

Genre Boundary Struggles. The Conflictual Relationship Between Circus and Bourgeois Theatre in Berlin Around 1900

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Mirjam HILDBRAND. *Theaterlobby attackiert Zirkus: Zur Wende im Kräfteverhältnis zweier Theaterformen zwischen 1869 und 1918 in Berlin [Theatre Lobby Attacks Circus: The Shift in the Balance of Power between Two Theatrical Forms in Berlin, 1869–1918]*. Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2023 (= *Ästhetische Praxis*, 4). 347 p.

Subject Matter and Theoretical Framework

The study opens with a personally inflected preface that frames the historical reappraisal of the relationship between modern circus and bourgeois theatre. Here, Mirjam Hildbrand reflects on how she came to focus on the circus and why the historical investigation of this form became a central concern of her research. Drawing on her own experience as a dramaturg and scholar, she observes a striking dissonance: while contemporary circus is a vibrant, inventive, and theatrically rich field of practice, within German-language academic discourse it has long failed to qualify as a “serious” object of theatre-historical inquiry. Her encounters with productions by *Zirkus Fahr Away*, as well as insights gained through an early theatre-analytical project, made this tension particularly visible. Within the professional field itself, the circus was widely taken to occupy a peripheral position, one that rarely invited sustained theoretical engagement.

Alongside this experiential point of departure, the preface also recounts the genesis of the research project. During archival work at the Berlin *Landesarchiv*, Hildbrand encountered the extensive records of the *Theaterpolizei* (theatre police), a source corpus of remarkable richness that had remained largely unexplored. The discovery of these materials

proved decisive, providing the empirical foundation for an entire research programme and opening up new perspectives on the institutional regulation of theatrical forms.

At the heart of the study lies the observation that, within German-speaking cultural discourse, theatre and circus are organised according to categories that appear neutral but are in fact deeply political and ideological. Theatre—particularly bourgeois literary theatre (*Literaturtheater*)—is conventionally understood as art, that is, as high culture. Circus, by contrast, is typically classified as entertainment or industry (*Unterhaltung*, *Lustbarkeit*, or *Gewerbe*), and thus positioned outside the realm of art. This hierarchy, however, is not the result of a natural or self-evident development. Rather, it is the outcome of protracted discursive and legal processes that took shape over the course of the nineteenth century. The central research questions therefore address how this hierarchy of status between theatre and circus came into being, why one form came to be recognised as art while the other did not, and which institutional, social, and legal mechanisms contributed to rendering this distinction largely unquestionable by the end of the nineteenth century.

The introduction situates these questions within a broader historical framework. The “long nineteenth century” marks not only the institutional consolidation of the bourgeois ideal of theatre but also the emergence of the modern circus in its recognisable form. From the 1850s onwards, Berlin hosted several permanent circus buildings, and circus performances increasingly relied on dramaturgical structures comparable to those of the theatre. Pantomimes incorporated musical and choreographic elements, resulting in complex, staged narratives rather than mere sequences of attractions. A critical turning point

was the *Gewerbeordnung* of 1869, which liberalised theatrical enterprise and thereby positioned the circus as a direct competitor to literary theatre. This development was followed by a series of political and professional campaigns in which theatrical interest groups deliberately sought to relegate the circus to a legally and culturally “inferior” category.

This process necessitated conceptual clarification. Hildbrand distinguishes between *Theaterform*, a neutral category encompassing a wide range of performative practices, and *Theater*, understood in a normative sense as an institution with elevated artistic status. One of the book’s central aims is to trace how this latter, restrictive usage emerged and gradually solidified.

The introduction also addresses the state of circus research. Within German-language theatre studies, the circus has long constituted a blind spot; most theatre-historical, cultural-historical, or legal-historical works have either ignored it altogether or mentioned it only in passing. By contrast, in Anglophone and Francophone scholarship, an autonomous field of Circus Studies has developed over the past four decades, complete with an established body of literature and its own archival practices. German-speaking researchers, however, have often been forced to rely on non-academic, anecdotal circus histories. While valuable in certain respects, these publications frequently reproduce unverified legends and rarely engage with primary sources. Against this background, Hildbrand’s monograph positions itself as opening up a new field of inquiry and underscores the exceptional nature of a rigorously scholarly investigation into the history of the circus.

Hildbrand defines her source base and methodology with notable clarity. She draws on four principal groups of sources: (1) theatre-related legal texts and regulations, including amendments to the *Gewerbeordnung* and fiscal legislation; (2) parliamentary and administrative records, in particular the files of the Berlin *Theaterpolizei*; (3) documents produced

by professional interest groups; and (4) press sources that testify to contemporary perceptions of the circus.

Methodologically, the study adopts a discourse-analytical approach. Rather than merely cataloguing practices and regulatory measures, Hildbrand investigates the formation of the categories and semantic networks through which theatre and circus were positioned within a cultural hierarchy. Discursive repetitions, value judgements, and normative assumptions articulated in the sources are treated as being as significant as institutional facts.

In discussing the historical background of the modern circus, the author emphasises that its emergence cannot be traced to a single point of origin, despite the persistent presence of 1768—Philip Astley’s first London performance—in canonical narratives of circus history. Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatrical culture was far more permeable than such accounts suggest. Minor theatres, hippodramas, and equestrian theatres all functioned as early antecedents of the circus, operating as hybrid forms that combined music, narrative action, dance, and acrobatics. The modern institutionalisation of the circus grew out of this heterogeneous prehistory. At the same time, bourgeois literary theatre increasingly sought, throughout the nineteenth century, to distance itself from precisely this hybridity, producing ever narrower and more normative definitions of what constituted “theatre.”

Following the delineation of these conceptual and historical premises, the study unfolds across three major sections. The first offers a detailed analysis of Berlin’s circus culture, introducing key venues, selected representative pantomimes, and patterns of audience and press reception. The second examines the development of theatre law between 1869 and 1900, with particular attention to the ways in which representatives of literary theatre attempted to restrict the circus through legal means. The third traces developments from the turn of the century to the end of the

First World War, a period in which moral and civic campaigns, ecclesiastical opposition, fiscal policy, and the emergence of new competitors—most notably cinema—significantly weakened the position of the circus while further consolidating that of the theatre. Taken together, these sections reconstruct the process by which a cultural hierarchy became established and stabilised in the latter half of the nineteenth century, one in which theatre came to embody the norm of high art, while the circus was relegated to the margins as a form of entertainment.

*Circus as Urban Modernity:
Performance, Technology, and Cultural
Experimentation in Fin-de-Siècle Berlin*

The first major chapter of the study situates the historical rethinking of the relationship between modern circus and bourgeois theatre within the cultural landscape of fin-de-siècle Berlin, demonstrating how the circus emerged as one of the most dynamic and experimentally oriented forms of urban performance. Hildbrand takes as her starting point a deeply entrenched assumption in theatre historiography: that the circus occupied merely the margins of popular entertainment and remained aesthetically and institutionally distant from the world of bourgeois *Literaturtheater*. Her detailed reconstruction, however, shows that by the late nineteenth century the circus had long ceased to consist of temporary fairground booths. Instead, it had developed into a multilayered theatrical form organised around permanent buildings and complex technologies of spectacle.

The institutionalisation of the circus in the modern metropolis was not simply the result of economic success or market demand. Rather, the genre integrated dramaturgical, visual, and technical innovations that would later play a significant role in the development of both theatre and moving-image culture. In this sense, the circus functioned not at the periphery of theatrical history but as one of its most innovative sites.

In the opening section of the chapter, Hildbrand outlines how a distinctively Berlin-based performance practice of the modern circus took shape. A genre previously regarded as marginal entered, at the turn of the century, a social and cultural environment particularly conducive to large-scale, rapidly changing, attraction-based spectacles. The principle of programme organisation based on constant novelty—that is, the logic according to which audiences would return only if presented with new productions night after night—turned the circus into one of the most intensively innovative actors within the urban entertainment industry. Rapid repertoire changes, spectacular technical developments, specialised machinery, and advanced lighting techniques all contributed to transforming the circus into an experimental laboratory attuned to the rhythms of modernity. While bourgeois theatre tended to emphasise the stability of a classical dramatic repertoire, the circus embodied the pulse of urban life itself: an aesthetic of movement, renewal, and perpetual transformation.

The next major section provides a detailed account of the three most important circus buildings in Berlin at the time: the Markthallen-zirkus, Circus Krembser, and Circus Busch. These venues not only surpassed many contemporary theatres in size and technical equipment but also reconfigured the organisation of spectatorship. The Markthallen-zirkus, with its robust hall architecture and eclectic wood-and-iron construction adapted from a former market hall, created a space of democratic mass culture. Its wide, circular public areas were both inclusive and acoustically manageable, and although initially reliant on gas lighting, the venue adopted modern lighting technologies by the end of the century.

Circus Krembser, by contrast, explicitly addressed a bourgeois audience. Featuring decorated boxes, a differentiated auditorium, and an interior architecture approximating that of dramatic theatre, it occupied an intermediate position between circus and theatre. This

dual orientation—preserving traditional circus structures while simultaneously approaching theatrical norms of elegance—ultimately explains why the venue failed to fit fully into either narrative. Among the three, Circus Busch possessed the most advanced technological infrastructure. Its steel-and-glass construction, fully electric lighting, and hydraulic ring system made it a paradigmatic example of technicised spectacle at the turn of the century. Water scenes, rising and sinking platforms, and the movement of large-scale scenic units achieved here remained technically challenging even for contemporary theatres. These examples demonstrate that the circus operated not on the margins of theatrical development but at its technological forefront.

This technical and organisational modernisation, however, was not an end in itself. It served the demands of a remarkably multifaceted and dramaturgically complex performance form. Contemporary conceptions of circus pantomime encompassed a wide range of genres and iconographic layers, from fairytale fantasies and exotic narratives to historical and military tableaux depicting royal and courtly scenes. The three productions analysed in detail—*Diamantine* (1883), *Babel* (1903), and *Jagdfest am Hofe Ludwig XIV* (1911)—demonstrate that these performances possessed fully developed narrative structures. Music accompanied the action, visual elements fulfilled dramaturgical functions, and mass scenes, dance interludes, and gestural vocabularies combined to produce a complex aesthetic form. This form aligns more closely with the tradition of ballet-pantomime than with conceptions of the circus as a mere succession of attractions. Music functioned not as simple accompaniment but as a central dramaturgical element, shaping rhythm, scene transitions, and emotional tone, while choreography formed an integral part of the visual narrative.

The fourth major section addresses the ambivalence of the circus's social reception. From the perspective of contemporary audi-

ences, the circus enjoyed overwhelming popularity. Sold-out performances, special trains, family attendance, and the strong presence of working-class spectators indicate a heterogeneous audience profile that bourgeois theatre struggled to attract. Through parades, processions, and posters, the circus occupied urban visual space, creating what might be described as an "expanded theatrical space" of the metropolis itself. At the same time, the rhetoric of bourgeois theatre criticism—branding the circus as "vulgar," "tasteless," or "alien to theatre"—reveals that this social expansion posed a direct threat to the dominant position of *Literaturtheater*. The negative critical reception was therefore less aesthetic than institutional and political in nature, functioning as a strategy through which the theatrical field sought to preserve its cultural primacy.

The concluding section of the chapter reconsiders the concept of "theatricalisation" in order to examine the discursive mechanisms that sustain genre hierarchies. Earlier historiography suggested that the circus moved closer to theatre around the turn of the century, becoming increasingly "theatricalised." Hildbrand demonstrates instead that the circus had long produced narrative, scenographically elaborate, and technologically sophisticated performances throughout much of the nineteenth century. Rather than moving towards theatre, it operated from the outset as part of a broad theatrical ecosystem—one that later, drama-centred definitions of theatre proved unable to accommodate. The concept of "theatricalisation," as used retrospectively, thus names a discursive operation through which the exclusive categories of bourgeois theatre were elevated to universal norms.

In this respect, the argument resonates implicitly with theoretical models from early film history. Tom Gunning's and André Gaudreault's concept of the *cinema of attractions* offers a precise parallel, illuminating how spectacle- and attraction-based forms are retrospectively devalued even as they played

a decisive technical and narrative role in the formation of a new medium.

The overarching conclusion of the chapter is that the Berlin circus at the turn of the century was not merely a phenomenon of the entertainment industry but one of the most vibrant, experimental, and socially inclusive forms of modern performance. Its subsequent marginalisation did not arise from aesthetic or historical necessity but from the normative self-canonisation of bourgeois theatre and the cultural institutions aligned with it. In this sense, the chapter constitutes not only a historical reconstruction but also a critical intervention into contemporary debates on the concept of theatre, genre hierarchies, and the selective operations of cultural memory.

*Law, Lobbying, and the Codification
of Cultural Hierarchies:*

The Institutional Marginalisation of the Circus

The book's second chapter uncovers the institutional-historical deep structure of the conflict between circus and bourgeois theatre. It reconstructs the multi-decade process of legislation and lobbying through which theatre, drawing on the instruments of cultural rank, genre hierarchy, and legal regulation, sought to exclude the circus institutionally from the category of "higher art." Hildbrand demonstrates with particular clarity that the marginalisation of the circus did not arise from aesthetic or qualitative differences but from political and cultural processes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, translated genre distinctions into legally sanctioned hierarchies.

The opening section examines the theatrical consequences of the 1869 Industrial Code (*Gewerbeordnung*). Initially, the new regulation brought about a liberalisation of theatrical activity. Parliamentary debates surrounding the *Theater im Reichstag* advocated a freer practice of performance, which temporarily afforded the circus a degree of institutional leeway. This brief phase of liberalisation,

however, was marked from the outset by a profound cultural ambivalence. While the legal framework became formally more permissive, representatives of the bourgeois *Bildungstheater* increasingly organised themselves into interest groups. Hildbrand traces in detail the emergence of an institutional coalition dedicated to defending the interests of "serious theatre," a coalition that by the 1870s was already calling for the "regulation" of the circus.

Liberalisation and restriction thus unfolded in tandem. What legislation permitted, the theatre lobby sought to curtail rhetorically and institutionally. Commercial genres—most notably the circus, cabaret, and popular pantomime—were still able to operate with relative legal freedom during this period, yet the discursive foundations were already being laid for the restrictive language that would dominate the following decades.

The second major section analyses the political and ideological background of the legislative tightening after 1880. The 1880s marked a decisive turning point, as the *Literaturtheater* lobby emerged as a genuinely influential political force. Parliamentary debates between 1879 and 1883 increasingly revolved around the notion of "higher art," a concept through which theatrical forms were systematically differentiated. The 1883 amendment to the *Gewerbeordnung* introduced an explicitly genre-based distinction, separating performances deemed to possess *Kunstinteresse* (artistic interest) from those considered to lack it. This legal category automatically relegated the circus to the realm of "lower" forms allegedly devoid of artistic value, even though the circus's actual aesthetic practice often demanded a higher degree of technical and dramaturgical sophistication than contemporary bourgeois drama.

The decisive consequence of the 1883 amendment was that genre hierarchy was no longer sustained merely by cultural convention but became fixed in explicit legal categories. As a result, the circus was placed at a disadvantage not only symbolically but also in

practical terms. The economic and administrative conditions of its operation deteriorated through licensing procedures, programme restrictions, and content regulations that particularly affected pantomime. The circus thus became subject to a regulatory regime tacitly tailored to the needs and norms of the *Literaturtheater*.

The third major section focuses on the period between 1884 and 1900, when the tightening of theatre law manifested less through new legislation than through enforcement, interpretation, and the operation of disciplinary apparatus. This was the most difficult legal phase for the circus. At the same time, theatre itself entered a period of crisis. Hildbrand shows that audience numbers for bourgeois dramatic theatre declined, institutions accumulated debt, and the genre's social prestige eroded. Nevertheless—or perhaps precisely for this reason—the lobby intensified its opposition to any performative form perceived as competition. A statement issued by the *Reichsamts des Innern* in 1888, which deliberately left the genre classification of circus pantomimes “ambiguous,” functioned as a tool of rhetorical delegitimation. Performances that could not be clearly categorised were more easily prohibited, restricted, or administratively curtailed.

An emblematic moment of this period was the 1896 revision, which reinforced rigid classifications of genres and repertoires. Circus pantomimes were now excluded from the “theatrical” category in almost every respect. They were not recognised as drama, yet neither were they treated as harmless spectacles; instead, they were relegated to a regulatory no-man's-land. The flexibility that had previously constituted one of the circus's greatest strengths thus became a liability within the legal framework.

The fourth section offers a theoretical confrontation with the underlying logic of these developments. Why, Hildbrand asks, did nineteenth-century legislation endow certain theatrical forms with “higher artistic interest” while denying it to others? This question

exposes a fundamental schema of German aesthetic history: the legal codification of the dichotomy between “high” and “low” art. A brief cultural-historical overview makes clear that these boundaries were not drawn along aesthetic lines but emerged from social and ideological considerations. The discourse of high art functioned as a cultural instrument constructed in the interest of *Bildungstheater*, aimed not at the objective protection of artistic value but at preserving the bourgeois theatre's institutional monopoly.

One of the chapter's most compelling moments is its interrogation of whether dramatic theatre itself could be unambiguously defined as art, pointing to the intense debates surrounding the very nature of bourgeois drama. If dramatic theatre lacked a stable definition, then the exclusion of the circus from the realm of “higher art” can hardly be understood as an aesthetic judgement; it must instead be recognised as a question of power.

The chapter's concluding examples—the legal struggles of Circus Busch and Circus Schumann—illustrate how circus companies by the end of the nineteenth century were compelled to fight for their very genre identity using legal language and administrative strategies. The theatre lobby mobilised legal categories underpinned by clearly articulated cultural hierarchies: licensing systems, content control, and genre classification all served to weaken the circus institutionally.

The overarching conclusion of the chapter is that the conflict between circus and theatre in the second half of the nineteenth century was not resolved on aesthetic or generic grounds but within the hidden networks of legislation, institutional interest representation, and cultural discourse. The marginalisation of the circus thus stemmed not from the nature of the genre itself but from social processes that elevated the norms of bourgeois theatre to universal standards. In this sense, Hildbrand's research constitutes not only a historical reconstruction but also a critical intervention, exposing cultural hierarchies that

are often perceived as natural as the outcome of contingent power formations.

Moral Regulation, Fiscal Policy, and Media Change: Coalitions Against the Circus in Early Twentieth-Century Berlin

In the history of modern performance, there are few periods in which institutional and social actors of such different provenance joined forces against a single genre—as happened, in this case, with the circus and the variety theatre in the first decades of the twentieth century. The book's third chapter reconstructs this particularly dense and complex phase of anti-circus campaigning, when three previously largely separate fields of power—the bourgeois theatre lobby, the professional associations of artists, and urban movements of moral regulation—suddenly began to point in the same direction. Although their motivations differed, the combined effect was the emergence of a cultural-political apparatus that drastically reduced the institutional space available to the circus and contributed in the long term to its gradual marginalisation in the early twentieth century.

The chapter takes as its point of departure the political discourse surrounding the proposed Imperial Theatre Law (*Reichstheatergesetz*). Around the turn of the century, the anticipated introduction of a unified theatre law was widely perceived as a chance to reorder the legal and cultural hierarchies of performance. Theatrical circles hoped that the law would finally fix the notion of “artistic interest” in unambiguous terms and thereby, on a legal basis, separate “higher” theatrical forms from “lower” entertainment. For the theatre lobby, a unified national regulation promised the institutionalisation of distinctions that had hitherto been sustained primarily through rhetorical and critical discourse.

For artists—the “stepchildren” of this legislative framework—the situation was more complicated. The first artists' associations, founded in the 1890s, found themselves in a

double position. On the one hand, they sought greater professional recognition, on the other, they were acutely aware that the genre's heterogeneous and partly informal structures threatened their reputation from within. Hildbrand shows with great subtlety how cultural distinctions emerged within these associations, separating “respectable,” contract-holding professional artists from itinerant, precariously situated performers working in the *Tingeltangel*. In defending their own social prestige, the organisations thus acquired an interest in distancing themselves from the lower-status segments of their own field—above all by stigmatising the *Tingeltangel* as a “contaminating” element. From this perspective, it becomes understandable why the artists' associations emerged as natural allies of the theatre lobby: their common ground was not aesthetic but status-political.

The third pillar of the anti-circus coalition consisted of moral-regulatory movements with ecclesiastical backing. The urban modernity of the late nineteenth century generated a wide array of cultural anxieties: prostitution, alcoholism, and “urban degeneration” were perceived by clergy and church councils as signs of a broader breakdown in social order. Variety and circus—particularly when they involved female performers or acrobats—were frequently drawn into discourses on sexual deviance, “public immorality,” and the “corruption” of youth. The term *Tingelbordell*, which appears even in synodal records, is telling. By rhetorically linking the *Tingeltangel* and the brothel, it suggested that variety theatres were, in spatial and functional terms alike, part of the city's “moral contamination.” The aim of this rhetoric was not accurate description but the disciplining of audience behaviour: the reassertion of control over the entertainment sector at a historical moment when the Church was losing ground in the increasingly secularised urban environment.

One particularly characteristic dimension of the conflict between moral regulation and the circus concerned Sundays and religious

feast days. For part of the clergy, it was unacceptable that urban residents should spend Sundays or major holidays by going to the circus. Among the conditions they formulated was the demand that, if clowns were to perform at all on such days, they should appear “without make-up and in civilian dress.” This seemingly minor detail points to a broader cultural mechanism in which humour, the grotesque body, and popular playfulness appeared fundamentally incompatible with the temporal and spatial norms of religious observance. What looks like a marginal issue thus in fact symbolises the larger conflict: a clash between two mutually exclusive cultural regimes of time.

In the subsequent sections, the chapter foregrounds the cultural and political history of the *Lustbarkeitssteuer*, the entertainment tax. This levy, which imposed additional financial burdens on new forms of popular amusement, targeted precisely those genres that had been discursively marked as “lower,” while the theatre effectively exempted itself from such measures. Bourgeois theatre thereby simultaneously expanded its own economic room for manoeuvre and restricted that of its rivals. The issue of taxation sharply illuminates the extent to which the maintenance of genre hierarchies was institutionally embedded in legal and economic mechanisms. Hildbrand pays particular attention to the specific vulnerability of circuses to such regulatory measures. Owing to high operating costs, the expense of maintaining animals, and the price of technical apparatus, circuses were especially sensitive to changes in taxation. The temporary closure of Circus Busch thus signalled not merely a business difficulty but an event of symbolic significance: it indicated that the state had turned the category of “high culture” into an instrument of economic policy.

The final major section of the chapter reconstructs the multi-factorial history of the circus’s cultural disappearance. The outbreak of war in August 1914 triggered an acute crisis of operation: artists were drafted, the feeding

of animals became increasingly difficult, and the infrastructure of travelling troupes collapsed. The economic crisis restricted audience mobility, narrowed the possibilities of urban cultural consumption, and, in many places, emergency measures made large-scale performances practically impossible.

Yet this was not the most important reason for the circus’s decline. During this period, film became the dominant medium of urban visual culture. Hildbrand argues that cinema did not merely introduce a new technological form; it also appropriated the visual and dramaturgical logics developed by the circus: attraction, spectacle, rapid transitions, exoticism, mass scenes, and visual illusion were all forms inherited from the circus. Drawing on early film theory, especially the work of Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, it becomes clear that there is a deep structural affinity between the “cinema of attractions” and the circus—except that cinema could adapt these aesthetic forms far more flexibly and economically. When cinemas began to open in rapid succession—often in former circus buildings—this signalled a radical reconfiguration of the cultural ecosystem. The circus was displaced by a new medium of modern mass culture.

The chapter’s conclusion emphasises that, although the Imperial Theatre Law was never actually enacted, the legal and institutional practices sustaining cultural hierarchies changed very little. The earlier logic of theatre legislation, the legal category of “artistic interest,” and the double standards of the entertainment tax all persisted. The circus and the variety theatre did not disappear in the early twentieth century because they had become aesthetically “obsolete,” but because a complex configuration of power emerged that subjected them simultaneously to social, economic, ideological, and cultural pressures. The self-canonising strategies of bourgeois theatre, the internal hierarchies of the artists’ associations, the moral discourses of ecclesiastical regulation, and the sudden rise of film together shaped a process that gradually

pushed the circus out of the centre of modern urban culture.

Conclusion

Hildbrand's volume offers a comprehensive reconstruction of the institutional and cultural reconfiguration of the modern circus at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one that extends far beyond the conventional boundaries of genre history. The book's central achievement lies in its refusal to treat the circus as an isolated form of popular entertainment. Instead, it conceptualises the circus as a strategic cultural field of modernity, a site in which the interests, anxieties, and discursive strategies of multiple social spheres intersect. The three major sections of the study—the reconstruction of Berlin's cultural environment, the analysis of struggles surrounding theatre legislation, and the examination of the anti-circus coalition after 1900—all converge on the same conclusion: the fate of the circus was not an aesthetic issue, but a question of cultural power.

At the turn of the century, Berlin's circus did not occupy the periphery of theatrical development; on the contrary, it stood at the forefront of technical and organisational innovation. The infrastructure of the modern metropolis, rapidly shifting repertoire strategies, advances in technologies of spectacle, and practices of mass reception transformed the circus into a dynamic cultural laboratory. Within this laboratory, fundamental forms of modern visual culture—attraction, montage, the dramaturgy of movement and rhythm—were articulated for the first time. One of Hildbrand's most compelling arguments is that the circus was not an "inferior" form of theatre, but rather a precursor of modern visual media, whose technical and aesthetic solutions were later taken up and adapted by cinema.

At the same time, the cumulative argument of the chapters demonstrates that artistic and technical innovation alone offered no guarantee of social recognition. In its effort to

preserve genre hierarchies, the bourgeois *Literaturtheater* lobby developed legal and rhetorical instruments designed to displace the circus into a position "outside culture." Artists' associations joined this process partly out of self-protective motives and partly in pursuit of social status, while the moral discourse of urban regulatory movements portrayed the circus—especially variety theatre and female performers—as a threat to public morality. The combined effect of these three fields of interest was not merely the introduction of administrative restrictions or economic burdens, but the targeted devaluation of the circus's legitimate cultural status.

The introduction of entertainment taxation, the legal consolidation of the category of "artistic interest," the rhetoric that framed pantomime as inherently "lower," and the construction of the variety theatre as a "dangerous space" all pointed in the same direction. Modern urban culture was reorganised according to institutional logics that strengthened the position of bourgeois theatre at the expense of popular entertainment. This process did not respond to the aesthetic qualities of the circus but to the social role it played within the visual public sphere of modernity. The circus offered forms of movement, corporeality, spectacle, and exoticism that proved difficult to accommodate within the normative frameworks of bourgeois cultural ideology.

The book's final chapter makes clear that the disappearance of the circus cannot be explained solely by market forces or technological change. Although the economic crisis triggered by the First World War and the rapid expansion of cinema accelerated the process, the weakening of the circus's cultural position was driven primarily by mechanisms of institutional and discursive exclusion. Cinema did not become the successor to the circus because it was inherently "more advanced," but because it was more easily integrated into existing cultural hierarchies by the state and the bourgeois public sphere. The circus, by contrast, gradually lost the

social and cultural space in which it had previously operated.

Hildbrand's study is therefore not only a contribution to circus history but also a critical work of cultural history. It demonstrates how artistic hierarchies are produced and stabilised, which institutional instruments are used to maintain boundaries between "high" and "low" genres, and how aesthetic, moral, economic, and political interests converge in the delegitimation of a cultural form. The book's central insight is that the history of the modern circus is not a narrative of decline, but a paradigmatic example of the self-canonising mechanisms of modern European culture: the story of how an urban genre that was technologically and aesthetically forward-looking was gradually excluded from

the official cultural sphere by multiple agents of cultural power.

For this reason, the conclusion should be read less as a closure than as an invitation to a broader rethinking of cultural history. Hildbrand's book reminds us that the history of modern culture is shaped not only by canonised genres, but also by those relegated to the periphery by institutional power. The disappearance of the circus is thus not evidence of the genre's weakness, but of a reconfiguration of cultural space—a process in which one of the most important forms of modern visual culture gradually gave way to cinema, even as it played a decisive role in preparing the ground for that very visual revolution.