's very first feel of an experiential good cannot be based on subjective experience; it has to be based on other information" (573). Such legitimised promotional texts constitute a portion of this 'other information' and, importantly, they also form a portion over which circus practitioners themselves have some influence. The research presented here investigates the level of solidarity and difference that appears in the value systems expressed by UK circus audience members and those presented in public promotional texts, focusing on the social and communal aspects of circus engagement suggested by Sorzano. By identifying where audience members express value in their circus-going experience, a path is opened up to adjust promotional strategies accordingly, in line with principles of cultural democracy; principles that encourage acknowledgement of value systems that may exist outside the hegemonic values of established cultural industries.

Background

Let us consider then the practice of attending circus performances—which I will refer to as circus *audiencing*, following Fiske. For most people in the UK, it is anticipated that more weight of meaning is derived from cultural representation of this audiencing practice than from first-hand participation, due to the proliferation of circus references in multiple cultural media sources compared against the infrequency of visits to circus productions. These sources reify a particular concept of circus in a "circular responsiveness" (Tait 2), more than circus itself does. The ideas around circus, as Tait notes, "are all too often severed from ongoing observations of its live performance" (7). This separation of media representation from lived experience produces a risky communicative situation because "when too much reliance is placed on one at the expense of the other, the continuity of meaning is likely to become problematic" (Wenger 65).

Anecdotal evidence provides some indication of the negative consequences that arise from misalignment in continuity of meaning regarding the practice of circus audiencing. For example, European artists touring in the UK with Gerry Cottle's Circus in the late 1970s described better economic conditions and greater success for circus performers and organisations on the continent than in Britain, which they attributed to "a more 'interested' and knowledgeable public" (Carmeli "Family and Economics in an English Circus" 257). This observation aligns with more scholarly understandings of how important audience members' prior knowledge is to enjoyment and engagement with the arts. Elements of reality that lie outside of our experience are inaccessible to us in practice and in thought. Experience has been theorised as that which gives meaning to our social world and such meaning is ineluctably connected to community, identity, practice and learning (Wenger). The ability to experience, and therefore notice, particular elements of reality is also tied to linguistic acknowledgment:

> An adequate vocabulary is important because the concepts we use to make sense of the world direct both our perception and our actions. We pay attention to what we expect to see, we hear what we can place in our understanding, and we act according to our world views. (Wenger 8)

The ethos that underlies this research aligns with the linguistic tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis—or, more commonly, CDA (Fairclough). Namely, that the analysis of discourse via textual artifacts can evidence loci of societal power imbalance and injustice, and that remedial actions can therefore be identified and taken, producing social change. CDA works at the complex juncture of social reality and language use, where each influences the other in mutually inextricable ways (Fairclough et al.). A major focus of CDA research is on

highlighting modes and effects of representation (see, e.g., Coupland; Kress; Van Leeuwen), as part of the process that identifies how inequalities are "constructed, re-produced, legitimized, and resisted in language and other modes of communication" (Catalano and Waugh 1). How a subject is represented impacts on the thought models and preconceptions people form around that subject.

Lynne Conner's ambitious and insightful work, *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era*, draws on psychology, philosophy and cognitive science to illustrate how the preconceptions that audience members carry with them affect their ability to appreciate their experience:

> Audiences enter the arts space with many preconceptions about what they are about to see—preconceptions that are literally part of their brains. Cognitively speaking, if their initial understanding is not engaged, they will fail to connect with and thus grasp the new information in any meaningful way. (110)

This failure to connect when insufficiently exposed to relevant representations of the experience beforehand suggests neither a problem with the audience members themselves nor with the art works in question, but rather with the available mediating representations. If only a small population have access to appropriate understandings, then this can threaten the role of the art form in the community (Van Maanen 178).

Linking this to performance theory, we can draw upon Henri Schoenmaker's exegesis of the "theatre frame"—a mode of convention-based understanding which is entered into when one finds oneself confronted with an object recognised as belonging to the theatre system. Particularly pertinent is his first principle, which can equally be said to apply to circus frameworks as to those of theatre: any human being encountering circus systems for the first time "will have to get used to these frames and the conventions regulated by these frames. A competence has to be developed" (Schoenmakers 96). In simple terms—and setting aside other social and economic factors that may influence attendance—if the representations available to an audience member prior to their first encounter with a circus system do not communicate conventions that match the requirements of the system, then the correct competence will not be acquired. As a result, the encounter will not be satisfying. This has an immediate impact on the audience member who will start to associate the convention of an unsatisfying experience with the notion of circus systems, building their circus frame accordingly. Once this process is begun, they will recall their negative experience when invited to try another circus encounter. Perhaps the cycle will repeat again, reinforcing their negative associations. Perhaps they will refuse the invitation, which—while not further strengthening a negative association—will do nothing

to dispel it and will allow it to remain. When that audience member discusses circus systems in the future, they will draw on the frame they have developed, reiterating and spreading any ineffective representation that initiated it. A negative spiral can thus ensue, colouring more first circus encounters with ineffective conventions, leading to more refused invitations. Refusals of this nature, unsurprisingly, have a negative impact on the economic health of the circus sector. However, it is also possible that the audience member could, in the meantime, encounter other representations which counteract the originals and offer new conventions through which to appreciate the circus system. This is a process of reframing, and relies on access to appropriate discursive materials that accurately represent the conventions and competencies required for satisfying circus audiencing. Promotional texts—discursive materials over which circus creators have some control—are a potential avenue through which this reframing could be activated.

The 'health' of a 'sector', of course, is an elaborate metaphor, and what lies beneath it is the livelihood and well-being of circus workers. Representations that perpetuate conventions misaligned with the competencies required to satisfactorily engage with a twenty-first century circus frame, therefore, generate adverse effects on real people's lives. Rather than suggesting a direct problem between audience members' desires and creators' products, this research acknowledges that the full circus experience equation is mediated through the impact of public evaluative texts; hence, it is these that form the basis of my study. Both reviews and publicity materials, as forms of evaluative text, can also be referred to as 'promotional texts', following observations that the visibility provided by review coverage has a greater effect on overall ticket sales than do the evaluations contained therein. Somewhat counter-intuitively, to receive a negative or critical review has been found to be more valuable than to receive no review at all (Shrum). The distinction between company produced publicity materials and third-party reviews can best be described using Shaw's terms of 'interested' and 'disinterested' categories to highlight the respective promotional intent of their writers.

All media producers aim "to construct a text which is in line with what they think are the opinions, attitudes and feelings—hence, the evaluative stance—of (the majority of) their readers" (Bednarek 203). While this is intended in many cases to encourage audiences to consume a product, it also has the effect of building and strengthening the stances such texts project. Regardless of what specialist knowledge an arts critic may actually have of their subject, they are seen as a legitimate "discourse-specialist and definer of roles" (Shrum 113), being part of the normative institutional system that maintains expectations around what a particular type of art "should be" (Herrnstein Smith 43). The elements of experience that critics value and construe as art become the legitimised definition of

art, potentially excluding elements valued by others from that definition. Eklund reminds us that scholars usually rely on reviews rather than engaging "ordinary spectators"[2] (9). This use reinforces the authoritative stature of reviews and the legitimacy they project. The situation is particularly troubling for circus if, as proposed by some practitioners, media reviews do not accurately represent the important facets of audience members' experiences (Kavanagh "Criticism within the Circus Sector" 73–74; Seymour 203). Boorsma and Van Maanen speculate that company-produced publicity material can "help the company's perceptions compete with the critic's view in the construction of experiences by the spectators" (334). If this is the case, then there is an opportunity for circus creators to address any misaligned representations of audience experience that appear in reviews. This would seem to be a necessary precaution as "audience members are disinclined to repeatedly attend an event when its rules of operation do not fit within their existing knowledge framework" (Conner 115).

Published research into circus reviews currently appears limited to my own previous study (Kavanagh "Criticism within the Circus Sector"), in which I have explored the relevance of values expressed in sample reviews to small groups of circus artists. Two main challenges to the reviews' perceived relevance were observed: a tendency towards romanticism and nostalgia, stemming from the outsider perspective of writers who have little familiarity with the contemporary workings and realities of the subject; and a propensity for polarization into unsatisfactory binary categories that fail to communicate the nuances of a broad and varied art form (6). In short, the artists felt that critics lacked knowledge and were not portraying work in the circus field effectively (75).

While circus now exists across and between previously held boundaries of high art/popular entertainment, it is still widely associated with the latter. Shrum notes that "most critics express greater interest in theatre than they do in popular performance" (155), based on his study at Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1994. My experience some three decades later—both at the Fringe and in the wider British cultural sector—suggests that most critical coverage still focuses on theatre and dance rather than circus and cabaret forms. Perhaps then it is of little surprise that what academic studies exist of performing arts reviews have so far neglected circus too.

My doctoral study addresses this gap in knowledge by identifying the values expressed in circus reviews in the UK. These values are then compared with those expressed by circus audience members and with those presented in circus publicity materials. Thus, any discrepancy between the value systems represented in public texts and those held by audience attendees is revealed. In line with the emancipatory aims of CDA (Nartey), this article prioritises the voices and values of the under-represented group of audience members and focuses particularly on the social, as advocated by Sorzano. Further insights

into the distinct natures of reviews and publicity texts are beyond the intent of this paper.

Methodology

The study adopts a corpus linguistic methodology that allows me to identify targets of evaluative phrasing in three respective corpora. The first comprises all available reviews from a representative sample of circus productions presented in the UK between February 2019 and January 2020. The second is made up of all the available publicity texts created for these productions and the third comprises transcripts of interviews conducted with circus audience members of alternative productions in June 2022. Although the initial plan had been to collect concurrent data, the intervening period was dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated effects on the performing arts industry.

Two major tenets of corpus linguistic studies are that the corpora be both reliable and representative. The measure of reliability in this case is based on the volume of text required to justify and validate the use of corpus methods, which facilitate comparison of linguistic features across large collections of writing. Any productions that received fewer than the mean number of reviews (6.2) were excluded to ensure that there would be a substantial body of data to work from. Of the remainder, the interquartile range was calculated to exclude productions that received outlying numbers of reviews. Twenty-one productions fell within this range and were marked as potential candidates for the sample.

These were then tested against the criteria of representativeness. Representativeness here refers to the "extent to which a sample [the corpus] includes the full range of variability in a population" (Biber 243). Within this research, the population in question is circus productions taking place in the UK over the collection period. Conventionally, circus productions have been regularly referred to in scholarship as "Traditional" or "Contemporary". However, there is no widely accepted definition of how this distinction is made and it relies heavily on personal interpretation (European Commission et al. 19). It has also been observed that "the use of theatrical techniques typical of contemporary circuses does not necessarily represent a practice that operates opposite to traditional circus practices" (Carrieri et al. 248). Carrieri et al. further note that the plurality of forms, structures and performance types comprising the circus field resist a singular definition and so, "presenting circuses as a sole, singular object of study is no simple task." (234)

Nevertheless, it is important that a research sample captures the full range of variability and to do so, clear definitions are required. Using my experience of the circus field and my understanding of how practitioners tend to differentiate

circus forms, I identified several ways I have most commonly encountered circus production types being distinguished. I then tested these various classifications against the volume of reviews generated during my collection period. The dimensions demonstrating the greatest variability in review coverage between their categories are those whose representation within the corpus sample is most important, to ensure under-represented types are included. While limitations of space prevent a full explanation of my categorisation here, interested readers can find it in my thesis (Kavanagh "What's So Special . . ."). In short, the venue dimension and the narrativity dimension produced the greatest disparity in review coverage between their categories. In the venue dimension, tenting productions received significantly fewer reviews than those touring to established venues[3]. Similarly, in the narrativity dimension, non-narrative productions received significantly fewer reviews than those with a storytelling[4] or thematic[5] structure. To ensure a representative sample of productions, the selection for inclusion in the sample balances these discrepancies to give a comparable ratio of production types to that identified over the full year. In combination with the reliability criterion discussed, this resulted in a sample of twenty-two productions from the period,[6] totalling 230 review texts with an average of 436 words each. Social media and consumer website-type reviews (e.g. Google, TripAdvisor, etc.) were excluded from this collection, which focused on individual reviews published online by mainstream or independent media outlets and blog sites.

The publicity corpus was collected from written material published to promote these twenty-two productions, comprising sixty-three unique texts with an average of 618 words each. Each performing company was contacted directly online to request copies of any marketing text they used for the production in the UK between February 2019 and January 2020. When the company website credited a marketing or press contact, they were contacted first. Where no such person was specified, the company directors were contacted. In cases where no contact e-mail address was provided, Facebook Messenger was used. In one case, the producing venue was the primary point of contact. Some companies were unable to send anything and recommended searching online for website, venue and listings blurbs. In some cases, these had been amended since the corpus collection period so were no longer valid for inclusion. A useful resource was found in the Internet UK Theatre Database, an online platform that archives venue and production listing copy from around the UK. This data collection process reveals that there is currently no standard practice around marketing circus productions in the UK. Further inconsistencies in the retention of publicity materials indicate that little, if any, reflective attention is given to the efficacy of such texts, limiting potential for ongoing improvement.

The audience interview corpus comprises thirty-four interview transcripts, edited to exclude the interviewer, with an average of 1007 words each. The

interviews were all conducted with audience members inside the Circus Big Top venue at Glastonbury Festival of Performing Arts, which was selected within the bounds of practicality for its programming across the gamut of circus types. It is recognised as "a major event on the circus festival calendar" (Arrighi and Davis xxxi) and as a major programmer of international circus artists (Seymour 110). The venue is programmed by Jade Dunbar with a continuous range of circus performance between 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 a.m. on the Friday and Saturday of the festival, with Sunday programming between 10:30 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. The venue is also programmed between 4 p.m. and midnight on the Thursday, when many of the festival's other main venues are yet to open. The acts appear on a thrust stage within the four pole tent and audience members can enter and move around at will to sit on heavy duty coir mats that cover the floor in front and to the sides of the stage. A canvas curtain separates the section of the tent behind the stage, which is used as a backstage area for artists to warm up and to store the props and costumes required during the shows. These shows range from youth circus performances early in the daytime to adult-oriented cabaret and burlesque acts late at night, encompassing family friendly entertainment acts and artistic explorations of circus forms, all hosted by a succession of compères throughout each day. This addresses the variety encompassed by the study's narrativity dimension and answers Szubielska and Ho's call for studies of circus audience experience to consider "diverse standards in terms of technical skills, abilities, and so forth" (172). Outside of the festival environment, some of these performances would usually be seen in tented venues and some in fixed venues, addressing as far as possible the study's venue dimension. In addition to the variety of circus work presented, it was also anticipated that the Glastonbury Festival's circus venue would be attended by a more diverse audience than alternative possibilities. The fact that a multitude of free entertainment competes for festivalgoers' attention over the four days of the festival makes the Circus Big Top venue an excellent place to capture data on what people value about their circus audience experience. They have chosen it over other alternatives without economic and other logistical concerns that might influence 'real world' decision-making and appreciation.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with questions based on the following prompts:

1) What made you choose to come into this tent?
2) Can you describe what's been going on for me?
3) If you had to imagine a scale of good to bad, how would you evaluate the quality of what we've been seeing?
4) What has been your favourite part of the performances you've seen?

5) Apart from the performance elements, what's been your favourite part of the overall circus experience?
6) Has anything been surprising for you?
7) Is there anything you've enjoyed least about your experience in this tent?
8) What were your opinions on circus before coming in here?
9) If you were writing a review for a newspaper or social media, is there anything else you would add that we haven't talked about?

Whilst a small range of demographic data were collected, results were not analysed on an intersectional basis due to the convenience sampling approach undertaken. The sample overwhelmingly identified as white, UK-based, and having attended state school. Almost two thirds had attended university; a similar proportion had no personal experience of circus training of any kind. Just over one third of the participants identified as male, with a single non-binary respondent. Approximately one in seven participants were under twenty-six with the rest evenly split between the age groups of twenty-six to forty-five and over forty-six.

Results were triangulated through both qualitative and quantitative linguistic analysis of the corpus data using a combination of Appraisal (Benítez-Castro and Hidalgo-Tenorio; Martin and White) and Key Semantic Domain (Rayson) analyses. This method reveals prominent topics that evidence value attribution through recurrent mention and identifies targets of evaluative phrasing in both explicit and insinuated verbal constructions. The relative frequency of the values that emerged were calculated for each corpus, and then compared, providing evidence of overuse or underuse between the different text types. Discrepancies between the values communicated by public texts and those expressed by audience members are revealed when oppositional concerns are given focus in the alternate corpora or when a single concern is over-represented—that is, given focus—in one case and under-represented in another (showing corresponding disinterest). These areas of opposition are termed hereafter as "value gaps".

Results

The results indicate that there are many areas in which the values expressed by UK audience members align with those presented in the promotional texts of reviews and publicity materials. However, there are also some significant value gaps. Pertinent to Sorzano's argument for increased attention to community-oriented concerns, one of these gaps is the UK audience members' interest in social experience and its inverse lack of representation in promotional texts.

The main evaluative target that is distinctively valued in the audience interview sample compared with the other two corpora is Audience Experience. The

particular aspect of Communality is also distinctly valued here, which refers to a sense of connection with others, both to other audience members—as in Healey et al.'s "axis of audience–audience interaction" (308)—and to circus artists. These are illustrated in the data extracts [1] and [2], respectively:

[1] So yeah, I was – it was quite moving to sit in the audience and erm . . . and yeah, **to see everybody else's – to see the audience's – here, to be a part of and surrounded by the audience's response** to circus. [AC28]

[2] So you know, if they – if they're trying to do something that doesn't quite go right, **you're kind of like 'oh yeah', no, that helps you kind of empathise with them** even more, I suppose. [AC23]

The over-representation of this aspect within an already over-represented category heightens the salience of this value within the audience interview sample.

Another two pertinent aspects marked as distinctively valued within the audience interview sample are Propriety and Cleanliness. The value of Cleanliness was expressed by stewards working in the venue who described pride in their team's ability to keep the venue clean, e.g., data extract [3]. The value of Propriety was largely articulated in relation to content considered inappropriate for children when the programming shifted towards more adult material as the day progressed into evening, e.g., data extract [4]. It should be highlighted that the adult material itself was not considered a problem (and, in fact, was a positive aspect for some audience members, e.g. data extract [5]), but instead it was the lack of warning that could allow parents to remove their children if preferred, as exemplified in data extract [6].

[3] But one thing we're very good at here is keeping the erm – the area **clean and tidy**. [AC31]

[4] Yeah, we were in here the other night and he was using **bad language**, and there was – it was – it was **before the watershed**. **There was children in here**. And he – some of the **stuff that he said was really inappropriate**. **Even when he wasn't using bad language, some of his stuff was inappropriate.** [AC27]

[5] Because it's happy and there's things going on, and there's activities and things to watch, and **it gets raunchy and fun at night** and is child-friendly during the day. **It's perfect. Win-win.** [AC30]

[6] Erm I think maybe **there should be warnings** at night-time about some inappropriate acts for children. I think, for me, it's fine. I think, in a way, it's quite good to have children exposed to weird possibly sexual things sometimes. Erm but **I think the parents should be made more aware**, perhaps. [AC22]

The data also reveals other non-venue specific examples of Propriety relating to children's well-being and development, with attending and practicing circus being seen as a wholesome learning activity in data extracts [7] and [8] respectively:

[7] Erm **we've taken our own children to a circus because it's good for them** to sort of experience lots of different acts and see what a circus is all about. [AC2]

[8] And-and the compère was mentioning something about, you know, **trying to find local circus schools for your own children** if there's something that's interested in. **I think that's a really great way of pushing it – it's a good thing to push it onto them**. [AC33]

Two further instances of non-venue specific Propriety values highlight animal welfare (data extract [9]) and artists' professionalism (data extract [10]):

[9] Erm **but it's changed quite a lot** cos it used to be animals and erm, you know, **it was little bit cruel really when they use to have animals to do some of the acts**. [AC2]

[10] **They seem very professional**. [AC16]

The prominence of Propriety evaluations in this sample demonstrates that the audience members interviewed placed particular value on the upholding of societal moral standards within their circus attendance experience, indicating an underlying concern with social cohesion. Moreover, this is at a markedly greater degree than found in the reviews or publicity materials.

Within the reviews sample, longer term enjoyment and deep impact is not valued as highly as immediate short-term impact. This is revealed through the relative over-representation of Hedonic expression—as in data extract examples [11]-[13]—and the equivalent under-representation of Eudaimonic expression—as in data extract examples [14]-[16]. This pattern is repeated in the other two corpora but is markedly pronounced within the reviews. This means that not only is immediate pleasure valued more highly than sustained impact in reviews, but it is also attributed more value than in the other two corpora. By extension, longer term pleasure is attributed less value in the reviews than in the audience interview or publicity samples.

[11] But all is not quite what it seems in a show of **blissful acrobatic prowess** and deep emotional shading. [RC345]

[12] The group suggest that this show is suitable from 8+, although there were children younger than that in the audience **who were clearly enjoying the show**. [RC105]

[13] Scott and McAulay are always **a joy to watch.** [RC205]

[14] **. . . making you forget time and your own worries** as it weaves its spell on you. Beautiful and uplifting, like a gift. **I feel grateful** for having seen this show. [RC341]

[15] If you see once [sic] circus show at the Edinburgh festival fringe this year, see Super Sunday and **you won't be disappointed!** [RC566]

[16] When you go there, **you feel the warmth of a family and community** the minute you walk into the tent. [RC694]

Within the publicity corpus, a tendency to value remoteness over proximity was revealed: the distant and the alien were attributed higher value than the local and the intimate, which contrasts with Bednarek and Caple's observation of news values. Under-represented aspects in the publicity sample include qualities of Commune-connection (see, data extract [17]). This reveals that the sample publicists attributed markedly low value to these qualities when compared to the audience member samples. This is in noticeable contrast to the audience interview sample where the similarly oriented experience of Communality was accorded particularly high value[7].

[17] Casus Co-Founders Jesse Scott and Lachlan Macaulay **shared an intimate hour of their lives** in 2018's 'You & I'. [PC20]

These results present discontinuity between audience values and the values being presented and reinforced through promotional texts in the UK circus sector. Audience members valued elements of experience that feed social bonding and longitudinal engagement that connects to their broader social lives. In contrast, the promotional texts overlook the social, focusing on the momentary performance object.

In addition to these discoveries, a further important finding was revealed: the audience members represented in this research demonstrated a lack of vocabulary to confidently express their thoughts around the subject of circus productions. The key semantic domain analysis shows that the audience interview corpus is characterised by a lack of knowledge around the subject, expressed both overtly and through the use of pragmatic markers. The relative overuse of expressions 'sort of' and 'kind of', and of vague nouns 'thing' and 'stuff', are referred to by Aijmer (197–198) as a form of "lexical imprecision", which can occur when a speaker does not have the vocabulary they need in discussing a particular subject. This overuse was evident relative to both the promotional text corpora of this study as well as to three individual reference corpora of general spoken English. This indicates that the phenomenon is specific to the circus audience speech rather than a result of the spoken modality. The audience members struggled to articulate the value of their circus experience, resonating

with Conner's argument for knowledge acquisition as a necessary precursor to establishing taste and facilitating greater audience enjoyment. Knowledge that audience members did express directly was largely from distant personal experience of attending circus events. Furthermore, evaluations of production quality that are expressed on generalised, non-specified grounds—e.g. data extracts [18] and [19]—outweigh those with explanatory detail that articulate the grounds of what was good and why. This reinforces the finding that audience members are not discursively equipped to recognise or communicate the value they find in their circus attendance.

> [18] Yeah, but I thought **it was really good.** [AC34]
> [19] Obviously, **some acts are better than oth-others, but the good ones are amazing.** [AC8]

While this result doesn't directly contribute an answer to what aspects of attendance are particularly valued, it highlights an underlying issue. The inability to recognise and articulate where and how value has been experienced implies further communicative distance between circus audiences and the professional circus sector. The language used in the review corpus is somewhat more specific than that of the other two corpora but is still characterised by a large volume of generic articulation, reinforcing the sector perspective that critics do not generally have adequate vocabularies for engaging with circus work in nuanced ways. However, critics are not alone in this, with more extensive inarticulacy revealed among the audience interviews and publicity texts.

Discussion

In a paper published just weeks before submission of my thesis, Guillaume et al. described interviewing a small sample of circus audience members in France who similarly highlighted a sense of communion, emotional closeness and connection with artists and other audience members as valued elements of their experience. This corroboration emphasises the importance of this element of circus audience experience and further problematizes its marked absence within reviews and publicity texts in the UK. It should also be considered, however, that the particularities of the Glastonbury Festival venue may also have contributed to the orientation towards communal values discovered amongst audience members in this research. Future studies would be beneficial to determine whether the findings are replicated in other UK circus settings. Beyond individual value difference, the inarticulacy of the audience members interviewed for this study also suggests a further sociological gap worthy of investigation.

According to Ivinson's elaboration of Bernstein's Code Theory, the apparent inarticulacy of one social group can be the result of their attempting to communicate within a dominant culture other than that in which they were linguistically acclimatised. In this case, the interviewees were asked to communicate the value of their experience as a circus audience member. The public face of this type of communication—that is, its dominant culture—is presented in review and publicity texts. Conner has described how Western performing arts audiences have become disempowered consumers over the last century as the power of elite gatekeepers has increased, resulting in a cultural logic that "entrusts only experts to make decisions about the meaning and value of an arts event or object" (149). In the field of circus, it would seem that whatever input has been provided by such public 'experts' has resulted in an impoverished discourse that, in turn, has limited the ways in which a circus audience member can consider their experience to have value. This reflects the issues of articulacy and vocabulary that Zaccarini has identified as stumbling blocks in sector development for circus more broadly (8). The values expressed in promotional circus texts differ in substantial ways from the values expressed by UK audience members, creating a socially sanctioned value system that differs from the value system held by the audience members themselves. The public face of evaluative circus discourse can therefore be seen to determine the way audience members feel they must talk about their experience, while restricting the tools or systems with which they can effectively do so.

By extension then, there remains a richness of experience that is masked by the limited articulacy presented in the interviews. The challenge for audience researchers going forwards is in learning how to access the elaborated code that could communicate this richness. As Zaccarini has observed, circus is somewhat "resistant to discourse" (8). Steps towards overcoming this challenge can perhaps be seen in the creative methods developed by Matthew Reason ("Watching Dance"), which harness visual meaning-making and metaphor to catalyse new pathways for articulation of experience that are otherwise inaccessible through conventional discursive practises. These methods have been used with groups whose members do not have access to the wider discourse surrounding their subject, such as children or adults unfamiliar with particular cultural dance forms. Greater familiarity with the subject was found to generate greater articulacy (Reason, "Writing the Embodied Experience"), indicating that these methods could be of particular benefit within circus audience research. Drawing again from Ivinson's reiteration of Bernstein, the communicative culture the interview participants of this research were acclimatised in was one in which exposure to circus and linguistic representations of the audiencing experience were largely absent. The elaborated code to which they could otherwise have access regarding this subject is therefore stunted. A complementary—and longer

term—goal then, for the circus sector, should be to increase public awareness of twenty-first century circus forms and practices by providing increased exposure to and opportunities for discourse on the subject. This would reduce distance and enhance solidarity between workers in the circus sector and their potential audiences. Care should be taken though to ensure these fora are not driven by a classical 'top-down' education, aiming to reinforce and privilege existing sector perspectives, but from an audience centred place of open discovery. Similarly, the limitations of this study's small demographic sample should be taken into consideration with attention paid in future research to perspectives currently under-represented in these findings.

This argument for increased exposure to, and opportunities for, discourse on circus topics also resonates with Conner's advocacy for increased value to be placed upon discursive activities in the arts and, in particular, Little's largely overlooked arguments to take seriously the discussions that occur in circus settings. In line with the principles of cultural democracy, the values of the target public should be considered in any attempts to engage with them. By creating publicity materials that promote values the desired audience care about—rather than regurgitating those legitimised by the established system of elite cultural gatekeepers—a more authentic and mutually beneficial bond can be nurtured between circus creators and their publics. For example, circus artists and producers have an opportunity to reduce this communicative distance by acknowledging the social and communal dimension of circus audiencing that this research has found to be of demonstrable value to UK audience members. As Holden acknowledges, culture blossoms best in the space where audiences and producers of the work meet. However, whilst he specifies this meeting as one where "the knowledge, prejudices and world views of the audience confront those of the artist, and the artist responds" (Holden 24), I contend that in the spirit of equality and power sharing, attention must also be paid to this intersection when the knowledge, prejudices and world views of the artist confront those of the audience, and the audience responds (and, importantly, is listened to). With such shifts in communicative practice, outdated circus frames can be refined in a way that brings their relevance back to the fore for contemporary audiences, ensuring a more virtuous circle of reinforcement than is currently available to most people in the UK. Whilst this study took a holistic approach to be representative of different types of circus production, it would also be valuable for future research to explore value difference between audiences of different circus types to further refine our understanding. It is important to note that the considerations outlined are not to be seen as encouragement to adjust the types of circus work being created, but rather to allow all types of circus creator to more effectively promote the work they choose to make.

Conclusion

The values of the promotional texts examined in this study were found to align more closely with each other than with those of the audience interviews, and the interviews tend to align better with the reviews than with the publicity texts. The promotional texts concentrate their values and attention on the transitory object of the live performance. However, the audience values are marked by an attention to broader social contexts, such as relational experience and societal morals. While the publicity texts also place value on extra-contextual conditions, these particularly relate to connections within the arts and culture industries, creating a loop of hegemonic legitimisation that supports the existing structures of power by reinvesting them with value.

The results provide important groundwork to a hitherto unstudied phenomenon, indicating where the communication between the circus industry and its audiences could be improved. The results from the linguistic analyses support a case for better communication of audience-appropriate values, both at the level of promotional texts and in calls for an enhanced level of public discourse around circus more broadly.

As much as circus is mythologized (Kwint; Lievens; Stoddart; Trapp), so too is the 'circus audience'. It is time to pull back from the reification of what we think we know about audience values and to connect instead with diverse understandings of how circus matters to those who watch it. In this way, circus artists and producers can begin to build a greater solidarity with their publics, creating pretexts that enhance the audience experience rather than confound it. In a broader cultural context, it is hoped that evidence from this study can be used to support the growing movement towards a cultural democracy for the UK wherein audience values are held in as much esteem as those of institutionalised elites.

Notes

1 A lively discussion that highlights the contentious and complex nature of these terms took place in the "Circademics" Facebook group for circus academics in May 2020. Over 150 comments were added within two weeks of the original post, which can be viewed at https://bit.ly/CircusClassificationThread

2 Recent trends in audience research in the UK have begun to address this issue (see, for example, the work of Mathew Reason, Kirsty Sedgman, Helen Freshwater, Ben Walmsley). However, audience research in circus is still scant and, such as it exists within organisations, often inaccessible.

3 Mann Whitney U test, p=1.401e-06

4 Mann Whitney U test, p=6.404e-05

5 Mann Whitney U test, p=0.00176

6 The productions represented in the corpus sample are: *Bromance,* by Barely Methodical Troupe; *Blizzard,* by Flip Fabrique; unnamed 2020 production by Circus Extreme; unnamed 2020 production by Cirque Berserk; unnamed 2020 production by Continental Circus Berlin; *DNA,* by Casus; *Filament*, by Short Round Productions; unnamed 2020 production by Gandey's Circus; *Heroes*, by All or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre and Room 2 Manoeuvre; *Hotel*, by Cirque Éloize; *Hotel Paradiso,* by Lost in Translation Circus; *Humans*, by Circa; *Knot*, by Nikki & JD; *Nosedive*, by SUPERFAN; *Super Sunday*, by Race Horse Company; *The Black Blues Brothers*, by Circo e Dintorni; *The Magnificent Top Hat*, by Zippos Circus; *Toruk*, by Cirque du Soleil; *Winter Wonderland* production, by Zippos Circus; *Xanadu*, by Giffords Circus; *YUCK Circus*, by YUCK Circus; and *Zeus on the Loose,* at the Fire nightclub in London.

7 Under the APPRAISAL coding system adopted for this study, Commune-Connection is an aspect of Quality–that is, linguistically attributed to an external object—while Communality is an aspect of Audience Experience, and therefore linguistically constructed as an internally felt condition. Semantically, however, they cover very similar territory and are therefore comparable categories.

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