



Publisher homepage: www.universepg.com, eISSN: 2663-7782

British Journal of Arts and Humanities

Journal homepage: www.universepg.com/journal/bjah



OPEN ACCESS | Research Article



Searching for Visual Ideas Through Associative Thinking and Illogicality in Circus Directing and Performing Arts

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Received Date: 17 July 2026

Accepted Date: 17 August 2026

Published Date: 24 August 2026

Abstract

The development of original visual concepts is a central challenge in contemporary circus directing and performing arts. While technical mastery remains essential, the artistic impact of a performance also depends on visual imagery, physical expression, spatial relationships, and the ability to transform familiar actions into unexpected stage meanings. This article examines associative thinking and illogicality as practical methods for generating visual ideas in circus directing and other forms of visually oriented performance. It proposes a structured creative approach in which an initial stimulus produces associations that are then transformed through movement, objects, scale, space, sound, contrast, and altered functions. Illogicality is understood not as meaningless absurdity, but as a deliberate disruption of conventional logic that allows familiar elements to acquire new artistic meanings. The article also presents practical exercises designed to develop associative flexibility and support the creation of original stage imagery. These methods are intended to help performers, directors, choreographers, and other creators move beyond purely technical construction and develop acts in which movement, visual metaphor, character, and stage composition work together as a unified artistic concept.

Keywords: Associative thinking, Visual thinking, Performing arts, Visual metaphor, and Circus performance.

1. Introduction

The development of original visual concepts remains one of the central challenges in contemporary circus directing and performing arts. Technical mastery is essential to circus performance; however, technique alone does not necessarily create a distinctive artistic work. The visual image, its transformation during the performance, and its emotional impact can significantly influence how an act is perceived and remembered (Babaeitarkami and Baghchi, 2024). Consequently, the search for methods that can facilitate the generation of original stage imagery is an

important component of the creative process. One possible approach is associative thinking: the capacity to establish connections between images, objects, sounds, movements, emotions, memories, and concepts.

Such connections may lead from familiar material toward unexpected artistic solutions. A related creative mechanism is illogicality—the intentional combination or transformation of elements in a manner that contradicts ordinary expectations while retaining visual, emotional, or metaphorical coherence. For

example, an umbrella may cease to function as protection from rain and instead become a sky, shelter, cage, character, or symbolic space. A chair may become a prison. A suitcase may function as a portal. Music may be represented visually by falling feathers rather than musical notes.

The practical question addressed by this article is therefore: How can associative thinking and illogicality be systematically applied as directing tools for developing original visual concepts in circus and performing arts? The article proposes a structured creative approach and a series of exercises through which an initial stimulus can be transformed into an association, visual image, physical interpretation, and ultimately a stage concept.

2. Review of Literature

Associative Thinking and Creative Imagination

Creative imagination does not necessarily depend on producing entirely unprecedented elements. It may develop through the transformation and recombination of material already present in human experience. Vygotsky's work on imagination and creativity emphasizes the relationship between previous experience and the creation of new imaginative combinations. From this perspective, creative originality can emerge through establishing new relationships between existing elements (Vygotsky, 2004; Usman *et al.*, 2024).

This principle is particularly relevant to associative methods. A familiar object can become the starting point for a chain of transformations because it already carries sensory, emotional, functional, and cultural associations. A scarf, for example, can initially be perceived as fabric, but subsequently evoke wind, water, a boundary, a memory, a human presence, or another visual form.

Visual Thinking

Arnheim, (1969) argued for the importance of visual perception as a form of thinking rather than merely as an illustration of ideas previously formulated in words. This perspective is particularly important for circus and physical performance, where artistic meaning frequently emerges through bodies, objects, spatial composition, rhythm, color, movement, and trans-

formation rather than dialogue. Visual creation can therefore be approached as a thinking process in itself. The director does not necessarily begin with a verbal statement and subsequently illustrate it. An image may become the starting point from which meaning develops.

The Creative Process

Wallas, (1926) described creativity through the stages of preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Although creative processes do not always proceed in a strictly linear sequence, this model demonstrates that an idea may emerge after a period in which diverse material has been accumulated and processed. Associative exercises can contribute to this accumulation by increasing the number and diversity of possible relationships available to the artist.

Csikszentmihalyi, (1996) similarly emphasizes that creativity develops in relation to existing knowledge, practices, and cultural systems. Artistic innovation therefore does not necessarily require rejecting existing forms; it can emerge through their transformation and recombination. Research into associative cognition further suggests that creative thinking may involve movement between analytical and associative modes, with associative processing facilitating connections between concepts that initially appear distant or unrelated (Gabora, 2010).

Physical and Nonverbal Creation

The proposed approach is also connected to traditions of physical and visual theatre. Lecoq, (2000) emphasized physical experimentation and the body as instruments for discovering character, rhythm, imagery, and dramatic meaning. This is particularly applicable to circus, where the performer's body is simultaneously an expressive and technical instrument. Brook, (1968) demonstrated that theatrical meaning can emerge through fundamental relationships among performer, action, space, and audience rather than depending exclusively on elaborate scenography.

Artaud, (1958) emphasized a theatrical language extending beyond spoken text through gesture, sound, movement, space, and visual imagery. Stanislavski's approach to purposeful physical action likewise provides an important foundation for understanding

the relationship between intention, physical behavior, and stage meaning. Together, these perspectives provide a theoretical basis for examining how associations can move beyond mental connections and become embodied, spatial, and visual stage material.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a practice-based and conceptual approach to artistic research. Rather than testing associative thinking through controlled psychological experimentation, it examines how principles derived from creativity research, visual thinking, and physical theatre can be translated into practical directing procedures. The method consists of three interconnected processes: generating associative material from an initial stimulus; disrupting habitual relationships through illogicality; and translating the resulting relationship into visual, physical, spatial, or performative form.

The proposed exercises function as creative experiments. Their objective is not to produce a predetermined correct result but to expand the number of possible artistic interpretations available to the director or performer. The approach is applicable to circus directing, choreography, clowning, pantomime, physical theatre, performance art, and other visually oriented performance practices.

Proposed Method: From Association to Stage Concept

The central contribution proposed in this article is the systematic application of associative thinking and illogicality as a directing process for developing visual concepts.

Stimulus → Association → Distant Association → Transformation/illogicality → Visual Image → Physical or Spatial Interpretation → Stage Concept

Stage 1: Stimulus

The creative process begins with a stimulus. This may be an object, word, sound, movement, emotion, piece of music, shape, texture, memory, or spatial situation.

Stage 2: Association

The creator records immediate associations without initially judging their usefulness. For example: Sea → waves → wind → freedom → distance →

disappearance. The objective is to generate material rather than immediately select a final concept.

Stage 3: Distant Association

The creator moves beyond the most predictable association. If an umbrella immediately suggests rain, the process may continue: Umbrella → rain → protection → shelter → roof → sky → private world. Increasing distance from the initial object creates opportunities for less predictable imagery.

Stage 4: Transformation and illogicality

At this stage, the conventional function or relationship is deliberately disrupted. The umbrella is no longer used as an umbrella; it may become the sky itself. A suitcase no longer stores objects; it becomes a portal. A chair no longer supports a person; it confines them.

Stage 5: Visual Image

The new relationship is converted into something that can be perceived visually. The question changes from “What does this mean?” to “What could this look like on stage?”

Stage 6: Physical and Spatial Interpretation

The image must interact with the performer's body and the performance space. The director explores touch, weight, scale, movement, spatial contradiction, sound, and lighting as possible means of transforming the image.

Stage 7: Stage Concept

The discovered image is developed into a coherent performance concept. The objective is not simply to produce an unusual object or action; the transformation should contribute to the emotional, visual, or dramaturgical world of the performance.

Associations as a Mechanism for Generating Visual Material

Associations are mental connections between words, images, sounds, movements, emotions, memories, and sensory experiences. Some associations are conventional, while others are personal or imaginative. In directing, the most productive process often begins when the artist continues beyond the first obvious association.

Word → Color

An abstract concept can be translated into color. Silence may be imagined as gray-white, rage as orange and black, or uncertainty as muted green and gray.

Word → Form

A quarrel may be represented as a jagged form. Memory may become circular. Forgiveness may become a descending or dissolving line.

Sound → Space

A creaking sound may suggest an empty corridor. Running water may evoke an open space. Silence may suggest a room filled with mist.

Body → Meaning

A physical position can generate meaning without verbal explanation. Standing on one leg may suggest waiting or instability. Fragmented movements may communicate panic.

Object → Story

A scarf abandoned on the floor can imply that someone has left. A chair turned unexpectedly toward an empty space may suggest absence, interruption, or anticipation. Associative thinking therefore allows an initial stimulus to travel between different artistic media.

Illogicality as a Directing Tool

Understanding Artistic illogicality

Within the proposed method, illogicality is understood as an intentional departure from conventional relationships that produces an unexpected but artistically coherent image.



It is important to distinguish illogicality from randomness. The objective is not to make a scene strange merely for the sake of strangeness. An effective allogical image retains an internal visual, associative, emotional, or metaphorical relationship.

Consider the image: Music is feathers, not notes. According to everyday logic, music does not produce feathers. Yet if feathers fall from a flute instead of musical notes being represented conventionally, an alternative visual relationship appears. The physical event is impossible or unexpected, but the image may still communicate delicacy, disappearance, weightlessness, memory, or transformation.

Illogicality as a Visual Language

Visual performance does not always require a single verbal explanation. A stage image may create a feeling that different spectators interpret differently. The director can therefore construct situations in which meaning is suggested rather than explicitly stated. An allogical relationship can encourage this interpretative activity because it disrupts an expected connection. The audience recognizes the original object or action but simultaneously encounters something that contradicts its habitual meaning. The resulting tension can become a source of metaphor.

Associative illogicality

An associative illogicality can be defined within this method as a relationship between two or more elements that do not conventionally belong together but can be connected through shape, function, movement, cultural association, emotion, or metaphor. For example, a hat and a vinyl record may share a circular visual structure. A mirror and a plate may be similar in form but differ in function. An umbrella and a satellite dish may create a conceptual transformation through similarity of shape. The connection begins with recognizable similarity but develops through functional contradiction.

Form–Function Conflict

Two objects may have similar forms but completely different purposes. A mirror and a plate may share a circular flat shape; a performer eating from a mirror creates a conflict between form and function.



Types of illogicalities in Visual Performance

Function Transformation

A familiar object is given an unexpected function: a chair becomes a cage, a coat becomes a companion, fabric becomes a living creature, or a suitcase becomes a portal.

Scale Transformation

Changing the expected size of an object can transform its relationship with the performer. An enormous shoe, miniature door, or disproportionately large everyday object changes the physical hierarchy of the stage.

Contradiction Between Movement and Space

Running in place produces a conflict between the physical vocabulary of forward movement and the absence of spatial progress. A performer may also execute movements suggesting forward travel while physically moving backward.

Contrasting Meanings

Opposing qualities such as joy and fear, tenderness and threat, childhood and death, or celebration and loss may coexist in a single scene, creating interpretative tension.

Audiovisual illogicality

Sound may deliberately contradict the action that produces it. A step, fall, gesture, or expression of anger may be accompanied by a sound that does not realistically belong to it, creating a new audiovisual relationship. For example, the sound of a whistling kettle can be used to represent a character becoming angry or emotionally overheated. This technique is commonly used in cartoons and animation, where an unrelated sound is associated with a character's emotional state to create a humorous or expressive effect.

Practical Application and Exercises

Exercise 1: Associative Circle

Develop speed and flexibility of associative thinking. Write one stimulus in the center of a page and record every word, image, memory, sound, emotion, or sensation that it evokes. Expand each association into additional branches. Afterward, select one distant association and investigate how it could become a visual stage image.

Exercise 2: Everyday Object Transformation

Select an everyday object such as a scarf, chair, spoon, lamp, or umbrella. Generate as many associations as possible, then ask whether the object could become a

character, emotion, environment, or lose its original function completely.

Exercise 3: Association Through Sound

Listen to a sound without immediately concentrating on its actual source. Ask what character, space, movement, texture, or emotional state it could represent. A creaking sound, for example, might become an old body struggling to move rather than a door.

Exercise 4: Association Through Movement

Choose a concept such as hope, fear, freedom, loneliness, or memory. Express it without words through posture, rhythm, gesture, balance, direction, and muscular tension. Repeat the task using several physical interpretations.

Exercise 5: Illogical Pair

Write ten unrelated words and randomly select two, such as clock + feathers or violin + water. Construct a stage situation in which the relationship between these elements is treated as completely normal, without verbal explanation.

Exercise 6: Form + Function = Conflict

Choose an object and identify another object with a similar shape but a different function, such as mirror + plate. Develop a scene in which the functions become confused or exchanged.

Exercise 7: Living Object

Select a scarf, umbrella, stool, spoon, or another simple object. Treat it as a living presence without adding a face or spoken language. Explore how it responds to touch, moves, avoids something, or develops a relationship with the performer.

Exercise 8: Shift the Scale

Choose an everyday object and imagine it ten times larger or smaller. Investigate how the performer's physical relationship with it changes and what emotional associations emerge.

Exercise 9: Double Scene

Select two opposing emotional states, such as joy + fear or tenderness + threat. Create a one- or two-minute scene in which both are simultaneously present through movement, sound, objects, costume, or lighting.

Exercise 10: Independent Shadow

Two performers represent a body and its shadow. Initially the shadow reproduces the body's movements accurately; gradually it responds too late, moves too early, travels in another direction, or acts independently.

Exercise 11: Unnecessary Use

Select five objects and invent uses completely unrelated to their intended functions. The performer must treat each new use seriously, as though it were completely normal within the theatrical world.

Exercise 12: Illogical Sound

Choose an ordinary action such as a step, clap, fall, jump, or gesture. Replace its expected sound with something physically unrelated but emotionally suggestive and develop a short scene around the new audiovisual rule.

4. Discussion

Associative thinking and illogicality perform different but complementary functions within the proposed method. Association expands the field of possibilities; illogicality disrupts predictable relationships within that field. The first process asks: What else can this object, sound, movement, or idea evoke? The second asks: What happens if its expected relationship with reality is deliberately changed? Their combination provides a practical pathway from an initial stimulus toward a stage image. This approach is consistent with Vygotsky's understanding of creative imagination as recombination of experiential material and with Arnheim's concept of visual thinking. It also corresponds with physical approaches to theatrical creation in which meaning can emerge through body, action, space, and nonverbal imagery. However, the proposed framework shifts the focus specifically toward the practical problem of visual concept generation in circus directing.

recognition → association → distance → contradiction → visual transformation → embodiment → stage meaning

A crucial distinction is that illogicality should not be equated with arbitrary absurdity. An image becomes artistically productive when the disruption of ordinary

logic establishes another kind of coherence: visual, emotional, physical, associative, or metaphorical. This distinction is particularly relevant to circus. Circus already presents bodies performing actions that frequently challenge ordinary expectations of balance, gravity, flexibility, strength, and physical possibility. Associative transformation can allow these technical actions to participate in a larger visual concept rather than functioning exclusively as demonstrations of skill. Further practice-based research could evaluate the framework through rehearsal experiments with directors and performers, comparing concepts generated through conventional brainstorming with concepts developed through structured associative and alogical exercises.

5. Conclusion

This article has presented associative thinking and illogicality as practical tools for developing visual ideas in circus directing and performing arts. The main contribution of the proposed method is not the idea of association itself, but its structured use in the creation of stage concepts. An initial stimulus can lead to associations, distant associations, visual transformations, and finally to physical or spatial solutions for performance. Illogicality can support this process by breaking familiar relationships and allowing objects, movements, sounds, scale, and space to be used in unexpected ways. The practical exercises described in the article show how these principles can be applied during rehearsals and independent creative work. Instead of searching immediately for a final meaning, the performer or director can first generate images, relationships, physical possibilities, and emotional responses, and allow the artistic concept to develop from them. For circus artists, this approach can help move beyond a purely technical presentation of tricks and support the creation of acts in which technique, movement, visual imagery, and artistic intention work together as one complete stage concept.

6. Acknowledgment

The author has no acknowledgments to declare.

7. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

8. References

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Citation: Slonova I. (2026). Searching for visual Ideas through associative thinking and illogicality in circus directing and performing arts, *Br. J. Arts Humanit.*, 8(4), 803-809. <https://doi.org/10.34104/bjah.02608030809>

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