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Semiotic analysis of paradigm change in circus arts – case study of Rīgas cirks

Master's Thesis

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Introduction

Circus as a cultural phenomenon is one of the oldest cultural forms of expression. Its presence in different forms and cultures can be traced back to thousands of years. That said, curiously the circus studies is fairly young. It seems that circus in contemporary culture and society is present and ephemeral at the same time, its role – ambivalent. Balancing between romantic traditions, contemporary expressions, on circular stages and in the metaphorical language it is hard to pinpoint the essence of circus. In this thesis, I am offering a portrait of what does circus mean in Riga, more precisely the institution and space of Rīgas cirks.

The choice of this topic is a continuation of my previous research and work in Rīgas cirks as the historical archive manager and caretaker. Since the Autumn of 2017 I have been closely connected with Rīgas cirks and in my bachelor's studies I started researching history of Rīgas cirks and the Baltics overall. Very soon it was clear that there is almost no information and research that is available about this space and the local culture in Latvia does not have circus as a part of self-description. In this work I have applied semiotic theories to analyze the possible reasons for such gap in cultural research.

The main research focus is the positioning of circus in culture. As a phenomenon it has the characteristics of being both international and local at the same time. To add, there is an omnipresent tension between the multifaceted and intermedial possibilities and realities of circus in opposition to stagnant stereotypes. The central problematic of this thesis concerns the semiotic recoding and paradigm change that is now happening in circus all over the world. Circus as an art form adjusts to the needs, values, realities and ethics of contemporary world, therefore a change is happening – from modern circus (colloquially called traditional circus) to contemporary circus. As the case study I have chosen Rīgas

cirks, the only stationary circus building that houses a circus and with paradigmatic change of the performance art performed there, reflects this change up close.

Rīgas cirks was built in 1888 and has been entertaining the local audience without stopping since then. Until 2017 it was the main institutional circus of Latvia that housed modern circus performances from all over the world. In 2016 a cluster of events that were connected with institutional negligence and social change, Rīgas cirks was subjected to structural change. Now it has completely new team, strategy and artistic direction which is contemporary circus. In the light of this thesis, I will be using the term “Rīgas cirks” to refer to this exact institution as it is the policy of institutional portrayal kept by the organisation itself. The main goal of this work is to study how more global changes and the position of circus in culture reflect in the specific case of Rīgas cirks.

Research objectives

The main aim of this thesis is to describe and analyze the explosive nature of paradigm change of the artistic system of circus arts in Riga. What are the artistic, social and cultural memory processes that impact an event like this. To approach this process from different meaning making planes, I will concentrate on four thematic aim subgroups:

- To describe historiography and paradigmatic influences of circus in Riga

In the Chapter one of this thesis I will introduce different circus traditions that have influenced the paradigmatic understanding of circus as a performance art in the Baltics. Through a historical perspective I will delineate the differences between the modern, the New circus (*Cirque Nouveau*) and the contemporary circus traditions. This overview will combine research about Western and Slavic circus paradigms and show the influences of these traditions on the Baltic region. I will also offer a historical overview of the position of Rīgas cirks in a local and more international context as Riga is located at the boundary zone of two strong circus cultures – the Western and the Slavic circus tradition, making the Baltics and specifically Riga is an active space of translation.

- To map the position of circus in culture in relation to other cultural systems

In the Chapter two, I will describe the position of circus in culture in the global and local view. This will be based on theoretical frameworks about mapping of circus in culture (by Paul Bouissac), its reflection and existence in other artistic forms, therefore the metaphorical understanding of the circus and how it impacts the memory creation about the circus. I will also look into a model of artistic paradigm change and the cultural dynamics of it and how it can be applied to the change from modern to contemporary circus.

- Paradigms of Riga circus in relation to the local context

In the Chapter three I will look closer to the specific characteristic of Baltics. To do so I will use Juri Lotmans' idea of semiosphere and more specifically the Baltics as a boundary zone. From that I will extend the analysis to Rīgas cirks and the paradigmatic change that began in 2016. Here I will apply Lotmans' ideas about the gradual and explosive dynamics of cultural development. Also by using Franziska Trapps' analysis of circus performance dramaturgy I will reflect on the difference in paradigm change and the heterogeneous environment of circus. By describing the dynamics within a circus performance I will show the different coexistent paradigms and how they reflect in the local culture.

- Infrastructure and institution as a more in-depth case study of paradigm change

The change of paradigm in Rīgas cirks happened not only in the context of performances and strategy but also in the context of infrastructure. The building was closed due to its critical state and there was a need to immediately begin the reconstruction. The main focus still is the explosive dynamics of this event, but the attention to the building is given as a description of a constant element that unites different traditions and as a marker of change due to renovation. The strategic direction that represents the contemporary circus tradition, its values of inclusiveness, heterogeneity, and multimedial art practices now also reflects in the Rīgas cirks structurally. In this case study, by using a theoretical approach to the concept of borders in space from a semiotic perspective I will compare the change in architectural mapping of Rīgas cirks before and after renovation which also reflects the difference between the modern and contemporary circus paradigms. Hence the change of cultural memory and mapping of circus as an artform in the local culture.

Research questions

The research questions of the thesis are:

- What are the contexts of how we use the term 'circus'?
- How do these uses impact the cultural placement and understanding of circus?
- What are the cultural and artistic paradigms that create the specificity of circus in the Baltics and more specifically – Rīgas cirks?
- What are the semiotic meanings of circus in the local culture of Riga and how it has changed?
- How does the analysis of space (in this case the infrastructure of Rīgas cirks) reflect a paradigmatic change in the artistic system?

Expected results

The main expected result is a holistic analysis of circus as an art form and cultural phenomena that has both metacultural qualities and specific local ways of expression. The ambition is to create a cultural description of a local, culturally explosive event of a paradigm change of an artistic system in Riga, while still being in this process of change. At the same time this is a contemporary situation and it is easy to see the applied strategies and their impact in real time.

By focusing on the institution of Rīgas cirks in the global and local context, I am expecting to find the specific characteristics of this space. To do so, the closing chapter of this thesis will be an in-depth analysis of the Rīgas cirks infrastructure and how the paradigm change has impacted and reflects in the recoding of the venue itself. At the time of writing of this thesis, the infrastructure is still under some change and it will continue also after the presentation of this thesis, therefore the building will be captured as a finite text until the end of March 2024. Hence another expectation for this thesis is to find a way of description of a dynamic process while it is still in motion.

1. On the history and historiography of circus

Circus can be perceived as a complex system of meaning making. To understand the possible facets of this topic, an overview of historiography and main theoretical sources of the thesis is necessary.

To look more in depth about circus positioning in culture, I will use different ideas, such as metaculturality, from circus semiotician Paul Bouissac. For analysing the development of circus as an art form, I will borrow from the model of media genealogy developed by cinema theorists Andre Gaudreaut and Phillippe Marion. To view artistic paradigm change where the central object of change is performance, I will use models developed as part of cultural poetics studies by Franziska Trapp which are based on literature theorist Moritz Baßler's models of dramaturgical analysis.

To map the main semiotic events of this thesis, as the main author I am using Juri Lotman and his ideas of semiosphere (emphasis on the concept of border), gradual and explosive cultural dynamics. With these frameworks it is possible to create a portrait of circus in Latvia and in Rīgas cirks and therefore offer first and initial description of this phenomenon.

An innovation of this thesis will be the combination of Western circus research and circus research about Post-soviet circus. There is a relatively small amount of research available about Slavic circus in the Western academia, therefore, by doing extended research and comparison of both paradigms I will try to put them in comparison.

Here I would like to highlight, that the lack of descriptions or study about circus in Latvia is not only a global problem as a gap in circus studies, but also a local one as a gap

in local cultural history. In Latvian there are only few books written and publicly available about circus in Latvia. There are available only three biographies of circus artists in Latvian – a white clown Rolands (Kazimirs Plučs) published in 1963, an aerialist Rodions Ņikitins published in 1987 and a tiger trainer Stepanš Denišovs published in 1989. Some memories are saved in a poetic description of life in Rīgas cirks by Dzirda Rinkule-Zemzare named *How Much Do We Pay For Happiness?* (1993). In the context of academic research there is one publication which is based on archival research done by Valda Kvaskova “Albert Salamonsky’s circus in Riga” (1999) and a popular science/historical overview written by Ģirts Dzenītis “Pages From Latvian Circus History” published in 1981. As it is noticeable, there has not been much contemporary research done on this topic. In March 2024 was published the first book that applies contemporary perspective to a historical overview titled *Rīgas cirks. Beginning. 1888-1957* (2024).

With this in mind, in this thesis I am positioning the global circus scene and the local in relation, thereby noticing patterns of repetition in history and using semiotic approaches to analyse the event of paradigmatic change as a phenomenon itself.

1.1. History of the research object

The main focus of this thesis is the artistic paradigm change of circus arts in Latvia and specifically Rīgas cirks. Rīgas cirks is the only stationary circus building in the Baltics and one of the oldest in Europe. In 2016 and 2017 this institution experienced a cluster of events that have resulted into a paradigmatic change – from a modern circus venue, to a contemporary circus venue. This change is reflected not only on an institutional level but also on cultural, artistic, and infrastructural. To begin to unravel this change, it is necessary to describe the history of circus and the historical meaning of this institution.

Riga as the capital of Latvia is the biggest city in the Baltics and is at the political and cultural crossroads of two different perceptions of culture and life – the Western and the Slavic. The political oscillations have created this geopolitical area very diverse and having great impact to the local national identity. Because of this diversity and regular

historical changes, there are topics that lack an in-depth description, and circus traditions in Latvia is one of them. It seems, that the local culture is in a way “blind” to this artistic phenomenon as for a long time it has represented values and realities of a time undesirable for contemporary audiences.

In this chapter, I will offer a slight introduction to the positioning within the research object of circus as a phenomenon. Following with an overview of the artistic paradigms that have influenced the development and positioning of circus in culture in the local region and specifically in Rīgas cirks – the Western and the Slavic circus traditions. I will explain this division and offer an introduction of the history of Rīgas cirks creating a portrait of what this institution has represented.

The meaning of a stationary circus building

Stationary or permanent circus buildings could be seen as an indicator of the role of circus art in a given culture. This relation can be seen in the location of these buildings, architectural solutions, historical use, or even the absence of them. However stationary circus buildings are mostly built due to very practical reasons for the circus art itself.

Historically, in the modern circus tradition, stationary circus buildings were built by entrepreneurs who were equestrians. Horses and horse-related practices are the beginning of modern circus and even nowadays the heritage and signs that remind us of circus are frequently connected with equestrian practices. Therefore the permanent circus buildings also had a practical reasoning – they allowed bigger horse troupes to have stationary stables and training space. (Avota 2023a: 19) Stationary circus with its infrastructural significance also meant a certain quality control as the institutional reputation was important for attracting the audiences.

Rīgas cirks is no exception. Its positioning in the city center and almost in the same zone as the national theatres and opera signifies the strong presence of circus in the local culture at the time of its building – the end of the 19th century. In the memoirs of citizens of Riga and also from artists of different times beginning from the first decades of the 20th century, Rīgas cirks (then named Circus Salamonsky after its first owner) was the peak

quality circus in the region. To get on the stage there was a privilege that only the best local artists could experience. Through time this positioning of quality changed based on the amount of resources available and the governing institutions, but the quality of performances has always been the main interest of this institution.

Although the collective memory of the Rīgas cirks as an architectural space has been changing since 2016, the infrastructure must exist in Riga as it allows the circus to develop in a space that is originally meant for circus, therefore writing a new story with a change of an artistic paradigm. To better understand the problematics of the local context, it is necessary to have an apprehension of what circus traditions have crossed this space.

1.2. Historical overview of circus as an artistic tradition

Although we can observe different elements of circus in ancient history (such as court jesters in Ancient Egypt and Circus Maximus with its often violent forms of entertainment in ancient Rome), or traditional arts and practices (such as Chinese poll discipline from traditional Chinese performances and tightrope walking as a form of entertainment and transportation in different parts of Europe and Asia), in this thesis I will sketch the historical context of European circus from the beginning points that are used traditionally – mid-18th century as the beginning of modern circus tradition as we know it nowadays, the 1970s as the beginning point of the New Circus turn, and 1990s as the beginning of Contemporary circus tradition.

Circus as an artistic and cultural system has a dual nature – it is always simultaneously connected both with the external, global traditions and paradigms and the local context of a certain performances. This thesis is doing the same – trying to map the positioning of the Riga circus on the overall map of circusculture and history, and find what are the elements of overall artistic expression and what can be perceived as a unique and local occurrence influenced by geopolitical and sociocultural reasons.

1.2.1. Circus in the world (international context)

Two voices – the Western and the Slavic

In the case of the Baltics, it is necessary to mention its geopolitical placement in the European context. Its positioning on a politically loaded boundary between Europe, Russia, and Scandinavia also creates a zone of artistic oscillation. The local tradition is inseparable from the political influences. Therefore, to define the role and position of circus in local context of Riga, it is necessary to introduce the descriptions of both Western and Slavic circus approaches as they have had the most prominent impact on the local context.

Why say Western and Slavic and not Western and Eastern? When analyzing this part of performance history in Baltics, we cannot conceptualize one ‘Eastern’ tradition, because it would be an umbrella term for too many different traditions — the Slavic, the Asian, the Middle-Eastern, the Australian, etc. traditions. However, it was the Soviet Union, with its legal and strategic developments rooted in the institutionalised Russian circus tradition, that exerted a huge influence upon the Baltic circus practices. Although the Soviet Union was culturally and artistically diverse in itself, I would like to offer this unification of Slavic. The circus tradition used Slavic languages and culture as the central node of institutionalisation had a unified system of circus legitimation which will be described later in this chapter. Further, I will also describe more elaborately the historical similarities and differences between Western and Slavic traditions and the way how they reflect in the Rīgas cirks cultural and artistic positioning in the different circus paradigms. Although in the 20th century, Western and Slavic traditions diverged into significantly different attitudes and strategies towards circus, the institutional formation of circus as a performance genre itself originates from the modern circus.

The beginnings – Modern circus as first defining circus

As mentioned before, circus tradition can be traced back to different disciplines a long time before the modern circus defined itself as a unified circus tradition. The

institutional formation of the circus as a closed artistic system is rooted in established popular performance elements such as juggling, clowning, rope walking, acrobatic acts, and trained and/or exhibited domesticated and wild animals. Usually, they were exhibited in fairgrounds, and taverns, occasionally some of the skills were implemented in theatrical performances. (Wittmann 2021: 19) These entertaining numbers are part of the carnivalesque tradition of culture, therefore they can be found in different cultures and different levels of society – from royal palaces to market places, to churches. Way before it had defined itself as an entertainment genre, there were different performers such as tumblers, rope dancers, balancing and juggling acts that provided entertainment for people in public spaces. (Arrighi, Davis 2021: 3)

Modern circus as a tradition essentially is based on entertainment provided through certain genres of performances, such as trained animals, clowning, juggling, different acrobatic displays, and menageries (exotic animal displays). (Wittman 2021: 19) The modern circus tradition is usually traced back to Philip Astley and his first displays of horseback acrobatic performances on a circular “stage” in 1768 in London. Later they were enriched with performances from other disciplines and animal expositions. (ibid) Notable names of this period are also Thomas Johnston and Jacob Bates (although they performed only horse numbers in their shows), Charles Hughes (who brought the modern circus to Russia), and Christoph de Bach (opening the first circus in Vienna). (Wittmann 2021: 22; Neirick 2012: 6)

The entertaining nature of the circus submits it to a stereotype of it being seen as the ‘low culture’, implying mere entertainment rather than art. (Dumont 2021: 189) There are three core elements that define the modern circus – the circular arena, the dramaturgy of the performances and the aesthetic signs. These can be perceived also as modes of representation that are coded, and which the future artistic paradigm developments change, therefore changing the meaning and role of circus in the culture. (Guy 2023: 24)

The formal unity of these elements in modern circus can be overall described as very traditional, therefore the colloquial term – traditional circus. The circular arena with the audience around it is closely related to equestrian performances. First of all the circular movement is much more natural for the horse to provide continuous movement of the

animal, secondly – the centrifugal force of the running horse gives more stability for the acrobat therefore gravity turns into a support mechanism for the performing artist and thirdly it could still remain in close proximity to the audience. (Baston 2021: 107) The dramaturgy of the performances usually is based on approximately a dozen numbers that are connected by an oral presentation of a ringmaster and structured in the Babylonian structure where the acts are sorted according to their difficulty. (Trapp 2023: 12) The aesthetic signs include such visual elements as clowns with red noses, horses with feather decorations, the acrobats in small or invisible outfits that highlight their perfect and sometimes superhuman bodies, and other signs, such as the aural signs of a live orchestra (either live or pre-recorded) and olfactory, such as the smell of animal droppings, candy floss, and popcorn. (Guy 2023: 25)

The roots of Slavic circus tradition overlap with the West. Similarly, circus existed mostly in public spaces, such as markets but the first modern circus troupe visited St. Petersburg at the beginning of the 1790s. It was Charles Hughes (historically one of the main rivals of Philip Astley in London) who traveled to Russia with his equestrian group and a small troupe of performers. (Neirick 2012: 7) It is curious that even the events and the relationship between circus entrepreneurs in London that later expanded in Europe and the ruling institution in a way also reflect in the future development of the institutional relation to circus. When the first temporary buildings were built in London and Paris, they were continuously in conflict with the legal system, and their practice was regularly disturbed. (Wittmann 2021: 20) Contrary to that, after first Hughes' visit to St. Petersburg, Catherine the Great who was the ruling monarch of that time, ordered a new amphitheatre building in Moscow and St. Petersburg for the purposes of circus and equestrian education. Hughes stayed in Russia for three more years, after which he left his horses, students and built infrastructure for future development in Russia. (Neirick 2012: 7) This is already the first case of circuses being officially approved by the ruling power and therefore the development of the future artistic paradigm is not only connected with the social and cultural role of circus, but also its political importance.

The 19th century was the time of another importation of Western circus entrepreneurs into Russia. Most of them are also equestrian trainers and acrobats such as

Jacques Tournaire from France, Karl Hinne from Germany, Gaetano Chinizelli from Italy and Albert Salamonsky from Austria. (ibid) The last of this list is also the main character of circus development and institutionalisation in Riga – he is the owner of the first stationary circus in the Baltics, nowadays called Rīgas cirks. The grand circuses of the 19th century were often similar to opera houses – with red velvet, gold decorations, and beautiful chandeliers. It was a significant difference from traveling circuses even though the entertainment was not perceived as high culture.

From the beginning of the 20th century, it is possible to notice the differentiation between the Western and Slavic circus traditions. It is connected with institutional decisions and strategies of circus development and both of these directions are reflected in the oscillating paradigm changes of Rīgas cirks.

Slavic circus – humans overcoming laws of nature, art for the people

Although the pioneers of Slavic circus were European, the modern circus paradigm nicely fit with the local worldview. The modern tradition was domesticated and the institutional support adjusted to the changing times of the 20th century. Russia is the first country to open a public circus education center in the world, which is a starting point for the strengthening of circus as an important part of Slavic culture. Circus became a state-supported art form and continues to develop the stage language of superhuman capabilities. By creating a network of circus education, research, and performance structure it developed as a self-sustaining system that in artistic quality became as famous as Russian ballet.

The opening of the first professional circus school took place in Moscow, named the Moscow Circus Artistic School in 1927 (Gillian, Davies 2021: xxvi). This significantly changed the tradition of the possibility of joining a troupe; no longer did you need to be born into a circus family or flee together with them to be a circus performer. It was now possible to learn acrobatics professionally. This strengthened and defined Slavic tradition as famously centered around unusual acrobatic performances and other circus disciplines such as clowning, equilibristics and juggling, that are developed in such an intricate way that it

had sport-like, competitive qualities. Education was completely centralized in this school as it was the only specialized institution for circus arts in USSR. It had a capacity of 400 students and its impact was noticeable also in other fields of entertainment such as cinema, theater, and others. (Efremov 2020: 338)

The circus was not absent from the politico-ideological sphere; a crucial role in the development of the Soviet circus industry attitude was due to one of Vladimir Lenins' interests in circus art as a non-linguistic form of performance that has the capability of unifying people from the most different cultures and socio-economical backgrounds. (Neirick 2012: 217) He signed the "Decree on the Unification of the Theatrical Concern" in 1919, which nationalized all the circuses in Russia, therefore institutionalizing circus as a national art. (Neirck 2012: 9) This decree, together with the nationalizing process (and therefore unifying the cultural coding of circuses) and later the opening of the first higher education institution of circus arts, strengthened the perception, that circus is an art form that has a legitimate voice in the cultural sphere of later Soviet union. But together with this legitimation and the different codes of the modern circus, it became an efficient propaganda tool that "besides promoting 'correct' human qualities such as courage, persistence, hard work, and physical health, also played a role in social education in the process of 'building the Soviet man'." (Efremov 2020: 338) Circus with its cultural existence on the borders of society, institution and culture gets molded into a powerful political tool.

In 1957 a circus organization that united all the Soviet Union circuses and artists was created – All-Union Association of State Circuses (Sojuzgostsirk). (Neirick 2012: 11) It merged all 77 stationary circus buildings of the Soviet union and was an umbrella organization for all circus artists of this country who applied for the official profession of circus artist or worker. (Dzenītis 1981: 15) Through this circus industry, the development of circus education was popularised, and the funds became capable of covering the most expensive circus discipline which had become financially problematic in the West — animals, such as tigers, elephants, and bears. This organization also governed Rīgas Cirks until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Independence of Latvia in 1991.

When looking at the state of permanent circus buildings, a lot of this infrastructure survived both World wars and later supported by the Sojuzgostsirk system could continue

to house circus art. The time between the late 1960s and early 1980s is recognized as “The Golden Age of the Soviet Circus” which also included infrastructure development in all the major cities of the Soviet Union. As a result, 50 more new circus buildings were built. (Efremov 2020: 338-339) So the circus infrastructure developed in a different direction, whereas the Western circus infrastructure and therefore also the tradition was badly impacted by both World Wars and the repercussions after them.

The West – the turn of the paradigm

Modern circus was also the beginning of the Western circus tradition and is still inherited there as a metaphoric understanding of traditional circus. The time (mid to end of the 18th century) and the praxis of circus (the main show being the equestrian numbers) created a similar visual language as it did outside of Europe. Similarly, as in Russia, the strengthening of a paradigm was caused by a process of institutionalization. Although it was based on different factors and done some decades later, the Western contemporary circus paradigm now has also developed into a philosophical attitude towards circus.

It is necessary to note that the Western tradition is also diverse in itself. By using the term Western I am describing the European context where the center that defines the paradigm is Francophonic countries such as France and Belgium, but closer to nowadays the contemporary circus scene has expanded to England, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Spain and other countries, therefore setting different voices of contemporary circus in Western culture. But for the context of this thesis, we will focus more on the events that happened in France, as the paradigm shift in Latvia in 2016 is artistically and culturally very inspired by this circus community.

Before speaking about contemporary circus as an umbrella term for a new way of thinking about circus, there is another step that develops as a transitional event between the modern and the contemporary circus – the New circus, also called *Nouveau Cirque*. As the modern circus tradition was the main perception of circus as an art form in the West even after the Second World War II, it was also very traumatic for it. The physical repercussions (bombings, fires, and destruction of cities) after the Second World War had destroyed much

of the stationary circus infrastructure and overall, the artists in France were reaching for more freedom in the sense of cultural framing.

The events of youth rebellion in France in May of 1968 were reflected also in the circus community. Young artists joined the protests and imagined a way to do circus differently, that is not family-centered, it could be outside of aesthetic norms attached to circus and to create an art form that would be in direct creative relationship with other art forms such as music, dance, and others. (Dumont 2021: 189) The ideals about this free form of circus grew and in the early 1970s first troupes of mostly collections of young street artists came together to create this New circus that would be free from the typical signs (such as specific outfits, visual representations of certain disciplines, for example, clowning etc.) used in circus and the modern circus attitude of display of different skills and curiosities. The goal was to create a new poetic expression of a nonverbal art that would be a communication way through “the poetry of the body”. (Dumont: 2021: 190) Later this idea developed also in other countries, that were connected with France, therefore New circus can be perceived as a counterculture to the modern circus that was still strong at this time. (ibid)

New circus is the first big change towards circus as a multimedial artform, where different forms of artistic expression come together to create a poetic expression through a circus discipline. Together with this, the artists of this turn are challenging the “rules” of circus, for example, experimenting with space, relationship with the audience, and the use of circus disciplines. (Dumont 2021: 192) Each discipline seems to invent its own aesthetic “language” and experiment with the locations where circus can be performed, seemingly “emancipating the ‘circus arts’ from the ring”. (Guy 2023: 24)

Another very crucial element of the turn to New circus and later development of the contemporary circus is the institutionalization of circus arts. 1974 is the year when the first spaces that offered circus education outside of the family-based structure, were opened in France. The first one was opened by Alexis Grüss and Silvia Monfort (L'école au carré, a training centre for circus arts and mime) and the second one but very close in time and space was opened by Annie Fratellini and Pierre Étaix (as they called it “the National School of Circus Arts”). These two organisations were made in tents and very soon the

number of their students could be counted in hundreds. (Dumont 2021: 193) The professionalisation of the sector was even more strengthened when inspired by the activity of these pioneers, the French government and the Ministry of Culture opened the first circus school that was sponsored by the state the Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC) in 1986. (ibid: 194) Here people from different art forms and different backgrounds could come and apply for studies in circus arts and this institution was as a first push to legitimate circus as not only part of popular entertainment but also a high-profile art form and experience the so-called “artification”. (idem)

When thinking about the dramaturgy and authorship of circus, New circus is the first step of giving attention to these aspects and giving them importance in creation of a show. New circus offers an approach, where the performance is unified under one narrative. Authorship of the creation of this show also has a greater role in the show. An example that many perceive as one of the biggest companies that represent the elements of New circus is Cirque du Soleil. Their shows represent the in-between state that New circus has – it has preserved the act-based structure of the show that is characteristic of the modern circus, but it is also going a step further, by creating a story world for every show. Nevertheless, the new circus seems more of a transitional form of circus, as the artistic movement is leaving the spotlight of the art form together with its inventors and a new, more institutionalized and experimental paradigm – contemporary circus is beginning to dominate.

Contemporary circus pushes the borders of circus aesthetics, philosophy, and traditions even further. Jean-Michel Guy defines it as “a circus of research and creation as is contemporary dance or contemporary music. Its principal notion is that of authorship.” (Guy 2023: 23) The beginnings of it are usually dated to a specific time and show – “Le cri du caméléon” by Joseph Nadj in 1997. (Trapp 2023: 101) This performance radicalized the system of visual and narration elements that could be perceived as circus codes and used circus discipline (acrobatics) to create a language that tells a story. If modern circus practitioners still use some of modern circus codes, such as the tent, the apparatus and the number, then contemporary circus is outside of these codes. (Guy 2023: 24) The space of circus is not delineated anymore, it can happen anywhere – from a theatre, to a street, to a library or even be in continuous movement from space to space (like site-specific shows).

The apparatus is not anymore fixed in a discipline, it can be challenged and new poetics of the apparatus can be explored, or even new objects can be given the position of the circus performer, for example, Andrea Salustris' work with styrofoam or Maria Baranauskaites' shows for ducks. The shows themselves are mostly monodisciplinary – where one circus discipline dominates and is explored, as opposed to modern circuses where different disciplines is showcased. The number is not an obligatory structure of the performance, the show can be created as an exploration of one discipline and the possible language that the apparatus can express.

The change of the paradigm from being bound to some certain codes of artistic expression to experimenting with these codes and searching for the “cirquesque” feeling of a performance is deeply connected also with the perception of the artform from within – the artists themselves. The perception that a circus performer is an artist who can approach circus as a medium and strive for originality has not only expanded the notion of what is and what is not circus, but also resulted in heterogeneity of the performances of this genre. Another institutional aspect that has supplied this change with resources is the establishment of artist residencies and different economic support systems that allow artists to experiment with their ideas, disciplines, and media. (Trapp 2023: 100) The expanded periods of time where artists can develop their creative ideas into new means of storytelling where the main result is not to perfect circus technique gives space for creative research. (ibid)

Although here I described the historiography of circus tradition that has been happening in France, the ideas and practices have already expanded outside of the Francofonic world. Nowadays there are many spaces in Europe that offer different residency options, there are many contemporary circus festivals and projects that offer space and collaboration between circus and other arts, including also projects where circus is a means of expressing sociopolitical concerns. It is getting more dominant and institutionally recognized as a new paradigm as it explicates the possibility of using one discipline to explore different possibilities of communication and it often represents such values as inclusivity, social responsibility, environmental strategies, and others that are important in the contemporary narrative outside art.

1.2.2. Circus in Riga and Rīgas cirks (local context)

Rīgas cirks as an institution allows us to capture and frame an artistic genre that has been on the periphery of local cultural perception for an extended time. The stationary infrastructure has palimpsestic features, where the different layers of cultural memory overlap, creating an overwhelming amount of “text” that the local culture has not learnt to read yet. It is still in the process of deciphering.

Circuses in Latvia have never really been perceived as a part of local Latvian culture. Yes, there are certain historical personas that represent the local circus community, but their meaning is mostly connected with the Soviet era and memories of them are disappearing together with their contemporaries. Historically there have been attempts to organize a Latvian troupe, but the circus usually is represented by some other, bigger tradition and there has not been enough resources to develop a local tradition. By introducing a historical overview of the circus scene in Latvia, I would like to introduce the dynamic changes and the distortion of memory about circus as an art form in this region.

Although circus has been a very popular part of entertainment in Riga since the 17th century (Gailīte 2003: 318) the beginnings of circus development as not only a nomadic tradition that performs in the peripheries of cities and cultures in Riga, are connected with Albert Solomonsky (1839-1913) and his work. (Vītola 2023: 18)

German-Jewish horse trainer and entrepreneur Albert Salamonsky decided to explore the Eastern part of Europe with the final destination being Moscow at the second part of the 19th century. (ibid) In his youth, while traveling with German circuses he had performed also in the biggest port city of Baltics in the 19th century – Riga. The city and the transit port that connects the West and Russian traders had charmed him with the fruitful potential of taking the monopoly of circus in this region. (Kvaskova 1999: 50) In the 1870s there were no other big circus entrepreneurs who would control this area of entertainment so Salamonsky saw and also took this opportunity.

In 1873 he built the first stationary wooden circus building in Riga city center (Kvaskova 1999: 46) This is a noticeable change in circus tradition not only as the first marking of territory by an influential circus entrepreneur but also stationary circus had a practical bonus – stables. It is possible to host more horses and other animal acts which requires a lot of space for accommodation. This means a change from small city market shows with cheap performers to grander and more artistically polished performances. Slowly and despite legal problems, Albert Salamonsky pushes the building of a real stationary circus building in Merkela Street 4 in 1888, where the building is still active nowadays. (idem: 73) It was and still is the only stationary circus building in the Baltic region, marking Riga as the central axis of circus infrastructure and possible tradition development in the Baltics.

Notably, the circus building in Riga was not the main residence of Salamonsky and his troupe. His main life project was the Circus on Tsvetnoy Boulevard in Moscow (nowadays called Circus Nikulin on Tsvetnoy Boulevard) which was the main circus of Moscow, built eight years prior to the building in Riga. (Vītola 2023: 18) This impacted the organization of the Riga circus throughout the times – it has always been a transit circus for big shows and other events like concerts, Greco-roman fight championships, and even movie showings. The population of the city was still comparatively small, therefore the local practice was to change the program every month or sometimes twice a month. (Avota 2023c: 112)

The format of the circus performances until the end of the Second World War was typical to modern circus practices. The dramaturgy of the performances was based mostly on the human defeat of natural rules, the depiction of a perfect human that is seemingly mythologized as more than regular humans and living “outside of the norm” – in the world of circus. Shows were supported by live orchestra that had a special balcony above the entrance of the circus ring and they also introduced the show with a musical performance of three to four popular songs, dance or traditional music. When thinking about the artists that performed, most of them were imported numbers from different parts of the world and even if there were some local Latvian artists performing, their stage names were chosen from a

culture with a different linguistic base, therefore making them more exotic, such as acrobats Rinaldo, equilibrists Mur-Murē and others. (Avota 2023c: 117)

Throughout the period between World Wars, the Circus Salamonsky changed owners and directors many times but it still was one of the most popular entertainment places in the city. It was a place for everyone (even if they publicly didn't admit to visiting the place) – from workers of the city factories who could buy the cheapest standing ticket, to ballerinas, opera singers, and politicians. (Johansons 1970: 55) The freedom of intellectualism and the sharpness of social critique in the performances attracted everyone. Political clowning was at its height and often police visited the local clowns which performed skits about current events in politics. (Nikitin 1987: 152) With more than six hundred seats and three hundred standing places, it was one of the biggest public gathering places that were in the Riga city center until the 1940s. (Vītola 2023: 36)

Through both wars, shows were happening regularly. There were more performances from local artists and the building itself was safeguarded from shellings and bombings. Most of the famous stationary circus buildings were destroyed in the World War II and as a result, Riga circus at the moment is one of the oldest buildings in Europe. (Kvaskova 1999: 72) At the time of the Second World War and after it, a big part of circus artists fled to Canada, America, or Australia. There is an interesting tendency that most of the artists that fled to North America, never settled down as artists but mostly as teachers. Their expression was too “pastel”, soft and intellectual for the American tradition. (idem: 76) After the occupation of the Soviet Union, the place was officially re-named Rīgas cirks and in 1957 together with other circus venues of the Soviet union was added to the newly created unified system of 77 Soviet circuses and thousands of circus artists named Sojuzgoscirk. (Neirick 2012: 11)

By being the location that has an audience with comparatively Western taste for the Soviet Union, it was also a space of translation. There are examples of Soviet clowns rehearsing and trying out their numbers specifically in the Riga circus just before performing them in the West. It helped to adjust the etudes more to the signs recognized in Western society. (Dzenītis 1981: 70) Even until 1991, Rīgas cirks was famous for its shows

and specific taste for the quality of performance. After the regaining of independence in 1991 the modern circus tradition still was the main type of circus in this building.

In 2017 a legislative change was made – the law prohibiting the use of exotic animals for public performances was approved. (Pāvula 2023: 12) This meant that one big part, a genre of disciplines of the modern circus tradition was forbidden. A new strategy was needed. In addition, the building had its last renovation in 1953 and was in a critical state and was officially closed for the audiences in 2018. (ibid) After the new law the Latvian Ministry of Culture completely took over the place and through an open competition new team won with a vision of the contemporary circus center of the Baltics which not only contemporary circus paradigm as central strategy for this institution, but also the renovation of the historic building. (ibid)

Riga circus first renovation stage has been finished at the end of 2022. Again there is infrastructure for new, contemporary and multidisciplinary shows and events. With the idea of creating a local, Baltic community of circus artists it is a new attitude of circus arts in this region that is exploring new identities and perspectives on what it means to be on this border between West and Slavic traditions.

Circus outside of Rīgas cirks

It is worth mentioning, that Rīgas cirks is not the only institution of circus art in Latvia. Traveling circuses and the forms of entertainment that involve different explications of circus, such as different disciplines, aesthetics and modalities have existed in parallel to the development of Rīgas cirks. (Vītola 2023: 38) In the interwar period traveling circuses filled the cultural and artistic gaps and mostly performed in the periphery of Riga or other cities. Often local artists begun their careers there or even performed there while working in Rīgas cirks. The dynamics between the institutional circus tradition and alternative forms of this form of performance will be explored more deeply through semiotic analysis later in this thesis.

Nevertheless, in the context of historical overview it is important to mention the case of contemporary circus festival “Re Rīga!” as a key event for the main focus of this thesis – the artistic paradigm change of circus reflected in the local culture.

The beginnings of the contemporary circus and street art festival “Re Rīga!” can be traced to the event of 2014 when Riga was the culture capital of Europe. The funding distribution allowed funds for creation of a new event in the local culture – a festival in the spirit of the contemporary circus, its values, spatial and artistic representation. It has been happening ever since, even throughout challenging times such as Covid 19. It was based on the experience and knowledge of a group of contemporary circus enthusiasts who had worked with contemporary circus performances sporadically and some of them also gained higher education in contemporary circus management in France. With the continuous activity, high quality performance import and the flagmanship of contemporary circus values of inclusion and social activity, festival “Re Rīga!” now is one of the oldest and influential forms of performance in this format in Baltics.

The importance of this case study is in the succession of it – the team that created this festival also won the competition of the new Rīgas cirks strategy in 2017 therefore reflecting the contemporary circus historical development also in the West. The Western circus paradigm typically has its own experimental search of the new circus narratives outside of the institution and later gains the legitimation from cultural, political and economical structures. (Dumont 2021: 95)

That said, it also experiences the model problematics of a paradigm change where an institutional turn can be a more dynamic process than collective memory can digest, therefore impacting the collective memory and creating mistranslations of the artform in the local culture.

2. Circus in the culture

To do a closer case study of the Rīgas cirks and the associated codes of different circus traditions, it is necessary to map the position of circus in culture. As a cultural system it has many different forms that extend the performance itself, such as spatiality, collectivity, metaphorical memory, and aesthetics. The cultural description depends on the position of the describer – the person inside or outside of the system itself. As noted before, there is a certain cultural “blindness” that is reflected in the lack of metacommunication about circus in the context of Rīgas cirks. Although it is not explicit in the visitation of the circus, as most of the performances are well received and popular, circus as a topic in the academic discourse is still a new field of exploration. In the case of Rīgas cirks, it has not yet been described in contemporary academia at all.

In the context of this thesis, I will not tackle the problematics of the definition of circus directly, but in this chapter I will mention the possible reasons behind the problematics of definition. I would like to suggest dividing these into different possible viewpoints for reflection – on the one hand systems within circus and the systems perceivable from the outside on the other. It is useful to distinguish these two perspectives, as it allows to reduce the generalization of the artform itself and also to untangle the possible causes of mismatch between what is perceived as circus (such as the romanticized perspectives of nomadic culture or metaphorical meanings of circus) and what circus “means” from within the institution or for the community itself. Nevertheless, both of these perspectives are intertwined and codependent in practical ways of survival of the circus, but also in the context of metacommunication and the development of new circus paradigms.

2.1. A look inside circus – circus described autonomous system

One way to define what is circus, is to describe the elements that are perceived as making up circus as an artistic system. For example Cambridge Dictionary offers this definition: “a group of travelling performers including acrobats (= people skilled in difficult physical movements) or those who work with trained animals, or a performance by such people usually in a large tent.” Typically, when an attempt is made to define what is circus, these are the elements that are described. This approach fits when we perceive circus as a closed system with clearly definable borders and in opposition with extra-systemic. Here I would like to characterise elements that are the basis of circus as an autonomous system – the circus as a type of performance (and the disciplines in action), circus as a type of collectivity and circus as a venue. By describing these elements I will also point out the possible problematics of this approach.

The Performance (and disciplines)

A circular stage, clowns, acrobats, animals, ringmaster, orchestra, illusionists – these are only a few of the elements that come to mind when thinking about the circus performance. But what if there are no animals? Or if there is no circular stage? Is it still circus? If these questions are discussed in the context of the modern circus, the answer very often is “no”. There are certain elements that represent the circus and the absence of them equals the absence of a circus performance as a system. But when we speak about this in the context of a contemporary perspective on circus it is much more arbitrary. The performance is not bound by strict rules and some deviation (perceived more as exploration of the borders) is welcomed more freely. Of course, any institutional organization has its limitations and its framing of the content performed and created within, but the contemporary circus approach promotes more experimentation with these restrictions and artistic traditions.

The circus performance, although carrying possibly the strongest meaning value of the artform itself, is the most dynamic one. It is changing much more rapidly than the cultural memory can digest it. This can be said both in global and local context. As an example can be mentioned the cultural meaning of contemporary circus in Finland, where contemporary circus performances have existed in the local culture since the early 2000s (Purovaara 2012: 159) compared to Riga, where it has been active since 2013 – the dynamics reflects not only in the audiences (knowing/not knowing what is contemporary circus), but also in the artistic production. In Finland there are already established and recognised contemporary circus troupes such as the Race Horse Company, the Lumo Company and others whereas at the moment we do not have local troupes with such international recognition. Despite the varied dynamic tempos of artistic paradigm change and cultural memory, circus definitions often commence with a description of the performance. In reality, if we compare these descriptions to the diversity of performances in contemporary circus we gain either only one piece of the whole picture of circus possibilities, or we create a definition that excludes further development of the artistic system.

If we think of performances not as externally described systems (as what we can see in the show), but characterised from within the system (such as how a circus discipline is used in a show), there are certain inner systems that still last for most of the performances in all types of circus.

Type of collectivity

Another one of these systems within circus is the type of collectivity. The social groups that create the system of circus are varied and changing together with the institution and the division of roles. If we think of the static and dynamic elements of this system, we can notice that artists (and therefore performances) are more dynamic and the institutional management more static elements of the system. By managing the dynamic elements of performances that change as often as every day (in, for example, festival setting or

contemporary circus setting), the static collective system creates its portrait and reputation of a certain institution that is recognised by the audiences.

A quality that is often attributed to circus collectivity is the nomadic life. The artists still have mostly nomadic lifestyle and that depends on the audiences of the venue of the performance. The bigger the audience of the venue, the longer a show can stay in one place, otherwise it is not feasible anymore. Although this alienates the artists from a certain local belonging, the community of the circus venue gives the feeling of affiliation to a certain institution that is a space of gathering of nomads. That allows the certain alienation from the local culture to be adjusted to the local context, therefore the elements of the performance that need to be translated, are translated to the local audiences.

The circus venue

As mentioned before, space is a crucial characteristics of circus arts. Even when we look at contemporary circus practices, the performance outside the ring carries the meaning of “defying” the ring or explicating the absence of the ring. In the last chapter of this thesis, I will expand the semiotic coding of circus space, but in this context it is necessary to emphasize that a stationary circus building anchors circus in a space. It leaves a permanent mark in the local culture, that it has the presence of circus. As the most stable of the circus systems, the spatial quality reflects the possible position of circus in culture, therefore the interest of this thesis is specifically the institution of Rīgas cirks, where this permanent building is the most grounded feature of circus as a system.

2.2. The look from outside – Circus as in relation to other systems

Circus as a cultural system can be also observed in relation to other cultural and artistic systems. Although its stereotypical role seemingly represent the boundaries of high and low culture, in reality its position can be much more diverse and complex.

Metacultural description in the form of academic reflection

One form of metacultural description is academic reflection on the cultural phenomenon. The term metacultural in this thesis is used as a higher form of description and reflexivity that describes circus as part of cultural systems. By having certain traditions and paradigms of research, the phenomenon (in our case circus) can develop its identity or self-descriptions and possibly a certain approach of research. In the case of circus studies, it is important to note the comparatively short history of academic research tradition on circus arts. Similarly, as with the historical writings, also academic reflections mostly come from within the circus community or the extended supporter community of circus. (Trapp 2023: 101) Therefore the beginnings of academic research can be traced back to first institutions of circus education. The first open public education institutions for circus arts that were based on a different, if not oppositional idea about the typical circus education that is more rooted in traditional ways of teaching. (Dumont 2021: 190) So from a closed education system of traditions and certain hierarchy, for example, the necessity to be part of the community to access the knowledge necessary for performing, it developed into an open educational system where people from different backgrounds could apply to learn certain circus skills. This opened up a change in perspective of possible reflections and uses of circus arts, therefore creating a paradigmatic change in circus arts. (ibid)

In truth, this is only one of the catalysts of academic research about circus, as still, until nowadays the education is more focused on development of skills and tacit knowledge that is developed into artistic language and creative research processes. Theoretical circus studies are as nomadic as the artform itself – the community of circus researchers and writers in Europe is comparatively small to other fields of research but is creating many different interdisciplinary reflections of circus applied to different topics, including psychoanalysis, politics, war, different socially tender topics, and others. (Trapp 2023: 101)

The positioning of circus in the cultural sphere is not a question that has been explored in academic studies of circus extensively. Important semiotic and cultural analysis is done by circus semiotician and historian Paul Bouissac who has based his reflections in extensive ethnographic fieldwork from all over the world. His main focus of research has

been traditional circus practices and the decline of traditional circus with a critical analysis of circus recoding and re-positioning in cultures all over the world. His semiotic approach and analysis of circus plays a crucial role in the academic discourse of circus arts, but contemporary researchers continue to develop and adapt them to contemporary contexts. As the beginning of the circus semiotic analysis is similar to semiotics of theatre, where in the 1980s and 1990s the approach was more or less within the structuralist tradition. (Elam 2002 [1980]: 203) Keir Elam in the second edition of his book *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (2002 [1980]) adds an extra chapter at the end where he reflects on the development of semiotics of theater since the first edition of this book. His reflection is that this structuralist approach was very popular, but it died in the span of one decade, as the post-structuralism took over and showed that structuralist approach is not dynamic enough for analysis of contemporary performing arts. (Elam 2002 [1980]: 203) In this case I would like to argue, that also Paul Bouissac's analysis is an important contribution to the semiotic analysis of circus, but it has to be updated for the contemporary circus needs and dynamism.

Circus is mentioned in different cultural reflections as more of a cultural code than an independent form of expression. As mentioned before, the complicated nature of defining circus as a cultural and artistic phenomenon could be seen as a reason why contemporary research does not try to create an overarching definition of circus as a unified artistic system. The modern circus tradition can be perceived as a closed system that has its own autocommunication processes and distances itself from the people who are outside of the circus. Whereas the contemporary paradigm anticipates open communication and collaboration with other forms of art, including writings and metacommunicational reflections.

It is a common phenomenon that in countries where circus is not stabilized as part of the local culture, there is no knowledge about its presence and role in the local culture. For example, the presence of circus arts in Estonia and Latvia is active, but because of the lack of institutional legitimation, educational and cultural description tradition, there is a comparatively little collective awareness about the presence of circus in culture. The self-description of this artistic system is not developed yet, therefore also the audience and

the local culture have a narrower perception of what this artistic system can be. The division between “what is” and “what is not” circus is simplistic and often based on clichés or historical stereotypes, resulting in a static perception of circus. Through time this might change if the position of circus in a local culture strengthens.

As an example of this, I would like to propose Jean-Michel Guy’s reflection on the terminology of circus:

Due to the diversification of the cultural scene, in France, in any case, the public is categorizing circus differently [as opposed to the modern, new or contemporary circus - authors note]: “informal”, “intelligent”, “accessible”, “challenging”, “popular”, “violent”, “slow”, “varied”, “long”, “colorful”, “intimate”, “cabaret”, “zoo”, etc. (Guy 2023: 21-22)

As we can see in this example, circus as an artistic system is much more developed and ingrained in the local cultural web, reflected in the more nuanced description done by the audience who are outside of the artistic system.

But circus does not exist in culture only as a form of artistic expression or entertainment but also as an idea that is reflected in metaphorical uses of the word ‘circus’. The second has a certain impact on how we position circus in a culture based on our metaphorical memory.

Circus as a metaphor

As mentioned previously, the word ‘circus’ represents more than just a performance. “Circus is not only a historical and contemporary phenomenon but also functions as a metaphor.” (Arrighi, Davis 2021:4) When thinking about an analytical approach to circus, it is necessary to make a separation between circus as a cultural phenomenon (performing art, institution, social tool etc.) and circus as “memory footprint” that creates metaphors and metaphoric stereotypes and therefore the perception of what is and what is not circus.

Circus as a metaphor often represents a description of deviation from a norm, a carnivalesque occurrence that results in misunderstandings and miscommunication. Although metaphorically carrying strong meanings, circus metaphors reflect the ideas and aesthetics that are more characteristic of the modern circus, it is necessary also to point out the negative and circus as something pathetic. (Bouissac 1976: 3) It includes also negative

or unpleasant situations that commonly are characterized as circuslike. (idem: 7) For example different political or social situations that seem silly or inadequate. Circus (in its modern tradition) is used as a metaphoric meaning carrier of low-culture representations. This metaphorical perception also mirrors the cultural placement of circus as a performance art form. Bouissac in his semiotic research of circus, already in 1972 mentions, that the “lack of sophistication is supposed to be responsible for its alleged decline, at a time when the world is progressing toward higher aesthetic values.” (idem: 3) His reflection depicts the overall cultural switch to a different value system, that is more appropriate and connected with the time when it is performed, therefore the historical process of the tradition change has the characteristics of a gradual process in the sense of Lotmanian terms.

When thinking about the contemporary circus role in culture and its popularity in different live performances and regular presence in art festivals, it is “... still subjugated to a number of ideologies and presumptions, which are reinforced by media, literature, advertisement, and popular culture.” (Trapp 2023: 101) The aesthetic and metaphorical values implied in these narratives strengthen the stereotypes of a romanticized and stagnant circus even though the art form itself is dynamic and reflect the contemporary context of the state of the world. (ibid)

In the case study of Rīgas cirks the metaphorical perception of circus is connected also with the cultural knowledge about circus, which has been mostly in the format of the modern circus that is rooted in the Slavic tradition. The change and possibilities of a new way of the circus were institutionalized not that long ago, before existing on the periphery of the local culture, in the format of the festival “Re Rīga!” or as cirquesque elements in other media and expressions, such as private events, city festivals and others. Now, when the contemporary circus tradition is institutionally supported, it is also building relationships both with the metaphorical understandings of circus and the modern circus tradition that has been the mainstream tradition in the Rīgas cirks building since 1888, for example by creating history research projects and events.¹

¹ Such projects as “Circus stories” where interviews with older generation of circus artists and other Rīgas cirks employees was done - <https://cirks.lv/en/circus/history/circus-stories/> [viewed in 14.05.2024.] or project

When thinking about the dynamic nature of contemporary circus, another element that unites contemporary circus performances is the usage of metadiscursive and intertextual strategies. (Trapp 2023: 101) As an example can be used the visual metaphors that we imagine when thinking about circus and its traditions – the red clown noses, the loud music, the round stage, etc. As the modern circus (and its metaphorical perception) is closely connected with bodily practices such as physicality, skillfulness, energy, nonverbal communication, and others, contemporary circus often references them. Nevertheless, it is done in an intertextual way, therefore creating a metadiscursive narrative that adds a cultural discourse to the bodily practice. (idem: 102)

These visual signs are just part of the elements that globally are recognized as circus, and are understood in many different cultures. Therefore, creating this relation of circus seemingly being a metacultural phenomenon that is accepted in most cultures.

2.3. Circus as a metacultural form of expression

Circus as a performance art has a curious relationship with the local culture where it is performed. Paul Bouissac uses the notion of circus as a metacultural phenomenon, that describes this circus positioning both in the local and global sphere.

For meaning to be transmitted there has to be an organization of goods or symbols that are conveyed between a wider cultural context and local community. These kinds of interactions and patterned exchanges of information in culture can be analysed as codes. (Bouissac 1976: 5) When a director puts together a show (in a circus context this can be attributed to the modern circus) and the artist creates a performance they create a cultural context in which the audience is exposed to a variety of audio-visual events that are transmitted as messages. For the audience to understand it and the communication to happen, there has to be a related meaning-making system that has the same coding mechanism between the performers and the audience. (ibid) In the case of the circus, the

“X=cirks” where the history of circus arts and Rīgas ciks was introduced to groups of school children – <https://cirks.lv/en/news/xcircus/> [viewed in 14.05.2024.]

coding mechanisms of the performances are based on non-linguistic communication and embodied experience of the performance. It allows the performers to travel and not rely on a specific cultural context that is restricted by certain linguistic structures.

The non-linguistic aspect of circus can be perceived as a double-edged sword – in some perspectives that allows more intimate and personal relations between the artist and the audience, but it has also been used as a tool to politicize circus as an ideological tool. (Ursič 2021: 28, 29, 39) Our knowledge systems are strongly based on language as an entry point. That allows us to map our disposition in the given context. When the language is cancelled as the main information carrier, a new coding system, and a new language is exposed. This embodied experience creates relatability to body expressions and metaphors. For example, while watching an acrobatic performance, the audience can follow the narratives and the meanings that are communicated on the stage, such as falling, flying, or the proxemic relationship between the artists on the stage. Most of the movements that are done on the stage are somehow relatable for the audience. The movements of tripping on something, throwing/catching objects, balance, and others, are movements that each human body has experienced in some way. The circus artist amplifies the movement therefore creating the awe and spectacularity of the trick.

But, as mentioned before, the non-linguistic aspect has also been used as an ideological tool. For example, for fifty years Rīgas cirks was subjected to the Soviet circus system. The policy of the Soviet Union was to popularise circus arts as universally accessible art form for everyone specifically because of its freedom from language barriers. (Neirick 2012: 9; Efremov 2020: 338) This is a direct example of the idea that circus is both metacultural in its expression but also connected with the local culture to be recognized by the local context.

Paul Bouissac mentions the peculiar status of circus in culture: “It appeals to all people, regardless of age, and generally captivates and gratifies them. However, its mention triggers ambivalent responses in which keen interest is mixed with derogatory laughter.” (Bouissac 1976: 6) Although it is not possible to homogenize the audience as having a unified perspective on the whole cultural system, the curiosity and the low-culture stereotype that survives with the cultural and historical perceptions of circus opens possible

keen interest in the performance even when the potential audience does not have a specific expectation of the show. Circus implies “fun entertainment”, “easily digestible content”. And together with the metaphorical understanding of circus, the theatricality of a possible experience can be perceived as circuslike. But why is it important to mention this stereotypical reaction? This ambivalence of the meanings (silly and low-culture mixed with curiosity of the performances that seem impossible and therefore imply a certain appreciation to the artists) suggests that the function of circus is not definite and its relation to it is not clear. “It seems to be at the same time both “within” and “outside” culture.” (Bouissac 1976: 7) This position gives the space for circus to be perceived as more of a metacultural code and metacultural discourse. (ibid: 7) It is based on commonly known signs, such as a tent, circular building, animals, clowns with red noses, aerialists who are similar to ballerinas, and other typical symbols of the circus.

The metacultural discourse is also strengthened by the appearance of circus in spatiotemporal terms. Spatially, for example, the visuality of the tent which has a cone-like roof that is architecturally significantly different from any other form of structure in the city marks it as a space with a specific and very different meaning than other locations in the city. (Bouissac 2010: 13) When we think of traveling circuses, a strong symbol is the tent, which structurally is traditionally built in a conic shape both because of the practical creation of the space and added to that, creates another meaning – to point out the presence of the circus in the local space. (ibid) When thinking about stationary circuses, the external architectural representation in permanent buildings is as heterogenous as the art form itself.² The conical roof is not a necessity, but in the case of Rīgas cirks, this symbolic element of circus exists, the building has a high red “big-top” like roof. But external characteristics of the space are not the only ones, that create the meanings of metacultural/nomadic discourse.

A certain amount of locality that ensures the understanding of the circus performances in the local context. Paul Bouissac notes that there is a need for a match between the local “cultural environment” and the symbolism of circus, for the circus to be recognised and visited by the locals. (Bouissac 1974: 7) The cultural environment includes

² This is a reference to a CFP for an International Conference "New Circus | New Architectures?" organized by Prof. Dr. Jan Lazardzig and Dr. Franziska Trapp and will happen in November 6-9 2024, Marchin, Belgium.

not only the experiences and interpretations of them in the personal context of a certain representative of a local culture, it includes also the relations between these meanings. (ibid) It can be applied also in the contemporary context, as “[...] circus today generates active involvement in the world it both reflects and mediates.” (Arrighi, Davis 2021: 4) As an example of the local contextualisation of performances, I would like to offer two perspectives – one from modern circus tradition and one from contemporary circus performance.

The cultural context implies certain frames for performances that are adjusted specifically for the local cultural context. Bouissac recalls a situation of a clowning act and a Soviet circus, where the clown enters the ring with a pickle jar in his hands and the audience begins to act lively. He, as a person from a French speaking culture, could not understand the meaning of this act so he could not identify the situation. So, in this case, if the Soviet audience knew that this act is done supposedly whilst being hungover (which is the implication of the jar) Bouissac found out only later about this implied layer of narration. (Bouissac 2010: 26) For example, nowadays in Rīgas cirks works Cronopio (Mariano Gedwillo) the clown. He is Argentinian, so his native language is Spanish, but in his performances, he uses few words or expressions in the local language of the space of the performance to create a closer relationship with the audience. This knowledge and use of local cultural signs creates a stronger relationship between the artist and the audience.

If we think about contemporary circus performances and localization, a pattern that shows the local cultural specificity can be found in the programming of circus shows in certain locations, countries, cities and formats. In the Rīgas cirks case, the shows that are brought to the permanent venue are more family-friendly and more traditionally understandable, more fit for families and larger audiences, whereas the festival format allows the local festival “Re Rīga!” to be more experimental in their choices of programming.

Circus performances that exist in a certain local sphere, can be perceived as a social structure that reflects the wider historical and cultural process of the time and location where it is performed. (Arrighi, Davis 2021: 5) Therefore, every change in the artistic system is dependent on many different social, economic, political, and cultural elements. In

the case of Rīgas cirks, the paradigm shift is a process like this. It has relocated circus from entertainment for families to a diverse art form that reflects the needs of contemporary audiences. For this change to happen, it is necessary to introduce the process of institutionalisation that had the actual hands-on power to push and legitimize the change of paradigm in circus arts.

2.4. Circus and institution – the process of legitimization

In this last subchapter I would like to introduce the notion of institutionalisation as it is one of the most crucial elements in the circus paradigm changes in Rīgas cirks. Although the process of the institutional change will be described in detail in the Chapter 3 of this thesis, here I will describe the role of institutionalization as a process of legitimization and therefore, in my case study, the catalyst of the artistic and paradigmatic change.

In the framework of Berger and Luckman, institutionalization is a natural process of human activity as it is based on habituation. (Berger, Luckmann 1991 [1966]: 70) Habit as an action that is frequently repeated in certain situations and recognised by the actor as the most efficient way to reach the means of the action. These actions are important for the individual, but the meanings created become embedded in the social routines and narrow down the choices of action, developing a more predictable meaning of a process which reveals its psychological impact on an individual, supporting more certainty and stability. (idem: 71) In the context of our case study, it is noticeable, that habit plays a strong role in the cultural positioning of circus. The location of circus, the codes and signs we recognise and the relations between artists, audience and space have certain habitual properties.

Above that exists an already socially created structure, that is institution which “occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types and actors.” (idem: 72) The institution supports the structure of “who does what and how”. And when the institution changes, this perception that is based on habit is disturbed. As the society is a heterogenous network, where different habits, values and world views exist together, the institution changes based on the actors of control. Institution can also change

without being logically or functionally integrated in society. (idem: 81) Therefore creating a break in meaning creation, and the support of this break depends on the position of the circumstances of the change.

Another aspect of institutionalisation is the process of legitimation. The participants of the institutional order agree upon certain meanings and actions that are approved by this organization. For this system of meaning-acceptance there has to be also a subjective meaning in the individual level that supports this process. (idem: 110) The main challenge begins at the moment, when the legitimized meanings need to be transmitted to the next generation which has different personal and social experiences than the previous generations. (idem: 111)

In our case study, a prime example would be the protests about animal rights, where the most active participants were the young people who have different opinion about animal rights. Here the higher institution, the legislative apparatus of Latvia decided to adjust to the new paradigm and to change the legislation, where exotic animal performances are banned in Latvia. This choice strengthens the new, contemporary circus paradigm and tries to leave the animal performances in the past, however the conflict of “how circus should be done” had its first questioning in this situation.

In the case of institutionality of circus, I would like to offer to look at it from three perspectives. Firstly there is the circus that exists seemingly outside institutional system but occurs in a certain context and that would be traveling performers that are active in socially dynamic places such as festivals, markets, and events. As their position is sporadic, their presence and position is predictable and almost socially expected as a norm. The second perspective is the street show performances that involve traveling shows. This is more institutionally organised and legitimized by a certain sieve of quality, certain institutional cell, should it be the artistic troupe or maybe the head of the traveling circus. Although their relation to a higher local institution is inevitable (as where they can and cannot perform), their presence in space is still ephemeral. The third position is the institution of stationary circuses or state circuses. These institutions hold significant institutional strength, as they not only represent a group of artists but also uphold a specific system of values, aesthetics, identity, and ideology. This is strongly reinforced by local institutional organizations. To do

so and to have a stationary circus that continues to carry its original function, it is necessary to introduce the possible genealogy of a phenomenon that develops into a legitimized artistic system.

The process of artistic legitimation

Cultural phenomena and artistic expressions emerge from different sources. In the case of this thesis, I would like to foundationally agree with the view that social change is located outside of the borders of art which reflects these changes. (Lotman 2013 [2010]: 46) But what if we try to take a look at the circus as an artistic medium as a cultural sphere by itself? I would like to introduce Andre Gaudreault's and Philippe Marion's ideas about media genealogy and apply them to circus, to depict how the circus in local, Rīgas cirks context can be analyzed in the past, present and probably project some development in the future.

The model offered by these authors tries to describe the process of the appearance of a new artistic medium. (Gaudreault, Marion 2002:13) In the case of cinema it is closely related to the technological development of the medium, but the slow process of media maturation is something that has resulted in a singularity, 'identity' of the medium. (ibid)

An important focus point of Gaudreault's and Marion's framework is the process of institutionalization that allows something to become an autonomous medium of expression. In their analysis of cinema, they indicate, that this process is not only external, they argue that the external process of institutionalization (legitimization from outside of this artistic system, for example from academia, other arts, legislative system etc.) could happen only because this process had happened from the practicing artists of this medium beforehand. Only after they understand the nature of their medium, the medium becomes autonomous. (idem: 14) Therefore creates a double birth of the medium – the integrating birth and the distinguishing birth.

The integrating birth happens when a new technological innovation occurs. In the case of cinema genealogy it is the moment of the leap in technology that created the possibility of moving pictures. (idem: 16) In this phase, the artistic paradigm is seemingly a

part of other artistic genres and is perceived as a deviation or exploration of other, more constituted media or artistic forms.

In the case of circus, the integrating birth can be traced back to the different positions that circus has in culture and that heavily relies on the technological (and therefore also economical) changes and innovations. For example if we take equestrian circus as the base of modern circus perceptives, it slowly changed the technological meaning when the urban transport was not the horse central anymore. As the access to technology is increasing, the legitimation of the circus as an art form increases too.

The distinguishing birth is the phase that occurs after the artistic paradigm becomes self-sufficient. Its intermedial nature slowly decreases and the new art form gains more of the characteristics of identity. The intermediality is not an integral necessity of the medium itself, but it is a choice of relationality. (ibid) Using this approach to circus, I would like to argue that Rīgas cirks will experience a second distinguishing birth in its history as an institution that represents a contemporary perspective that is projected to the future. From 1888 until 2016 while Rīgas cirks was home of a modern circus, it was carrying certain signs (both artistically, aesthetically, spatially, and otherwise), that represented circus as having a strong identity that can be recognized from other genres of art. The key elements of animal training, acrobatics, clowning, equilibristics, and juggling were something that the audiences could always count on when visiting circus. But with the switch to contemporary circus strategy in 2017 most of the typical indicators of Rīgas cirks identity were changed – the structure of the performances, and the aesthetics were changed from mainstream to authorial, and the access to circus infrastructure to audience was changed. When speaking about this change in Rīgas cirks and the possibilities of the distinguishing birth phase (culturally and historically for the second time) it is important to note that this change and the legitimization of this artistic paradigm is still in the process of cultural explosion. It has only just begun, therefore the future possibilities are unpredictable, although as a government institution, it has a strategic plan, that includes further regional development of circus arts and education system. By developing these systems of legitimation, the positions of actors in this artistic system will become more explicit and therefore more understandable for the “outsiders”.

3. Baltics as the border of two paradigms

Historically, political changes in the Baltics have impacted the region not only geographically, but also culturally. It has developed as the translation zone between different cultures and world views. There is an oscillation between these cultural systems, and that is also reflected in the local circus tradition. In this chapter, I will explore more the characteristics and positioning of circus in the local context of Riga.

I will introduce the paradigmatic changes that have been present in the cultural scene of Riga and explore more in depth the last one, which begun in 2016. I will introduce the specifics of the local cultural context that is related also with circus arts through the perspective of semiospheric analysis. By using the dynamic cultural description of gradual and explosive processes that has been coined by Juri Lotman, I will describe the consequences of this event and the semiotic errors in the local collective memory.

A controversial element of paradigm change in the local context of Latvian culture is the contents of performances. As this aspect is also the most accessible for audiences, opinions about it clash the loudest. The changes in artistic paradigms of the performances will be described by using the performance dramaturgy model of Franziska Trapp which depicts certain semiotic qualities that can characterize a show. This approach will liberate the theoretical analysis from sticking to a static historiography and reveal the dynamic nature of the circus and its symbiotic paradigms.

3.1. Paradigms of circus

One of the purposes of this thesis is to explore changes in circus through Juri Lotman's question "How can a system develop and yet remain true to itself?" (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 1) It is followed by the question of relationality with the extra-systemic and question about the static and dynamic relations within the system. (ibid) To see how this approach can be applied to a case study, circus in Riga and Rīgas cirks as an institution is a curious case study of system development.

When thinking about circus as a semiotic system, often the first direction of thought travels to the textuality of performances. However, the application of semiotic analysis of performance as text is quite complex. Similar to Juri Lotman's definition of text, there is a relatively new field of ideas that is called Cultural poetics, which is based on Moritz Baßler's literary theory, which postulates that "any cultural representation can be read as a text situated in relation to other contexts. A text is anything that can be stored, repeated, and read, that is, it can be attributed meaning through comparison." (Trapp 2023: 102)

So, when we think of performance as a text, it is necessary to note Erika Fischer-Lichte's argument, that in performing arts often there are multiple sign systems existing at once. Next to linguistic signs exist also paralinguistic signs, proxemic signs, scenographic signs (such as masks, costumes, decorations, hairstyles etc.), and signs of movement. (Fischer-Lichte 1998 [1983]: 15) In the case of circus in addition there are also the relevant sign systems that represent the circus disciplines that are performed, such as juggling, acrobatics, equilibristics, and others, carrying the paradigmatic meanings of these disciplines. (Trapp 2023: 105) Here I would like to make a bridge to the notion of paradigm, that allows us to contextualize the perceived text.

Franziska Trapp, following Roman Jakobson, proposes that the perception of any text is a process that has two main levels: the individual elements of text and their relation to preceding and succeeding elements are represented in the syntagmatic level, whereas the comparison of these elements to other elements that could be standing in their place is perceived in the paradigmatic level. (Trapp 2023: 105) In other words and context of the circus – the "textual" elements that exist in the performance space and time can be

understood as fitting into one or other paradigm if their disposition is changed. For example, the same acrobatic act can be understood as a part of the modern circus paradigm if the acrobat is dressed in a sparkling leotard, or as part of a contemporary circus if the acrobat is dressed in layperson's clothes. This comparison from the perspective of the audience can happen unconsciously but in the process of creation of the performance it carries the paradigmatic meaning. Hence the quality that distinguishes paradigms – their disposition in comparison to the other. (ibid) In the light of this thesis, I would like to offer to expand this notion of paradigm of performance textuality to also socio-political, cultural, and environmental elements, that could be perceived as text.

As with many artistic systems, the circus in Rīga has different paradigms at the same time and the paradigm change in the institution of Rīgas cirks is deeply connected with an overall cultural change. Juri Lotmans idea of cultural memory can be generalized and projected also to this cultural domain:

Every culture establishes its own paradigm of what ought to be remembered (that is, preserved) and what is subject to oblivion. The latter is deleted from collective memory and “as if ceases to exist.” But time and the system of cultural codes shift, and the paradigm of memory and oblivion changes. What had appeared to be truly extant can turn out to be “as if nonexistent” and subject to oblivion, and what was nonexistent can become extant and meaningful. (Lotman 2020 [1985]: 82)

Rīgas cirks, as the only stationary venue, has always had a hierarchical dominance in the sphere of circus in local culture. The change of strategic political identity of the governing institution of this space sets the tone of what artistic and cultural influences have a voice here. In the *Table 1* is an overview of the five main periods of distinguishable paradigms:

Time	Name of the stationary circus	Influence of the circus traditions in the stationary circus	Influence of the circus traditions in the circuses outside the stationary venue
... - 1888	-	-	Western modern circus tradition Traveling circuses, sideshows, solo performers and entertainers
1888-1945	Circus Salamonsky (private enterprise)	Western modern circus' influence Explicit in the stage names of the performers and the dominating origins of guest artists	Western modern circus tradition Traveling circuses, sideshows, solo performers and entertainers
		Slavic modern circus' influence Close relations with Moscow, as Albert Salamonsky has a circus also there	
1945-1989	Riga Government Circus (government institution under the <i>Sojuzgoscirk</i> system)	Slavic modern circus' influence All the performances and artists are approved by the quality control system of <i>Sojuzgoscirk</i>	Slavic modern circus' influence All the performances and artists are approved by the quality control system of <i>Sojuzgoscirk</i>
1989 - 2016	Rīgas cirks (partly private, partly governmental institution)	Slavic modern circus' influence. The governance and programming of the space are still closely tied with the Russian-speaking (therefore more ex-Soviet) artists and companies. The visual aesthetics also reflect the modern circus accentuation on spectacularity	Slavic/Western modern circus' influence, traveling circuses performing on the periphery
			Since 2013 – Western contemporary circus' influence the Beginnings of the festival “Re Rīga!” and other sporadic shows. Performances are happening in non-circus spaces (such as streets, theaters, markets, and others); the structure and narrativity of the performance represent contemporary circus practices
2016 - ...	VSIA “Rīgas cirks” (The governmental institution, the Latvian Ministry of Culture is a 100% shareholder of this institution) ³	Western contemporary circus' influence Performance structure, imported performances, the structure of the circus school, positioning of circus in culture as an interdisciplinary form of art correspond with Western and Nordic value systems.	Modern circus influence. Performances are happening at the periphery of the city as traveling shows or whole traveling circuses, still active use of domesticated animals. Artists and communities that were the core of the previous paradigm are now actively working under a society named “Association of Circus Artists” and creating events and performances.
		The contemporary circus and street art festival “Re Rīga!” is happening both in the Rīgas cirks and in different locations in the Riga city center. Representing the contemporary and new circus traditions	

Table 1. An overview of paradigm change of circus in Riga

³ More detailed information about the official shareholder positioning and roles available in English here: <https://cirks.lv/kapitalsabiedriba/> [visited: 15.05.2024.]

As mentioned before, the different paradigms of circus can co-exist at the same time in the same cultural sphere, but in time the dominant one that was presented in the stationary circus, changes. The semiospheric approach can be a useful and explicit tool how to explain this process of the oscillation. At the end of this chapter, I will offer a closer look at the last paradigm change, that happened between the last two periods mentioned in this table as at the moment we have the most information about this switch and it is the most distinguishable.

3.2. Two voices at the same time – semiospheric perspective of circus in Baltics

To find the unique characteristics of circus in the Baltic region and more specifically Riga and Rīgas cirks, a suitable analytical tool is Juri Lotman's theory of semiosphere. From a more general viewpoint, the Baltics is the boundary zone between East and West. Even nowadays we can notice that the worldviews and cultural spheres of more Western or more Slavic perceptions coexist in the same space.

The relationality of these perceptions include a spectrum of translatability – from complete mutual translatability, to complete mutual untranslatability. (Lotman 1990: 125) In the case of circus in the region of the Baltics, we can also look at this space as a boundary zone, which has a function of accelerated semiotic processes. (Lotman 2005 [1984]: 212) Also in the circus arts, we can see how these two general groups are in a dialogue and in the case of Riga, the dialogical relations reflect directly to circus arts.

In contemporary research, there is a gap in the discussion about the relationship between the Slavic and Western circus traditions. It is recognized as modern versus contemporary or metaphorically it can be compared to ballet versus contemporary dance. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the roots of both of these paradigms are similar, but their development is deeply connected with the cultural dynamics, socio-cultural processes (including value systems), and also the role of art in culture. Nevertheless, the mediation between these two voices in the contemporary context is almost non-existent. Therefore,

the case study of this thesis that regards the Baltics and its mapping on the artistic paradigm location is an unexplored object.

Application of the semiospheric analysis could be useful when thinking about the circus paradigms as mirrors of broader cultural structures. One of Juri Lotman's core ideas is connected with the understanding, that "cultures in general are self-referential systems insofar as they tend to define themselves and evince isomorphic semiotic spaces as mutually inclusive levels and metalevels." (Nöth 2006: 249) Although there is still a debate whether Juri Lotman conceived the possibility of many semiospheres, he did discuss cultures as separated by boundaries and "spaces enclosed within spaces like a *matryoshka*, or spaces reflecting other spaces within themselves like mirrors reflecting the space in which they are immersed." (ibid)

In the semiospheric analysis of culture, where the mapping consists of an institutionalized core, a periphery that is in a dialogue with the core, and the boundary that is the space of dialogue between different semiospheres, Latvia could be mapped as being in the boundary zone between East and West. The boundary as a notion is also an ambivalent one. It both unites and separates. (Lotman 2001 [1990]: 136) Therefore creating possible friction between the communicating spheres in question. As the local culture is in this zone, the cultural influences change, but they don't fully detach from others, therefore creating an environment where there is a dominant culture, but also different counter-cultures. For example, at the times of national governance, there is the mainstream Latvian culture with a national influence, and next to it exists a Russian-speaking cultural sphere.

In the case of Rīgas cirks and Baltics, if we try to do the spatial mapping of the artistic semiosphere of circus, it raises the schematic question of the boundary. The logic of boundary in the Lotmanian sense is an antagonistic one. The position of "us" versus "them" is the beginning of cultural self-identification. (Lotman 1990: 129) Binary oppositions as a possibility of understanding oneself, but at the same time the duality is interconnected and co-dependent. "Boundary does not only separate, it also *constitutes* the semiosphere in its cultural individuality and identity." (Nöth 2014: 10) Boundary between two spheres functions in an antagonistic dynamic – 'us' versus 'them' – whereby the internal identity is

created as opposition to the extra-systemic (the sphere behind the boundary), while belonging into some broader sphere means that identity is constructed as *matryoshka* – certain likeness, isomorphism with the broader sphere. Now, Rīgas cirks can be viewed as being at the same time part of two different traditions and mirroring them both to some degree in the *matryoshka* style. Yet at different points in time, Rīgas cirks could also set the boundary (from internal perspective) differently, opposing to either West or Slavic tradition at least in some extent differentiating us from them, while in case of *matryoshka*, we identify ourselves as part of the bigger ‘us’.

Combining this perception of the boundary being the zone of self-identification and culture having a *matryoshka*-like structure, I would like to offer the perspective of the West and Slavic traditions as two identity mechanisms, that overlap in Riga. But when we try to schematize this process, we are met with two ways of depicting (and therefore understanding) the semiospheric disposition of Rīgas cirks, see in Figure 1:

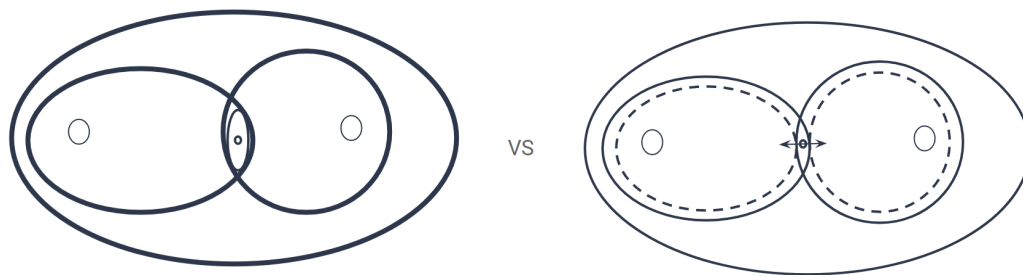


Figure 1. Semiospheric mapping of Rīgas cirks positioning. Shecma A and Schema B

For the beginning, it is necessary to clarify that this depiction of semiospheric mapping is simplified and approximate. As semiosphere “includes territorial, social, cultural and individual identities, which in turn are represented by semiospheres of different levels.” (Torop 2022: 297)

The surrounding ellipse signifies the overall artistic system of circus and the two semiospheres depicted signify Western and Slavic circus traditions. In reality, the whole artistic system is much more rich with overlapping and extending of traditions.

The core part of these depicted systems is also approximate, but geographically and politically it is far from the local Baltic context. It is also culturally heterogeneous, and we can think of each side having many institutional cores, but in this graphic depiction, these cores represent the established codes of circus. The previously mentioned West and Slavic paradigms.

The schema A depicts how Baltics could be perceived as being in the overlapping zones of the Western and Slavic circus paradigms, therefore both of these representations and also audience expectations exist at the same time. There is a certain group of people that has a strong memory of Soviet and Slavic circus, therefore the contemporary context of performing circus does not seem familiar to them, for example, the absence of animals in circus is something that seems alien and destroys the meaning-making systems of circus. This depiction also tries to contextualize the Baltics as an artistic and cultural unity or semiosphere inside of this boundary crossover. In this case, Rīgas cirks, as the only space that has a permanent circus infrastructure, creates a certain core and the rest of the Baltics represent the periphery that is always in communication with the core. Hence this topographical system, which again can be compared to *matryoshka* in a way, that the delimitation of the precise elements of semiosphere is impossible to draw, therefore creating semiospheric models within.

Now, turning to the Schema B. It represents the lack of communication between the West and the Slavic circus paradigm. Historically there has been a translation process from Slavic circus to Western in this area. The main adjustments of translation that were based in Riga happened mostly at the time of the Soviet system. As an example can be mentioned how clowning shows were tried out in Riga, before exporting them to the West. Because of the cosmopolitan population in Riga, it was the closest to the possible Western perception of culture and art. Therefore Russian clowns, for example, clown Juri Nikulin, chose to perform in Riga before tours in the West. It was done to observe the reactions of the audience and to adjust the numbers more to Western audiences. (Avota 2023b: 90)

Unfortunately, only Soviet circus examples similar to this one are case studies of a direct process of artistic translation happening in this area. In reality, the communication between the Western and the Slavic paradigms is happening more at the institutional level,

therefore creating the cultural positioning of certain paradigms in the local culture. This will be described and expanded upon in the following subchapter.

This semiospheric depiction show that Baltics in the circus context is always subdued to a translation process but because of this dynamism has not yet developed its own artistic voice and is still very intertextual in its nature. This phenomenon is the specifics of this region, but at the same time, as self-reflexivity mostly happens after cultural self-identification where it is clear what to describe, the Baltics still do not have the self-reflexive voice of self-description. And as the artistic change of paradigm has happened so soon, there is no larger semiospheric institution that would create a reflective analysis of this area.

3.3. The gradual/explosive event – 2016 and Rīgas cirks

The artistic paradigm change in Rīgas cirks can be analyzed through the Lotmanian view of cultural development, the dynamics of gradual and explosive processes. The change that could be perceived as explosive can be dated to the year 2016, but to understand it more fully, it is necessary to see the gradual dynamic development towards this explosiveness. This analysis is an effort to fill a gap of cultural self-reflexivity, as there is no overview of the different dynamic events that happened at the same time in the local culture and that have a direct impact on the cultural mapping of circus in the local culture.

The chain of the events

I would like to start by highlighting the specific events that could be seen as integral to this process of change. Below is a chronological list of these events:⁴

⁴ Timeline based on the information published in Rīgas cirks hisrotical chronology Available here - <https://cirks.lv/en/circus/history/chronology/> [visited: 18.05.2024.]

January of 2016	End of a property lawsuit that has been active for twenty years and prohibiting the development and renovation of infrastructure of Rīgas cirks. The institution now fully and officially is owned by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia
February of 2016	The building of Rīgas cirks is closed due to infrastructural safety issues
April of 2017	After the infrastructural and strategic unification under the Latvian Ministry of Culture, after an open competition, a new team takes over the institution VSIA “Rīgas cirks”, beginning the strategic development of contemporary circus in Latvia.
July of 2017	Latvian Animal Protection Act is updated with article 27.1., which states that both wild and captive-bred animals may not be trained or used as amusement animals or shown in public as amusement animals. (Officially active from 01.01.2018.)
September of 2018	The building is open after the temporary conservation of the most dangerous infrastructural element – the facade of the building
Spring of 2019	After a public competition for the architectural project of future development of Rīgas cirks as a multifunctional art center, begins the first phase of renovation.
2021	Rīgas cirks is closed for performances, the shows are presented in other theaters and public spaces of Riga.
October of 2022	Rīgas cirks is opened to the public after the first phase of renovation. It is finished architecturally, but not fully equipped (there are no grandstands, light and sound systems, etc.). The place is actively rented for events and circus performances return to this arena.
March of 2024	The grand opening of the equipped and finished arena.

Table 2. The timeline of gradual events of paradigm change in Rīgas cirks

Juri Lotman characterizes development processes in two dynamic forms – gradual and explosive. The gradual dynamics is based on predictability and represents a strong force of progress. Whereas the explosive process occurs and is characterized by unpredictability and very sudden creation and destruction of meanings. (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 7) Although this division exists, both of these structural tendencies are dependent on each other and cannot exist without the other. (idem: 8) We can also notice that in the list of the events of our case study, where, for example, the problems with infrastructure are the results of long-term neglect, as in contrary, the event of a change of governance happens comparatively rapidly. Different meaning-making systems have different dynamic tempos. (idem: 12) In our case, such elements as infrastructure, governance, or artistic paradigms change more rapidly, but such systems as cultural self-description need more time to change. So the gradual and

explosive elements exist in a synchronic space and in different systems at the same time. (ibid)

As mentioned previously in this chapter, in the local Latvian media and research, there is a lack of descriptions of this cluster of events. It seems that the cultural description system itself is not ready to reflect on these events holistically or there could also be the problem of lack of terminology. This gap in terminology is closely related to the gap in knowledge about circus as a dynamic artistic system and the timidity of describing it. Lotman notes, that the synchronicity is connected also with the inadequate self-description at the time of the events. The dynamic processes appropriate the language of self-description and only later, with a time distance, it is possible to develop research terminology. Nevertheless, in the beginning of self-descriptions of these processes, the attitude is implicitly or explicitly antagonistic and sometimes self-contradictory. (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 12)

Although all the events mentioned in the chronological list could be analyzed from the perspective of gradual and explosive dynamics, I would like to offer a closer look at one of them, which is culturally the most significant seemingly embodying the paradigmatic change – the event of exotic animal ban in performances.

Changes in the Animal Rights Act – a threat for the past and the portrait of the future

One of the circus disciplines that are key to the modern circus paradigm is animal training. Any changes or legal interventions are perceived as a threat to the modern circus as an artistic system. In the case of Riga and Rīgas cirks the addition to the Animal Rights Act, prohibits animal training for the purposes of amusement and entertainment and was expanded and positioned as the beginning of the death of circus.

Modern circus, as opposed to other paradigms and types of circus, is a more closed system, that follows the historical traditions. For example, the performances are structurally similar and their structure “respects a set of representational codes expressed by conventional signs.” (Guy 2023: 24) In the context of this example, the dramaturgy of the performance is crucial. “.. there is a dramaturgy based on a dozen numbers in juxtaposition

with no thematic link but various specialties, which usually includes animal acts connected by the oral presentation of a ringmaster or the repetition of a clown act with an individual structure in every number.” (idem: 25) So any disruption of these key elements that are the definitive elements of the performance is seen or can be perceived as a threat to survival. In the local context, the animal rights movement is closely related to activism and youth activity. Although the Act itself was approved in July of 2017, the protests had been happening since 2014. The local Latvian culture of protests usually does not have a great impact on the change therefore, the protests were not perceived as a threat that should be taken into account to begin the process of adjustment.

The protective reaction about the change in legislation was explicitly expressed by the previous head of Rīgas cirks Lolita Lipinska, who in interviews often stressed the necessity of animals in performances, supporting it with the data collected from audience members. For example, in an interview from November 4, 2016, we can see her stance on this topic: “Lolita Lipinska reminds, us that the audience survey of the season 2015/2016 shows, that 95% of circus audience would be interested in seeing performances with animals. She says:

When the Ministry of Culture will order the circus to change to a different concept, according to which both wild and captive-bred wild animals will be forbidden to train and perform in public, I doubt that the 5% of the population that used to come to circus performances will turn into 90%.⁵

With comments like this, we can see that the event of prohibition of animals in performances is perceived as an explosive cultural change which implies unpredictable development of Rīgas cirks and circus in this culture overall.

The gradual nature of this event is noticeable – local public protests, discussions with the collective of Rīgas cirks, the main animal rights NGO “Dzīvnieku Brīvība” (“Animal Freedom”), and animal well-fare specialists. But there is also global processes that support this gradual expansion of animal rights. The conflicting attitudes do modern circus practices and animal rights defenders most times is quite violent. The symbolic

⁵ Interview with Lolita Lipinska – the last head of Rīgas cirks under modern circus paradigm. Published in November 4 of 2016 under the title “The Director: Circus animals are not suited to live in the wild.” Available here: <https://www.apollo.lv/4621693/direktore-cirka-dzivnieki-nemaz-nav-piemeroti-dzivei-savvala> (translated by the author), [visited: 19.05.2024.]

meanings of animal trainers are also changing together with the contemporary systems of value. For example, Paul Bouissac notes, that “The heroic posture of the traditional wild animal trainer confronting raging lions and tigers that was displayed on circus poster has no become for many the symbol of a shameful past.” (Bouissac 2022: 5) This gradual switch to either non-animal circus, circus without exotic animals but possibly with domesticated animal species, or a policy that restricts training and exposition of certain animal species is happening all over the world since the early 2000s.⁶ So the pattern of change in artistic paradigms that concern animal performances can be seen as a global movement, a dynamic contemporary change in culture.

Now, looking back at this one event from the cluster of events that happened in 2017 we can see that the chain of events leading us to today's situation seem logical and fits the context. But, as Lotman has noted: “The moment of explosion is the moment of unpredictability. Unpredictability should not, however, be understood as constitution a series of unlimited or undefined possibilities for movement from one state to another.” (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 123) From the process of institutionalisation under the Ministry of Culture to the change of the strategic development and core team, to the new strategy and the renovation of the Rīgas cirks infrastructure – there is an unpredictable development to any step. As the circus in Latvia does not have a recognized status in the local culture as part of the national culture it has less support than theater or other forms of art. Throughout the time of change, there is also the important aspect of audience education, as the change of a paradigm needs time to settle in the local cultural memory and co-exist with other systems of memory, that have a strong influence on what we perceive as representing circus.

⁶ More information about global legislations here – <https://www.four-paws.org/campaigns-topics/topics/wild-animals/worldwide-circus-bans> [visited 18.05.2024.]

3.4. Performance as text – a look from different cultural viewpoints

Circus in the contemporary context of the 21st century is diversifying in many ways. One of them is the performance itself. In the case of Rīgas cirks, the absence of animals was perceived by some as a threat to the whole artistic system of circus. In time, contemporary circus in Rīgas cirks has shown a different way of doing circus not only by having or not having certain signifiers (such as animals, ringmaster, a local live orchestra, and others) but also by offering a different approach to performances themselves.

Circus performances are connected with multiple perspectives. Performances themselves are mostly changing and adjusting not only to the artists' subjective position at the time of the show (such as physical wellbeing) but also to the space of the event and the audience of each show. As the connection and communication in any form between the audience and artists in the circus is crucial, each performance can be perceived as a unique text by itself. Here I'm using the term text in the Lotmanian sense of text perceived as an event that is framed, artificially capturing the chosen moment (or object of interest) in time, but still understanding it as being in relation to extra-textual systems as well as with with past and future. (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 13) In this subchapter I would like to use Franziska Trapp's model of text structure for performance analysis. By using this model I will describe the conflicts in the cultural memory of Rīgas cirks, that occur when the dynamics of the model change, when the relations between the elements of the model changes, or when the dynamic prominence of elements change.

The model of performance analysis

The role of semiotics in an analysis of performing arts is changing. It is not explicit as an academic discourse on its own often, but we can see qualities and different semiotic approaches in different aspects of circus analysis. Here I would like to offer a model that is defined under the approach named cultural poetics.⁷

⁷ This chapter is based on Franziska Trapp's phd thesis "Lektüren des Zeitgenössischen Zirkus. Ein Modell zur text-kontext-orientierten Aufführungsanalyse" (2020), but as the text will be published in English translation "Lectures on Contemporary Circus" only in 2025, some of the aspects are sourced from her open lecture

The model in question is based on Moritz Baßler’s classification of three levels of literary text: the level of text itself (*Textebene*), the representation level/content level (*Darstellungsebene/Inhaltsebene*) and the level of meaning (*Bedeutungsebene*) (Trapp 2020: 56) Dramaturgy and cultural poetics scholar Franziska Trapp offers to expand this classification and adjust it to performance format. The adjusting of terms would include:

- From the level of text to Performative level (*Performative Ebene*)
- From the representation level/content level to Diegetic level (*Diegetische Ebene*)
- The level of meaning is kept the same

The spectacularity of tricks done by artists in different disciplines and amplified by visual, audial, and proxemic signs is one of the key elements of circus arts. Therefore another layer is added to the pre-existing model and named the level of spectacularity (*Spektakuläre Ebene*). (Trapp 2020: 62) See the schema of the model in Figure 2.

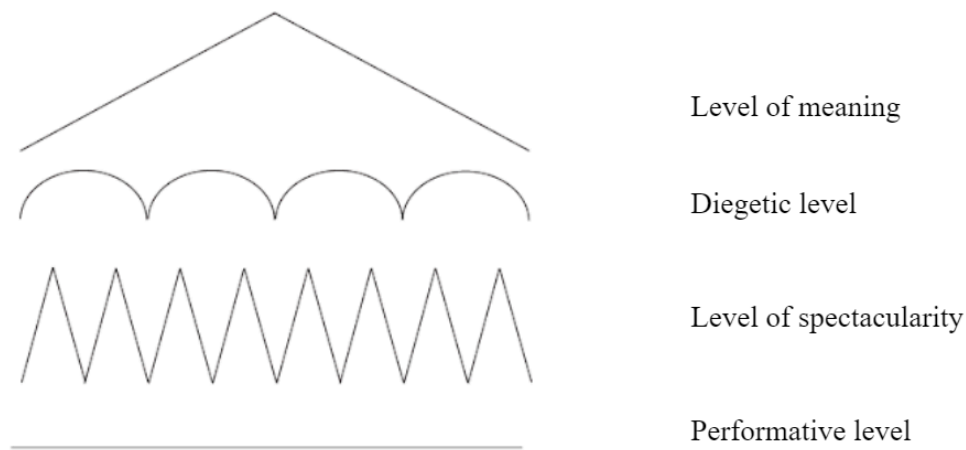


Figure 2. Levels of performance analysis (Trapp 2020: 62)

where she introduced this model to the public. Presented as a lecture “Reading circus” in Symposium called “Reading circus” in the context of CircusDanceFestival in Koln, Germany in 2022, available online here - <https://www.circus-dance-festival.de/en/cdfthek/reading-circus-franziska-trapp/> [visited 19.05.2024.]

In the lecture “Reading circus” Franziska Trapp describes these levels in a very concentrated way:

- The performative level can be perceived as also the phenomenological moment of the performance. It is perceived by the audience and is ephemeral, therefore there are qualities that are predictable, but there is a certain amount of subjective randomness of a performance.
- The level of spectacularity, as mentioned before, is closely connected with tricks and spectacle of a circus performance. This is the level, that often impacts the audience in an embodied way. Often it is related to the notions and codes of risk, fear and others.
- The diegetic level is the plane of narration and the story-world of the performance
- The level of meaning includes the context of meaning in which this performance exists.

All these layers exist in most of the performances at the same time, but in a different intensity and their roles can be more or less prominent depending on the context of the performance. Franziska Trapp also offers three main models of dynamics of between the levels, that describe the three typically differentiated traditions of circus. Here I will shortly introduce these models and describe their roles in the cultural and artistic context of Riga.

The modern, the new and the contemporary

To begin with, I would like to highlight again, that these possible models are presented as the three most typical ones (possible model situations) to exemplify performances of modern, new, and contemporary circus paradigms. In reality, there can be (and more often it is the case) performances that are in between these models or have some of the qualities being more distinct than others. In the light of this thesis, I will shortly introduce these models and then compare them as a point of reflection about the understanding of what is circus in the local cultural context of Riga.

While looking at these models, we can see that there are certain levels of performance text, that are more emphasized as definitive. In the case of modern circus,

most important element is the spectacularity of a show. Often the performances are based on the Babylonian structure of dramaturgy, which entails the gradual development of difficulty of tricks throughout the performance. (Trapp 2020: 64) A mosaic of different tricks and acts, where certain symbolic sounds (such as drumroll) mark the success of a trick. The aesthetics of risk expressed by the dangerous tricks are always pointed to the performative level and grounded in the performance act. The performances themselves do not support a diegetic level of expression. (ibid) The level of meaning is more connected with the tradition itself and less with a created world or reflexivity of the time and space of the performance. (idem: 67)

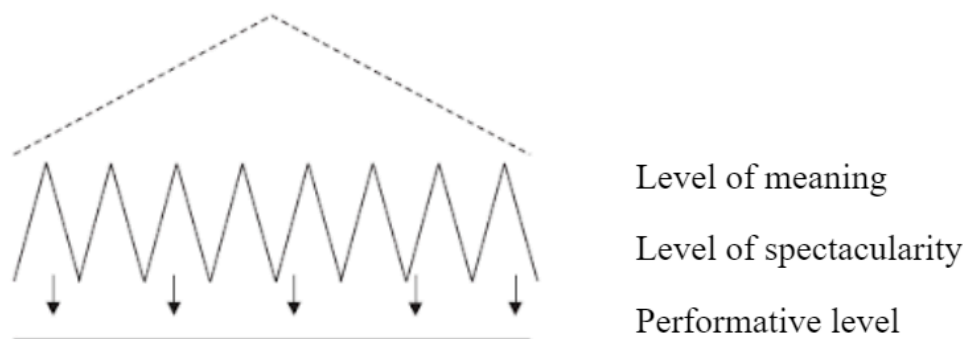


Figure 3. Levels of modern circus performance analysis (Trapp 2020: 64)

When thinking about the New circus, the model is more complex. The level of meaning becomes prominent. There is a certain unifying meaning of the performance, for example, if we think about one of the most popular examples of the New circus, *Cirque du Soleil*, their performances are often created in a certain world of meaning. Such as *Ovo* (2009) that is inspired by the world of insects uses the diegetic level of the certain world, but the level of meaning seems to be not connected with real world. The level of spectacularity is still important in these shows and usually comes in an alternating rhythm with the diegetic level. In other words, it is possible to separate the trick from the story world of the

performance. Although it can be used as a way of expressing the diegetic level, it is not inseparable. (idem: 67-71)

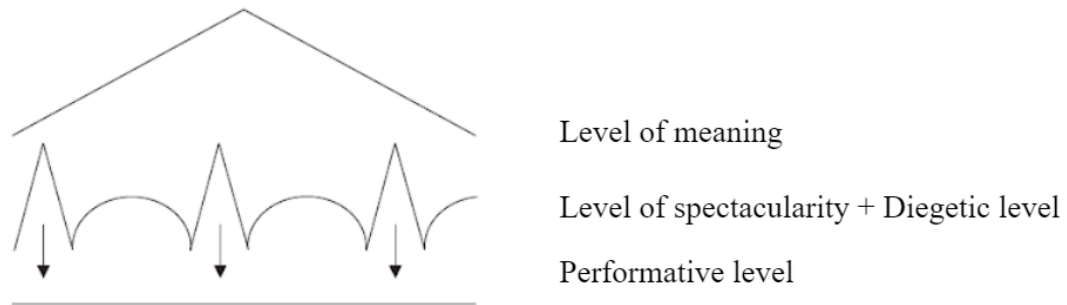


Figure 4. Levels of a New circus performance analysis (Trapp 2020: 71)

Last but not least is the model of the contemporary circus. Here the level of spectacularity, the diegetic level, and the performative level become one interdependent functional unit. Each of these elements can become fundamental in the constitution of meaning created in the show and they can also change their prominence throughout the performance itself. (Trapp 2020: 71) The performative level is deeply connected with the structure of the performance – is the stage frontal? Is it circular? Is it in the street or is it sight-specific? Also, the levels of spectacularity and diegetic perspective are intertwined, as the tricks and the “language” of a certain discipline become part of the meaning creation of the diegetic world, it becomes part of it. The level of meaning becomes more intertwined in the performative level. The performance itself is not just “transferred” to a location that fits the performance, it has a relationship with the space which is explicitly exposed also to the audience. (idem: 71-73) Relationality and interdependence to create an artistic text in different levels of perception is the key to this model.

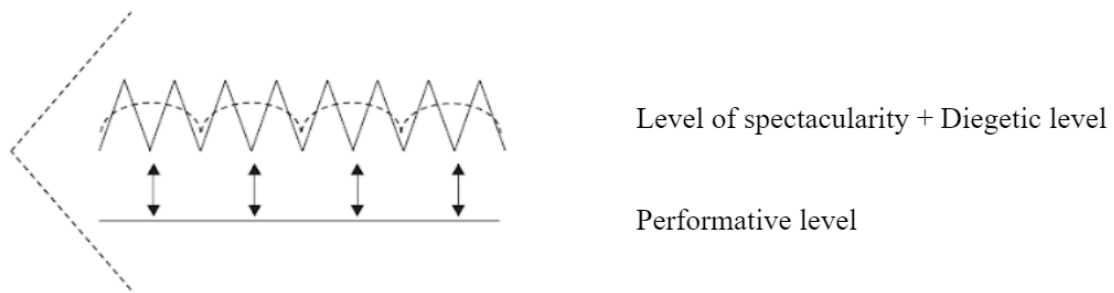


Figure 5. Levels of contemporary circus performance analysis (Trapp 2020: 73)

These models show different approaches to circus as a way of expression. In modern circus, the spectacular level is dominating and the meaning of tradition is what makes it important. We can see parallels between this approach and the conflict in Rīgas cirks, where at the moment when the tradition is questioned, audiences reaction to the artistic system can become antagonistic. If we look at the New circus model, it seems to imply the role of a magic world-building circus has as a role in the culture. A place that seems to be “out of this reality” to a certain amount by having the artists present certain tricks as part of their world. Contemporary circus tries to question and expand the possibilities of circus’ position in art and culture, opening a possible reflexivity and discussion about the space, culture, and perception of the world in the certain place where the show is happening.

Where do these circus models “live” in the local culture of Riga?

Rīgas cirks, before the change of 2017, was housing modern circus and had an emphasis on caring for the historical tradition of circus. With the change to the new strategy of contemporary circus, it was often mentioned, that the “real” circus will die, but instead it broadened or helped to reconceptualise the notion of circus in Latvian culture. All the models mentioned in the previous subchapter exist next to each other in the same space of Riga, only their positioning in culture and their meaning is changing.

As mentioned before, the impact of the Slavic circus is closely related to certain sociopolitical events. Rīgas cirks being part of the huge industry of *Souzgoscirk* became a small, but nevertheless flourishing space of circus arts. After the collapse of Soviet Union, because of political negligence and lack of governmental support, Rīgas cirks was culturally forgotten and since the 1990s has continued the trajectory where it was, but now, without the support of the *Sojuzgoscirk* institution. The continuation of traditional circus performances and cherishing the same values and ideology since the mid-20th century, together with the lack of strategic development and financial support, led to Rīgas cirks being a system that represents aged values, a system, that was too closed to change with times that the only possible catching up of the contemporary cultural system is a certain amount of explosive destruction.

As the explosion brought change in most of the subsystems within circus (the organizing team, the performance format, the space, and others) we can notice how it seems, that the local audience had to learn to see the contemporary circus in a different light. Although in the beginning the model of the modern circus also reflected certain expectations both positive and negative, nowadays the local audience recognizes the models of the new circus and contemporary circus as equally valid. As heterogeneous as the audience can be, the main element that depicts this validation could be seen in the positive amount of visitations of the performances.

Therefore, culturally the change in Rīgas cirks does not seem like the “death of circus”. We can see how the discourse that the old, modern circus team and their self-positioning in the culture reflects in their contemporary location in the culture. In interviews with the previous head of Rīgas cirks, Lolita Lipinska, she often emphasizes how the program of Rīgas cirks was always based on the wants and needs of the audience. For example, the previously mentioned crucial role of animal training that defines circus existence. The institutional role of Rīgas cirks demanded that it should reflect certain political, social, and cultural values of the government. But, after the change of 2017, it seems, that the modern circus is finding its position in the culture, that is fully based on the support of the audiences by organizing performances in different cultural venues or in

traveling format. The contemporary paradigm that is perceived as future-oriented and Western, is a priority in the governmental institution that is Rīgas cirks.

Here I am adding an approximate graph that depicts the position of circus in the local culture of Riga. The modern circus tradition has existed in the format of traveling circus since before the building of the stationary circus and since the year 1888 has been performing also under a stationary dome. In 2013 the festival “Re Rīga!” began and opened doors for street art performances and also circus shows that represent the models of both new circus and contemporary circus. Here the dynamic that is recognized is the seemingly Slavic tradition still dominating both in the traveling and institutional format, but the seemingly Western, more open, and experimental approach of circus existing in the periphery and minority. The change in 2017 reversed the dominance and the contemporary circus became the legitimized central identity of Rīgas cirks.

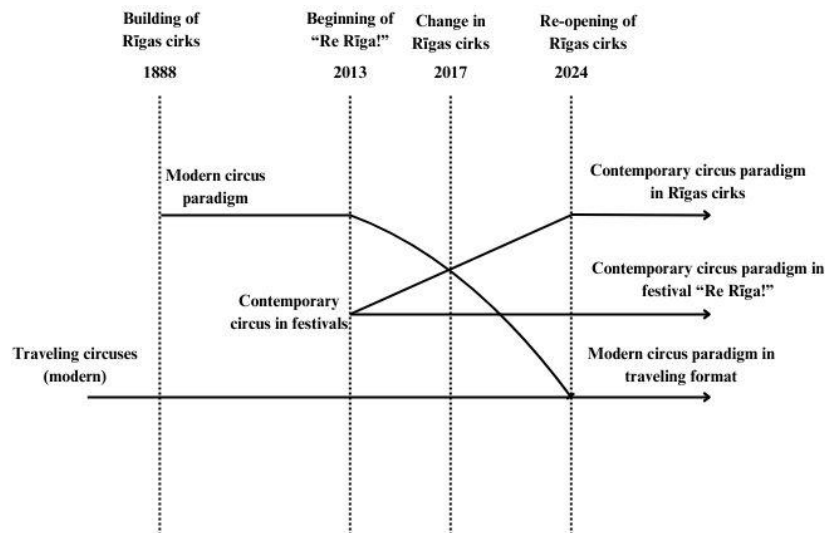


Figure 6. Schematic representation of circus paradigm co-existence in Riga. The position on the vertical axis is a position in culture – moving up (is closer to the institutional core) or down (is more in the periphery)

It is curious to think of what is the future of circus in Rīgas cirks, in Latvia, and even in the Baltics. At the moment the infrastructure and the current strategic plan involves further development of circus arts in this region. With having a circus education center and supporting circus to exist in Rīgas cirks as a multimedial and interdisciplinary art center, Riga could potentially develop its own characteristics and position in the global circus

community. The explosive event of paradigm change left certain cultural scars and disturbed certain corners of cultural memory. The expectations to see a tradition that in reality does not reflect contemporary society now are not satisfied in Rīgas cirks, but it is pushed back in its original format of nomadic performance experience.

Another major change that reflects the paradigm change in a more physical and permanent form is the reconstruction process of the Rīgas cirks infrastructure. In the closing chapter of this thesis I would like to offer a closer semiotic analysis of this event as a closer case study of how Rīgas cirks as a space emphasize the relationship between the audience and circus community.

4. Recoding of space – a case study of Rīgas cirks renovation

This chapter is devoted to a more close-up analysis of paradigm change that is reflected in spatial re-coding. As Fischer-Lichte notes:

Since spatial settings are established by society as a whole, by social institution, or by individuals and/or groups of individuals, the symbolic functions fulfilled in the process can be related to the society as a whole, to the institution, or to the individuals or groups of individuals involved. (Fischer-Lichte 1992 [1983]: 94)

Therefore, we can notice, that the changes in society are reflected in the spatial relationships.

In the case of Rīgas cirks, the building itself had not changed its semiotic and spatial mapping since 1888. In 2019 the building was officially closed for the first part of the reconstruction which included strengthening and adjusting the arena itself to contemporary legal, technical, and artistic needs.⁸ It is worth mentioning, that the different “closings” are not a misunderstanding, but are connected with different structural and architectural reasons. Whenever some of the works were finished and it was possible to organize some temporary shows, it was done. By describing the non-architectonic elements that have impacted this re-coding process and offering a visualization of this change in the mapping of the space, I will introduce the analysis of different spatial codes that have been changed in the spirit of contemporary needs and the strategic development of the space overall.

⁸ More information about the reconstruction process – <https://cirks.lv/en/circus/reconstruction/> [visited: 18.05.2024]

As a theoretical base, I will use Paul Bouissac's semiotic analysis of circus space. His analysis is deeply rooted in the modern circus tradition so the codes and meanings that he is describing and pointing out as crucial for circus existence, I will compare to the current situation of Rīgas cirks infrastructure. This will be done by using also other tools of analysis that could be translated into spatial analysis. By describing the roles of physical and semiotic borders in a circus space I will try to explore how changes in these borders change the relationship between the audience and performance.

4.1. Stationary circus and its meaning

Circus as a cultural phenomenon has many different forms of representation. In this thesis until now, I have mostly tried to map the circus as a cultural and artistic phenomenon, overviewing it both in the global and local contexts and trying to untangle the relationship of circus with other cultural phenomena. In the local context of Riga, the least dynamic element of circus arts is the Rīgas cirks building. It is an anchor that signifies the presence of circus in the city, but because of its aged value system, it experienced a complete re-coding and is still in the process of stabilization in the local culture.

Architectural and spatial analysis of circus as performance space is a field yet to be discovered. (Divac, Krklješ, Milošević 2022: 1) Spaces that culturally are coded as circus performance environments are still an important part of the contemporary circus world. Although the spatial distribution of circus is an integral part of the performances themselves, in the context of academic reflection it is an accompanying segment more than a central topic. Another aspect is the problematics of getting an overarching perspective of circus architecture in Europe is the lack of connection between Eastern and Western Europe. (Divac, Krklješ, Milošević 2022: 2) The meanings of circus existence in space and culture are diversifying, therefore, the analysis of Rīgas cirks and its re-coding of space can be seen as an example of a case where the oscillation between East and West depicts the different perspectives of circus in a cultural context.

When thinking about Rīgas cirks, as mentioned before, there is a lack of metacommunication about the circus performance environment. This is a side effect of this space being lost in translation since Latvia regained independence in 1991. There is almost no reflection about the meaning assigned to Rīgas cirks both in the global and local context. Detailed descriptions of stationary circus infrastructure exist about Europe and Russian circuses, but the lack of knowledge about Riga is reflected in the lack of factological information or even false information published in recent academic publications, such as this: “Albert Salomonsky opened a stone circus with four thousand seats in Moscow in 1880 but before that he opened a wooden one in Odessa and was credited with opening a circus in Riga (now Lithuania)” (Divac, Krklješ, Milošević 2022: 12). Nevertheless, the goal of this chapter is to offer a semiotic analysis of space that could unravel the hidden architectural pearl that is Rīgas cirks.

Circus architecture and local context

Although in the contemporary context of circus, the artform is challenging its performance spaces continuously, it is possible to define three main types of spatial structures of circus: the stationary structures (such as Rīgas cirks), the temporary structures (such as tents and other forms of temporary infrastructure) and public spaces (such as city squares, streets or other shared spaces). (Divac, Krklješ, Milošević 2022: *ibid*)⁹ The development of these structures is closely related to both the format of the performance and the historical and political situation of the local culture. (Divac, Krklješ, Milošević 2022: 2) But when thinking about stationary circus buildings there are certain elements that describe circus infrastructure, the artform itself, and therefore also our perception of circus overall.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, circus as we understand it is a cultural and artistic phenomenon that seemingly “arrives” to a culture and is not “developed” within a culture as a local phenomenon. It gains certain localized qualities, but that happens as an adaptation of a previously imported form of performance. At its arrival, to merge into the

⁹ The Pandemic and its created digital turn had also its influence on expanding the spaces of circus to different digital platforms and even inviting the audiences in personal spaces of a performance creating a way of doing circus online. This is a sphere of performance art existence that will not be viewed in this thesis.

local cultural sphere, there are some constraints on spatial relations that circus has to negotiate with the local environment.

Paul Bouissac offers some contradictions that the circus has to negotiate with the local culture. The first of them is the ratio of space and demography. “Circus needs free space and an audience in order to draw its resources from its social environment.” (Bouissac 2010: 12) The free space depends a lot on the necessary staging requirements and a traditional characteristic of circus is its circular stage.

When Rīgas cirks, then Circus Salamonsky was built, it was located on the border of the Old city, in the newly opened space for city expansion. Before that, this was the zone of medieval defensive ramparts. Nevertheless, the land that Albert Salamonsky bought was smaller than expected. We can notice the certain economy of space in the size of the circular arena. As the regular size of a circus arena is 13 meters, Rīgas cirks is smaller, only 11 meters in diameter. At the time of its building in 1888, it was located on a street – now Merķeļa Street – which was developing rapidly. As the city has expanded over time, movement and transportation in Riga has been much more based on the means of public transportation, however, in terms of accessibility, the location of the circus building has been always fairly comfortable spot both for the city inhabitants and visitors. When thinking about the availability to the audience, Rīgas cirks have historically had fairly cheap prices. (Avota 2023c: 113)

Another negotiable element of existing in the city is the seeming architectural “alien morphology” of the externality of circus venues. “It opposes an ephemeral conical or pyramidal architecture to the immutable rectangular patterns of cityscapes.” (Bouissac 2010: 13) In other words, one of the most famous symbols of circus is the conical shape of the shape of traveling circuses. In the case of Rīgas cirks, the conical red roof is a key element in the external design. It is the only building that has this significant shape on this street, but because the buildings around it spatially dominate and Merķeļa Street is very dynamic, there is not much open space from where to enjoy these external signs. The rush of urban life overshadows the space creating a paradox where the building is in one of the most dynamic locations but it is seemingly “invisible”.

This “invisibility” was there both spatially and artistically until 2016. When the cluster of events in 2016 and 2017 attracted new cultural and social attention to this space, the meaning of Rīgas cirks in the local culture began to change.

4.2. Re-coding of Rīgas cirks

To describe the re-coding process it is necessary to note what is understood by the institution that is Rīgas cirks. There is only one element that has been omnipresent throughout time and all the meanings and forms of this institution – the round arena with the bright red conical roof. Therefore, at the end of this chapter, I will describe the comparisons between the old and the new codes of Rīgas cirks infrastructure. But a renovation process and physical change are not happening on their own.

If we think about the re-coding process of Rīgas cirks, there is a need to distinguish the mental model of this institution and the physical change that this place as a space went through. Nevertheless, both of these coding systems are intertwined and co-dependent, but what is specific to the explosive event of paradigm change, in this case, is that both – the mental model and the physical structure – are disrupted and changed.

Change of non-physical elements

To manage the re-coding process of a space, there are also non-spatial elements that need to experience certain changes. Architecture and institutions existing in them reflect certain values of a society living in the city. (Fischer-Lichte 1992 [1983]: 94) The re-coding of Rīgas cirks architecture is closely related to the values, and practices of the new team and a change in approach to circus and its possibilities. In the Table 2 I offer a description of the most prominent non-infrastructure elements that existed before and after 2017:

Before 2017	After 2017
Governmental institution + shareholder ownership	Fully governmental institution
Rīgas cirks team educated and disseminated knowledge and values learned from hands-on practices, a more traditional way of circus education	Rīgas cirks team applying knowledge and experience from other fields of management or from Western academic studies
Circus as a closed space, home for circus arts	Circus as a multimedia art space, home for circus and others
Circus education in a traditional form – training from the masters, artists, modern circus paradigm schools	Open education center “The Rīgas Cirka School” for all age groups
Projection to the past - tradition as important	Projection to the future - adjusting to the intermediality
“Slavic circus” sign systems, such as central for circus being “a show”	“Western circus” sign systems, such as central for circus being “community”
Circus in a circle	Circus inside and outside of the circle
=	=
The previous meaning of Rīgas cirks	The new meaning of Rīgas cirks

Table 2. Non-infrastructure elements that have changed during 2016/2017

Here, side by side we can see an approximate comparison of differences between the “previous” Rīgas cirks and the “new” one. These distinctions can be questioned, as they are not as fixed and could be analyzed as a separate research objects, and in the case of this thesis, I am just outlining some of the main differences that have a prominent role in the re-coding of the space and the artform itself.

During the process of change, there was also a moment of transition, where the two paradigms overlapped. Between the spring of 2017 and the spring of 2019, the new team of Rīgas cirks already began their work and application of the new strategy in the infrastructure of the location. But the space was still in the previous state of pre-renovation. Therefore, sometimes there seemed to be a dissonance between what the audience expects

and is used to see in this venue and the new circus paradigm that was slowly settling in this space. As a documented example I can mention Latvian National Television news story about a performance of Swedish acrobatics troupe “Kaaos Kaamos”, named “Babel, Glöm” and performed in Rīgas cirks in September of 2020. We can outline three opinions here: firstly the audience members of mother Dace and daughter Līva who give opinion after seeing the premiere of the performance of the show:

Līva: “I really liked it. I was amazed. It was very exciting and when they were jumping I thought that they will fall!”

Dace: “I felt like a kid. I was just watching with awe what is possible and how it is possible with acrobatics. And it was nice to see that it was visible, that the artists themselves are also enjoying.”¹⁰

After this we see a clip with Dace Pecolli, a representative of the most famous Latvian illusionist families with extensive experience in modern circus.

Dace Pecolli: “I went out in the middle of the show, I’m sorry. If this would be a free show, then yes, I would understand. Young people with very good physical form. And what? Where is the show? Where is the story? Where is the scenography? Where is the magical atmosphere? Where is the level of technicality? Where was it?”

After that follows a comment from the artistic producer of the new team of Rīgas cirks Odrija Kalve:

Odrija Kalve: “In contemporary circus visual spectacularity is not that important, the focus is mainly on something else which leaves the flitters in the background.”

This short example explains that there still was the overlap of memory of the old circus and the sudden change of the new. This cultural discomfort has stabilized a lot after the renovation of the building itself and the relationship between space, audience and performers now is changed and adjusted to the contemporary needs.

Change of circus mapping – spatial analysis

The space can be seen as an anchor of further meaning creation of the circus itself. The difference between stationary, traveling, or circus in public spaces puts the performance itself in relation to the local culture and audience. Although in Riga all three of these spatial

¹⁰ Quotes are taken from the news story available here – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SyyIbrDUno&ab_channel=LTVZi%C5%86udienests (interviews translated by the author) [visited: 19.05.2024]

forms of circus co-exist at the same time, Rīgas cirks represent the official institution of the circus in the local culture. In this last subchapter of this thesis, I would like to briefly invite the reader to follow the spatial changes of Rīgas cirks and how they reflect the change of the artistic paradigm.

If we think about venues that are purposefully made for circus performances, there is a certain algorithmic pattern that generates topological oppositions which then create spatial meanings. Paul Bouissac offers to see it as “four basic relations of opposition” (Bouissac 2010: 14-15):

- 1) The space of the circus as disjointed from the urban space where it is implanted,
- 2) The space of performance as disjointed from the space intended for the possible audience, which can enter via certain exchange of an admission fee,
- 3) The space of the audience disjointed from the private space of circus population,
- 4) The space of performance disjointed both from audience and the private zone of circus population.

These spaces and the “disjointment” of them are enforced and controlled not only by physical borders but also by semiotic reinforcement that is based on the symbolic and quasi-taboo meaning of circus. (ibid) For example, the zones of stage and backstage for audiences are prohibited in the paradigm of the modern circus. It is not only because of privacy but also for safety both for the laypeople and for the artists too. The stories about careless people entering the private space of artists and getting scared or in the worst case attacked by animals is a very popular folklore narrative about circus world. But it is also dangerous for circus population as predictability and order is very important for the safety of artists.

Bouissac notes, that in practice in circus there are three zones of spatial arrangement that have very different meanings – the stage, the private zone for artists (or “backstage”) and the space intended for the audience. (idem: 15) These topological spaces can be shrunk or extended depending on the resources of space overall, but their relationships do not change. Now, thinking about Rīgas cirks, the spatial mapping has changed from fully fitting this model as a modern circus venue, to challenging this model and adjusting the space to

contemporary needs and relations between internal (artists and workers) and external (audiences) circus community.

Rīgas cirks – from “tradition” to “adventure”

The modern and contemporary paradigms of circus present the differences between a closed system and an open system and Rīgas cirks as a building definitely represents this change. By explicitly showing the different spatial relations and distributions I would like to depict this change. In light of this thesis, I will do this analysis only of the main body of this infrastructure, which includes the spaces on the first floor as their meaning has changed the most.

Before the change of 2016, the three zones mentioned before were strictly present. The spaces that were accessible to the audience were very limited and most of the the building of Rīgas cirks was not known to people. The arena had always consisted of parter seats, balcony, the circular stage that was divided with a low barrier with velvet tapestry, the balcony for musicians above the artists' entrance, and the VIP balcony perpendicular to the artists' entrance. In reality, there was also a small “apartment” on the roof for light and sound management and secret passages that connected the arena with different spots in audience seats, so the performers could use it to surprise audiences. But the latter spaces did not exist in the spatial perception of the audience. Other spaces that existed in the perception of space for the audience were the passage around the arena with available wardrobes, snack shops and bathrooms. The entrance was always from the main entrance door under the decorative stairs. The role of the audience was more passive – with limited space, the possibilities were mainly to follow the spatial borders and experience the shows. Here I would like to introduce the division of spatial possibilities.

The audience has a certain spectrum of accessibility. In mapping these possibilities, I would like to offer three categories – spaces that are forbidden for the audiences, spaces that allow a certain freedom of movement but are under a certain spatial hierarchy, and spaces that have no explicit restrictions of movement for audiences. In this graph, I have schematised these categories that were active from 1888 until 2016:

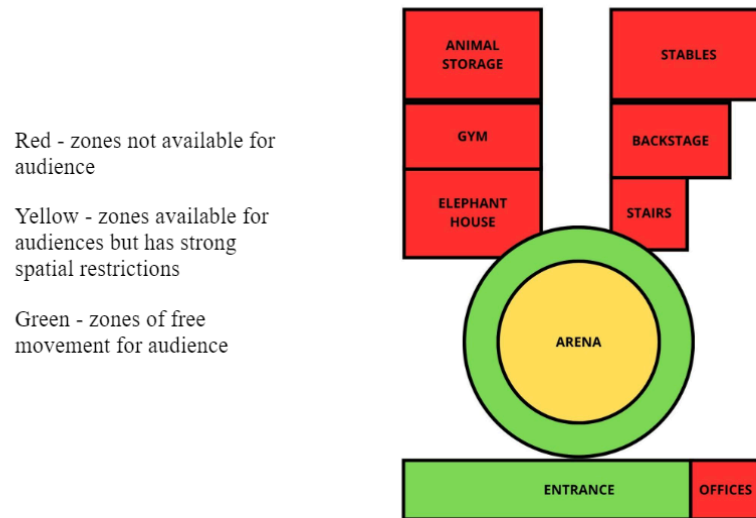


Figure 7. Spatial mapping of Rīgas cirks first floor 1888-2016

The relationship between the audience and the circus internal community and the art form was based on this spatial model of modern circus. The strong physical borders were a key to “keep the circus magic alive” and to strengthen the borders of the circus as a closed system. But the reconstruction strategy is changing that, and the project developed by the architect group NRJA (No Rules Just Architecture) is trying to imply the cirquesque playfulness also in the architectural solutions.

In the official video pitch of the renovation project of Rīgas cirks¹¹ playfulness and audience involvement are the main focus points of the project. The logic of “adding by removing” is the main driving moto of the architects, in other words – by taking off different historical layers of the space, the different points of history are revealed to the audience. In this way, the historical heritage is still displayed as part of the contemporary architecture, but the space is adjusted for contemporary needs.

If we think about the mapping of the renovated space, it is completely changed. As there is no need for so much private space that is located in the back of the building, it is reused for other purposes. Most of these rooms were used as stables for different animals –

¹¹ Available here - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzZmX_mZy_E&t=112s&ab_channel=R%C4%ABgascirks

a specific elephant room, horse stables and room for exotic and domesticated animals now are turned into a temporary cafe, blackbox stage for theater group “Kvadrifrons”, storage rooms, and bathrooms. The space of the arena has also changed, as now it is an open plan space with an open and wide balcony. The telescopic tribunes allow free spatial movement to create space for shows that are made for classical circular arena or frontal ones. Also, the audience is not separated by any barrier from the artists, there is only a slight change in the floor material, therefore the audience also has a responsibility to take care of their safety during the shows. Now the spatial categories of accessibility of the audience are different (see in Figure 8).

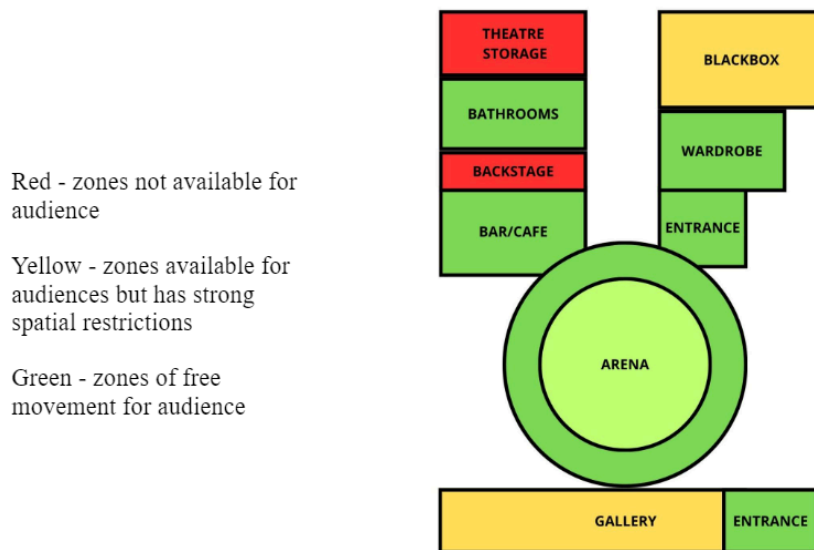


Figure 8. Spatial mapping of Rīgas cirks first floor 2022-...

The entrance in the arena has been changed to come in from the back because of contemporary fire safety rules and one of the yards is now open as a public space. The space now allows a lot more movement to the audience and even to see the previously “hidden” rooms. This possibility also allows creation of a dialogue with the more skeptical audiences about the possible well-being of animals in this space. As now it is possible to see the actual size of the stables and rooms, it allows a more subjective reflections about this situation.

The dynamic nature of the space reflects the values of inclusion, community, and close contact between the audience and the circus as an art form itself, which are central to the new contemporary strategy of Rīgas cirks. The spatial change of Rīgas cirks expresses the requirements of contemporary spaces for contemporary circus practices, but do not forget the circus as a tradition and its historical heritage.

An example of this is an interactive and sight-specific show co-created by history researchers, Rīgas cirks, and theater group “Kvadrifrons” named “Wonderers” (“Brīnuma skartie”).¹² This was an available show for people at the time of the transition – just after the new strategy implementation and before the renovation process. It included stories about Rīgas cirks history and was made in a walking tour format. This was a possibility to activate the cultural memory of the locals with exploring what are our memories about this space, how it looks now and what are the myths and realities of Rīgas cirks. At the moment a VR version of this show is finalized.

The invisible experience of circus – olfactory aspect of space

As many visit circuses when they are kids, the memory of the mix of recognizable smells in unusual combinations is what is present in the memory of circus. Paul Bouissac writes:

In circuses which feature animals the air is imbued with their acidic and sulfuric olfactory presence that blends with the sweeter smell of the quasi ritualistic food consumed by the audience such as candy floss and popcorn. In addition, the fresh sawdust that is traditionally spread inside the ring and, sometimes, the earth of the field upon which the tent is erected combine to create unusual effluvia – the smell of the circus which awakens childhood memories in the audience. (Bouissac 2010: 16)

This description is typical of the modern circus tradition and was present in the Rīgas cirks space before the change of the Animal Rights Act in 2017. But nowadays, the presence of animals is not there anymore and the wellbeing strategy of the new team implies healthy and sustainable snack options. At the moment this element of the circus is still in the process of discussion, trial and error, but in the future, it will be interesting to see how this aspect of Rīgas cirks spatial experience will change.

¹² More information here - <https://cirks.lv/en/news/excursion/> [visited: 19.05.2024.]

To conclude, Rīgas cirks is not only a circus in the terms of performing arts, but also an urban node. It reflects the society within which it exists, its values, and its future strategies. Although contemporariness often is future-oriented, the contemporariness of this space is to give space for the new while still searching and researching its past.

Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis is a holistic analysis of a culturally explosive paradigm change. To approach the events in question from different perspectives and aspects, therefore finding the underlying possibilities of cultural memory disruptions. To understand what is the relationship between the paradigm change of circus from a modern to contemporary approach globally and locally, while also delimitating the specifics of circus location in the local culture of Riga.

The main event of focus is the paradigm change in Rīgas cirks that begun in 2016. This thesis deals with how to describe a turbulent cultural change. It is described that Rīgas cirks is a boundary space between two traditions and while there has been fruitful dialogue between them, in a more recent history Rīgas cirks became closed system somewhat isolated from global as well as local context. So after the paradigm change we can see how it reverberated in many different systems – performances, the team (community) and also the circus infrastructure itself. And this thesis overviews how these many different systems are interconnected and create an overwhelming amount of information that has to be still processed in the communal memory.

By creating a description of circus historiography of the Western and Slavic circus paradigms I have offered a comparison between two cultural spheres of circus that are bordering in the geographical space of Baltics. This description has shown what are the external influences to the local positioning of circus in Riga.

In this thesis I have also described circus positioning in relation to other cultural systems. One of the approaches is observing circus as a metaphorical value in culture and language and how it impacts our perception of circus as an artistic system on its own. By following Paul Bouissac's idea about circus as a metacultural phenomenon I have described how circus has the nature of being an external artistic system (signifying the nomadic culture of circus) that is localised for the preferences and cultural memory of the local

audience of exact performances. By applying media genealogy theory from Andre Gaudreaut and Phillippe Marion and sociosemiotic framework of institutionalisation by Peter Berger and Thomass Luckman I have described and analysed the impact of institutionalisation to an artistic paradigm change and legitimation.

After mapping the circus history and circus relation to other cultural systems this thesis turns more towards analysis of the Baltics and Rīgas cirks. Rooted in J. Lotman's idea of semiosphere I am offering a cultural mapping that describes the Baltics as a zone of boundary and therefore a zone of translation. Describing the oscillation of translation that is happening in this region I am describing the exact events that pinpoint the event of paradigm change. By using the cultural dynamics of gradual and explosive events the factual process of this change is compared to the cultural memory problematics of the paradigm change. As the most approachable and relatable element for the audience is the performance itself, the change of performance structures due to paradigm change is described by using Franziska Trapp's modeling of performance dramaturgy. This is also supplemented with reflection about cultural memory of circus performances in Rīgas cirks. As Rīgas cirks infrastructure has been the only element that has been present throughout all the changes, it is a strong visual indicator of any change of paradigms. The renovation process has created a re-coding process which reflects the paradigm change from modern circus that is rooted in protection of traditions to contemporary circus approach that is experimental but at the same time pays respects to the traditions of circus.

An underlying problem highlighted by this thesis is the cultural "blindness" that exists towards circus. Here we can conclude that it is closely connected with the liminal character of circus in culture. The ephemeral relation with the "hosting" culture, the metaphorical form of circus existing in other systems of cultural meaning, aged and often negative stereotypes and the disjointment of the contemporary and traditional formats of this art.

This multifaceted analysis offers a semiotic analysis of how a change from a closed system that is modern circus to a more open system that is contemporary circus and how the explosive event beginning in 2016 in Rīgas cirks, has changed the local perception of circus arts.

The innovation of this thesis can be seen in three directions. Firstly a description the circus in Riga what is not done before. Secondly – an analysis using different semiotic theories to understand circus as a system itself and as a system in relation with other cultural systems. And thirdly an ambition to describe a culturally explosive even whilst still being in the process of change.

As semiotic analysis of circus arts has been dormant for extended time, the prospects of this topic could be application of semiotics to the process of circus positioning in the contemporary culture in all forms it exists.

+ there is, in future, possibility, perhaps, to develop a system/typology of models of spatial structure of different paradigms similar to Trapp's models of text structure?

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Resüme

Paradigmanihe tsirkuses – semiootiline analüüs Riia tsirkuse näitel

Tsirkus kultuurinähtusena näib olevat sama vana kui inimkond. Sellegipoolest on huvi tsirkuse uurimise vastu alles lapsekingades. Tsirkus Baltimaades on veel avastamata uurimisvaldkond ja see väitekiri on katse visandada üleilmsete paradigmuuutuste mõju just selles geograafilises piirkonnas erilise tähelepanuga Riia tsirkusel (Rīgas cirks). Lõputöös tuuakse välja semiootilised protsessid, mis mõjutavad kultuurilist enesemääratlust ja tsirkuse positsioneerimist nii üleilmses kui ka kohalikus kultuuris.

Töö koosneb neljast sisupeatükist, kus kirjeldatakse tsirkuse eri paradigmasid, mille lmestamiseks kasutatakse juhtumiuuringut Riia tsirkuse infrastruktuuri põhjal. Esimene peatükk annab ülevaate Riias valitsenud kahest peamisest, lääne ja slaavi tsirkuseparadigmast. Järgneb Riia tsirkuse ajalugu Baltimaade ainsa statsionaarse tsirkusehoonena ja ühtlasi ühe vanimana Euroopas (ehitatud 1888. aastal), kus on järjepidevalt tsirkuseetendusi korraldatud.

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Kolmas peatükk on pühendatud Baltimaade paiknemisele tsirkuseparadigmade semiosfäärilisel kaardil ja lahatakse üksikasjalikult Riia tsirkuses toimunud paradigmanihet. Viimases peatükis tehakse Riia tsirkuse semiootiline ruumianalüüs ja uuritakse, kuidas toimunud muutused annavad semiootiliselt edasi Riia tsirkuse uue strateegia väärtusi ja tähendusi.

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(Paradigmanihe tsirkuses – semiootiline analüüs Riia tsirkuse näitel)

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