

*READINGS OF CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS,  
A DRAMATURGY, LONDON: ROUTLEDGE,  
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IN this exciting and ambitious monograph, scholar and dramaturg Franziska Trapp has set herself the Herculean task of redefining the common vocabulary terms used for circus classification: “traditional”, “new” and “contemporary”. The justification for this is sound—they are poorly defined, relying heavily on personal interpretation (European Commission et al.). Moreover, the general consensus around this tripartite labelling rests on particular socio-historical contexts that do not accurately reflect the breadth of performance practice taking place across different time periods and global contexts. Trapp’s proposal, therefore, is to realign the terminology to dramaturgical structures, drawing on a substantial semiotic framework that she has constructed through combined theoretical and practical studies.

The volume follows the established tradition of analysing performance through semiotic means (see, e.g., Popa Blanariu’s overview), extending beyond the pioneering circus analyses of semiotician Paul Bouissac to address evolutionary changes within the field in a systematic manner. Noting that, at the time of writing, no model existed for a coherent analysis of meaning generation across circus performance types, Trapp has endeavoured to provide one within this volume. Whilst this is now complemented by my own recent Ph.D., adapting a linguistic model of communication for circus analysis (Kavanagh), Trapp’s proposal is differentiated by its focus on cognitive meaning, as consistent with her semiotic background.

Drawing on theories of cultural poetics—in particular the work of Moritz Baßler—Trapp describes an “aesthetics of reception” that reveals processes,

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structures and effects of circus performance, focusing on works she has defined as “contemporary”. The book presents a “reading model” that facilitates methodical analysis, with an ultimate goal of revising the historiography of circus: to move away from a perspective where defining features of genre are administrative and socio-political changes, and vague discussions of narrative, to a consideration of “how the techniques of performance have changed” (6) in line with other art historiographies. Examples of Trapp’s in-depth analysis are provided through seven selected case studies—each presented as a monodisciplinary work from Europe or Canada, performed in indoor or tented venues—which form the basis of her dramaturgical definitions. (Whether her theory holds true for twenty-first century circus performance outside of these formal limits remains to be explored, as the small sample presented is only representative within those bounds).

The book comprises ten chapters, the first three of which guide the reader from background rationale in the “Introduction”, through existing understandings of circus analysis in “Theory”, to the vital exposition of Trapp’s structural approach in “Contemporary circus readings: An analysis model.” Supported by clear diagrammatic representation, Trapp defines the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes which must be addressed to fully describe a performance, and a circus-specific system of “levels” which describe interacting facets of audience reception. These are demonstrated through an illustrative analysis of the production *Acrobates* by the French duo of the same name. The following six chapters each address one of the further parameters identified by Trapp as essential to the contemporary circus form, through example analyses. The relation of diegesis and risk is the focus of “Come wander with me: On narration in *Fragments of a Mind* by Squarehead Productions”; the relation of metonymy and metaphor take centre stage in “Metonymic and metaphorical readings: On ambiguity in *I am (k)not* by Ana Jordão”; intertextuality and intermediality are addressed in “A balancing act between novel and circus: Intertextuality and intermediality in *Le fil sous la neige* by Les Colporteurs”; performance context and mobility are the focus of “‘Show me where you play, and I’ll tell you what you are’: On the relevance of performance context in *L’Argile* by Jimmy Gonzalez”; frames and their ideologies are attended to in “‘Otherness is the craziness we carry inside’: On the discursive context of *L’Autre* by Cie Claudio Stellato”; and, finally, the concept of circus metadiscourse is explored through the example of “Welcome to the Wonderland of contemporary circus: On metadiscourse in *Les Princesses* by Cheptel Aleïk-oum”. The final chapter, “Conclusion and outlook: Toward a dramaturgy of contemporary circus”, briefly expands on four additional features as characteristic of contemporary circus performance: “Pluralism of sign systems and art forms”, “the significance of repetition”, “the aesthetics of risk”, and

“ambiguity and polyfunctionality” (153–154). While beyond the scope of this volume, I look forward in due course to seeing a holistic performance analysis that addresses all these features in combination.

The study is contextualised around ways in which dramaturgical input can be practically useful to creative processes, introducing a compelling motivation for practitioners to engage with the analytic procedures outlined and reiterating this need again through the final chapter. The density of semiotic theorising evidences a remarkable rigour underlying the ambitious manuscript. However, this sometimes takes for granted a reader’s understanding of the principles by which the author arrived at her interpretations, which—in the manner of much semiotic analysis—remain somewhat amorphous. Future work that provides practical guidelines for users, to supplement the theoretical background and case study examples, will be welcome.

The framework is eminently suitable for the analysis of circus performance, but I cannot help speculating that its future application may be limited by the insistence of retaining pre-existing terminology as its labelling device. In theory, adjusting from one set of definitions to another is something an individual can take in their stride. However, in discursive practice, confusion between conflicting definitions serves to complicate rather than clarify communications. Following Trapp’s proposal, for example, a performance can be considered an instance of New Circus technique even if it occurred nearly ninety years ago (75), whereas previous conventions of labelling link the term to a historiography of trends emerging in the late 1960s. Discussing a performance in such a manner with practitioners or publics unfamiliar with the new definitions could foreseeably cause unnecessary and unproductive friction. Whilst Trapp emphasises that her model is not designed for classification of performances, but rather an exemplification of techniques typically found within the genres as generally conceptualised (75), this would appear to reify the conventional historiography and not complicate any of the issues previously raised. She makes the pertinent argument that “a precise use of terms is required to conduct research that is free of contradictions” (13). With this in mind, perhaps her cogent and insightful framework would be best utilised as part of a multi-dimensional analysis that also acknowledges socio-historical contexts, rather than pitting two sets of definitions for a single vocabulary set into competition with each other.

Translated from its original German by Rebecca Walsh, some slight errors and ambiguities in the publication are hard to attribute. However, the significant contribution that Trapp has made to the circus studies field with this research is incontrovertible. Chapters of this book will no doubt be top of the reading list for circus schools throughout the world for some time to come.

## References

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## Author Biography

Dr. Katharine Kavanagh is a circus writer and researcher interested in the communicative space between practitioners, publics and institutions. Her interdisciplinary research sits at the intersection of discourse analysis, audience research and circus studies, with an ongoing focus on applying linguistic methodologies to address challenges of evaluation within the creative and cultural industries. She is currently a teaching associate at Cardiff University and has worked as a visiting lecturer at Circomedia (Bristol), the National Centre for Circus Arts (London) and Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH, formerly DOCH). She is also the founder of the online platform *The Circus Diaries*.