

From Civilization to Regulation: Airports, Circus (Bodies), and the Battle over Control

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A well-dressed woman appears on stage, walking energetically, pulling a wheeled suitcase, looking around as if she is seeking something. Her moving forward is abruptly set on hold by a man, an official, wearing a green neon vest, quickly pulling out red cordons from stands. Suddenly she finds herself fenced in, trapped in a minute square delimited by the cordons. More people with suitcases and trolleys appear and form a line behind her, for what the loudspeakers, with the significant, reverberating sound of a P.A system, announce as “check-in.” A man in the line is standing intimidatingly close to her, pushing his suitcase almost aggressively against her trolley, as they move step by step. More people appear: there is a hustle and a bustle, a man casually opens a big suitcase, perhaps to check something, and from the inside, a female contortionist in a short dress surprisingly rolls out. Immediately she begins to do fast somersaults, twists and shakes, backflips, and other acrobatic movements. A battery of drums raises the sound to a crescendo, the pulse is pounding, the people on stage swarm around, then the check-in counter “opens.” The performance Airport has begun.

The Performance

Airport played at Theatre Republique, in Copenhagen, Denmark in November 2015. It was written and directed by Kristján Ingimarsson and performed by Neander, a company founded by Ingimarsson in 1998.¹ The performance is conceived as an exposure of how extremely quickly humans adapt to even rather radical measures of control and governing systems, and the effects these systems can have on them. The five artists in the company are trained in both physical theatre and circus, so the performance *also* explores how—in a public context such as a departure hall—an exceptional use of the body and of radical strategies for dealing with situations in public spaces can overcome or even subvert the many points of restraint and limitation which constitute the experience of arriving at, waiting at, and consequently taking over—at least symbolically—an airport.

Airports are what French anthropologist Marc Augé has labelled “non-places,”² and they also represent a paradox: at one time a starting point for travelling, the potential individual pursuit of goals, and the crossing of borders of all kinds; and at the same time a place where you are kept on hold, submit yourself to the utmost regulation and de-individualization, where the archaic dream of flying, of defying gravity, and being united with the elements of nature is realized through high technologies, extreme modernization, and the division of all kinds of labour (Augé 1995, 52). This paradox is what is essentially up for discussion when the sharp, hard, linear, and rational frameworks of modern airports are contested by an “other,” that is: by humans, circus artists, who neither physically nor mentally surrender themselves to this logic, and who possess the skills and will to take up the challenge of navigating around the risk of dehumanization and societal control in these non-places.

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The following will attempt to trace the implications of spectatorship, participation, and late modernity on our perception of social relations, as they are—according to the just-mentioned paradox—set at play in *Airport*. With the support of Zygmunt Bauman’s conception of liquid modernity (2000), Jacques Rancière’s writings on the emancipated spectator (2009), and the concept of a performance’s potential transformative power as put forward most recently by the German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), the article will investigate how the experience of a performance which is based on both circus skills and theatrical structures may provide the jumping-off point for a rethinking of the mechanisms at work in the everyday experience and understanding of airports.

Airport is a performance in ten sections, following (at least in principle) the dramaturgy of travelling by plane: queuing, luggage handling, security, lounging, cancellation and waiting, drinking and partying, shopping and consuming, and finally flying. In each section, the performers use different kinds of extraordinary social behaviour, bodily skills, and symbolic actions to question the accepted rules of conduct in these (social) situations and within the framework of an airport as a community as well as a regulated environment. The overall impression is a performance emphasizing the many, often unconscious or at least internalized, limitations to which you must submit yourself in order to gain access to flying: a performance which uses excess, caricature, and grotesque enlargements of behavioural patterns to demonstrate alternative ways of coping with these limitations.

In the first scene, following the opening, it is luggage handling we witness. In a sort of “behind the scenes,” the suitcases are being handled (as roughly as we sometimes imagine they are) by people on a scaffold construction as a symbolic representation of the luggage belts and transportation mechanisms we never see as passengers. The luggage handlers work rhythmically and in synchrony, choreographed—albeit seemingly loosely—throwing the items from one to another, just escaping the falling weights, yelling and growling. Like a big symbiotic organism, the performers pump the luggage through the system, obviously with a physical capacity most of us do not possess.

Next, we follow the person guiding the planes on the taxi and take-off process using fluorescent sticks, who also possesses a capacity most of us only dream of. The powers invested in his sticks to direct, control, and send the plane off in a blast almost seem to stream out of his body as he poses—with the sound of the roaring airplanes to accompany him—and then “throws,” brakes, and slides the imaginary, enormous steel bodies on their journey.³

As a contrast to this demonstration of man-and-machine symbiosis, the next scene takes place in the familiar situation of a body search in the security check. The female person that is searched, however, is—as are most of us—ticklish. The security officer’s invasion of her personal sphere is made impossible, as she over and over again breaks into a giggle, lowers her arms, and thus through her natural reaction to the unnatural intimacy of the security official, offers us a mirror of the anxiety one could have when facing that exact procedure, often half public, and always uncomfortable. But where most people would have suppressed the urge to giggle, and let the idea of securing travellers control the bodily reaction, here we witness another approach, one of giving in to the laughter, which eventually leads to the official having to give up the project, and the woman is allowed unsearched into the departure area.

The next three scenes slip almost seamlessly into one another, working up a steady crescendo in sound levels as well as the activities on stage. First, a group of people cram together in the lounge area, trying to get private things done: rearranging stuff in suitcases, taking photographs, changing

clothes, all centred around a too-small table with not enough chairs or space, leaving them to crawl under the table or lie on top of it. The strange paradox of the density of people during rush hour in the airport (beyond check-in there is nothing to rush about, after all) is presented as a weird interim situation, in which everybody at one time becomes extremely aware of each other and at the same time has no contact. This limbo-like scenario is emphasized in the next sequence, where the loudspeakers announce a delay, and a time-has-stopped attitude takes over. A man with a ponytail, and what appear to be bones made of rubber, embodies the feeling of having to stay put but simply being unable to feel comfortable in any position. Literally, he lies, balances, twists, and curls himself on the sofa, at one point upside down like a bored child, at another trying to balance something on his nose while keeping his body balanced on the top of the seats. But the eventual postponing and cancellation of the departure prompts a new approach to an unplanned stay in the airport. Techno music starts pounding, and the action is again led by the woman who appeared from the suitcase; hyper-energetic, dancing, raving, and jumping she draws everybody with her in a tumbling, drunk parade including airport personnel and flight attendants. Everybody gives in to the party vibe, dragging decorations from the airport inventory to form a symbolic palm grove resembling the now-even-more distant destination for the flight, and culminating with the stewardess dancing electric boogie moves to trance music. The situation slowly breaks all the rules of the airport, subverting all systems, and total disruption of order is the final result.

The idea of depersonalizing the flight attendant (through robot movements) carries on in the next section, as the commercial side of airports becomes the focus. The structures of the airport as marketplace and temple of tax-free commercialism are dissolved as the group of people, now in slow motion, grab a mannequin from a fashion shop and split it into the arms, legs, torso, and head. Each person carries a piece, lifting them up and holding them back again in the shape of a body, now letting the mannequin “fly” above their heads. The other body is virtually carried around, alternately separated and gathered again.

As the flying sequences die out and the party lights are dimmed, out of the darkness comes a person lying on the lower shelf of a luggage trolley, arms spread out; the sliding movement of the cart allows us to get a feeling of the lightness of a person gliding through the air. More trolleys with bodies in perfect balance slide onto the stage, performing what becomes the grand finale: an air ballet of circus bodies, where the creative use of the trolleys appears to abolish gravity and allows the performers finally to take flight.

Projection, Identification, Transformation, and the Circus Body

Historically there has, within cultural studies and related lines of research, been some opposition between projection and identification as two ways to understand how an audience, a consumer, or just a human being might engage with cultural products in which the presentation of physical actions is the main element. The psychology of audiencing has often been divided into one of these two positions: either you do (more or less literally) something yourself—bodily, that is—or you submit yourself to the experience in the sense that you imagine yourself in somebody else’s place. Either you project yourself into something, participating in the production of the experience on a direct level, or you mirror the action in your mind, and try to get an idea of what more physically active participants must be experiencing.

But the last two decades has seen a steadily growing interest in combining the two positions into a third way of investigating how to be present at a performance. This contributes to ongoing efforts to understand the experience of live performance as an exchange between bodily actions and reactions, and the psychological processes during, as well as intellectual reflections after, the event. It is encapsulated in an understanding of the event as embedded in late modernity as a historical period as well as conditions for living, inspired by the concept of liquid modernity coined by British-Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 3). Within this conceptualization, late modernity is characterized by an absence of stable structures. Under these conditions, self-positioning at a performance involves awareness of one's own bodily presence, experience of the performance on a sensual level, and intellectual reflection on the performance's meaning. This self-positioning becomes a way to face the challenge of navigating in a world with few solid landmarks: we use events such as the performance in question as a means of anchoring ourselves. It also links to thinking about spectatorship put forward by Jacques Rancière (2009), which replaces the idea of viewing a performance with the radical notion of participation. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière states: "‘Good’ theatre is one that uses its separated reality in order to abolish it" (2009, 7). As with Rancière, the aim in this article is to investigate how the participating audience may use a performance like *Airport* to examine and potentially transform their understanding of social behaviour and control mechanisms by becoming aware of the inherent similarities between the performance's symbolic presentation and actual circumstances in airports. Or, as Rancière puts it, the awareness is that of the constituting oppositions: "the network of presuppositions, the set of equivalences and oppositions, that underpin their possibilities; equivalences between theatrical audience and community, gaze and passivity, exteriority and separation, mediation and simulacrum; oppositions between the collective and the individual, the image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation" (7).

Basically, the performance *Airport* maintains a playful, entertaining attitude from both performers and audience, and not a modernist, artful one. My focus is therefore not as much on the aesthetics of the performance as it is on the actions in it seen as a way of engaging entertainingly with serious problems. Play and entertainment can, according to the Danish cultural studies scholar Martin Zerlang and along the above-mentioned dualism of identification and projection, be conceived of as *mirroring* or *throwing*, two contrasting albeit indivisible sides of the same cultural element (Zerlang 1989, 18).⁴ The mirror (image), the pleasure of recognizing ourselves or situations we have experienced, is one side. Most entertaining performances emphasize recognizability over abstraction, and the possibility of relatively easy recognition of places, people, and situations is also the scenic strategy of *Airport*. This is combined with an element of joy, when confusion (as when, before the PA system announces the check-in, we are not sure what the empty stage is representing) becomes surprise and relief when we can attribute the elements and actions on stage to a unifying concept (when the voice sounds and all the elements fall into place), or the other way around: apparently ordinary situations evolve into unpredictable ones and back.

The other side is throwing, as in throwing yourself into the performance, here not in the sense of the previous (historical) understanding of physical doing as actually participating in the show itself, but rather the understanding of affective participation in which one might not be actively walking out onto the stage oneself, but one is nonetheless actively physically responsive to what's happening on it. In *Airport* we are invited to participate in the action through our (bodily) readiness to react to the actions and situations on stage. The classic "ooh and ah," the "wow effect" of circus is one prominent mode of reacting. But as Australian circus researcher Peta Tait points out, "while it is possible to claim a spectrum of jolts, gasps, contractions and sighs in the perception of circus

bodies, the extent of their arousal and interpretive significance for an individual spectator remains open-ended” (Tait 2005, 143). To be submitted to the immediate affect is no doubt an important element in the overall experience, and even one that is sought after and appreciated. This therefore makes up one very important half of the pleasure, or as Tait puts it, “the immediacy of visceral experience contributes to the reception . . . and therefore also invariably accompanies the perception of a body’s cultural identity” (143). Which in this context might translate into the notion that as you viscerally respond to the performance, you are also inevitably noting the ways in which the bodies in the performance are coded (e.g. gender, ethnicity, ability).

The scenic presentation and immediacy of bodily reactions evoke the possibility of the previously mentioned combination of experiences, consisting of both the “wow” and a reflection on the cultural significance of the actions involved. For instance, when the contortionist rolls out of the suitcase, at first we are just surprised, but soon after it crosses your mind: “How could she get (and fit) in there?” At the same time, our own bodily experience of curling up tells us that it is an extreme achievement, requiring extreme control over one’s muscles. So we throw our experiences with our own bodies into the experience of the opening sequence, which invites a reflection on our ability to manoeuvre in a restrained space, and ultimately where we find these spaces physically as well as mentally in our lives.

It is thus in the exchange between the two types of experience and attitude that value is rooted. Zerlang sums it up as follows: “Play and entertainment can . . . be divided into types through the opposition between throwing or projecting part of yourself onto something else and mirroring or identifying yourself with something else” (Zerlang 1989, 18). He identifies four different basic elements in entertainment, four types: fighting, gaming, masking, and vertigo. They are all based in the relationship between oneself and the other, drawing on psychology and social relations theory. Zerlang writes: “Since it is the same mechanism, you can do a model of entertainment that would otherwise dissolve in the in the swarm of forms. There is a system of play in amusement. It can be played in four modes. You can out play the other like in sports, but you can also play another like in theatre or movies. You can play on the other like in gambling, but you can also play with your identity like in the roller coaster of the amusement park” (18).

In *Airport* all four of these are present, although with a strong emphasis on masking and vertigo. Through the theatricality of the performance, the use of characters (masks), dramaturgy, and staging, acting becomes the predominant element, though the performers time and time again contradict this and through circus skills transform their function on stage into a different mode of experience.

In this mode, vertigo is often a vital element, firstly because there are a lot of flying acrobatics involved—leaps and jumping, throws and rolling (even on the luggage trolleys, as all kids long to do). Many situations also develop more surprisingly, because the actions break away from ordinary (airport) behaviour and dissolve into energetic or poetic abstractions, which may leave the audience slightly dizzy and overwhelmed. Projection and identification are possible on a number of levels, and the experience of the performance gets its power from the complexity of strategies it involves, engaging both bodily reactions and intellectual reflection.

In this sense, *Airport* becomes a terrific showcase for the ways in which the understanding of theatrical performances as experience has evolved in recent years. American theatre scholar Marvin Carlson boils it down to the change from the notion of a work of art to an event. In the introduction to Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Carlson states that as an

audience at a performance we are in “a situation in which we have an experience which causes us to gain a new, refreshed comprehension of our own situation of being in the world. [One that] engages the full activity of the human being as an embodied mind” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 7). When investigated along those lines, *Airport* offers an understanding of the situation experienced by the woman queuing for check-in, but that is maybe not the point. The attraction in which audiences perhaps are equally interested is the possibility of engaging fully in an experience, which enables renewed understanding of our own conditions and sparks reactions to living in late modernity. In the following, I will try to trace these possibilities in *Airport*.

Circus and Civilization: A History of “the Individual”

The first challenge presented in the performance, the lining up, is in many ways an emblem of civilization. You must suppress all your instincts and urges to succumb to the principle of queuing. Or in other words: you must behave as civilized. On civilization and entertainment, Zerlang notes the following: “Civilisation consists of an exchange of symbols: you trade instead of rob, fights are settled in court, punishment is no longer primarily mutilation of the body, but rather moral improvement of the spirit. . . . The entertainment industry had a civilising effect for two reasons: Firstly it taught people to put themselves in an idol’s place: identification. And secondly it taught them to transfer their own conflicts to others: projection” (Zerlang 1989, 132).

I propose that the performance *Airport* acts within this system of symbolic exchange, as do most performing arts. But—and this is my point of interest—while symbolic exchange *per se* was the hallmark of civilization processes, what is now called for is performative action to handle the discussion of the *backside* of civilization as it evolved into modernity: frustration, anxiety, and the unbearable suppression of bodily energies. We are presented with actions that we both bodily identify with, and upon which we project our conflict with the process of civilizing.

German philosopher Walter Benjamin, according to Zerlang, has called circus “a sociological nature reserve” (1989, 141). This is, however, a reserve where nature must obey modern man for *social* reasons. After having conquered animals and learned to exploit their potential, for instance by *riding* a horse and thus obtaining speed far beyond human capacity, he or she, when becoming civilized, dismounts the horse. Instead—in circus—he or she shows how, from a distance (with oral commands, signs, lashes of the whip, etc.), they can control the animal, in principle without any other purpose than exactly that: symbolically showing they can, and in that process presenting him or herself as an admirable individual for the audience to identify with. The presentation of trained animals in the traditional circus is part domestication and part anthropomorphizing: by making the animals perform in as close a relation to humans as possible, and making them appear to have human qualities (like putting the dogs to bed, etc.), the sovereignty of man over animals is transformed into a question of civilization.

In *Airport*, this element from traditional circus is challenged through reversal, since it is the un-tamed and perhaps even un-tameable individuals who take over. Gone are the animals, as they often are in contemporary circus. Instead, humans, acting in their place, take on the role the control of animals had occupied in traditional circus. Amid the hypercivilization depicted in the performance by the infrastructures of an airport, we are confronted with civilization’s “other.” We then, in a way, can have a double mirroring: we can identify with the ideal behaviour which the situations in principle call for, and we can certainly feel an urge to identify with these individual “others” in the sense that

they offer to act in a way which we are unable to dare (or are physically not fit to) do. On one level, the whole experience of being present at *Airport* thus offers a negotiation of our own individuality, and this, according to Bauman, is exactly what liquid modernity is about:

Casting members as individuals is the trademark of modern society. That casting, however, was not a one-off act: it is an activity re-enacted daily. Modern society exists in its incessant activity of “individualizing” as much as the activities of individuals consist in the daily reshaping and renegotiating of the mutual entanglements called “society.” Neither of the two partners stays put for long. And so the meaning of “individualization” keeps changing, taking up ever new shapes—as the accumulated results of its past history undermined inherited rules, set new behavioural precepts and turn out ever new stakes of the game. (Bauman 2000, 31)

This is what *Airport*—and performance as such—might enact: taking a role in the undermining of rules that seem so firm and unchangeable, governing how we as individuals may act in public space, in order to ease the burden of civilization.

The meaning of “other” has in *Airport* moved from being, in traditional circus, part of a genre that worked as a showcase for the *control* of “others” (wild animals, materials, race and gender, gravity, or mentality) toward a concept that—when used about artists—challenges the same control from within. Through uninhibited movements, the possibility of liberating the body from physical restraints, and the blurring of borders, all of which are hallmarks of circus, the performers present “others” with whom we can identify. The problem in late modernity is not how to be civilized, but how to react to the structures civilization has produced and which now have become an obstacle. From being the controlling instance, admired by the audience for the degree to which the trainer managed to control an animal, we now admire the individuals who, as a result of self-discipline (i.e., years of training their body) are able to evict control.

Circus Bodies and the Un-controlled Extraordinary

Airport takes circus skills and circus bodies as described by Tait and uses them to handle situations from everyday life. In *Airport*, the reference to contemporary circus is made obvious, and this referential system allows the radical mirroring and opposition of what according to French circus historian Hugues Hotier was the scope of traditional circus: to make the extraordinary available only within a realm clearly separated from everyday life—and under control (1995, 95). In the performance, and set in the framework of the familiar—for most of us—airport, bodily actions take us to a certain level of identification. Tait writes on this kind of experience with regard to aerial acts, but I think the basic idea of this exceptional, phenomenological moment also applies to some of the actions in *Airport*:

Spectators might be attracted to athletic movements that are physically familiar, whether it is sport, or dance or aerial movement. Conversely, they might be bodily drawn to watch unfamiliar extremes. Comments by performers and spectators imply that a body in action can create sensory spaces that momentarily enter “opaque zones.” (Tait 2005, 147)

So what *Airport* offers is a moment where the spectators at one time symbolically refer their understanding of the performance to an airport, and at the same time, through the experience of the actions presented to them, can enter that special zone where the idea of how to behave in the airport is transformed.

In *The Transformative Power of Theatre*, Fischer-Lichte argues that, because of the performativity involved, it is not merely symbolic acts we experience when going to the theatre or circus, but the possible reestablishment of reality—in a transformed way (2008, 7). Setting off from J. L. Austin's idea of the performative act of speaking, where things do actually transform due to the performing of a speech act (the model example is baptizing, where the child literally transforms into someone with a name in the instant the priest says it out loud for the congregation), and linking to gender theories by Judith Butler and anthropologies of performance by Richard Schechner, Fischer-Lichte arrives at an understanding of performance as a place where in the mere utterance, the performative action holds the potential of transforming the audience. By offering the experience of another person embodying specific ways of acting and handling of a specific situation, a potential for transformation of one's own way of acting is constituted, since reality is indeed in this line of thinking equal to how you act, rather than to a given norm or standard. Although Fischer-Lichte writes about performing identity and gender in a more general sense, her ideas can, I think, be applied to this instance I have pursued:

individuals alone do not control the processes of embodiment; they are not free to choose what possibilities to embody, or which identity to adopt. Neither are they wholly determined by society. While society might attempt to enforce the embodiment of certain possibilities by punishing deviation, it cannot generally prevent individuals from pursuing them (27).⁵

Here in *Airport*, we witness precisely the battle between civilized behaviour and the potential punishment for the deviation from it, and the liberating and potentially transformative power of another approach to embodiment and behaviour in the restricting framework of the airport.

This analysis of *Airport* has tried to justify a view of its performance as an example of a historical development from understanding circus as part of a civilization project (a reservation for the un-fit as well as the extraordinary as mere sensation), toward seeing circus and the trained circus artist as the impetus for possible experiences of optimism and liberation. The concept of the other in this sense has come to represent a possible way of dealing with the limitations and frustrations of modern life by back-flipping the meaning of oppositions like ordinary-unusual, normal-exceptional, or possible-impossible.

Notes

1. A 3:19 min. video excerpt from the live performance is at <https://vimeo.com/146642006>. This article is based on the author's experience of the performance on November 15, 2015, during its first run at Republique Theatre in Copenhagen.
2. In his groundbreaking book, Augé describes airports, highways, railway stations, etc. as places for transit, commerce, and leisure, but which are defined in his theory by their lack of historical continuity (1995, 52).
3. The recorded performance soundscape is composed as a flow of music, real sound, effects and noises, carefully designed to both reflect and drive the actions on stage.

4. This and subsequent translations from the Danish are the author's.
5. Translation from the German the author's.

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