

IN BETWEEN - HOMO CIRCENSIS & SPORTIVUS

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Abstract

The dialogue between art and sport became a revealing aspect of modern history. Thus, for more than 200 years, the mastery of objects manipulation by jugglers, the dizzying jumps of acrobats and the impressive balance of funambulists put circus and gymnastics in a constant and paradoxical dialogue. In this essay we highlight some historical feature with some contemporary deployment, including recent events that took place in RIO Olympic Games and the media impact in this process. Showing that there is a long, strong and contradictory relationship between sport-art (circus-gymnastics), based on a rhizomatic action of resistance, which raises the body as a catalyst capital.

Key-words: Sport; Performing Arts; Circus; Gymnastics; Professional carrier.

A long journey challenging the limits of human performance

Back to the classic works developed by Amóros in France, Guts Muths in Germany or Per Ling in Sweden, we note that the constitution of modern gymnastics was based on different performance knowledge, including those that were being transmitted from generation to generation by circus artists. On the other hand, there are several evidences that the modern circus also found in sports, gymnastics and its protagonists, possibilities to catapult their shows to all social classes, as indicated by Dalmau (1950) in Spain, Martini (2000) in Italy, Silva (2015) in Brazil, among so many other scholars. Definitely, many are the studies that have reported this close, contradictory and sometimes conflicting relationship between circus art and sport.

When the Brazilian reality is observed, particularly from the second half of the 19th century, these relationships are evident and generate multiple discussions in the political, scientific and educational field (LOPES & EHRENBURG, 2020). Mistaken are those who think that this is a process that has not reached our times. In a recent study, we analyzed dozens of ex-athletes who became professional circus artists in the last decades, concluding that this is an ongoing process, producing wonderful encounters and some mismatches (SILVA, RIGO, BORTOLETO, 2020).

In particular, the expansion of circus schools in the past decades, including the National Circus School (Rio de Janeiro / Brazil) and so many other international institutions (CNAC - France; Rogelio Rivel - Spain; ENC-MTL - Canada; CARAMPA - Spain, NICA – Australia; among many others) reinforced these relations between sport and circus.

Our studies also indicate that many of the circus companies (small or large), have been forged based on the sport-circus dialogue. In this sense, when asked about the relevance of gymnasts to the circus, the director of the Casting Department of the Canadian multinational Cirque du Soleil said:

One of the dominant sports is Acrobatic Gymnastics, simply because it doesn't require any equipment. It's a sport that brings a certain advantage in terms of choreography for creating acts. After that it goes to Men's and Women's Gymnastics, certainly Men's Gymnastics, which offers a wide scope of ability¹ (Bernard Petiot).

It seems that the secular premises remain active, placing these two contemporary phenomena face to face. Together, the *sportman* and the *circusman* make a legion of MEN AND WOMEN with performance bodies. Thus, the circus, as an art of the impossible, of flying, jumping, juggling, - in short, of the domain of the body in its multiple possibilities (BENTO, 2007), represents for thousands of people, a state of “in between”, something between art and sport, which is neither one nor the other, but something hybrid, a mixture of them.

However, we also inherited from Amorós and a legion of protagonists in the history of sport - and gymnastics - (VIGARELLO, 2002), a denialism legacy, or, in some cases, a relationship involved by tensions and resistance. That said, although there are several evidences, such as the brilliant story about the gymnast José Floriano Peixoto who became a renowned circus artist in Brazil in the 19th century (LOPES & EHRENBURG, 2020), the scientific, pedagogical and mediatic narratives continue to contribute to misinformation and reinforcement of historical prejudices. Therefore, many of the discourses that mobilize contemporary society criticize the relationship between sport and art (which includes the circus and gymnastics), failing to recognize the positiveness of this secular process.

Rio 2016 - circus performances in sports venues

¹ Available at: https://gymnastics.sport/publicdir/wog/72-77/77_eng/interview-bernard-petiot%2C-vice-president%2C-cirque-du-soleil.html

There is no doubt that the historical flow built between art and sport has been renewed from time to time². A good example are the sport mega-events, which often include artistic performances - circus - on their agenda (opening ceremonies, cultural program, etc.).

The 2016 edition of the Olympic Games, held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), was no different. The RIO-2016 cultural activities program allocated musicians, dancers and circus artists in various spaces, including some of the arenas that hosted the competitions.

In the year prior to the event, the National Arts Foundation (FUNARTE), launched a public call, hiring 10 circus shows in different capitals of the country, trying to promote art in the context of the Olympics. More than one million of *Brazilian Reais* (approx. 300 thousand USD at the time) were invested (FUNARTE, 2020). Months before the opening of RIO-2016, an international project dedicated to art produced by homeless people, was headed by the social circus project *Crescer e Viver* in Rio de Janeiro, as part of the Rio 2016 Cultural Olympics (Celebra Cultura 2016). In it, “a delegation of 18 artists, directors of NGOs and former homeless people from Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Portugal and the USA joined the local to celebrate the work in arts carried out with the homeless series of pop-up performances, workshops and debates”.

On the other hand, students from National Circus School (Rio de Janeiro) participated in different side events during the RIO-2016, including performances at “Club France”, which took place at the Brazilian Equestrian Society; and, especially, in the concert “The Orbital Choir” presented at the House of Switzerland Brazil 2016, under the coordination of the University of Music Lausanne (HEMU). The concert was reported as “It will surprise the visitors with a mix of musical performance, mechanics and acrobats. After two weeks of rehearsals in Rio, they

² As we have seen, circus schools have become meeting places for ex-gymnasts, ex-coaches, as well as countless circus artists and masters, and therefore with the secular culture of the circus. My friends Patrice Aubertin (former Artistic Gymnastics athlete and currently coordinator of the Circus Research and Knowledge Transfer Center - CRITAC, of the National Circus School of Montreal - Canada); Rodolfo Rangel (ex-trampoline world champion and teacher at the National Circus School in Rio de Janeiro - Brazil); and the dear – in moemorian - co-worker Vicente Espinoza (ex-athlete and trainer of Artistic Gymnastics in Cuba and teacher at the Rogelio Rivel School in Barcelona - Spain), are some of the dozens of examples that I could mention to give concreteness to these arguments.

will present the show twice a day from 2 to 4 August. This Swiss project was made possible due to the support of the National Circus School (RJ) and the participation of their acrobats”³.

In the particular case of Rio de Janeiro, unfortunately, it is not possible to notice structural changes in public spaces and policies, neither with regard to sport, nor to circus practice and education. In general, the legacy of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games is the target of enormous criticism, indicating that there has been a much smaller social, cultural and economic impact than was promised, whether in the macro (Brazilian society) or micro (Rio de Janeiro) scope. Nevertheless, circus and sport meet again, renewing their historical ties, and showing how each can contribute to the vivacity of the other.

The body as capital - preliminary hypotheses

The arguments presented show a long and profound relationship between circus and sport, although doubts remain about the positive dimension of this dialogue. My personal trajectory in sports and in the circus has allowed me to observe this relationship up close, and I note that after several conflicts persist, and also some superficial and prejudiced understandings.

There are so many examples that could be cited, and so different the forms of interaction created, that any attempt to reflect on this influence seems to succumb to its own complexity.

My interest to the human motricity, led me to observe that the BODY represents a catalyst element, perhaps the main capital, as Bourdieu (1985) would say in the transition made by athletes to the circus context, and also in the opposite direction.

Thus, the training, disciplines and sacrifice to which the body is subjected tends to reveal fundamental elements, for any of these practices (Stephens, 2019). I clearly remember, when interviewing the Brazilian circus acrobat, Gustavo de Arruda Carvalho, an athlete who also left

³ Available at: <https://www.swissnexbrazil.org/swissnex-brazil-goes-olympic/hemu/>

behind a career as a gymnast, as he said: one of my masters was “André Simard, a Canadian gymnast who revolutionized the circus world in the 1990s, he dedicated himself to the cantilevered trapeze and aerial choreographies, gave a new dynamic to the exercises and developed a belt system with elastic that allows the trapeze artist to be more autonomous and safe. In the aerial quadrant and double trapeze, we use an adaptation of the gymnastics ring technique, a method developed by a Russian gymnastics teacher named Yuri Sakalov, who works at the Brussels Higher School of Circus (ESAC), in Belgium” (BORTOLETO & BARRETO , 2021).

Based on these experiences, two hypotheses emerge, although none of them has been contrasted: a) the athlete-artist transition is pushed by the financial aspect, becoming a mechanism of professionalization (recognition), escaping the amateur model of sport; b) it is also motivated by the possibility of prolonging excitement⁴ (adrenaline, rigorous training; endless repetition, striving for perfection, overcoming pressure).

In both, we see a strong relationship with performance, with commitments (trips and shows - replacing competitions), and maintaining a (more or less flexible) work routine. Notably, the body is at the center of attention, highlighting the processes of physical preparation, learning and maintaining techniques, medical treatment, and, above all, deliberate exposure to constant challenge.

The role of the mass media - the promotion of the performing body

There is no doubt that the hypervisibility promoted by the mass media has been changing social behaviour, especially after the second half of the 20th century. Human performance, including the feats that the bodies of athletes and artists perform, have become the object of business for the media and, therefore, of consumption for the general public.

In the context of this essay, the role of social media grew and projected, as never before, the body capital in the social fabric. As a result, sports performances, especially major competitions, and body shows (dance, physical theatre, circus) found a lot of media reverberation.

⁴ In reference to the weightings left in: Elias, Norbert & Dunning, Eric (1986). *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.

This same media has made it more evident, as ex-athletes have occupied the artistic scene, as in the great shows of the Belgian company of Franco Dragone; in smaller circuses like Circo Zanni in Brazil or even in classic circus companies like Circus Tyhany (USA). In all of them, many bodies “jumped” from sports to circus shows, sometimes for a casual reason, and at other times driven by attractive work contracts. There is nothing more attractive to the media than showing radical changes, examples of success, although most of the time these reports (newspapers, websites, blogs, social media) fail to identify body capital as a catalyst for this process.

Rhizomatic resilience as *modus operandi*

Jan says: gymnasts can only make money if they are among the best. I, as an acrobat, play a high level sport, but I am not among the best. Still, I manage to make money. Yeah, because of the way I present myself. There is the advantage of being an acrobat and not a gymnast. (GRUNBERG, 2020 pp.61).

We invoke the notion of rhizome by Deleuze & Guattari (2002), to better understand this relationship between circus and sport and, vice versa. This option is due to the idea that the relations between art and sport represent one of the ways found to resist and keep both phenomena active. In fact, based on a sociological and, sometimes, ethnographic perspective, our studies show different technological (equipment), procedural (training methods) relations, and also on body techniques, suggesting a complex network that has been contributing for both sides. We note that old tensions are still active both in the discourse of the protagonists, as well as in the information presented by the media, suggesting that power struggles are still present in this field. With this, we see the need for more efforts by science, education and the media seeking to review their positions and recognize their positiveness.

Finally, we understand that we are facing a dialectical and paradoxical process that can be manifested by the “artification of sport” (Sizorn, 2008, 2019), as well as by the “sportification of art” (Marini, 2011). In both - circus and / or sports, acrobatic performance shows even more clearly the relevance of body capital.

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