

# Ethno-semiotics of a circus act: Mirko and his goats

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*This article addresses the challenges of engaging in ethno-semiotics research of circus performances and provides an example to illustrate the methodological strategy that is proposed. The approach is bottom-up rather than top-down. First a fine-grained description that integrates both perceptual information and emotional experience from the individual point of view of the observer is produced after several attentive viewings of the performance. Reactions from other members of the audience are also noted to limit the possibility of a strictly subjective verbal rendering of the experience. Secondly, the cultural implications, semantic connotations, and cognitive semiotics of the performance are probed in order to develop a 'thick description' that can serve as a basis for a tentative interpretation. The article then proceeds from the description of a goat act to examine other acts belonging to the same paradigm in circus culture: animals that are paradoxically trained to do nothing. The final section attempts to explain the cognitive reason for which such acts are enjoyed by the audience, and, more generally, why the circus makes sense even in its most unexpected productions.*

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## Introduction

Circus ethnography research is a complex endeavor that requires difficult choices at the onset. The shows produced by today's traditional circuses, and by other contemporary forms of the acrobatic arts, are only the tip of the iceberg. Certainly, the performances can be observed and analyzed as meaningful multimodal texts. But truly construing the circus as an ethnographic object should imply that equal attention is paid to the long processes of production themselves and to the organizations that support them. These aspects have historical

depth, social and economic dimensions, and semiotic relevance. Although I had direct access during several episodes in my life to the inner world of the circus, my scientific focus has been so far exclusively on the ethno-semiotics of the acts and programs which can be observed in actual live performances (Bouissac 1976, 2010, 2012, 2015). The rationale for this heuristic decision is that the interface between a circus act and its audience for the time of its duration is a well-bounded event both temporarily (it has a marked beginning and end) and spatially (it occurs within a circular area and above it, and the spectators surround it with maximal visibility). Even if the scope of the research is thus restricted, the quantity of semiotic information displayed in the ring during the few minutes that a circus act usually lasts and the complexity of the dynamic that unfolds under our eyes can be overwhelming. The circus ethnographer who attends an act for the first time experiences a holistic event that could be characterized as a massive production of meaning and a collective emotional response that is contagious. The systematic semiotic probing of the interface between performance and audience attempts to answer the following questions: what kind of meaning is produced? How is it articulated? What are the assumptions or implications at play? And why does it trigger such gratification among the audience or, at times, is met with disapproval when it fails?

At this point, an important methodological decision is called for. Will the description and interpretation be based on a single viewing, thus focusing merely by necessity on the most salient meaningful effects and reactive affects that can be registered in short-term memory? This is, after all, the experience of the great majority of spectators who attend a live circus performance only once in a while and foster later a long-lasting selective memory based on what they perceived and felt then. Or will several successive viewings of the same spectacle be used by the ethnographer to construct a richer and more complex object of study making it possible to engage in the *thick description* (Geertz 1973) of a structured event, loaded with cultural connotations and implicit intertextual references, that is repeated day after day with minor variations? The latter enables a quasi-exhaustive categorization of all the multisensorial elements at work in a circus act and the ways in which they are combined, and unfold as a dynamic unit from the beginning to the end. During multiple observations, attention can be paid to the audience's reactions and, these indications can provide the researcher with reliable information on the variations that may occur in the reception of the act in synchrony with its successive moments.

All scientific observations and descriptions are based on a model or a matrix that has been constructed through the first stage of the inquiry. Any acrobatic or trained animal act is generated by an algorithm, that is, a set of self-instructions which the performer implements at a particular pace. These instructions include (i) technical movements such as: make the horses run clockwise three times around the ring; then, make them change direction; or: juggle with three balls with twelve catches; then, add a ball and pirouette before the last catch; and (ii) make social gestures toward the audience around you such as smiling as if you were having

fun with the horses; or, tilt your head toward the public and pause after a series of successful juggling tricks to acknowledge their applause. All this can in theory be described 'objectively' but the observer of a circus act is also necessarily a spectator and, therefore, is embedded into the very object of the study. This creates an experiential dimension that transforms the observation into a comprehensive self-implicating account.

The only way to do semiotic justice to the complexity and symbolic richness of circus acts is to engage in a 'thick' description while keeping in mind that the subjectivity of the observer is an important component of the experience that is reported as the 'object' of the study. There is enough evidence, though, that it is a shared subjectivity grounded on the common denominators of the performance. It can be safely assumed that a significant overlapping of the individual receptions guarantees the authenticity of the ethnographic descriptions and interpretations.

The traditional circus offers a limited set of genres and paradigms within each genre. Genres include for instance ground and aerialist acrobatics, or domestic and wild animal training. The paradigms within the domestic animal genre comprise species endowed with distinct status: horses, dogs, and farm animals such as cows, pigs, and geese. They rank on a scale from higher to lower class, the latter being most often associated with clowns; the former with equestrian aristocracy. However, it must be kept in mind that the differential statuses of animals depend on the cultures in which they are observed and on whether they are considered to be autochthonous or exotic. Furthermore, each species comes with its own local semiotic baggage, a bundle of symbolic values, stereotypical characterizations, and folk narratives. Similarly, acrobatics of all kinds can evoke historical and mythical associations through the artists' demeanors, their stage names and costumes, and the music that accompanies their acts. 'Thick' description cannot gloss over these webs of images, metaphors, and connotations that are delivered as a rich package with each performance. Whether these meaningful dimensions are only in the eyes of the beholders or deliberately designed by the performers, they infuse the experience that is the object of the ethnographic inquiry. Indeed, circus acts are not passively 'consumed' by the spectators but they are co-constructed by the artists and their audience. Therefore, the goal of the ethno-semiotician is to elaborate an inclusive and comprehensive object through elucidating the dynamic interactions of the multiple signs that are at play in the performance of a circus act. It also must disentangle the multiple layers of cultural memories that are woven in it.

## **A challenging goat act**

Let us probe the approach described above in the case of an act I observed in August 2015 in a Polish circus that was performing in Warsaw. *Cyrk Zalewski* had pitched its tent in a

suburb of the Polish capital. I was able to attend the show three times. As an admirer of the circus arts, the first show is always for the pleasure. Putting temporarily semiotic concerns into parenthesis, I experience the acts as a *bona fide* spectator, feeling free to pass esthetic or technical judgments on the performances I witness. The program was traditional. Some acts were a little better than average. I was only mediocly interested in a goat act that was presented by a clown, Mirco (Miroslaw Bogut). On face value, it was trivial except for an amusing trick at the beginning of the act. There was a lot of talking by the clown during the act but the goats were only minimally trained and what they did was truly undistinguished. Not being conversant in Polish, this was a handicap. But, after all, circus is a visual art and I can tell a well-trained animal from one that hardly meets usual standards. I thought it was a poor act. But, for the ethnographer of the circus, when one moves from the first experience to the reflexive observation and description, a bad act is as interesting, if not more, than a good act. Why was it bad? This is a true question for the semiotician. I was challenged by the fact that this 'mediocre' act was quite successful with the public which, obviously did not share my critical opinion. From their point of view, it was a good act. But why?

The second viewing was in the company of a native speaker of Polish who first provided some fragments of translations, then, quickly, stopped and dismissed the talk as 'uninteresting chatting'. That time, the goats were behaving with some variations compared to my memory of the first experience. But these were not variations that could be considered as the results of a sophisticated training. They seemed to be random. Still, the audience appeared to enjoy that act. Obviously, some meaning was produced very efficiently by this performance.

For the third observation of this act, I came equipped with my pencil and notebook, and later extracted from the native speaker on my side the gist of what the clown was saying during his constant chatting. The act unfolded as follows in two distinct parts.

1. As some stools and other props are being brought into the ring in preparation for the next act, someone creates a disturbance among the audience. The ring master, who was busy overseeing the placing of the props, turns toward the culprit and a spotlight illuminates a shabbily dressed clown. The ring master asks this individual if he has an admission ticket, adding that, if he does not, he will throw him forcefully out of the circus. While the ring master walks around the ring to reach the location where the disturbance occurred, the clown asks a lady seated next to him whether she would kindly let him have her ticket just for a moment. She complies and when the ring master stands in front of him, the clown triumphantly shows him the right ticket. So far, so good. The ring master apologizes and begs the man to keep quiet henceforth and enjoy the show. As the ring master is walking back to the center, the clown calls him and suggests that he should also ask the lady next to him whether she has a ticket. The public laughs at the gag.
2. The clown, Mirco, walks to the ring, extracts a newspaper from his pocket and sits

down on the border of the ring and unfolds the newspaper to read it. A large black goat enters the ring and approaches him from behind. He notices the animal only when it starts eating the newspaper. At this moment, Mirco starts chatting to the goat and will continue chatting non-stop in a confidential tone of voice, at times raising the volume to make side remarks intended for the public. Expectedly, the goat's action is explained by alluding to its starving for news. The goat is led back to one of the stools on which four more goats have been brought by attendants holding them on leashes. The goats are spectacular. They are beautiful specimens of the Valais mountains breed found in the South of Switzerland. They sport long curved horns and a rich, long coat of white and black hairs. Mirco makes comments about each animal and describes their great acrobatic skills. Including standing on the pedestals, climbing a pyramid of stools, doing feats of balance, and leaping from stool to stool. In fact, the goats are merely trained to stay in the ring and are pulled or pushed through their paces by Mirco or his attendants, or they are enticed to move from one spot to the other by small rewards of food. In addition to the five adult goats, a young animal cavorts around the arena but Mirco pretends to keep it under control with occasional gestures and verbal commands. He tells the audience that this young goat is eager to work and cannot wait for its tricks...which never happen. The big goats' performances are equally unimpressive. When one of them is brought to a stool and ordered to jump to the next one, it leisurely walks across the short gap between the two stands. Instead of doing a hind-leg walk, Mirco hoists the front legs of another one and the attendants push it from behind. Several such 'tricks' are presented in rapid succession while Mirco keeps chatting about how smart and skilled the goats are. At times, he begs them not to ridicule him as he needs to make money to feed them. He also explained to the audience what they think and why they act this way. At the end, they all leave the ring while the spectators express their pleasure with sustained applause. This last information is crucial. It indicates that meaning has been produced and this is what matters to the semiotician. But how to account for the success of such an apparently mediocre display of animal training?

Snapshots of this act can be found on Miroslaw Bogut's Face Book page among other visual documents <https://www.facebook.com/mirco.bm>. It shows in particular the clown begging a goat to leap through a hoop held high above his head, and another photo showing that Mirco has to hold a milk bottle high in order to have a goat standing on its hind legs and resting its front leg on his body to hold the upright position.

## **Animals trained not to do what they are asked to do**

Mirco's goat act belongs to a rich paradigm of domestic animal acts in the traditional circus repertory. The algorithm has the following form: take a docile domestic animal and train it to stay calm in the ring and do nothing or very little while the presenter frames this inaction (or spontaneous natural behavior) within a discourse describing what this animal will do, can do, or thinks. At the same time, be very active around the animal and implement physically whatever the animal is supposed to do as a result of its training. Note that this applies to domestic animals with are defined in the contextual cultures as providing an economic service such as work, food, or other functions, for instance: mules, donkeys, dogs, goats, cows, chickens, geese, and the like.

This abstract algorithm can generate various narratives that can be implemented in the ring with effective dramatizations. Examples I have witnessed during the last four decades include the Swiss mime and clown Dimitri who presented a cow. The ring master asked him for some milk but the clown was unable to obtain any because he lacked the basic technical knowledge necessary to draw the milk from the udders; he first placed a bucket under the animal and tried to make the cow deliver spontaneously the milk by enticing her with the kind of whistling sound that is often made by a caretaker to prompt an infant boy to urinate, thus assimilating the udders with penises; then, he attempted to pump up the milk by manipulating up and down the cow's tail as if it were a water or gas pump; instead, the animal, which had been given plenty to drink before the show, often released itself in the ring for the enjoyment of the audience. The Russian clown Karandash performed with a mule that refused to pull his cart to the point that he had to leave the ring pulling himself the cart in which the mule was seated. Douglas Kossmayer, under the stage name of Eddie Windsor, introduced his 'glamorous' partner Lola Basset, who turned out to be a female basset hound; the dog entered the ring slowly and walked toward the trainer standing beside a table. 'She' had a touch of make-up on the cheeks and was wearing a diamond-studded collar. The animal was self-composed and looked up at the trainer with loving eyes. However, when it was ordered to jump on the table, it would not budge. The man had to lift the dog half way. Lola eventually was hanging with the front legs resting on the table's edge. Inch by inch, he pushed her up until the dog was resting on top of the table. The trainer kept verbalizing how dynamic and obedient 'she' was but had to bring the dog back on the ground using the same process as the one he used for the way up. Then came the trick of leaping through a hoop. Holding the circle high in front of the dog, the trainer shouted 'Jump Tiger!' As there was no reaction, he lowered the height several inches down while his orders were becoming more and more like supplications. Eventually, Lola walked through the hoop when the later was on ground level. The trainer never stopped talking, at times to the dog, at times to the audience, for all the duration of the act. These three examples of the implementation of the paradigmatic algorithm that was formulated above were met with great success.

Engaging in a thick description of Mirco's goat act first required that we identify the paradigm in which it belongs. This does not mean that the full paradigm was present in the trainer's mind when he conceived and created this goat act. Circus artists, though, maintain a kind of memory bank comprising a number of past and contemporary acts in their specialty. They work from precedents, like some legal systems, which they may imitate and slightly modify rather than creating them from scratch through applying an explicit code to a particular domain. The same is true for the audience. They hold some folk knowledge about the fauna of their natural environment. Their own occasional experiences of the circus prompt them to foster a set of expectations when they go to a circus. Farm animals are often associated with clowns, or with presenters dressed as farmers, which, incidentally, is the original meaning of the word 'clown' in Old English. These farm animals are supposed to embody lower moral or mental qualities. Donkeys are considered to be stupid and stubborn. Goats are credited for being willy and devilish, and they are sometimes characterized as the clowns of the animals because of their antics. They have long been loaded with mythical symbolism, from their kinship with the god Pan to their affinities with Satan and witches. All these semiotic layers form a thick cognitive context from which the spectators spontaneously draw symbolic resources for their immediate live interpretations, thus making sense of the performance. But the key to understand why the non-performance of the goats in Mirco's act produces so much humorous sense relates to a fundamental cognitive competence of humans called the 'theory of mind.'

## **Humor and the theory of mind**

The theory of mind (often referred to as T.O.M.) is a notion that was first devised by developmental psychologists who observed that a stage in the maturation of children allows them to interpret others as intentional agents (e.g. Meltzoff 1995; Baron-Cohen et al. 2013). This means that the child discovers that others have a mind and perceive their surroundings in a way similar or not to their own. It is important to understand that T.O.M. is not a philosophical discourse about what the mind is but designates our conceptualization of others as having their perceptions and intentions that may be different from our own. It empowers our capacity to design strategies that take into account what we believe others believe and perceive. Empirical studies have shown that this cognitive competence has evolved in primates as well as in other species (e.g. Premack and Woodruff 1978; Krupenye et al. 2016) but has reached an apex with humans who have the ability, to some extent, to 'read the mind' (that is, the beliefs and intentions) of others before they act, or at least to assess their options and anticipate their most likely behavior that may be determined at times by false beliefs. This is a marked adaptive advantage in social species but, like all adaptations, it carries a cost. Intentions can be attributed to inappropriate physical objects for the sole reason that they move and appear

to behave like organisms. In many traditional cultures, volcanoes, for instance, are construed as unpredictable powerful agencies and it is common for the populations which are threatened by an eruption to sacrifice some animals, and even sometimes humans, in order to appease the volcanoes and prevent them from killing more people. It is a great advantage to figure out what others are likely to do, and to devise appropriate strategies or, at least, to understand that the point of view of others must be taken into consideration. But we are prone to read intentions where there are none, to misread others' minds, or to be deceived by their manipulative behavior. As in the case of visual perception, framing and priming can bias what we see. Humans tend to perceive faces in clouds, on tree trunks or on stone walls on the bases of a few minimal visual cues. This human cognitive competence and its tendency to over-interpret must be kept in mind when we endeavor to understand why Mirco's goat act is successful with the audience in spite of demonstrating only rudimentary training skill.

The constant chatting of the clown provides a general frame of interpretation by pretending to read into the mind of the goats, putting word in their mouths, so to speak, or at least articulating their assumed inner speech. He personalizes them by giving them names and he pretends to read their intentions and private motivations. When an animal fails to jump on order, he utters: 'Ah! This was a good joke! She can jump high in the backstage but she always tries to humiliate me in public! Three months ago, she made a big leap. She brought the house down' or to a goat that does not budge on request: 'Please, Angela, don't do that to me. I need to earn my bread ... and yours'. Gestures can also construct intentional frames. If a goat seems to hesitate to walk a bar between two pedestals, the clown kisses her on the nose and she immediately complies. 'That is the way she manipulates me! She never has enough kisses!'

As the act unfolds, the audience construes the goats as the principal agencies and, as in the similar dog acts that were described above, the meaning produced is that the animals reverse the relation trainer / trainee. The iconic example of this operation is the trick to which I alluded earlier in which the clown who had come to the ring in a cart pulled by a mule, eventually left the ring pulling the cart in which the mule was seated.

This circus paradigm cannot be fully understood, though, if it is not related to the category of wild animals training in which the dominance over natural wilderness is redundantly asserted. The clown is an anti-trainer, the symmetrical inverse of the wild animal trainer. Each one derives its value from the other. Transposed in the social register, we could say that the opposition stands between the warriors and the farmers, or even, perhaps, between the hunters and the pastoralists. This constitutes the deep semiotic opposition that accounts for the production of meaning of this act. In fact, the program in which the goat act was a part included a lion act through which the animals were forcefully driven through their pace and fully accomplished the tricks they were prompted to do. It should be clear that a circus act's meaning emerges from the complex dynamic relations that are embodied in the whole circus tradition. This tradition is rooted in the deep time of oral mythical narratives of which circus



acts survive as shards and fragments of ancient rituals. In the circus experience, there is indeed more than meets the eyes.

Is Mirco an anti-hero? Or is he a meta-hero in the sense that he deconstructs the delusion of the heroic lion trainer? The status of meta-hero would be congruent with his function as clown. Through contemplating his apparent failure to dominate the animals which, as domestic animals, are culturally defined as dominated, the spectators can access the broader abstract structure that is cognitively subjacent to the spontaneous understanding of this act. This has to do with the semiotic of action which implies a logical system of oppositions whose cardinal positions are: first, doing and not doing with respect to the values of possibility and obligation; secondly, making someone do something, not making someone do something, making someone not do something, and not making someone not do something. This subjacent system of oppositions and mutual implications accounts for the semantic of action verbs such as achieving, failing, forcing, preventing, prohibiting, allowing, and the like, which are at the core of the spectacular process of training animals. The circus paradigm we have explored in this essay, more particularly Mirco's goat act in the context of the whole circus program, displays a visual theory of manipulative action in the symmetrical inverse mode which establishes the transgressive nature of the clown and his capacity to transcend the code that defines one of the main tenets of Neolithic cultures within which we still live: the domestication of some species. We can note in conclusion that just before the goat act started, Mirco first appeared as the protagonist of an episode in which he acted as a transgressor whose presence in the audience was unlawful, and that he escaped punishment by tricking a spectator into conspiring with him for the purpose of outsmarting the ring master, thus unveiling the arbitrariness and vulnerability of the cultural order. This action had qualified him as a trickster right at the onset of the goat act.

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