### **ARTICLES**

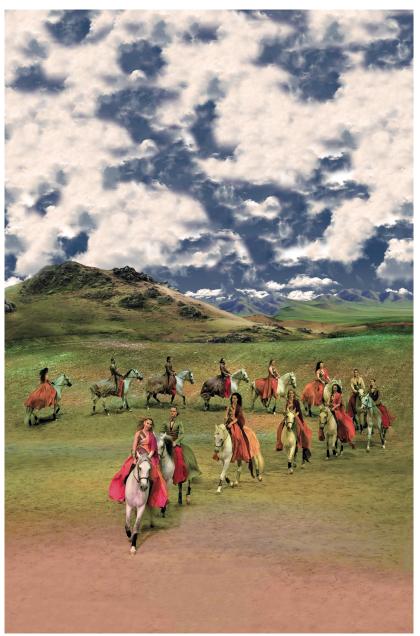
# Cavalia's Odysseo—A Biopolitical Myth at Work

### Ante Ursić

The Canadian circus enterprise Cavalia, founded in 2003 by Normand Latourelle, is known for its emphasis on equestrian virtuosity in its shows. *Odysseo*, Cavalia's second production, opened in 2011 and has toured through North America ever since. As of August 4, 2017, according to its online press kit, *Odysseo* had been performed more than 1300 times and seen by more than two million people. It is a show of superlatives: one of the largest touring big top shows in the world, the stage alone is 17,500 square feet. A huge projection wall, three times the size of an IMAX cinema screen, serves as a backdrop on which ever-changing landscapes are projected. 10,000 tons of earth and stones are transported to each set to create a kind of hilly, natural terrain. In front of the spectator's eye what the press kit describes as a "world of dreams and fantasy" takes form and shape. This immense stage, together with the projections and idiosyncratic lighting design, conjure a sense of unbound nature. *Odysseo*'s horse and human performers appear to traverse forests, dunes, savannahs, and mountainscapes. Toward the big finale, even a lake is created. To produce this stunning effect 40,000 gallons of water are pumped each performance onto the stage.

In her seminal essay "Teddy Bear Patriarchy—Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York, 1908— 1936" Donna Haraway describes the peculiar performativity of the dioramas of mammals displayed in the African Hall in the American History Museum of Natural History. Haraway suggests that the stuffed mammals are staged in such a fashion that the museum visitor experiences "a moment of origin where nature and culture, private and public, profane and sacred meet—a moment of incarnation in the encounter of man and animal" (1989, 29). Attending Odysseo in San Francisco in 2015, I could observe how *Odysseo*'s elaborate scenography and human-horse choreography operates on a similar register as those dioramas in the African Hall. The show succeeds in mesmerizing its audience. And indeed, I too was highly entertained by its elaborate stagecraft: the agility and virtuosity of its human and animal performers combined with spectacular projections and scenography. However, one should be careful not to be easily transfixed by such an extraordinary display of human and animal feats and technological splendour. Rather, a critical rumination discloses a conservative sentiment at the core of Odysseo. Numerous moments in the show are charged with heteronormative and racially discriminatory meanings, which are mediated through the human-horse encounter. To elaborate further, it might be worthwhile to look at the origins of modern circus, a history inseparable from the human-horse relationship.

Ante Ursić's professional career has been as a performer and choreographer in the field of contemporary circus. He performed with companies such as Cirque du Soleil, Circus Roncalli and Tiger Lilies Circus. Ante received a master's in performance studies at NYU. At UC Davis, he is a PhD candidate in performance studies with emphases in practice-as-research, critical theory, and science and technology studies. Currently, Ante is investigating the animal-human relationship in traditional and contemporary circus.



Scene from Odysseo. Photo by Dan Harper.

Philip Astley (1742–1814) is widely regarded as having founded modern circus when he opened his riding school in London on April 6, 1768. Initially intended as a school for teaching horse riding skills, Astley's enterprise expanded into a display of masterful horsemanship, giving birth to the modern circus we know today (Kotar and Gessler 2011, 9). In its earliest phase, the acts were primarily horse-centred, but they were already beginning to diverge. Comical horse acts as well as cross-animal feats such as monkeys riding horses were performed soon after the school's first documented performance on May 6 of the same year. The program grew more and more diverse, and by 1775, the season opened "with a great variety of new Men, and feats of Horsemanship, and Activity, in a manner beyond conception" (14), meaning that feats of other human and animal performers had been integrated into the program, displaying what later became the four main circus disciplines: animal feats, acrobatics, equilibristics, and juggling. It is salient to note that the modern

circus appeared at the end of the eighteenth century—precisely at the time when, according to Foucault, the biopolitical regime, focusing on macro- and micro-management of the life of the population, started to replace the sovereign regime. The sovereign regime displays death as a spectacle; it is a "gloomy festival of punishment" (Foucault [1978] 1995, 8). I suggest we consider modern circus as the spectacle of the biopolitical regime, because it is concerned with the theatrical staging of a festival of life through disciplined, docile, obedient, and trained bodies. Further, I would like to foreground that modern circus, far from being an apolitical performing art form, has served as an apparatus of verification: it verifies, centre stage, the dominant prevailing discourse of human exceptionalism (the genre of Man). In this political fiction, the white, male, heterosexual body is superior to other subjects in relation to it, which are feminized, exoticized, and racialized. Moreover, the horse performer requires particular attention, because it has served as a crucial medium to establish the Western notions of masculinity, femininity, and racial and class superiority.

In Astley's modern circus, one could witness the techniques of the body that entangled the ideal vision of an honourable, respectable man with his relationship to the horse. Marcel Mauss's definition of techniques of the body as a physiological, psychological, and sociological assemblage emphasizes that these techniques are not just assembled by the individual alone, but through education, through the society to which s/he belongs and the place s/he occupies within this society. The body is the first object of manipulation and therefore also the first object that is rendered into a shape that correlates to the hegemonic order (Mauss 1973, 76). Monica Mattfeld (2014) stresses the importance of the horse as a crucial agent in establishing a sense of British superiority. In Astley's circus, an idealized male body that governed both himself and others was promoted as an exemplary image of masculinity. The horse was an important point of orientation for British citizens towards a more righteous and honorable expression of masculinity (which was in essence British). This exemplary masculine body was connected to the rider's relationship with the horse; on the one hand, the rider was superior to the horse, but on the other, the rider was dependent on the horse, as masculine strength and relative superiority were constituted by it (Mattfeld 2014, 25). As in the case of a patriarch who conducts a family business or a monarch who conducts a nation, dominance is dependent on a successful management of subordinates. Hence the still-often-used phrasing to describe someone getting into a dominant position of power: to take the reins. However, what is important to stress here is that domination, preferably, was not executed with brute force. Rather, the contrary was the case: a new understanding of British superiority was tied up with an understanding of a higher grade of civility in comparison to the native population of British colonial territories, but also to other colonial powers. Horse-human entanglements, expressed in equestrian craftsmanship, offered a way to embody the ideology of the time, and in circus and hippodramas the possibility to dramatically stage it. The emergence of modern circus offered this visceral experience for London's populace and assisted in the crafting of a new sense of British self (Mattfield 2014, 23-24). In short, modern circus, as a mode of performance has through its particular staging of horsehuman entanglements participated in the representation and propagation of superior forms of masculinity, representations that have often been bound up with the discourse around nation, national belonging and nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

Because horseback riding was intrinsically connected to masculinity, it is no wonder that the appearance of the female horseback rider in the nineteenth century, launched by the establishment of the bourgeoisie, was at first a disturbing sight (Weil 1999, 5). She was seen as a disruption to the established order of man-horse relationship. Additionally, the woman-horse relationship was often sexualized: the horse became a rival to man, as it displaced him as the source for sexual enjoyment (5). Of course, this intimate woman-horse relationship had to be controlled. Hence, *en amazon* 

describes a riding style in which the female rider sits "with their legs tightly together on one side" (10), making the mount and dismount dependent on external and in this case male help, while at the same time reducing the contact, most importantly the genital contact, with the horse (10).

However, the newly appearing woman-horse relationship was not only strictly policed, but also sanctioned. Therefore, imagery of the female rider oscillated between two positions. On one hand riding was regarded as a tool to enhance woman's virtue: her interaction with the horse reflected her higher social standing. Here, we are entering the discourse of race and eugenics. Animal studies scholar Kari Weil suggests that for these women "riding brought out their very 'nature' as women of good breeding" (1999, 31). Indeed, this outlook is intertwined with the emergence of the purebred horse. Stud books (breeding registries that trace the genealogy of pedigree purebreds considered to be suitable to reproduce) served as evidence that racial purity exists, that it must be protected, and further, that it can be engineered. The establishment of the category of purebred is inseparable from the discourse around race, sexuality, and reproduction. It comes as little surprise that the bourgeois rider only mounts a horse worthy of his/her nature, that is, a purebred. In contradiction to this, another discourse existed simultaneously: female riders were considered to disfigure their natural feminine traits in becoming more like men or like the animal. In contrast to the first discourse, which enhanced female purity, the latter diminished it and was seen as a breach of her social position (31).

I suggest having these specific histories in mind—in which the horse served as a medium to carve out certain, albeit sometimes contradicting, understandings of masculinity and femininity in Western cultures—when considering Cavalia's Odysseo. Indeed this contemporary spectacle perpetuates the notion in which the horse is entangled in the construction of an ideal, pure, and noble subject: on Odysseo's website a whole section is dedicated to the different horse breeds performing in the show. The noble and chivalrous appearance of some of the human performers works in conjunction with the horse performers, which are needed to construct a fantasy of a knightly primordial self and a noble sense of the humans' sexuality. It is as if the horse gives them culture, masculinity, and femininity, which seem to be purified from the carnal, the animalistic. The horse serves as a medium for sexual sublimation. This does not mean that Odysseo is without any erotics: to the contrary, it is full of displays of heteronormative erotics. Countless versions of the same heterosexual coupling are channelled through the horse, be it literally though the numerous horse acts or figuratively as on a horse carousel pole act. In this act, for example, a life-sized carousel drops to the stage and four couples display their agility and dexterity on it. In this scene, Odysseo shifts suddenly to the present, communicated through the mechanical apparatus and the casual, modern-day clothes of the performers. Unsurprisingly, gender roles uphold norms: while men show off with their physical fitness, by flexing their muscles and presenting different planks on the poles, women display their flexibility, which means, in this case, to do numerous versions of the same split.<sup>5</sup>



Odysseo's Carousel Act. Photo by Dan Harper.

Still, one has to acknowledge that *Odysso* has made some progress with regard to gender equality, as has society at large. No woman seems to be in need of male help to mount her horse. Women also participate in previously male-dominated horse riding skills such as Cossack riding. However, this does not mean that female sexuality is completely vacant of hints of animality, or that the horse is not feminized. In one of the last scenes of the show, female performers promenade alongside the slow plod of their neighing partners. The scene is telling because the horses' manes uncannily resemble the hairstyle of their female companions. The coiffure of both, horse and woman, shows how femininity is still in close relation to animality, but also how the horse is feminized, being subjected to Western beauty standards.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, while gender difference no longer prevents some performers from mounting a horse nor mastering a certain horseback riding technique, it arouses curiosity that *Odysseo*'s black performers are barred from access to the horse. For the white performers it seems all too natural to be on the horse; as I argued above, their cultural identity, which carries a certain noble essence, is in fact constituted through the horse. In contrast to this, the black performers' "natural" place is on the ground. *Odysseo* is not stingy in employing well-known racial stereotypes. While the horse and aerial scenes are accompanied by dramatic neoclassical tunes, including the playing of violins and opera voices, the black performers' working tune is shaped by the rhythm of djembe drums, to which they enthusiastically perform, barefooted and bare-chested, their impressive floor acrobatics.

The group of Guinean acrobats performing in the show are exclusively male. However, they conjure a different form of masculinity than that of the male horse riders: a raw, even untamed excess of prowess, agility, flexibility, and sturdiness is displayed through their athletic feats. But this excess

seems never to match the nobility of the riders, which is presented in controlled and aestheticized movements in conjunction with the horse. Rather, the black performers' masculinity is paradoxically presented at a higher intensity but at the same time inferior to their white male counterparts. They cannot control their overabundance; they cannot master their masculine drives. It is here where it seems that the horse serves as a transitional object, which makes it possible for the white riders to display a masculinity of a higher degree. Whiteness has overcome its animality through the engagement and control of the horse which, one might argue, is the animal within Man.

Lastly, the masculinity of the black performer is devoid of any sexuality. While white performers engage in heterosexual coupling via the display of equestrian skills or aerial acrobatics, the black performer is, even though hypermasculine, somehow asexual at the same time. The heterosexual encounter on stage is reserved for white subjects only. Is the hypermasculinity of the black body only permitted because it does not breach the racial division and because there is no danger of its reproduction? *Odysseo* seems to suggest that what can and should be reproduced is whiteness, which is, in essence, knightly and noble, and superior to blackness.

Processes of animalization are inseparable from the discourse around race and by extension the history of forced labour (slavery). In Odysseo, racial division is enacted through an endorsement of a specific kinesthetic order: only the horse body and the black body parade an excess of movement, agitation, and physical strength. While the black bodies and the horses are constantly moving, the white equestrians are distinguished by moving as little as possible. The rider lets the horse move. The master's task is to initiate, to control, and to surveil movement. Not moving, or moving sparingly, is the privilege of the white body in *Odysseo*. But not moving is also the privilege of a predominately white audience who comes to see the show, and who can afford to pay between 50 and 240 US dollars—before taxes—for a seat. This contrasts strongly with the local labour force (ushers, popcorn, and beverage vendors), who, in my observation when viewing the show in San Francisco, were mostly black. It is quite unsettling to realize how the hierarchical and racial difference on stage mirrors the economic difference in the tent. As of August 4, 2017, on the website indeed.com, where employees can share their experience with their employer, Cavalia receives overall good reviews. Interestingly enough though, what is complained about most is that one has to stand for long periods while working for them. The seated position is a position of privilege.

I suggest that in *Odysseo*'s big top tent, the audience is invited to encounter their primordial cultural self. The show conjures up a knightly past, a paradise lost. The riders appear in a garment resembling a melange of attire from antiquity and medieval times. In this fantasy world, certain humans are again friends with horses, with nature, reestablishing an assumed bond that has been dissolving since we entered industrialization. *Odysseo* (in correspondence with the Odysseus story) stages for its audience a symbolic, and at the same time nostalgic, homecoming. It is interesting to note, though, that this lost union of nature and culture (a state presumably eclipsed by the advancement of technology) is artificially produced through the newest scenographic technologies. What is produced is an origin story in which the white, male, middle-class, heteronormative subject is at its centre. The white subject is the one who controls, who traverses different landscapes, who masters different apparatuses—be it the horse or the various kinds of circus equipment. The white performers move with grace and elegance through different scenes. The black performers do what the white imaginary believes they do best: they ecstatically dance, sing, and tumble to the sound of West African tunes.

To further describe the cultural work done by *Odysseo* and to situate it in a social-political frame, I turn now to Jean Luc Nancy's concept of *mythation* and once more to Michel Foucault's notion of *biopolitics*. In his book *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy argues that myth is a self-foundational enterprise. Community relates back to a mythic foundation, and through a mythic origin, it founds itself (1991, 45). Differently put, Nancy seems to suggest that the main function of myth is to produce a communal origin, an essence, a structure of identification. He writes, "humanity is represented on the stage of myth" (45). I find the correlation between stage and myth suggestive. Mythation might be understood as staging, or maybe even as dramatic actualization of the myth for the members of the community. *Odysseo* is exactly that: a staging of the myth of a specific vision of humanity, in which the white, male, heteronormative subject, i.e., Western Man, holds the reins in his hand. Further, through the process of mythation, the community becomes one with the founding story of the communal myth. It becomes a communion. Myth produces affective states that help the members of the community identify with their origins. It is this affective labour which *Odyesseo* masters perfectly, and which, in my opinion, explains its success.

Further, mythation and its actualization belong to the realm of *oeuvre*, which translates as work. Work here seems to be associated with the social stratification of bodies, positions, and assignments. A "work" then is not a process of something which is constantly changing or developing, but rather the setting and staging of a mythic script (Nancy 1991, 46). The French term *mise en oeuvre* (setting to work) correlates here with *mise en scène* (setting on stage). A myth set to work is the successful rendering of a certain discourse, a logos, into a community. Mythation appears to be this: a myth set to work. Importantly, for Nancy, the community that is produced through a myth set to work is a community as a work. He states: "Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects" (31). Further, Nancy differentiates between community and communion. A communion is a community produced by a mythation. A community is always in danger of becoming a communion (i.e., a stratified community). Hence, the political gesture of a community is to be aware of this danger and to labour against this tendency, by "unworking itself" (31). Hence, for Nancy, an inoperative community is the countermovement to communion.

I further suggest that modern circus is the spectacle of what Foucault calls the biopolitical regime, a new epistemological regime which replaced the older sovereign regime. While the latter "takes life and lets live," the former is a mode of power which "fosters life or disallows it" ([1978] 1990, 138). Perhaps we can consider modern circus as mythation of a new myth for this new epistemological regime.<sup>8</sup> Modern circus has been complicit in the promotion of biopolitical concepts of race, sexuality, and (dis)ability. Further, it is a spectacle in which this new humanity has been displayed, verified, and celebrated.

Nancy's notion of mythation and Foucault's notion of biopolitics help us to understand the cultural work that *Odysseo* is doing. The show displays an abundance of life. However, life in biopolitical terms is not measured equally, but is strictly hierarchical. The excess of the black body (quantity) contrasts with the knightly moderation of the white body (quality). And let's be reminded that in the biopolitical regime the reproduction of the population and therefore heteronormative coupling becomes an issue of highest importance. As I elaborated earlier, questions of reproduction adhere to a racial grid, in which white life is fostered and black life too often disallowed.

I want to stress that Cavalia's *Odysseo* is not just an exception of circus as myth but an example of what can be observed in the vast majority of contemporary large-scale productions. In addition to Cavalia, the shows by the Quebec-based circus company Cirque du Soleil are further lucid and at the same time disturbing examples of this kind of contemporary, biopolitical mythation. One has just to read the short description of shows with titles such as *Mystère*, *Totem*, and *Quidam* (Latin for "a certain one") to see that these shows aspire to create a myth. These myths are always in correspondence with a Western vision of humanity as elaborated above. What fascinates me about *Odysseo* is how its particular mythation carries over a specific, very troubling history of horse-human relationship into the present.

In conclusion, I caution against the tendency toward an establishment of binaries between the notions of traditional and new or "contemporary" circus, as has become familiar in circus studies today. Such binaries often work reductively in dichotomies such as good/bad, nonart/art, low art/high art, animal/human. Rather, I deploy modern circus as a term that refers to a mode of expression which has participated in the mythation of this new vision/version of humanity since its inauguration at the end of the eighteenth century by Philip Astley. I argue, in keeping with Foucault's ideas, that the modern circus is the spectacle of the biopolitical regime and displays a spectacle of life executed through disciplined, trained body-machines, spanning both sides of the traditional/new circus divide. Modern circus serves as an apparatus of verification, as it verifies centre stage the dominant prevailing discourse of Western Man.

Modern circus is a work, and circus artists are considered to be diligent workers—craftsmen, rather than critical artists. As a circus artist myself, I have observed that we absorb this notion with a certain pride. In contrast to the actor, "we" don't fake it, "we" don't pretend: "we" simply are. Additionally, circus artists are always at the limit of their bodily capacity. But don't the limits which circus artists embody in their techniques constitute the core/centre of the biopolitical paradigm, today intrinsically linked to neoliberalism, and therefore often reproduce dominant cultural beliefs? I urge the circus community to become inoperative. "We" should take the risk to expose ourselves, to start a process of sharing, to account and be accountable for our complicity and participation in the mythation of the biopolitical regime; that is, in reproducing ableist, animalizing, racializing, feminizing, and exoticizing practices. Modern circus proclaims to be a performance practice for the community. But as with *Odysseo*, what is too often proclaimed through modern circus is a communion, a community as work which stratifies bodies into specific positions, places, and assignments. To truly hold up to its promise of a communitarian art practice, modern circus has to start unworking itself, finally.

## **Notes**

- 1. Subsequent details about the performance are taken from the online press kit.
- 2. I am aware that this is a grand claim which needs further elaboration. However, the parameters of my contribution here allow me only to gesture towards this claim. Foucault readers know that the disciplinary regime is not replaced by the biopolitical regime, but subsumed under it. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault shifts the terminology from discipline to anatomo-politics.
- 3. I am drawing on Foucault who states that "knowledge . . . is like a language whose every word has been examined and every relation verified" ([1970] 2002, 96). Hence, the knowledge of a superior form of humanity, which is regarded to be rational, and therefore can rightfully dominate what is deemed to be irrational or sub-rational, must be verified as well. Wynter calls this superior status the genre of Man. The

- genre of Man is intrinsically linked to the white, liberal, heteronormative subject. People of colour, considered to be nonhuman, or not-yet-fully-human, are ontologically excluded from the genre of Man (Wynter 2003, 257-337).
- 4. For more detailed accounts of how masculinity is produced through the horse-human relationship see Donna Landry's Noble Brutes (2008) and Monica Mattfeld's Becoming Centaur (2016). Peta Tait gives us insightful accounts of the ways wild animal performers have been framed in a traditional circus setting to produce a "range of fanciful masculinities" (2012, 42). Further, wild animals stand in for the inhabitants of their geographical origins, that is for the colonized. For more see Peta Tait's Wild and Dangerous Performances (2012).
- 5. A plank denotes a gymnastic exercise and figure. In advanced plank positions, the body is projected horizontally outward, in a flag-like fashion. The artist is only holding onto the pole with his/her hands.
- 6. It is important to understand that the horse is not a stable signifier but carries multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings simultaneously. The same horse can be feminized, as shown above, but also masculinized and/or racialized depending on the context.
- 7. For more on this topic see Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* (2014).
- 8. I caution against prematurely distinguishing between traditional, new, and contemporary circus practices. Often these differentiations follow a chronological understanding of time coupled with a progress-driven account of (circus) history. For me, the term modern circus encompasses all current circus genres and suggests that today's circus is still complicit in the production, justification, and verification of the genre of Man. However, this does not mean that circus practitioners have not engaged with their practices in subversive and critical ways. On the contrary, as Deleuze and Guattari show us ([1972] 1977), any apparatus is transversed with lines of flight that produce destabilizing or deterritorializing tendencies.
- 9. Foucault stresses the intersection of neoliberalism and biopolitics. He suggests that Western capitalism transformed into an enterprise society marked by fierce albeit controlled competition after World War Two. Foucault dubs the new subject produced by this latest form of power "homo oconomicus" (2008, 147).

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