

# PROBLEMATICS OF CIRCUS RESEARCH ON THE FRONTIER – THE BALTICS

Elvira Avota  
University of Tartu  
Semiotics MA 1



## Introduction

Being on the border of two influential circus traditions - the Western and the Eastern (Slavic) - Baltics has always been a frontier of communication between these two traditions. As circus in academia has not been in the spotlight of interest, the first step of researching traditions and praxis of this area would be understanding the possible problematics of this research to avoid misjudgment.



Traveling circus "Apollo" at the beginning of the 19th century. The usual circus format before stationary circus was built

## Terminology of the field

- **Modern circus** - rooted in the tradition begun in 1768 by P. Astley. Based on the notion of human overcoming nature and its laws
- **Contemporary circus** - begun in 1970s France with the founding of new circus schools. It is based on the "human circus" and created in symbiosis with contemporary dance and theatre and other experimental performative arts
- **Western tradition** - strongly based on entrepreneurship; communicating also with other forms of performance art
- **Slavic tradition** - first which had official circus schools, based on rigorous training and work ethic, more athletic

## Objective

To understand the problematics and influences of possible research of circus tradition in the Baltics

## Methodology

- Historical analysis of circus arts in this area
- Analysis of the current state and development of the tradition
- Semiotic analysis of Baltics as a border zone of circus arts

## Conclusions

- To analyze the Baltics as a circus frontier there is a need for deeper historical research
- Juri Lotman's theory of the Semiosphere and its inner structure could be a method how to analyze this area
- For understanding the contemporary circus tradition, empirical research is necessary
- Semiotics can be a method how to analyze the development of circus arts in the Baltics

## Historical context of the tradition

### Modern circus tradition

As a frontier space between two dominating traditions, the Baltics and especially Riga has been a creative laboratory for circus arts. Circus has been one of the most popular ways of entertainment all through the 19th and 20th centuries and has always been very topical in time and location.

### Contemporary circus tradition

The 21st century comes with big changes in tradition. Estonia first opens a contemporary circus school in around 2000 and Lithuania has been active in this field only for the last couple of years. Latvia had a very dramatic change of tradition in 2016. Now it is developing as the main contemporary circus center in Baltics by developing education methods and infrastructure.



Salomonsky circus in Riga (1920) - the only stationary circus in Baltics, built in 1888



Andrea Salustri's show "Materia" in 2022 - contemporary circus show with object manipulation and exploration of polystyrene and its properties

## Problematics of research

- Definition - circus as an art that is always symbiotic with other performative arts is not definable as a whole
- There have been almost no studies about circus in Baltics
- Contemporary circus tradition is only 20 years old in Baltics and is changing the idea of circus as art. Is it possible to speak about a tradition while it is still developing?

### Juri Lotman's concept of border

J. Lotman's theories are the base of P. Boussacs semiotic analysis of circus.

The idea of the border as the most creative and experimental part of a semiosphere could be a way how to analyze this area, but it brings up the question - are Baltics a creative frontier or just transit space?