

Circus Bodies Defy the Risk of Falling

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Image 1: Ella Zuila. One of my favourite defiant muscular circus bodies is Australia's own Ella Zuila doing her high wire act from the 1870s. The act was seen by tens of thousands of people in the USA and Europe, which makes her the most famous Australian performer internationally until Nellie Melba. In her younger career she also hung from a trapeze to catch her partner, husband George Loyal, flying through the air as a human cannonball. The spatial conquests of the nineteenth-century circus were those of individual performers.

Circus acts are thrilling, wild, awe-inspiring, and at times mysterious. They ask: what are the limits to human physicality, to the human body? Performers repeatedly test outer limits as they strive to surpass them. They seem so free. As Naomi Ritter (1989) points out, for this reason, circus artists are the envy of other artists.

Image 2: The Great Wallendas. Seventy years after Zuila, the world's leading high wire act was by the Great Wallendas, a family act of exceptional skill and intricate balance. By the twentieth-century, circus acts that conquered space were group displays of skill created through finely honed working relationships and complicated social relationships.

Representing Freedom with Danger

Circus skills such as those presented by these two examples have captured the social imagination, and made their artistry into the most popular international art form and were co-opted by traditional circus in the ring and, more recently, new circus. I argue that, more than ever, we need the bodily freedoms promised by circus artistry—to defy, to fly, to fall. A solo or a group act like these two might be considered stunts, uncomplicated physical risk-taking, except that Zuila was also transgressing the restrictive social standard for women’s physical movement during her nineteenth-century era. In the Wallendas’ act, each performer was balanced in total reliance on the others as they inched forward; the feat literally mimics social dependency. I use examples of high wire acts to track how physical freedom implicates social risks in live circus and its phantasmic other, the literary circus. While writers and other artists are attracted to the circus of physical endurance—superb muscular physicality that becomes grotesque in its excess—they are equally fascinated by a seemingly self-contained world, one that encapsulates experiences of dependency in life.

There are two main threads here. Firstly, all circus performs ideas of freedom and risk but its adventurous action also defies social norms. In this way, circus acts present constant reminders that physical risks are inherently also social ones. Secondly, a perception of freedom and risk intersects in circus with a vague perception that circus artists are physically exceptional, a suspicion that they are not quite human. Risk-taking with social identity ultimately challenges even the limits of human embodiment. I propose that there is a continuum between bodies performing ideas of risk in circus and the expression of socio-political freedoms.

Starting from Paul Bouissac’s (1976) insightful claim that circus is symbolically central to society and yet makes much of, and is even protective of, its social

marginality, it is an intriguing process to extract some of the significances of ideas of circus, especially from literature. As a prime example of Foucault's (1979) disciplined body, the symbolically central circus body performing at the margins of physical endurance reveals much to society about physicality and muscularity, about bodies. Of particular interest is how a circus composed of muscular bodies becomes metaphoric of less tangible freedoms: escape from the social order and its regimented identities.

Image 3: Wallendas. A fall in rehearsal (Morris 1976)

Image 4: Wallendas. This fall injured 6 performers but the act continued (Morris 1976).

While high wire acts and trapeze acts became broadly synonymous with transcendence and yearning—as Helen Stoddart (2000) elaborates, also of desire—they are invariably linked to the opposite ideas of faltering, failing and falling. But elevating everyday behaviour opens up the possibility of transcending other social limits, such as those of gender and race identity—or should that be opening up to a falling out of such precepts? In overcoming limits, a circus act was and is also representing that which contains and restraints bodies in social as well as physical hierarchies.

Why do we need live circus in 2006?

Circus might seem old world, but at the beginning of the twenty-first century, circus artistry is a vital antidote to an increasing social and political conservatism. Ask yourselves: Is it a mere coincidence of history that political freedoms are being eroded by national security measures when there are ever increasing restrictions over work and leisure activities from the economics of risk aversion? As Ulrich Beck explains about what he terms the “risk-society”, “In the

advanced modern period [...] the social production of wealth goes hand in hand with the social production of [...] scientifically and technically produced risks" (1989: 86). Controversially, he writes of wealth distribution shifting to the distribution of risk and its economics. Beck is arguing that this knowledge is diffused by how "risks and dangers [can] be prevented, made harmless, dramatized and directed, channelled away" so as not to hinder industry's socio-economic dominance (1989: 87). Yet such risks cannot be alleviated and instead have become global. The threats from, for example, explosives, have collapsed technological advance into random acts by individuals in crowds. The "risk-society" generates disproportionate social anxieties but, in the developed world, these are being channelled into popular drama which personalises and individualises risk rather than exposing the operation of larger systemic forces. As Beck points out, individuals do not perceive damage to nature or their health (1989: 90), because they engage in "risk displacement" (1989: 101). They are diverted from perceiving actual risks and risk is reported irrationally in the media (1989: 97). If cinematic and televisual dramas with narrative resolution dissipate appropriate responses and fears to social risks, the live circus reinvigorates the meaning of risk. Physical and social risks intersect in circus, but this is not a separation of the physical body restrained by the social body, suggested by Mary Douglas (1969), although intersecting circus risks confirm her subsequent idea that the perception of risk changes (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). The physical languages of circus bodies are social ones.

Perhaps this is why new circus has evolved as such a vibrant form in tandem with the expansion of the risk management culture in a "risk-society". Society needs live circus more than ever as an art form that can reflect such a major social concern at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Circus communicates ideas of freedom through bodily experience. It provides an arena of extreme athleticism—like some team sports. But circus is not about winners and losers in open competition. It is about complicity between performers and spectators. Performers undertake physical acts to entertain, to uplift, to engage sensory visceral responses of spectators, in unfolding exchanges. My longstanding fascination with all circus skills centres on how its artistry is viewed bodily in a process of unfolding exchanges that exemplifies body phenomenology. This owes a debt to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of a lived body arising out of continual habitual engagement with other bodies in movement and in motion (Tait 2005). From this theoretical perspective, spectators are bodily watching extreme circus action in ways that are fundamentally aligned with how bodies, and therefore their risks, are watched in society. Bodily freedom is sensory visceral risky action in circus.

I uphold the distinction between traditional and new circus forms while acknowledging their complete interdependence, but I think it is even more important to also make a clear distinction between live circus performance and circus in cultural representation. While the imaginary circus is inspired by the extraordinary variety of the live original, viewing the cinematic circus is not the same as viewing the live performance. The live circus performs the quality of liveness itself (Auslander 1999). But the imaginary circus is relayed through another art form, as a phantasmic double. I am very pleased that we have a performance of circus liveness accompanying this talk.

Image 6: Blondin. This is the legendary Blondin who walked across Niagara Falls in 1859 and conquered nature. In his time, his celebrity status might be considered to equate with that of David Beckham.

Rope-walking and dancing acts are ancient skills that long preceded their inclusion in Astley's 1768 modern circus, and continued to be performed outside the ring. During Blondin's heyday of the 1860-70s, wild animal acts were newly incorporated into the circus ring from the menagerie and expanded displays of species hierarchies, of human bodies and its others, and became important to spectacles in the three-ring circus (Davis 2002). Animal acts remain the most contested in traditional circus and function to elevate human-only acts of circus skill once again in new circus. But does a falling out of precepts of social identity extend to humanness? I will return to this question later.

Image 7: Blondin. Blondin took risks commensurate with the 1859 era of colonial empires expanding through global geographical conquest.

While these circus skills seem timeless, historically, circus feats have always exemplified the values of the time and it is the rope-walker who Nietzsche makes into his Superman. The nineteenth-century philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, made the rope-walker emblematic of his hope for a future superior species, one free of the moral, social and physical limitations of his contemporary nineteenth-century Christian world. A superhero rope-walker was also forerunner to the trapeze and other aerial performers in the 1870s schema of social Darwinism with the trapeze gymnast demonstrating the potential for the human body's flight between trapeze bars. It is probably not surprising to committed devotees of circus arts that a silent performer in extreme acts on high seems superhuman. A rope-walker, like all circus performers, would be practiced and, performers would add, mentally focused.

Image 8: Blondin. Blondin came to his great fame in Nietzsche's life-time.

In his quasi-religious, literary classic *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's character prophet, Zarathustra, is made a spokesperson for his own beliefs and announces that "God is dead". Interestingly, Zoroastrian hymns might well be a forerunner of all major religions, where God is the good mind.¹ Nietzsche's Zarathustra goes to a market place full of people waiting for a rope-walker and calls out to the crowd "Man is something that should be overcome. [...] What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to Superman" (1976: 41-2). You may be sitting there questioning this outmoded hierarchy of man over animal, and rightly so. The imperfections of humans have been outlined in an analogous conflation of rope-walking and spiritual journey within evolutionary progression, as Zarathustra continues: "Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking back-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still." The rope-walker exemplifies Nietzsche's self-made Apollonian hero (Ritter 1989: 102 (Faber)).

But Nietzsche is outlining how existence itself is dangerous and that the rope performer provides a visible reminder of life's risks—contemporary philosopher Judith Butler (2004b) outlines an idea of life as precarious post 9/11. Nietzsche's danger is a social one as the rope-walker reveals the possibility of moving forward to future freedoms. To the spectators in Nietzsche's square, rope-walking is dangerous because the performer is up high and might fall from between two towers. Nietzsche's rope-walker is challenged by a rival and it is this figure of a buffoon who causes a fall. The buffoon cries out to the rope-walker in a "fearsome" tone, "'Forward sluggard, intruder, pallid-face! [...] You

¹ This draws on some of the oldest known religious hymns from Iran and middle eastern neolithic cultures, currently arguably claimed to coincide in the seventh millennium BC (Settegast 2005). Nietzsche uses the name of Zarathustra because he is the first known figure to identify the struggle of good and evil, light and dark (reverence to fire), in the metaphysics and morality he created (1976: 31). But Nietzsche makes this a self-denouncing morality that he created through truthfulness (ibid).

belong in the tower, you should be locked up, you are blocking the way of a better man than you!’ And with each word he came nearer and nearer to him: but when he was only a single pace behind him, there occurred the dreadful thing that silenced every mouth and fixed every eye: he emitted a cry like a devil and sprang over the man standing in his path. But the latter, when he saw his rival thus triumph, lost his head and the rope; he threw away his pole and fell, faster even than it, like a vortex of legs and arms” (Nietzsche 1969: 47-8). The buffoon’s accusatory tirade and threat to imprison the rope-walker is about the threat to individual liberty itself. This is a social conflict. Here the rope-walker chooses his fall in an act of free will; he falls because his supreme artistry and act are attacked and ridiculed by a devil-like buffoon. If the rope-walker, the committed artist, becomes a sacrificial Christ figure by falling for all to see, this story remains a triumph for the circus performer and his or her capacity to defy natural laws, gravity. This is no unavoidable accident, no act of merciless fate. There is dignity and bravery in the rope-walker’s choice.

Nietzsche’s imaginary rope-walker is probably based on his observations, and Blondin is one such performer achieving great fame during Nietzsche’s life-time. He may have seen a copy of Blondin’s act; there was even a Blondin horse. But was Nietzsche likely to have seen a rope-walker fall in an accident? Certainly, inadequately trained performers undertaking sensationalist but unrealistic endeavours did fall. But not a performer like Blondin. The buffoon might manage a high wire walk as a dare-devil stunt, but not repeatedly.

Nietzsche’s rope-walker is an idealist, and the circus skill of rope-walking metaphoric of someone striving for higher ideals, but brought down by grotesque idiocy and stupidity. In a literal gravity-defying raising-up high of the everyday actions of walking, dancing, carrying, balancing, this circus act defies the constraints of the habitually lived social order. In Nietzsche’s anti-

conventional religious exposition about the meaning of existence, he does not look for a rhetorical speaker, an actor, to model a moral activist claiming the spiritual high ground but instead looks to a nonverbal figure made heroic through physical ability and agility, a superiority achieved through training, application and mental focus. There is a timeless quality about the rope-walking action through history, across cultures from east to west, and it is important because the rope-walker strives to spatially overcome physical limitations of humanness.

Spectators do not see the performer's repetitious practice which makes such an accident unlikely. Circus is a performance of danger and an impression of riskiness is part its illusion, its 'fabulous risk'.

Image 9: Phillip Petit. This is Phillip Petit performing Blondin.

Phillip Petit is a new circus performer who walks across the skyline of major cities. In the tradition of high wire walkers, Petit defied natural and social laws, and the law *per se*, so he was often gaoled after his flash of freedom. Petit personifies a lone individual's triumph over the city and its socio-political power, and perhaps over culture itself. His 1974 walk between New York's twin towers now has extraordinary resonances post 9/11. Circus arts are always conquering spaces and breaking records and the solo high wire act offers a lightness of spectacle with its lone figure against the world. Petit's 1973 walk between the north pylons of the Sydney harbour bridge illustrates these ideas and how traditional and new circuses connect. Petit was bailed from gaol by the Ashtons circus and performed with them in return.

Image 10: Petit. Petit walking between NY's twin towers.

Petit's muscular control also confronts government controls over the lives and properties of citizens. If this popular performance is symbolic of an individual's choice to put his or her body on the line – on the wire – it becomes metaphoric of messy, unruly democratic individuals and their ongoing civil disobedience and rejection of the internal mechanisms of surveillance. New circus acts everywhere draw inspiration from cultural ideas of circus, reinforced by literature's imaginary circuses, as well as the historical legacies of the skills of the live circus. New circus turns over, and overturns, cultural ideas of socio-political freedoms.

But the dramatised fictional circus – and also the media – invariably depicts the sensational, the accident. This has fuelled anxiety for over a century. Circus has subsequently been viewed through the drama of the performer who falls in the metaphoric interpretations relayed through other art forms.

Image 11. Film segment from *Wings of Desire* of new circus performance for an audience of children.

In Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, the cliché of the spectator's yearning for the freedom of life in a travelling circus is turned around as a male angel living up high falls in love with a female aerialist. But she works in a poor and not very glamorous new circus. Trapeze artists have commonly been associated with angels since the invention of flying action in 1859. But this is a fall of a completely different kind. The greatest fall: from a sacred body to a human one, a fall from grace. The angel character sees everything, so this is a fall with all the knowledge of the insecurities and terror that European history imposes on human lives and minds. This could only be a circus love story. The angel character yearns for the sensory experiences of the human body, the breeze against his skin, the circus with all its viscerality in ways that intermingle with his yearning for human male sexual experience. He longs to descend into the physicality of humanness, to inhabit a sensory body able to experience colour.

This angel is beyond humanness, like Nietzsche's mythic Superman in another guise. In this film, angels work for an absent God perhaps banished after Nietzsche but one whose existence is certainly in doubt after the wars and mass destruction of the twentieth century. Wenders' angel wants to cross the species divide—it must be noted that circus in the ring collapses separations of animal and human bodies—and he chooses to descend into human physicality. The angel who wants to become human seems a mysterious figure.

But there are dangers to transgressing identity boundaries, social ones. If circus acts undermine notions that gender separation is natural, they are also asking what is natural about species identity.

Image 12: Bird Millman. Bird Millman was the most famous wire dancer of the 1920s at RBBBC for working without balance apparatus and for doing a popular dance on the wire.

Image 13: Berta Besson. After Millman married, her cross-dressing replacement was Herbert as Berta Besson.

The freedoms of the physical body in the live traditional circus included queered identities that were evidently mainstream by the mid-1920s, as the hiring of Berta Besson confirms. The practice of male to female cross-dressing for pragmatic and aesthetic reasons is longstanding but, unlike theatre, circus featured far less female to male cross-dressing. In her extended discussion of gender norms and their undoing, Judith Butler makes the point that the categories of gender and of human identity have not been and are “not captured once and for all” (2004a:13); they are unstable. Moreover she writes that an idea of humanness is crafted over time through “norms of recognition” (ibid). Butler is interrogating ideas of gender and transgender radicalism in the shadow of Foucault, using

marginalised gendered bodies to ask larger questions about what it means to be human, and how this is continually stratified so that not everyone is entitled to claim the same human rights. By implication, in circus such questions also extend to species' rights in relation to human rights. Underlying Butler's questions about humanness is an attunement to the variable limits on individual freedoms and how these change over time.

Circus performers recognise that the outer limits of human physicality change over time, and it can be argued that the individual freedoms of the twenty-first century start from challenges to fixed gender and sexual identities, which are a longstanding inadvertent consequence of circus practices. Butler writes, "It is important to remember that the specific forms which freedom takes depend upon the social conditions and social institutions that govern human options at this time" (2004a: 88). These interconnecting ideas suggest new ways of framing the freedoms presented by circus acts as being inseparable from questions of humanness and human rights.

What it means to be embodied as human is already an underlying question contained within circus, so unsettling norms of gender can by extension become unsettling norms of humanness. Butler writes, "If there are norms of recognition by which the "human" is constituted, and these norms encode operations of power, then it follows that the contest over the future of the "human" will be a contest over the power that works in and through such norms" (2004a: 13). Beck's "risk-society" encompasses environmental risks destroying the habitats of animals long known to audiences through circus acts in which, as Yoram Carmeli (1997) explains, animals perform humanness.

The legacy of physicality and socio-political freedoms is made explicit in new circus; Circus Oz stands out as a beacon with its brilliant combination of political

satire and comic silliness. Such freedoms are being consciously explored and expanded in ways that stand against the restrictions of the rhetoric of risk aversion. Our society needs artists who approach ideas of freedom in deliberate and potent ways, in tangible visible demonstrations. The circus and its performers offer one of the most accessible responses to our yearning for freedoms against increasing curtailment.

Famous Accidents

I want to briefly consider the resonant meanings of life's precariousness raised by circus acts that expose underlying dependency. Rephrasing my initial question: What are the limits to physicality? What are the limits to trusting others with your physicality in society, your humanness? I would argue that in its ideas of freedom and yearning, circus also reveals how physical limits are overcome through working with, others. This becomes emblematic of living with others. Bodies overcome their physical limits learning from, and training and performing with others. A group wire act seems to involve more risks than a solo act because of this reliance on others. This is the live circus showing the quality of liveness and humanness as an act that also shows how we are "physically dependent on one another" (Butler 2004b: 27)—in what Butler's terms "interdependency" (2004b: xii), mutual dependence.

The Great Wallendas pioneered record-breaking high wire acts. Germans Karl and Helen Wallenda were working seasons with RBBBC from 1928 and every year from 1938 (program) and also worked for Bertram Mills at Olympia (program). By the late 1940s, the Great Wallendas act with the next generation was reaching new heights, performing with seven people walking together and balanced in three tiers. Was it foreseeable that this precarious group balance would collapse? They performed from 1947 to 1962 without safety net or lines and without a major accident or a counterpart act anywhere in the world. For

fifteen years, the act was performing at the physical limits of a group high wire act. Time is the issue here because this is a professional family act that routinely performed for decades and whose descendents still have acts. The history of circus accidents, like those with extreme sports, reflects the possibility that over decades of daily performances, often two a day, there could be a serious accident in any act.

Regrettably, Karl's nephew Dieter dropped his balance pole and the pyramid on the wire collapsed on 30 January 1962 in Detroit, in what become a famous accident (Morris 164-6). Two performers died, one was paralysed and one had head and other injuries. This accident happened through human error with tragic consequences. This act relies on the skill and steadiness of others in mutual dependence. It provides a vivid metaphoric reminder of the dependency on others in existence itself.

The film about the Wallendas focuses on the accident so it is more like a medical drama than a film about circus. In its circulation through representation there are some interesting enhancements that at once both remove the risk for the performers and spectators and yet enhance them through close-ups that magnify emotions. In this cross-over between forms, the live and the representational, the spectators are shown how actors might interpret the emotions of doing the circus act, and an additional element of fear.

If this act is an explicit demonstration of liveness taken to physical extremes, it is instructive that trust in others is unavoidable. A heightened sense of risk in our society, the insecurity about bodily safety always involves mistrust of others. The freedom becomes taking risks to trust others. Through its athletic action, circus remains an arena in which performers confirm the hopefulness of trust in others. It reinforces that primary quality of liveness, of life's dependency. Circus

confirms that our mutual dependence is both the source of freedom and its potential threat. Circus potently demonstrates the cultural importance of feats of freedom that require risks.

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