Course Description

What do you think of when you think of the circus? Elephants and Tigers? Aerialists dressed in sparkling costumes? An exhibition of freaks? Circus—which is not considered purely theatre, art, or sport—is often ignored academically because it is difficult to define, or deemed “mere” entertainment. But circus is not simply spectacle; it is a reflection of society.

This course is an exploration of the Western Circus as a performance form that can construct, affirm, and even change cultural values and norms. Beginning with a foundation in Western circus history, we will look at circus acts from the eighteenth century to the modern day as spectacles that have the power to resist the status quo. Considerations of gender, race, sexuality, and nationality, will guide readings, viewings, and discussions of freak shows, animal acts, aerial and acrobatic performance in theatre, film, popular culture, and on the national stage. Through the lens of the circus, this course seeks to explore the larger impact of popular, performing arts on society.

Course Objectives

The course aims to uncover a history which is not often taught in undergraduate programs, but which reveals much about Western cultural identity. Circus history and performance highlight stories and spaces of resistance against the marginalization of identities.

The focus will be on illuminating how mainstream, normative cultural values are being negotiated in performance. As a cultural studies course, the larger point is how popular performances subsequently create and transform social relations, values, and power in daily life.

Students will come away with a greater facility for reading ideologies behind all types of performances in popular culture, as well as new tools for talking about marginalized and intersectional identities.
Written Assignments

Weekly Journal
Students will be assigned weekly written responses to the reading and viewing material. These will be posted on Trunk and are intended to give you space to make sense of the material, pose questions, and bring in your own interests.

Response Paper
3-4 page paper responding to a live circus performance that we will attend as a class. The performance will be the fall tour of Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey, or the fall show produced by the Boston Circus Guild (TBA, depending on schedule).

Research Paper
8-10 page research paper on a contemporary circus company. The research will also be shared with the class as a 15-minute oral presentation. Students will explore such things as style of work, audience demographics, critical reception, issues and themes addressed. You are expected to research at least two of the company’s productions in detail. Students will be given a list of companies that might be chosen, but a student may propose a company not on this list for consideration.

Final Project

Students will be asked to use the work we have done throughout the semester to design an original circus act that consciously makes space for marginalized identities. The act will be produced by a fictional circus company that students design, and you will come up with a mission statement for your company.

For this project, students will work in groups to create the companies, but grades will be decided on an individual basis in relation to your contribution to the group as well as your own work. Each student will submit an individually written component.

Each group will present their final project to the class, describe their concept for its staging, and discuss the ideas/themes/issues that their act addresses. Groups may choose to design any type of act, and their final presentation may include performance (not required) if they chose something like clowning or juggling that may be demonstrated safely in a classroom setting.

Grading

All assignments will be letter graded. Because this is a discussion-based course, attendance is essential and class participation will be a significant part of the student’s grade.
SYLLABUS
*working copy, subject to change

Week One—Introduction to the topic of Circus.
Origins and Birth of the Modern Circus in the West

Read chapters 1 & 2 of Duncan Wall’s *The Ordinary Acrobat*.

Opening Discussion: What do you think of when you think of circus? What are the common features of “circus” entertainment? How is circus unique from other forms of popular culture?

TOPIC: Origins of the modern Western circus

We will look at the history of the modern circus in the west beginning with Philip Astley in eighteenth-century England, and continuing through the nineteenth century, and the emergence of circus in America. This will build the foundation for the more specific exploration of circus acts that we will embark on in this course.

Week Two—The Golden Age of the American Circus, P.T. Barnum

Read Helen Stoddart, “Circus: cultural history and aesthetics” from *Rings of Desire*.

TOPIC: The American Circus in the twentieth century

We will examine figures in who rose to international fame in the American circus, with a particular focus on stars like wirewalker Con Colleano, and rope artist Lillian Leitzel. Looking at a series of images of each from historical circus posters, these performers will begin our discussion of the representation of race and gender in circus advertising. We will also discuss the demographic makeup of circus audiences to get a sense of who was participating in these spectacles.

Week Three—Freaks and Freak shows

Read Truzzi, Marcello, “Circus and side shows” from *American Popular Entertainment*, and Bogdan, Robert, “Exotic and Aggrandizing: Modes of Presenting Freaks,” form *Freak Show*.

TOPIC: Freak shows in the twentieth-century circus
We will focus on visual representations of different marginalized identities and the ideologies promoted by “freak show” exhibits. We will also discuss the presence of the “freak show” in current popular culture.

**Week Four—Animal Acts**


Response Paper Due.

**TOPIC: Animal acts**

We will discuss the beginnings of wild animal acts in the American circus as performances of nationality, and explore the iconography of several different types of acts, from tigers and bears to horses and dogs. We will also look at the recent controversies over animal acts in the Ringling Bros. circus, and the historic decision to eliminate elephant acts by 2018.

**Week Five—Juggling Acts**


Watch TED Talk by Michael Moschen, “Juggling as Art…and Science.”

**TOPIC: Juggling acts and the New Circus movement**

We will look at the evolution of juggling acts in Europe and America, and focus specifically on the work of Jerome Thomas, the “Godfather of modern juggling.” We will consider how juggling acts in the New Circus begin to more consciously use the performer’s body to tell stories and communicate ideals to the audience.

**Week Six—Clown Acts**


Watch *Slava’s Snowshow*, Arte France Cinema, 2010 (available online)

**GUEST VISIT:** Leah Abel, member of local clown troupe and an active participant in Clowning for Social Change.
TOPIC: Modern clowning

Our case study will be the famous Russian Clown Slava Polunin, whose work in the internationally successful Slava’s Snowshow provides a view into the clown as social outcast, and advocate for marginalized identities.

In the second half of the class, Leah Abel will come to talk about her work with advocacy groups as a Clown for Social Change. She will get the students on their feet and give us all a lesson in clowning!

**Week Seven—Partner Acrobatics and Contortion**


TOPIC: Ground acrobatics

We will consider physical displays of virtuosic movement, from handbalancing on partners, to teeterboard, to contortion acts. In class, we will view clips of some contemporary acrobatic acts and discuss them with a particular focus on how the body is used to communicate gender and sexual identity.

**Week Eight—Contemporary Circus Companies**

Oral Presentations / Research Paper Due.

Students will present their midterm projects on contemporary circus companies.

**Week Nine—Aerial Acts and the Performance of Risk**


GUEST VISIT: Jill Maio, local aerialist and owner of Aircraft Aerial Arts in Somerville.

TOPIC: Aerial acts
We will build upon our conversations from week seven, as we continue to read acrobats’ performing bodies for their sociocultural identities. Discussion will center around the performance of risk. How do you read a body high above the ground? How are men and women expected to perform differently in these types of acts? Are heteronormative identities affirmed or transgressed in these acts?

**Week Ten—Circus Arts in the Theatre**

Watch excerpts from circus-theatre companies *Les Sept Doigts de la Main*, and *500 Clown*

TOPIC: Circus arts in the contemporary theatre

We will consider the use of extreme physical performance as a mode of storytelling. Case studies will include *500 Clown Macbeth* and *500 Clown Frankenstein*—shows performed at the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago in 2007, which are available to watch online.

**Week Eleven—Circus on Film**

Watch *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Cecil B. DeMille (1952)

TOPIC: Circus arts on film

Students will watch the 1952 winner for Best Picture, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, which is a film set in the Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus. Together, we will discuss the ideologies present in the film, both overt and hidden, and decide what we think the film has to say about normative vs. marginalized identities. To broaden our discussion, we will look at the representation of gender and race in circus posters from the Golden Age of the American circus, and compare them to images of popular entertainment in advertising today.

**Week Twelve—Thrill and Novelty Acts: Circus Acts Taken to the Extreme on a National Stage**


Watch Nik Wallenda’s tightrope walk across Chicago, broadcast by the Discovery Channel in 2014 (available online)

Explore “Niagara Falls Stunts & Daredevils: History,” Niagara Parks Online.

TOPIC: Thrill acts performed on the national stage
These acts, from Niagara Falls wire walkers, to Philippe Petit’s tightrope performance between the World Trade Centers, to Nik Wallenda’s televised walks over the Grand Canyon and Chicago, take circus skills and stage them for millions at a time. We will discuss the ideologies present in the advertising and presentation of such acts.

**Week Thirteen—The Emerging Circus: What We Envision**

Presentations of Final Projects.

Students will present their original concepts for an act performed by an imagined contemporary circus company.