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CIRCUS ART IN MODERN REALITIES: FUNCTIONS, PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The circus has always been one of the most controversial culture branches for terminologisation. Even today this is a field to deal with clichés, stereotypes, a platform for discussions about this activity type independence and its role in modern society. Unfortunately, the circus sphere has to fight for the right to be recognized as an independent culture segment, as an art form, although the fact this type of entertainment has been one of the most popular in society since ancient times remains incontestable. The scientists began to define the circus status as a phenomenon in the cultural sphere "table of ranks" transferring this discussion to the scientific field. The Soviet circus school as the most powerful in the world and after Soviet Union collapse each of the former Soviet republics actually again created its own circus school on the post-Soviet territory, based on the Soviet circus traditions. Politics became the reason of the most powerful cultural branch appeared under the threat of death. And in today's realities the threat has become even more realistic. The Russian and Ukrainian circus appeared the most powerful after the USSR collapse, each of the school was the famous Soviet circus legal successor.

Keywords

Circus – Sport – Actor – Circusophy – Circus knowledge

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Introduction

Russian and Ukrainian scientists became this phenomenon theorists initiated its introduction into scientific use. "The study of circus" term appeared in humanitaristics in the middle of the last century, the task of which was to study the circus phenomenon, its social functions, its theory and history, its place in culture. E. Kuznetsov¹, became the study of circus founder, whose works laid the foundation of the circus studies questions transfer to the scientific field. If until that moment it was possible to find mostly miscellaneous publications on individual issues, more often – mentions of certain events in circus life or biographical notes, then the circus began to be investigated more seriously in different contexts since its research appearance: the works on circus theory, its individual genres² practical aspects, its history³ appeared, besides, the circus began to be analyzed in psychological, culturological, pedagogical and philosophical aspects⁴. The circus cultural field theorization allowed to introduce into scientific circulation not only the category of "the study of circus", but also the term "circusophy", bringing the circus theory to a new level, applying a multifaceted philosophical instrument to practically oriented research. There are not only more methodical recommendations appeared, textbooks (mostly on certain circus genres), but also dissertations: O. Pyatayeva⁵, E. Shaina⁶, V. Savina⁷, O. Klepatskaya⁸, V. Barinov⁹, M. Sorvina¹⁰ etc. The Ukrainian segment of circus studies is now in its nascent stage, as the Ukrainian circus history, separated from Soviet one, is only 29 years old. Of course, the dividing line is conditional – the illustrious phenomenon history cannot be artificially broken down into fragments according to political aspects. This increases the formation complexity, for example, the Ukrainian study of circus in the of post-Soviet humanitaristics context. Theoretical research in the field of circus was in Ukrainian science also in the Soviet period¹¹, however, speaking actually about the Ukrainian content, we emphasize the works since 1991. And so far there are very few of them that does not contribute to the circus actualization as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon in the theoretical aspect. There are purely theoretical researches of art criticism¹², cultural¹³ or pedagogical¹⁴

¹ E. Kuznetsov, *Circus: Origins. Development. Perspectives* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971).

² V. Barinov, *Basics of circus creativity* (Moscow: MGUKI, 2004).

³ T. Abidov, *Traditional circus in Uzbekistan: genesis and evolution: Doctor of art criticism thesis.* (Moscow: 1984).

⁴ V. Barinov, *Artistic-figurative structure of circus art* (Moscow: MGUKI, 2005).

⁵ O. Pyataeva, *Multinational circus of Russia of the XX century: thesis abstract of PhD in Art Criticism* (Saint-Petersburg: 2009).

⁶ E. Shaina, *Creation and functioning of museums of circus art (Russia, USA, European countries): thesis in PhD in Cultural Sciences abstract* (Saint-Petersburg: 2008).

⁷ V. Savina, *Artistic and creative training of circus performers in secondary specialized educational institutions: thesis in PhD in Pedagogical Sciences abstract* (Moscow: 2001).

⁸ O. Klepatskaya, *Circus as a phenomenon of Russian culture in the first third of the twentieth century: thesis in PhD in Cultural Sciences abstract* (Kirov: 2009).

⁹ V. Barinov, *Aesthetic emotions in the artistic-figurative structure of circus art: thesis in PhD in Philosophy abstract* (Moscow: 2008).

¹⁰ I. Sorvina, *Circus in Russian feature films (1910-1989): the influence of the expressive means of the circus on cinematography: thesis in PhD in Art Criticism abstract* (Moscow: 2010).

¹¹ M. Rybakow, *Kiev circus, People, events, destinies* (Kiev: Atika, 2006).

¹² Yu. Romanenkova, "Contemporary circus art as a field for combating stereotypes", *Art-platforma.* (2020): 1.

¹³ O. Pozharska, "Content and functions of the circus spectacle", *Young Scientist* num 9 Vol: 49 (2017): 181-186.

¹⁴ M. Malykhina, "Professional circus education in Ukraine", *Culture and Contemporainity*, (2012): 174-179.

vectors and practically oriented developments with more applied functions¹⁵ among the works devoted to the circus. But anyway, both theorists and practitioners dedicate their research pages to the circus. In recent years economic problems have increasingly been raised because of many private circuses of various types existence and changes in their working principles in the current realities. Circus management problems – production, circus product promotion – have also become relevant. But circus referring to one or another human activity, i.e. its single-valued classification as a sport or as an art form has been still one of the most controversial positions in circus studies. It is discussed in many researches from the viewpoints of culturologists, philosophers, art experts, teachers.

The circus has turned a phenomenon that teeters on the brink of different human activities types a long time ago. From of old its specificity was in society that appreciated the phenomenon first of all as a performance, a demonstration of human strength and agility that allowed it to be attributed to sports. As a sport the circus can be appreciated as synthetic because its genres variety for today gives a very colorful picture. However, if the circus work phenomena numbers can really demonstrate the strength limits and agility as a goal in itself, then there are also many circus genres, entertainment forms, that do not fit into this definition and go outside its framework by their characteristics. Power amusements, for example, have been known and existed as a part of circus programs for a long time, can be appreciated as a sport action. Although their direction can provide an occasion for disputing this postulate. But how the plays of acrobats – “airmen” can be related to the sport in its pure form? How to appreciate only the gymnasts on aerial silk show as a sport? How to refer clown shows to sports? Especially when not a single trick is considered, the purpose of which is really to demonstrate the human body capabilities, excellent physical training and the technical skill elegance, but entire programs, shows, with complex direction, multilayered concept, idea. All this is directed to much more composite goals being firstly a performance that has both entertaining and educational functions. And the recent years tendencies indicate the circus is getting closer to the theater in its functions and methods of communication with the audience, i.e. there is a circus theatricalization process, directly proportional to its intellectual beginning strengthening, handling not only the body capabilities, but also the soul movement and mental process. The classical circus entertainment, complex direction, the phenomenon theatricalization allow it to be classified as an art. And such a concept as “Raw circus” appearance in the culture allows us to speak about not only theatricalization but also about circusophy. This is a conceptual circus, which aims not only to entertain the audience but also to make them think. Ukrainian director T. Pozdnyakov’s project, which began in 2005, became an alternative to the circus classical concept, expanding the horizons of its understanding and perception. This is a kind of underground circus, one is not for everyone. Like any form of underground culture it is doomed to a narrower group of admirers, promotion difficulty and mass popularity lack. But it's not so much a show as a performance, not so much an entertainment as an idea and a concept, it is costumes and properties minimalism, coloristic locality and technical skill concentration. Therefore, it is not just a circus, it is partly a circus, partly a theater, synthesized with philosophy. All these are art marks the circus call for the right to belong to. But: these entertainments creators are people in excellent physical fit, performing finally-honed, unique tricks, i.e. not only artists and directors but also sportsmen.

¹⁵ Yu. Romanenkova; A. Ignatov y V. Gandzuyk, “Experiments of young artists in the genre of pair manual equilibrium in the context of the development of the Ukrainian project “Raw circus”, Science, research, development (2018): 29-34.

Therefore, it is impossible to classify the circus categorically, classifying it either as a sport or an art, it is cultural activity synthetic type, which, of course, is based on both the sports component and the obvious art features.

Circus art functions as a subject for discussion

There are no less discussions about the circus art functions, its audience categories and the prospects for the industry development. Some questions are exclusively ethical and increasingly emphasize every day, not having a conclusive answer. The aspects related to the art and sports undergo the destructive influence of economic factors and are increasingly losing hope for the future. The circus entertainments functions seem to be conclusive, the traditions go from the depth of the centuries. Classes related to circus genres help to strengthen the body and spirit, keep yourself in good physical condition. For the audience, this is firstly an entertainment, i.e. its function is in priority. One of the stereotypes related to the circus comes down to the fact the main audience category, the circus product consumer, is children's one ¹⁶. It follows that clowning and training have become the most popular, requested circus art genres. However, the relationship between the audience and the artist in the context of circus art today is much more complicated and multifaceted. If we are speaking about the classic circus, clown shows, programs with animals, children's audience remain the most grateful for the circus art product appreciation. However if we are speaking about, for example, the most complicated plays of "acrobats-airmen", jugglers, equilibrists, then the child is unlikely to be able to appreciate the complexity and virtuosity of playing entertainment, especially its director's concept. It is above the children's audience strength to realize that a circus play in such genres (equilibristics, acrobatics), lasting several minutes, is only the iceberg top, a beautiful obverse sparkling with festive gewgaw, where there is a less attractive, but real reverse behind. It is hard, exhausting work, sweat, injuries, hazard to life, sometimes maiming injuries or fatality. This is team work, because several people are involved in each play, where the hazard to life is assumed, each of them has its own functions, if not fulfilled, the artist runs into danger of death. This work does not allow hokey-pokey and trickery. A circus is an environment where any team member's mistake can cost another's health or life. Fatal accidents, beyond human's control, also play a role. Obverse – the costumes shine, artists' smiles, noise of music, applause, fees. All this is an external, superficial attribute of circus action. And the reverse is daily lasting many hours trainings, rehearsals, a tough schedule and strict keeping to the diet to be in good condition, the risk of work without safety wire, according to which the artists work at their own in order to develop their showmanship, the danger of injury, having fallen from the height or as a result of contact with a predator having got out of control. The pay for the audience' eyes glint is extremely high, the artists frequently died in full view of people, the representatives of various circus schools: rope walkers, horsemen, animal handlers, aerial gymnasts, equilibrists. Even the most famous circus in the world, the Canadian "Circus of the Sun" ("Du Soleil"), which has almost 40 years of history (since 1984) and is popular firstly due to unique shows without animals, often shocks the audience with information about the artists' death. Airmen most often endanger themselves, falling down from a height, typically when working without safety wire. Of course, only certain categories of artists who have highly succeeded in profession and have experience have the right to perform daredevil stunts without safety wire. Otherwise, it is strictly forbidden by safety rules. Clown Irina Asmus, known as "Iriska", died in 1986 having fallen down from the 12-meters-high big top and undone safety wires. In 2008 in the London circus, Russian gymnast Ravshan Alimov died, having fallen on the

¹⁶ Yu. Romanenkova, "Contemporary circus art as a field for combating stereotypes", Art-platforma. num 1 (2020): 70.

arena from a height of 6 meters. In 2009 Alexander Zhurov, a Ukrainian aerial gymnast who worked in the “Circus of the Sun”, died having fallen down from the trampoline during a rehearsal in Montreal. Thus, in 2011 the Kazakh circus’ artist Peter Testin died, having fallen from a height of 17 meters when the winch broke. Also in 2013, the life of French acrobat Sarah Guyard-Guillot, who fell from a height of 15 meters, having dropped the safety wires during the Canadian circus performance in Las Vegas, stopped. In 2017, North Korean acrobat O Yun Khek died during a somersault performance in the Moscow State Circus. In 2018 the "Cirque du Soleil" again lost its acrobat – Yann Arnaud who fell down from a height of 6 meters and died. However, it is the safety wire deficiency rattles the audience’s nerves with a real danger to the artist's life, increases entertainment, excites the performer’s nervous system. The financial aspect is a more prosy reason that often pushes circus artists to work without safety wire, which is especially typical for the post-Soviet Union because the amount of fee when the safety wire is absent during the performance of a risky play is significantly higher.

Sometimes entertainment plays with animals end tragically, which belong to the most popular in the circus art genre hierarchy. In the “Durov’s Corner” animal tamer Alexander Terekhov was thrown from elephant’s back and trampled to death by it in 2001. A Russian animal tamer Umar Zakirov died from bear teeth there in 2003. A tamer Snezhana Dautova was killed by tiger’s tush in Odessa circus in the same 2003. The killer whale drowned the animal tamer Keltie Lee Byrne in 1991, and in 2010, Canadian animal tamer Dawn Brancheau fell a victim to the same killer whale, which drowned her during a performance. Manager Dmitry Potapov died because of bear’s attack during a rehearsal of an ice show in Bishkek in 2009. Animal tamer Alexander Crispin, the United States native of Russian origin, fell a prey to a tiger in one of the Mexico circuses during a performance, having been attacked by it in 2012. Anastasia Maksimova, a Russian circus rider, died, having been trampled by a horse during a show near Novorossiysk in 2015. These are just a few examples of how a few minutes of audience pleasure can cost an artist his life. It is this problem that leaves open an ethical question – about circus existence possibility using animals. One audience self-interest demands the tradition continuation, the humanity of the audience other part appealed to stop using animals in circus performances. Both views have the right to exist and both have weaknesses, gaps in the logical reasoning chain.

That is why, the question of circus function can be considered in different planes. Of course, this is also an entertainment function, which is remembered first of all when analyzing the circus phenomenon. But, of course, the educational, formative function is on a par with it. And not only for the children’s audience, with which the circus is usually firstly associated. A child who comes to the show forms a taste, love for sports, gets acquainted with the world of entertainment culture in this way. And a child, who from the first years of life is on the other side of the arena entrance, forms there respect for hard daily work, an understanding of the circus phenomenon beautiful side value. Such a child, who has tasted the world of the circus backstage, absorbed the arena smell, will never offend a circus artist with the word “circus man”, will never use the word “clown” in a humbling sense wishing to humiliate him, because he knows that several minutes of funny grimaces are many hours of daily rehearsals, and behind a funny painted mask – the painstaking work of make-up artists.

Circus therapy as a method of the weak body strengthening and broken spirit revival

The formative and educational functions of circus art can be considered evident, both for the audience and for the art product creators. However, there is another function, not so distinct, but definitely existing, which is confirmed by certain examples. This is a particular

kind of therapy. The term “circus therapy” is used more and more in today's society. Modern processes taking place in the world, the political and economic factors symbiosis that shake society have an extremely disruptive influence on the children's weak consciousness, physically unhealthy people and personalities, emotionally excitable and sensitive, i.e. creative professions representatives. Not everyone is able to cope with the stresses that today's life is replete with. In addition to it there is personal problems complex that increases in ratio with common to all mankind problems. And for many people it becomes more and more difficult to preserve their consciousness in an intact state, to protect it from rifts and decay. For more than one year, for example, zoo therapy, dolphin one is applied, i.e. horses, dogs, dolphins, are involved as rehabilitation measures in children development as well as people recovery, who have been in a war zone or whose psyche has suffered as a result of family dramas, or has been broken by a serious illness, contact zoos are often used for the same purposes. The ethical side of the question again appears in the discussion. The circus art instrumentarium is also used for many of the goals that are set in this case. Children are involved in some of the circus genres activities, and not only for development and health promotion. Often we are speaking about the so-called "unreliable" children, i.e. the measures become corrective (for example, as in the “Upsala Circus”, operating in St. Petersburg, Russia since 2000). Children are distracted from the external factors negative influence and focus on self-realization attempt in the circus world. Some genres representatives, most often clowns, are also involved in actions carried out, for example, in children's cancer centers – sick children are distracted at least for a short time from the pain, fear and despair they have to suffer from while staying for a long period in hospital walls, often without hope for positive outcome of treatment. In such cases, this is already an influence not only on the physical development and the child's body formation, i.e. therapy for the body, but most important – the spirit strength resurrection, escapement from despair and hopelessness, the normal self-perception recovery and belief returning – in life, in the future, in oneself. Such circus therapy has different formats and a rather long history. During Second World War, circus performances were one of the ways to raise the soldiers' spirits taking part in military operations. Circus artists also toured the front alongside the fit-up theatre performances, concert crews, extemporaneous cinema showings. There were quite a lot of them – moreover, some of them left their profession and went to the war, fought with weapons in their hands, and if they survived, after the war they immediately returned to the circus. This is how the famous clown Yuri Nikulin, who fought until 1943 and invalided out because of concussion, and his counterpart, the clown Nikolai Shulgin, acted. This happened to the legendary Vladimir Doveyko, the glorious circus dynasty representative, the famous acrobat, whom the Germans called "Laughing clown": after he shot down the plane in 1945 with Goering's nephew on board, the clown image on the Soviet plane fuselage did not cause laughter, but horror and panic – the pilot was included in the list of those who was a subject to destruction by Goering's personal order. Equilibrist Lev Osinskiy went through the war with arms in hand. Mikhail Tuganov¹⁷, famous for his fancy riding, volunteered for the front immediately after the performance on the 22nd of June, 1941. But there were many artists who did not leave the profession even during the war: at the hazard of their own lives, in terrible conditions, working to the point of exhaustion. Often they had to perform for the wounded men, in hospitals, to raise fighting spirit before important battles. This became the main task for the famous athletic drolls Lavrentiy, Nikolai and Pyotr Lavrov, Boris Vyatkin, Khasan Musin, Nikolai Rummyantsev (known as Karandash), Lavrentyev and Mozgoviy acrobats, Zementov aerial gymnasts, athlete Nikolai Zherebtsov, acrobats and

¹⁷ Sobolev, Yu. Circus Arena Heroes – Heroes of the Great Patriotic War. Available at: <http://parnasse.ru/blogs/cirk-detstva-moego/geroi-cirkovoi-areny-geroi-velikoi-otechestvenoi-voiny.html>

illusionists Oleg Zhukov and Vladimir Shilinsky-Lerry, acrobat Ivan Shepetkov – one of the 28th Panfilov's guardsmen (Sobolev), who soon became the illusionist Emil Kio's legend, and many other front group artists. Their contribution to the Victory was very significant. It was probably even harder for circus artists than for other art types representatives who went through the hell of war: after all, they also had animals in their charge, which had nothing to feed. But still, plays with animals were popular during the war. The star of the legendary animal tamer Vladimir Durov, who amazed with elephants, fur seals, camels performances rose already in those years; Alexander Buslaev (Butenko) showed the audience of the war years motorsport wonders and plays with a trained lion; even a little girl, seven-year-old Valentina Lerry, who later became a famous equestrienne, demonstrated agility by dancing on a galloping horse's back¹⁸.

The Leningrad circus difficulties were especially notable – a front-line circus was founded in 1942, which performed mainly for the Northern Palmyra inhabitants, and soon front-line circuses appeared in other the USSR cities. This fact confirms the circus art impact power on the human spirit in extreme conditions, when the entertainment did not supplement but replaced bread. The beleaguered Leningrad survived only due to its inhabitant's unique courage and spirit strength. And they were given moral support by those who honed their skills during the war, all almost 900 days of the blockade. Performances were staged right during the bombing, laughter drowned out the scream of falling missiles, dangerous tricks diverted from the fact people were dying nearby. The audience forgot for at least a short time that in a day, or an hour, or 5 minutes, many of them would die, someone from a missile, someone from hunger ... Being physically exhausted themselves the artists showed those around their iron nerves, unbreakable spirit and fearlessness. People received belief. The circus also educated compassion: Leningrad was cordoned off for 872 days, the most terrible 872 days in the city's three hundred years history. Thousands of people died of hunger. But the exotic animals in the Leningrad circus not only survived but were also fed by Stalin's personal order as well as circus horses, that were not sent to the front and left in the troupe – even Stalin understood that the circus deter the human spirit from a despair. People returned to the fairy tale for a short time – the circus gave them the illusion of peace and quiet.

The challenge of existence: modern circus on the blink of extinction

Any of the arts types, especially the entertaining ones, among the instruments of its impact on the public has contact with the spectator, interaction with the audience. The circus is not an exception. Any circus genre, any form requires a public reaction, the artist has direct emotional contact with the audience, as if fueled by spectator's reaction. And some genres, such as illusion or clownery, have features of immersive shows involving the audience in their performances. Therefore, since 2019 the circus like many art types appeared on the blink of extinction – those who had been saving many people for many years from depression, moral decline, despair with their art themselves appeared on the blink of destruction. The "COVID-19" epidemic placed in jeopardy the circus art existence in principle – the performances were put on hold, many programs ceased to exist, a number of circuses, even the largest ones, were on the blink of closure. This period became an exam and a time for reevaluation for many groups. The society clearly formulated the demand for certain art types in the period when it was necessary to make a choice.

¹⁸ Sobolev, Yu. Circus Arena Heroes – Heroes of the Great Patriotic War. Available at: <http://parnasse.ru/blogs/cirk-detstva-moego/geroi-cirkovoi-areny-geroi-velikoi-otechestvenoi-voiny.html>

This was expressed primarily in whether there was a response from society when the artistic fraternity asked for help at a time all performances were put on hold and circuses seemed to be on the blink of extinction. In fact there was any support from the state machinery, regardless of which country we are speaking about. Even the most famous circus in the world, the well-known Canadian one "Du Soleil" declared bankruptcy: the circus had to make redundant 95% of its troupe – and in fact it includes artists from almost 50 countries of the world, including the post-Soviet Union, Ukrainian and Russian (Russian-speaking artists form about a third part of the "Circus of the Sun" troupe). The Belarusian circus "Dziva" stopped working completely, the Belarusian tent circus "Harlequin" got stuck in the Brest region, where it was caught on tour by a pandemic, the National Circus of Ukraine stopped acting before the public, where a new ambitious program "Africa" was supposed to start in winter 2019/2020 with the invited artists participation, whose troupe was stuck in Kiev and could not return home from the tour. Only at the end of September 2020 the Dnipro circus restored its performances. The Ukrainian circus on ice had been under quarantine restriction for six months before restoring its work. About 200 travelling Russian circuses were idle, Moscow State Circus artists, ones from circuses on Vernadsky and on Tsvetnoy Boulevard in Moscow did not go to the arena, the life in St. Petersburg circus also stopped – the strongest circus schools in the world activity was blocked. The same situation is with all circus groups in the world, which continued to rehearse only part of the plays, but stopped acting before the public.

No matter the show format – whether it is a traveling circus, tent, stationary one, private or state, whatever the program, in any case it is built on engagement with the audience. All options for replacing live contact with the audience offered by today's realities, such as, for example, the online format which is everywhere accepted as a panacea, are not suitable for the circus: one-way contact with the public is impossible in this case. The pause can be filled by the archival shows, but this is temporary cultural vacuum replacement, concepts substitution. And this is really equal to destruction for artists, for the circuses themselves: in the absence of the opportunity to act before the public, the artists not only lose their financial ability to exist, to pay back the programs – costumes, stage property, animal management, but also get out of shape, which will take a lot of time and effort in order to get back in condition. Besides, there are those forms, the circus art genres, in which it is impossible to work outside the circus, because certain conditions and stage property are required. And for circus animals, the absence of performances is equal to death – the animal must move, it must go to the arena, observe the schedule of both rehearsals and feedings. And if the artists are looking for the other ways to survive in such a period, either performing individually in a chamber format, or, for example, performing as animators, then the plays with animals have to continue rehearsals, the circus animals schedule cannot be changed. The circus that did not cease to exist even during the Second World War, which worked in besieged Leningrad under bombing in conditions of complete famine, can disappear as a pandemic result of the early 21st century.

Conclusion

The situation in which the culture of different countries of the world found itself due to the pandemic triggered to review modern society value system, methods developing to strengthen those mechanisms that turned out to be vulnerable in the face of such a danger. The changes appeared to be global – modern cultural process paradigm changed. The circus found itself in a situation where the industry had to survive. And it became clear that circus art has actually no mechanisms to preserve itself in such situations. The main task of today is their development.

But if the circus task is to learn how to survive, to keep a professional form, to invent new formats, then the state bureaucracy task is to learn how to influence the situation so that art does not find itself on the brink of a catastrophe, among the goals is the preventive measures development that allow the performing arts representatives, cultural elite not to find itself in a sad state, remaining in the profession during forced inactivity of a global scale. But the audience get to choose as well- it has to decide for itself whether the circus is in demand as an art in today's realities, whether the spectator is ready to support the circus world during periods of forced cultural emptiness, to make a request for this sphere of leisure new art product or agree to make a forced cultural hunger to be the norm.

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