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*SOCIOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY OF SOCIAL RESEARCH - 29th cohort*

**ITALIAN 'CONTEMPORARY' CIRCUS IN A NEOLIBERAL SCENARIO:  
artistic labour, embodied knowledge, and responsible selfhood.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the social and bodily underpinnings of contemporary circus practices, and their embeddedness within post-Fordist reconfigurations of art, work, leisure and the body. As such, it focuses on the nexus between the recent transformations of the modes of practicing and consuming circus and broader social changes, and on the processes and meanings involved in the embodiment of circus-specific body techniques.

As well as a pioneer work in what might be called the 'sociology of circus', the thesis engages with affirmed and broadly known bodies of work and theoretical debates, having its main contributions in the areas of cultural sociology, the sociology of the body and the emotions, and qualitative methodology of social research.

The research takes the northern Italian city of Turin as a significant case study, and draws on the exploration of formal institutions and modes of organisation within contemporary circus as an artistic field under construction in Italy, and of the meanings, representations and definitions of circus as a community of practice. It focuses on the many forms acquired by circus careers today, on the practical understanding entailed in circus practice, and on how it is acquired.

Data were generated mainly between January 2015 and March 2016 through document analysis, participant observation (and observant participation), shadowing, in-depth interviews, object, photo and video elicitation, and – due to my position as an insider within the community of circus practice - autoethnographic analysis.

The identification of internal and external boundaries to the contemporary circus community provides a first research outcome. Other important findings concern the interplay between heteronomous and autonomous principles in the process of construction of a circus field, and the centrality of risk in circus practices. If physical risk has been a characteristic of the circus since its origins, new forms of risk – artistic, entrepreneurial, and narcissistic – deeply affect the careers and learning processes of contemporary circus practitioners. This has important implications at the level of adequate presentations of self, of body and emotion work, and of emotional labour performed to realize and demonstrate authentic, responsible selfhood.

Finally, this study confirms the 'disenchanted effects' of sociological research, especially when conducted by a full member of the researched group. Highlighting subcultural meanings previously taken for granted implied a normalization of such meanings and practices. Wearing the sociologist's glasses means focusing on power relations, heteronomous forces, and typical, rather than unique, dynamics of interaction. Circus in this light appears as a normal quest for meaning rather than an exceptional quest for sensation.



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“Damn everything but the circus! ...damn everything that is grim, dull, motionless, unrisking, inward turning, damn everything that won't get into the circle, that won't enjoy. That won't throw it's heart into the tension, surprise, fear and delight of the circus, the round world, the full existence...”

E.E. Cummings

Why the circus? “Circus is my life” says a t-shirt I bought at the AYCO (American Youth Circus Organization) Educators Conference in Montreal – Canada, in September 2014. I started practicing circus disciplines at the age of 14: juggling, floor acrobatics, stilt-walking, human pyramids at first, before discovering my favourites - static trapeze and partner acrobatics. At the age of 17 I got my first job as a stilt walker and balloon modeller for a Christmas event, and a few years later I started teaching young kids. I have travelled a lot, and wherever I went I would make circus friends and find a space to train or perform.

Circus practice has become a sort of ‘visiting card’ to access and get involved with contexts, life experiences, and people. To say it with Bourdieu (1986) and Wacquant (1995), circus has shaped my habitus and the forms of capital I have been accumulating (economic, cultural, social, and bodily). Within specific frames, it is like an invisible “uniform” or a “skin”, in Goffman's sense (1974: 575), rooted in my “flesh”, like Hochschild (2006: 98) would put it. As a result of the mix of chance, choices, personal and socio-cultural background, and forces beyond our control characterising every human trajectory on earth, circus has become my life. After writing a PhD thesis about it, I still feel very thankful for this privilege.

This thesis is the outcome of three very challenging years. Like – I guess - every Phd project, besides satisfaction, fun, insightful discussions, new friendships and contacts, it entailed stress, sweat, tears, fatigue, a lot of work, time and dedication.

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## Introduction

“In thirty short years, circus – in its contemporary narrative-driven, animal-free form – has blossomed in Quebec to the extent that it has become a potent cultural and economic symbol of the successful marriage of creativity and, yes, entrepreneurship”. With these words circus scholar Patrick Leroux (2016: 3) starts the introduction to the book ‘Cirque Global. Quebec’s expanding circus boundaries’. The economic success of the (re)invention of circus in Quebec - underpinned by the creation of famous companies, first and foremost Cirque du Soleil, and the opening of one of the world’s best known circus schools, the National Circus School of Montreal – is testified by a “phenomenal” impact on the economy of the area, with a peak of \$1 billion annually in direct revenue, reached around 2012 (ibid: 4).

Even the well-known theorist of ‘The rise of the creative class’, Richard Florida, in an article written together with another scholar (Stolarick & Florida, 2006), takes Cirque du Soleil as a key example of “creative-content provider” (: 1809), and, together with TOHU – Circus City (a cultural pole dedicated to contemporary circus, located in the same area as Cirque du Soleil’s headquarters and the National School), as an example of business “cross-fertilization” and “a showcase for community development and technology transfer” (: 1810) in the region of Montreal.

Besides its financial success in a historical moment in which culture and creativity represent key underpinnings and drives of economic development in different countries (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011), circus in Quebec is significant of how, paradoxically, reframing circus as a form of art rather than mere entertainment can turn it into a business opportunity, as well as a “stamp of authenticity” (Leslie & Rantisi, 2016: 224) of the cultural wealth of a ‘nation’, Quebec in this case.

Like it happened in France, the early development of the circus sector in Quebec was embedded in a political context of “strong government intervention in the cultural sector” (ibid: 231), and concern for “both cultural democracy and the will to rehabilitate popular art forms” (Shapiro, 2004: 317). To mention but two significant examples, in 1979, in France, circus was transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture to the area of competence of the Ministry of Culture (Salamero, 2009). In Canada, the provincial Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec officially designed circus as an art form in 2001 (Leslie & Rantisi, 2016). In both countries, but also at the global level, the birth of the new artistic field of ‘nouveau cirque’ and ‘contemporary circus’ has started up processes of proliferation, specialization and differentiation of circus forms and institutions.

On the contrary, the announcement of the closing, in May 2017, of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which has been known as ‘The greatest show on earth’ for the last 146 years of American history, stands out as a clear sign of the decline of ‘traditional’, or ‘classic’ circus.

On a much smaller scale, the same trend is affecting the circus world in Italy. Suffice it to compare, by way of example, the critical financial situation and difficulty to maintain a sufficient audience of the successors of the last famous circus star in Italy, Moira Orfei (who

died in November 2015), and of the other Italian traditional circus families (Serena, 2008), to the form circus has been taking in talent shows, fitness centres, professional schools, dedicated street and theatre festivals and also in the 'alternative' urban scene of important Italian cities.

At the level of national cultural policies, 2015 marked a consistent shift in the allocation of public resources from traditional circus families – to which 1,5% of the Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo (FUS, the governmental funding mechanism for the show business) had been addressed since 1985 (ibid), towards 'contemporary circus' institutions, including schools, festivals, audience development projects, companies and productions. Several factors contributed to these changes, besides the opening of professional circus schools and the formalization of circus as an art form, rather than mere entertainment. Community and social circus programs have been spreading all over the country, and circus is slowly becoming a sport activity like many others for children, teenagers and adults alike. As such, what I call 'contemporary' circus in this thesis generally refers to the developments of both amateur, professional, artistic and social circus in the last decades.

How are these events connected to each other? How can circus simultaneously prove to be such a profitable business and art form, and a dying kind of entertainment? And how are facts occurring abroad relevant for an Italian case study of contemporary circus practices? Specific analysis would be required to answer these questions extensively. In this context, these cases are merely mentioned as relevant examples of epochal cultural, economic and political changes. They highlight how the success of a cultural sector can be defined in economic terms, or in relation to the official policies, or, still, to a subcultural scene, depending on the cultural, political and economic context of reference, and on the peculiarities of the historical development of the genre. In other words, the examples above effectively introduce the thesis' focus on contemporary circus as an artistic field under construction and a community of practice. As such, circus provides a significant site to investigate artistic labour and processes of embodiment and construction of 'responsible selfhood' in the neoliberal context.

First of all, as well as marking a shift in the aesthetic tastes of the audience, these facts are significant of a historical moment in which creativity and innovation represent central social values and are hailed as solutions to the crises of contemporary economies and subjectivities. Creativity has been even defined as a new ideology, in that it functions as "a strong motivational factor" for creative labourers, and a source of value for the products of the creative industries, while concealing the hierarchical, hyper-flexible, and precarious character of what is perceived as "creative and self-actualizing" work (Arvidsson et Al., 2010b: 297).

With these new features, neoliberal forms of production and consumer culture have been able to access new territories, previously preserved from the productive logic of the economy. This has blurred emotional and business relations, the domain of the arts and culture and the domains of production and consumption, the 'mainstream' and the subcultural, marginal and deviant (Sassatelli, 2007), conceptions of passion, authenticity, self-commitment and discipline, character and success.

Performing creative, 'immaterial' and 'affective' labour (cf. Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 2008; Mc Robbie, 2001; Stephens, 2012; Virno, 2004), and, particularly, 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983), has important socio-psychological implications, since cultural workers are required both to engage emotionally with their tasks, and to 'normalize' this deep form of labour commitment, distancing themselves from its emotional effects (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008). Body and emotion work are thus invested with new, foundational subjective and social meanings, both at work and at leisure. In this sense, the body becomes a site to continually search for and demonstrate individual autonomy, self-discipline and self-actualization, unicity and authentic (but also responsible) expressions of self.

In this light, the study of contemporary circus practices becomes highly relevant. Contemporary circus in Italy is currently being structured as an autonomous field of cultural production, although in constant dialogue with other artistic and sport fields. Circus artists inhabit a world still framed as separated, subcultural and 'different', but are increasingly required to manage effectively the relations with the economic field and the field of power. Circus practitioners at all levels engage 'body and soul' (Wacquant, 2004) with circus disciplines in order to improve technically, remain creative, passionate and innovative, manage precarious working conditions, and build adequate, responsible selves.

This ethnography investigates the "social and sensual logic" (Wacquant, 2004: 7) that informs contemporary circus practices, and its embeddedness within post-Fordist reconfigurations of art, work, leisure and the body.

As such, it asks a first sub-question about the nexus between the recent transformations of the modes of practicing and consuming circus and broader social changes, and a second sub-question about the processes and meanings involved in the embodiment of circus-specific body techniques.

The research draws on the exploration of formal institutions and modes of organisation within contemporary circus as an artistic field under construction in Italy, and of the meanings, representations and definitions of circus as a community of practice. It focuses on the many forms acquired by circus careers today, on the practical understanding entailed in circus practice, and on how it is acquired.

The research puzzle is rooted in more than 15 years of direct engagement, in Italy and abroad, with different circus practices – including training, performing, and teaching a number of disciplines (especially floor acrobatics and handstands, juggling, hand-to-hand, and static trapeze); investigating social circus projects and organising youth circus events; working for community organisations, national networks and international programs, and participating in meetings, exchanges and festivals.

In this sense, this thesis may be considered as the intellectual output of bodily and emotional experiences, and of a reflexive attitude through which I attempted to maintain the awareness about the embodied situatedness of my perspective, and my own performances of face, body and emotion work.

The research design highlights the nexuses between subjective meanings, social interactions, and historical and cultural contexts. It focuses on daily routines, individual representations, personal histories, the sensory and the emotional, but it also considers the struggles to control definitions, resources and the acknowledgement of values, hierarchies and roles – “the space of positions and the space of position-takings” (Bourdieu, 1993: 30) - and particularly the tensions emerging around processes of commercialization and formalization within the circus field and community. This reveals ontological and epistemological assumptions assigning central value to constructions, representations, everyday interactions and subjective meanings, but also to the biological and physiological component of bodily experience, and to the connections between the subjective, embodied and structural implications of contemporary circus practices.

Thus, the research explores expert discourses and the representations, normative constructions and experiences of circus practitioners at different levels (including amateurs and professionals, and, among the latter, artists, teachers, directors, project and space managers), and in different settings (professional and amateur schools, open training spaces, social circus projects, circus workshops and courses) in the northern Italian city of Turin. For the reasons mentioned in chapter 3, the latter is taken as a significant case study to look at contemporary circus as a community of practice and a field currently under construction in the country.

Data were generated mainly between January 2015 and March 2016 through document analysis, participant observation (and observant participation), shadowing, in-depth interviews and autoethnographic analysis. Moreover, the research draws extensively on object, photo and video elicitation, holding circus props, apparatus, tools and visual artefacts as central in the construction and circulation of subcultural meanings.

The participants to the research are practitioners of ‘contemporary circus’ forms in Turin. As such, the fieldwork did not focus on the experiences of members of the ‘traditional’ circus community. I partially accounted for this circus world in the literature review and in the historical framing of the object of study, but traditional circus mainly represents an ‘absent presence’ in the thesis: contemporary circus is often defined in comparison, and often in opposition, to it, but a substantive definition and investigation of its current situation lacks in this work.

Moreover, as mentioned above, research settings and actors are representative of all kinds of circus practice: professionals and amateurs, project managers, directors, teachers and educators. This is because the research aimed, in the first place, at a definition of ‘circus practice’, rather than taking one of the existing, contested definitions as a starting point. It aimed to identify the most relevant meanings and processes at stake in the definition of a new artistic field and in the transformations of the circus community, and how these affect individual and group careers as well as embodied learning processes.

As such, the identification of “symbolic and social boundaries” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), internal and external to the contemporary circus community, provides a first research outcome. However, practitioners’ representations, movements and careers also blur boundaries and positions. For instance, professional artists may turn into teachers during the winter months; they may perform for free when attracted by the artistry of a project,

or participate in an event just to make money. Many amateurs occasionally turn into professionals and integrate their income with paid circus performances. Social circus educators and managers – who may well be former professional performers - establish and maintain relationships with professional schools and festivals, to foster the circulation of future potential artists, or simply to provide models, references and fun to social circus participants.

The circus scene in Turin is composite, mobile, and continually changing, in terms of both key sites, actors, and core subcultural meanings. These blurred boundaries are characteristic of a developing, but still relatively small, Italian contemporary circus sector, which – depending on specific contexts, circumstances, and positioning – either follows or resists formalization, mainstreaming and commercialization.

Other important findings concern the interplay between heteronomous and autonomous principles in this process of construction of a circus field, and the centrality of risk in circus practices. If physical risk has been a characterising aspect of the circus since its origins, new forms of risk – artistic, entrepreneurial, and narcissistic – deeply affect the careers and learning processes of contemporary circus practitioners. This has important implications at the level of adequate presentations of self, body and emotion work, and emotional labour performed to realize and demonstrate “normative selfhood” (Sassatelli, 2010: 29).

Finally, this study confirms the ‘disenchanted effects’ of sociological research, especially when conducted by a full member of the researched group. Highlighting subcultural meanings previously taken for granted implied a ‘normalization’ of such meanings and practices. For instance, at the start of the research, circus looked in my eyes as representative of a peculiar way of cultivating the body, the emotions, and human interactions. However, as the research progressed, it became clear that it was embedded in and representative of widespread social dynamics. Wearing the sociologist’s glasses means focusing on power relations, heteronomous forces, and typical, rather than unique, dynamics of interaction. Circus now appears as a ‘normal’ quest for meaning, rather than an exceptional quest for sensation.

Despite its sensory and bodily roots and implications, trust as a glue for social ties has become ephemeral, careers are discontinuous rather than coherent, based on contingencies rather than long-lasting ‘vocations’, risks and benefits impossible to judge - in the circus world like in post-Fordist society at large. However, I reckon that this increased ‘affective detachment’ in relation to the circus world should not cause annoyance or hostility to the readers belonging to the circus community. It is, instead, an opportunity to reflect on one’s assumptions, and to broaden and enrich one’s perspective on the social world. More importantly, this thesis represents, to my knowledge, the first contribution to the sociological study of contemporary circus in Italy.

As well as a pioneer work in what might be called the ‘sociology of circus’, the thesis engages with affirmed and broadly known bodies of work and theoretical debates, having its main contributions in the areas of cultural sociology, the sociology of the body and the emotions, and qualitative methodology of social research.

First, the thesis provides a further empirical case of how 'fields' are structured by autonomous and heteronomous principles, positions and position taking, dynamics of distinction and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993, 1995b). In this view, circus can be taken as both a field of sport and of cultural production, but also as an 'art world' undergoing a 'revolution' (Becker, 1982). Contemporary circus can also be seen as an activity around which a 'community of practice' (Paechter, 2003; Wenger, 2010) takes shape and subcultural meanings and authenticity claims circulate.

Secondly, this research provides insights into how meaning making is deeply entangled with an experience of reality which is first and foremost bodily, sensory, and emotional. This idea that the "social agent is before anything else a being of flesh, nerves and senses [...], a "suffering being" [...] who partakes in the universe that makes him, and that he in turn contributes to making, with every fiber of his body and his heart" (Wacquant, 2004: VII) has implications both at the theoretical and methodological level.

On the one hand, it concretizes in a focus on style, attitude, and on the deeper marks left by circus practice, on body techniques, bodily capital and feeling rules, and more generally on the management of self-presentations and expressions, of one's body and emotions.

On the other, it aims to highlight strategies of analytical enquiry into universes in which researchers are profoundly, personally and/or professionally implicated. This entails designing research so that the advantages provided by pre-existing knowledge, contacts, facilitated access and understanding of specific language, meanings and mechanisms, can be maximised, while the risk of assuming terms and issues as trivial, taken for granted, 'normal', and as such undeserving further exploration and clearer definition, may be contained. This translated into a methodological approach which drew on personal bodily, emotional and affective experiences, while simultaneously deconstructing them through frequent shifts in focus, strategy and perspective during participant observations, and through comparison with the replies of other research actors, both to interview questions and during fieldwork conversations.

Moreover, this supported the use of objects, pictures and videos selected by the participants as representative of their circus practice, but also the discussion of pictures which I had selected as significant to highlight circus internal and external boundaries. Thanks to this visual support, it was easier to 'get to the point' as of whether my views corresponded to the respondents', to enable the emergence of 'surprising', rather than expected, thematic threads, and their systematic analysis and report.

The diversity of approaches and bodies of sociological work underpinning this thesis may find consistent justification in its descriptive goal, abductive approach and sensitizing employment of concepts. This entailed that none of the sociologically relevant insights was excluded *a priori*, and that the research focus of analysis was defined and clarified as the research process unfolded – from reviewing the literature, to analysing expert discourse, talking, sharing and debating with members of both the academic and the circus community, and, importantly, practicing circus with all the sweat, bruises and injuries, joys and frustrations this entails.



Circus has always been a heterogeneous phenomenon, its development tied to multiple fields. It originated in the conflation of the military tradition with that of fairgrounds and freaks; it has been framed as a business and a form of art; it used to be a closed community, but also carried important social and symbolic values; it has always deeply interlaced the professional and the personal life of its practitioners. In the same vein, the contemporary circus movement was found to have implications at very different levels, including cultural policies, relations of art and labour, the study of sport, leisure and commercial culture, the ways habitus is embodied, and how this affects careers as well as reflexive and emotional capabilities.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 clarifies the object of study providing a historical context, highlighting elements and processes of sociological relevance, clarifying core symbols and meanings of the 'timeless circus frame', and introducing the 'contemporary circus' frame. It aims, in other words, to outline the defining characters of the circus, as they have been shaped in the last centuries, and to lay the foundations for a 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) of the circus.

Chapter 2 introduces the main conceptual references employed in the subsequent analysis, providing a sort of theoretical glossary which will acquire more precise and relevant forms in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 illustrates the research design, providing insights into the epistemological and ontological assumptions and the process of formulation of the research puzzle, questions, and methods.

Chapter 4 takes the first steps into the field, outlining the situation of the contemporary circus field at the moment that research took place. In this chapter, the case of the circus space and the circus scene which represented the main sites of fieldwork provide a midpoint to zoom out on the intersecting boundaries drawing circus communities of practice and delineating circus careers across issues of style, authenticity, and values.

Chapter 5 reports insights into external and internal, symbolic and social boundaries through which the community of circus practice takes shape. Furthermore, it roots the analysis of circus careers across art, labour and leisure in chapter 6, and enables to zoom in on the micro-level of embodiment and everyday bodily interactions in the circus-specific spatial and temporal dimensions, and on the 'internal' level of the emotions in chapter 7.



## **Chapter 1: Defining circus: a state of the art**

### **1.1 Introduction: a ‘sociological imagination’ of the circus**

This chapter engages with the specialized, multidisciplinary literature on circus to introduce and clarify the object of study and the conceptual value of its history and symbolic characters, in relation to some of the main sociological themes emerging from the research. In particular, the chapter provides insights to better understand the current dynamics at play in the reconfiguration of the genre and in the construction of a circus field in Italy. The goal is thus to contextualise these processes and to highlight significant nexuses to past events, and the fundamental semiotic categories and aesthetic tendencies circus has assimilated, represented and transformed since its origins.

Far from being an extensive historical account of the circus genre, the focus is mainly hinged on its developments in the Western world, and particularly in Europe, although examples from other areas of the world will be mentioned. Despite this circumscribed focus, providing a single framework and overview is not an easy task, due to the fast evolution of the genre, to the multiplicity of the term ‘circus’, its hybrid and flexible character, which escapes labels and univocal identification, and to the recent, ‘multipolar’ proliferation of pedagogical structures, artistic developments and aesthetic trends in different geographical and cultural areas of the world (Jacob, 2001). Moreover, the circus also represents the object of a variety of academic approaches and research interests.

One of the most important, most recent changes in Western circus history occurred in the 1970s, when circus emerged as a radical art and expanded to new spaces and forms of practice. Since then, the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ circus became one of the main object of debate for circus scholars. Most of them agree on their common roots, for instance the Routledge ‘Circus Studies Reader’ depicts both traditional and contemporary, animal-free circus performance as “artistic and athletic, comic and serious, professionally specialized and community based”, as well as an always changing and very lively genre (Tait & Lavers, 2016: 1). In the working definition provided in the Reader, circus is described as:

“an art form which explores the aesthetic potential of extreme physical action by bodies (animal, human, and post-human) in defiance of cultural identity categories including species, and usually performing live with apparatus in big to small enterprises, often with costuming, music or a sound score, lighting, and technological effects [...]. Audiences have an expectation that circus offers extended muscular action and physical expertise with dynamism that exceeds social norms and is framed in ways that will surprise and excite, and circus is particularly focused on direct engagement with audiences. The skills needed to make circus are a unique blend of acrobatic and artistic and, in its immediacy, its liveness, the circus performer places herself/himself at risk, whether perceived or actual.”

(ibid: 6)

However, it is important to note how the word circus does not only refer to a performing genre: it indicated for instance a building in the Greco-Roman world, and today it can refer

to a way of doing art or business, a cultural institution, a form of social and educational work, or a bodily practice aimed at the cultivation and expression of bodies and selves. Thus, the above definition only partially captures the circus as it is explored in this thesis. While physical action, cultural identity categories, organisational forms, and risk have central conceptual and analytical relevance, the above quote assumes an understanding of circus as a form of art and (live) performance, centred on the direct relationship with an audience, rather than a contemporary form of bodily practice. In this sense, while the existing historical, critical and theoretical literature provided fundamental building blocks, a specifically relevant definition of the circus will represent an outcome, rather than a starting point, of this research.

This investigation is focused on the bodily, practice-based character of circus today, rather than its aesthetic, artistic foundations. However, the history of circus as a performance genre, and the existing distinctions - and tensions – promoted by the re-structuring of the circus field, represent fundamental starting points to contextualize the research, understand the sociological significance of the recent transformations, and make sense of the participants' representations and experiences, constructions of meanings and boundaries. Hence, this chapter focuses on the historical developments of the circus and attempts to highlight the social and symbolic underpinnings of this practice as it has developed through the ancient, modern and contemporary worlds.

As such, the chapter also compensates, at least in part, for the dearth of attention, in the rest of the thesis, for what is today known as 'traditional' circus. While travelling family-run circuses still exist in Italy, as a case study based on the circus scene in Turin the thesis focuses on the practitioners of 'contemporary' forms of circus. It includes those which are closer to more 'classic' styles, and a few artists who have been occasionally hired by traditional circuses during their careers, but it overlooks the representatives of the youngest generations of important circus dynasties – such as Orfei, Togni and Casartelli – and of the many smaller, commercial circuses struggling to survive (Serena, 2008) against a changing institutional and artistic backdrop.

Finally, the chapter introduces themes of sociological relevance as they emerge from the historical, cultural and social developments of the circus. First and foremost, the history of circus illustrates the interdependent dynamics of autonomous and heteronomous principles defining the fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993, 1995; cf. Faure, 2008; Salamero, 2009). In a Bourdieusian perspective, artistic fields are outlined through the struggles over definition and classification, that is, over boundaries and hierarchies or the "principle of vision and division" (Bourdieu, 1995: 223) between two opposite poles of the field: "the subfield of the restricted production, where producers have only other producers for clients (who are also their direct competitors), and the subfield of large-scale production, which finds itself symbolically excluded and discredited" (ibid: 217).

In this sense, these struggles revolve around the opposition between autonomy (in which legitimation derives from the principle of "art for art's sake", and implies symbolically dominant but economically dominated positions) and heteronomy (in which legitimation is favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically, like in the case of commercial or nationalistic art) (Bourdieu, 1993).

Moreover, the history of the genre is significant of the central role played by ruptures and continuities (Salamero, 2009) - and, thus, by “inventors and rebels” (Wallon, 2013b: 231) - in the building and redefinition of the “space of possibles” (Bourdieu, 1993: 64) and the “field of position-takings” (ibid: 34) in circus history:

“The dynamic of the field is based on the struggles between these [available] positions [e.g. consecrated artist vs striving artist, novel vs poetry, art for art's sake vs social art], a struggle often expressed in the conflict between the orthodoxy of established traditions and the heretical challenge of new modes of cultural practice, manifested as *prises de position* or position-takings, [which...] may refer to both internal (e.g. stylistic) and external (e.g. political) positionings”

(ibid: 16-17)

According to Wallon (2013b), being the circus not only a type of performance, but also a space for rehearsal and creation, and a way and place of life, the tension between popular origins and the longing for legitimization - between the strength of physical, visceral performance and the interpretative shift - is particularly strong: in this sense, the circus aims to keep the contraries together. In the same way as it combines fear and laughter, balance and movement, force and grace, glitter and sawdust, feathers and droppings, it wishes to reconcile lowbrow and highbrow, the need for recognition and the desire of independence, its carnivalesque symbolism and a moral and political function. For instance, in late Georgian and Victorian Britain, “the circus packaged up the vestiges of carnival within an orderly commercial space, and added feats of human discipline and demonstrations of how animals should be cared for and cultivated”, to break with the previous traditions of disorder, cruelty and roughness (Kwint, 2016).

Like in other fields of cultural production, the interplay of oppositions can turn initially minor tendencies into mainstream ones. Hence, phases in which the genre gained legitimization ‘from above’, from the political authorities interested in supporting and controlling it as a medium of propaganda or a symbol of power and prestige, took turns with cases in which formal acknowledgement was conquered ‘from below’, through struggles and initiatives of circus artists and – in an apparently paradoxical, but very ‘circusy’, way – managers, who struggled to establish their own codes.

Wallon (2013b) argues that this Bourdieusian analysis is easily applicable, for instance, to the historical cases in which circus businessmen like Astely and Franconi employed strategies to circumvent the laws attributing the monopoly of theatrical dialogue to performers on stage (and prohibiting it in the circus ring), such as installing a platform on the back of the horses. We could add many other examples, such as the propaganda staged by the Soviet Circus in its world tours in the 1950s and 1960s (Bouissac, 2012), or the cases in which royal or imperial legitimization was searched and privilege asserted through the acquisition of titles such as ‘national’ circus (school), or of systematic public funding and formal structuring of the sector (Wallon, 2013b). In other words, the dynamics of autonomy and heteronomy shape historical circus articulations of “definite contents referring to the body politics and other issues”, either unwittingly (“by conforming to the mood of the time”) or deliberately (“in the context of struggles for political awareness”) (Bouissac, 2006: 5).

The emergence of the '*nouveau cirque*' in France in the 1980s provides another significant example. This "sub-field" resulted from the drive of renovators initially pushed to the margins of both the field of power, the economic field, and the field of legitimate culture, and which gradually imposed new norms and practices, both through concrete achievements and manifestos, thus redefining the circus field (Wallon, 2013b: 232). However, as we will see, the French contemporary circus field was then re-appropriated by the field of power, supporting Salamero's (2009) argument that the circus as a social practice represents, in history, a relatively – either economically or politically - dominated field, and, as such, heteronomy has always represented a common trend and a condition of survival for this field of cultural production:

"For each circus genre, more or less strong oppositions emerge between the defenders of an art close to the field of power and the promoters of a spectacle of physical exploit, close to the economic sphere. Both these tensions paradoxically tend towards the same trend, heteronomy, the main resource for the new-comers in a field. This orientation is thus the sign of a blurred [*"floue"*] boundary of the circus field, marked by different social forms in history: from a "modern circus" close to power, to a globalized and industrialized "modern circus" closer to the demand, then to a circus of art, the "new circus" and the "contemporary circus", affiliated to the field of legitimate culture."

(Salamero, 2009: 49, my translation)

In this sense, as it is highlighted also by Wallon (2013b), the history of circus well illustrates Bourdieu's (1984) "paradox of the imposition of legitimacy", which underpins the entanglement of mechanisms of distinction and reproduction, making it

"impossible ever to determine whether the dominant feature appears as distinguished or noble because it is dominant- i.e., because it has the privilege of defining, by its very existence, what is noble or distinguished as being exactly what itself is, a privilege which is expressed precisely in its self-assurance – or whether it is only because it is dominant that it appears as endowed with these qualities and uniquely entitled to define them" (: 92).

This dynamic introduces the theme of the current, ambivalent engagement of Italian contemporary circus with economically, culturally and politically dominant values such as multidisciplinary, diversity, creativity and authenticity, illustrated in chapters 4 and 5.

On the other hand, heteronomy is a defining principle of the circus and its history not only in relation to economic success and the celebration of the nation, but also in relation to other artistic and sport fields, such as theatre, dance, and acrobatics or gymnastics. These blurred boundaries – and the opposition between heteronomy and autonomy involved in their definition - are of central interest in this research. Highlighting external influences, they illuminate, by contrast, some core characters of the form – which represent the main interests of a number of circus scholars (cf. Bouissac, 2010; Goudard, 2013; Moreigne, 2010; Stoddart, 2016; Tait & Lavers, 2016; Wallon, 2013a).

These traits emerge as symbolically dominant, or at least commonly recognized, providing substance to circus as an autonomous field: spectacularity, hybridity, multidisciplinary, a peculiar space-time dimension, mobile and indefinite careers, as well as its longing for, and

resistance to, formalization, institutional recognition, commercial success; but also physicality, centrality of risk, viscosity of perception.

As such, on the one hand this chapter provides a context to look at the structuring dynamics of a field of 'contemporary' circus in Italy. On the other, it lays the basis for a related and complementary conceptual perspective, one which sheds light on the subjective, embodied dimension of meaning making through circus practice, which represents the other central focus of this thesis.

Insisting on the centrality of boundaries as "one of the most fertile thinking tools" to capture the fundamental social process of relationality (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 169), the first part of the chapter highlights the interplay between autonomous and heteronomous principles, thus clarifying the "social boundaries" at stake in circus as a historical and contemporary phenomenon; the second part of the chapter represents a first step towards the understanding of the circus 'frame' (Goffman, 1974), as it results from context-specific articulations between "social" and "symbolic boundaries" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

I thus aim to highlight the social dynamics that bring new producers, products and systems of tastes into an artistic field by pushing the existing set of beliefs into the past. According to Bourdieu (1980), the "consecrated authors" are such because "they have become part of 'general culture' through a process of familiarization which may or may not have been accompanied by specific teaching" (: 290). In this sense, rather than an aesthetic or dramaturgical focus, this chapter demonstrates how "in the space of the artistic field as in social space, distances between styles or life-styles are never better measured than in terms of time" (ibid).

For what concerns specifically contemporary circus in Italy, the historical articulations between symbolic and social values will be investigated through the illustration of the processes of formalization of the circus field in chapter 4, and the focus on circus practitioners' representations, subjective meanings, and embodied knowledge in chapters 5 to 7.

## **1.2 Circus History: autonomous and heteronomous principles at work**

Circus skills have been practiced for centuries. The origins of the circus skills ("tumbling, ropewalking, juggling, animal training, and clowning", Wall, 2013: 43) can be traced back to prehistoric religious rituals, whereas circus as a form of performance composed by different acts first appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Thenceforth, circus has been structured mainly as a family-run business, until when, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, circus schools opened the possibility of professional circus careers to any potential artist attracted by the practice, particularly those without a circus family background. New codes, goals, aesthetics overlapped to persisting old ones. Today, besides being a profession and having gained the legitimate status of art in certain countries, circus is practiced in different settings as leisure or fitness activity, as well as tool for social or educational intervention.

Circus history meandered between marginal and mainstream, fairgrounds and opulent courts, degrading job and glorified successes, innovation, recuperation and stagnation. What is today known as 'traditional' circus, to distinguish it from 'modern' or 'contemporary' circus, derives from a kind of show which "itself was a melting pot, a fusion of the highbrow equestrians and the lowbrow fairground performers" (Wall, 2013: 116). Moreover, as well as a collection of disciplines, the circus evokes a corporeal experience of prowess, risk, and extreme physicality, and extraordinary, dream-like, absurd, adventurous and marginal worlds. While this romantic collective image persists in the collective imagination, the circus is today extensively recognized, at least in Europe, as an artistic genre defining culture:

"The circus originally was a strategy of ephemeral acceptance and precarious survival devised by ethnic minorities that were not allowed to settle for business in villages and towns. [...] In industrial and post-industrial societies the circus became progressively one of the performing arts that define culture. Its status as an artistic genre that commands respect is a recent phenomenon. Today's relative gentrification of the circus in the form of national institutions, heritage monuments, official festivals, and multinational enterprises, emerged in parallel to the perpetuation of an ancestral nomadic way of life that, for many circus families, still consists of eking a living out of the social environment by performing spectacular feats"

(Bouissac, 2010: 12).

### 1.2.1 Origins

The origins of circus-related arts and practices probably date back to ancient times: among the early types of performers, contortionists, acrobats, trained animals, and clowns played central roles in religious, mystical and shamanic practices and sacred rituals (Serena, 2008; Wall, 2013). Carvalho Ilkiu (2011) refers to scenes of bull hunting depicting acrobats in an ancient town in Turkey 8.000 years ago. Pascal Jacob (1992), a well-known circus historian, talks about the first collections of captive animals in sacred *ménageries* in Ancient Egypt, about 35 centuries ago, which had mainly the function of game in royal hunting and played a privileged role in the cult of the gods. Egyptian pyramids and graves show images of jugglers, balancing acts, and contortionists (Carvalho Ilkiu, 2011), whose role was probably similar to that of dancers (according to Serena, 2008, the hieroglyphic of the verb 'to dance' was an acrobat with a reversed body), to celebrate nature, life and death cycles, and gods. Acrobatics had "ecstatic origins" and a "magic aura" (Serena, 2008: 3): a body in a backward reversed position is unnatural and, when assuming it, human beings acquire an extraordinary character.

In Ancient Greece, artists worked mainly in the streets and plazas, including the Agora. Religious parades in 500 BC displayed hundreds, sometimes thousands of animals and actors. Both the ancient Greeks and Egyptians trained animals to perform acts or employed them in acrobatic exercises, such as bull jumping or riding: according to Jacob (1992), the taste of danger and risk – which still characterises contemporary circus - was already present in these ancient games practiced with ritual aims. Acrobats, rope dancers, contortionists and bamboo balancers were important in other regions as well, like in Asia Minor, Japan, India and China. Acrobatics, associated to the different martial arts, was part of the training for Chinese warriors and hunters, and acrobats were dispatched to perform



for foreign heads of state (Carvalho Ilkiu, 2011; Jacob, 1992; Serena, 2008; Wall, 2013), and later to participate in the 'Hundred Games' (Serena, 2008: 7). Acrobats testified the perfection of the state and the cosmos.

Later, these circus disciplines progressively acquired a more secular, entertaining or gymnastic character, losing their spiritual content, while maintaining their form (Serena, 2008). In Roman times, when *panem et circenses* was the motto of imperial politics, culture was at the service of pleasure and entertainment: together with the main attraction of wild animals, gladiators, and Christian martyrs, parades and acrobatic, balancing, and trained animals' acts were offered to the people free of charge, to seduce them and maintain them under an authority "whose strength resided more in the power and blood of the circus than in the marble of the Senate" (Jacob, 1992: 16).

These games, regularly played in Roman arenas – the most famous of which, the Circus Maximus, could host up to 385.000 people - marked everyday life rhythm and passions, sustaining a demagogic and authoritarian regime while projecting, in the shape of the building and in type and structure of the feats performed, universal order and human destiny. However, jugglers, acrobats, rope dancers and other artists were also performing in the streets. In 395 AD laws against the circus, which had become synonym of violence, were enforced also against these entertainers, and a massive migration of artists started and grew with Rome's fall in 410 AD (Jacob, 1992; Serena, 2008; Wall, 2013). These nomadic performers – named minstrels, *jestours*, *jongleurs*, *histriones*, *bateleurs*, *baladins*, or *saltimbanques* (Wall, 2013) – went thenceforth from castle to castle to entertain the nobles.

Another important phase was marked by the appearance of the fairgrounds in the X century (Jacob, 1992). These important institutions crystallized the phenomenon of nomadic life, becoming a privileged site for artists to perform. Around the same time the Roma – a caste of metalworkers and musicians who fled northern India in the XI century and led a nomadic life telling fortunes, dancing and training bears - started mixing with the saltimbanques, leading to the modern association between the two groups (Wall, 2013).

The audience changed, shifting towards lower status segments. The errant life was not easy for the early medieval performers, which had to go through wars, disease and starvation. The status of these saltimbanques was further undermined when the Church started spreading the idea that the pleasure gained from watching these performers had an amoral, demonic character. The secular power reinforced this degrading trend through the promulgation of "vagrancy laws" against the "new migrant class", including artists but also "merchants, soldiers, pilgrims who rowed from town to town in search for work" (Wall, 2013: 45) in the XVI century, and edits promulgated against charlatans, associated to jugglers and saltimbanques (Serena, 2008), and against fairgrounds, which were seen as the source of social unrest (Jacob, 1992).

Despite the heteronomous domination of the field of power, the damaged reputation and the adverse economic and life conditions, autonomous developments of what would become the circus genre can also be glimpsed from the analysis of the period. The fairgrounds became important meeting points for the artists, and in the XV century the first

big troupes of acrobats, jugglers, rope dancers, joint English and Spanish horsemen to perform outdoor or in the first theatres, such as Sadler's Wells in London.

From then on, the history of circus has been deeply entangled with developments in the sport and theatre fields, which provided sources of both influence and differentiation. For instance, the first manual entirely dedicated to acrobatics was published in Paris in 1589, and later innovations such as Jules Léotard's invention of the trapeze in 1859, resulted from the bourgeois growing culture of sport and free time (Serena, 2008; Wall, 2013), and were appropriated by the circus as central components of its body of knowledge. On the theatre front, the XVII century saw the emergence, again in Paris, of a new kind of spectacle, mixing acrobatics, rope dance, music and drama: the *théâtre forain* (Jacob, 1992; Serena, 2008), which marked the passage of the errant artists from "the street pavements" to "the fairgrounds' barracks, then in the theatres, for reasons of technique comfort and the audience's convenience" (Gaber, 2013: 59).

Thus, despite the outburst of hostility towards the performing artists, and the nomadic class more in general, the circus disciplines – in the form of both street shows and stage acts – not only survived, but acquired increasing popularity throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as an essential part of the theatrical genre (Serena, 2008), highlighting once again the dialectic and adaptive nature of the interplay between autonomous and heteronomous principles. The case of Venice, as depicted by Serena (ibid), represents a significant example. When, under the Austrians, hanging and rigging acrobatic apparatus became an issue of public order, traditionally nomadic entertainers such as puppeteers, horsemen, acrobats, magicians, contortionists, balancers, rope dancers, freaks, mimes, who had until then worked in San Marco square, were welcomed in the city's theatres.

As anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, the history of circus shows that this artistic genre and form of living has been, since its origins, a "public affair" (Wallon, 2001) heavily influenced by norms and political power, as well as economic trends, and strictly intertwined with technical and artistic developments in more legitimate fields of entertainment: when excluded or banned by urban religious and commercial institutions, the artists occupied streets and fairgrounds, adapting strategies to circumvent existing norms, either settling and constructing buildings, or travelling from place to place, working in big families or clans ready to take the road when the interest of the audience weakened. These strategies, together with the adoption of successful innovations in sport and theatre, represent the historical underpinning of today's circus flexibility, adaptability, instability, diversity and hybridity.

### **1.2.2 The birth of modern circus**

"A new sort of public entertainment emerged in London during the latter decades of the eighteenth century that eventually gave rise to the institutionalized circus form. Although not initially called 'circus', these entertainments exemplified a drive to develop new skills and capitalize on the public's curiosity and willingness to be amazed. [...] the capitalist market drives and narratives of innovation associated with modernity were embedded within the earliest productions of the circus and were, moreover, an intrinsic feature of the performance genre that came to be known as 'circus'."

Before its definitive conversion to popular, family entertainment, the circus oscillated between definitions as highbrow and lowbrow genre. The so-called modern circus was born in the second half of the XVIII century in England: in a time devoted to capital and work, and in a place where the clash between city and countryside, owners and workers, businessmen and corporation was particularly brutal (Wallon, 2001). If until then the disciplines which later would have constituted the circus belonged to the domain of the “popular art” (Gaber, 2013), Philip Astley, recognized by the historians as the father of modern circus, was an ex-cavalryman who left the English army in 1766, and that two years later started performing in his own riding school, employing a circular arena after discovering that the centrifugal force allowed him to stand on his galloping horse (Serena, 2008).

According to Salamero (2009), the birth of the circus happens within historical circumstances in which the court society values of lightness (“*legereté*”) and presentation of self found an echo in equestrian vaulting and spectacle in general. Central move in the emerging of a new field, Astley created the first dedicated space to this new artistic form, a stable, closed building with a noble name reminding of the Roman times: “*Royal amphithéâtre of arts*”, which fitted the aristocratic habits and preferences (Jacob, 1992). Payment was at the entrance, and seats could be purchased according to the spectator’s status and resources. Furthermore, Astley formalized the first circus codes: a 13-metres diameter ring, fanfares, uniforms, colour red, combination of horsemanship and clown acts, even the smell of sawdust (Salamero, 2009; Wall, 2013).

Although the term circus re-appeared only years later, in Charles Hughes’ (a former member of Astley’s company) Royal Circus (Carvalho Ilkiu, 2011), Astley’s model was exported to the rest of Europe (where he alone constructed nineteen circus buildings) - and to the colonies, facilitated by its physicality and lack of verbal language (Wall, 2013). Later on, Antonio Franconi, an Italian in exile, founded the French circus. The success of the hippodramas, patriotic plays performed in his “*Théâtre Nationale d’Equitation*”, led the managers of theatre halls and operas to appeal to the public power to defend the monopoly of their activity.

According to Salamero (2009), the construction of dedicated buildings in a context in which dialogues were forbidden on scene, and the tensions with a theatre going through a crisis, represented the first step towards the autonomization of the circus field from other artistic fields. The deconstruction of previously prevailing values concerning the relationship between equestrian spectacle and field of political power represented a second element of this process: the aristocratic and military class saw the emerging entertaining function of the traditionally noble art of horsemanship, and its mixing with popular forms such as clowning, as a threat.

However, these transformations were also in line with broader social changes which saw class walls “crumbling” and classes beginning to mix in the XVIII century: “early circus audiences included every class and creed” (Wall, 2013: 116). In respect to the circus in this historical moment, Cordier (2013) speaks about the beginning of a tendency towards a “cultural democratization”, in which a central role in enabling the access of a larger, more

diverse audience was played by the increasing employment of circus tents (which will slowly replace the stable buildings during the XIX century).

In parallel to democratization, the autonomisation of the circus also implied a movement in the opposite direction, that is, approximating courts and highbrow culture (Hodak-Druel, 2001). Again, these trends derived from the everyday choices of circus managers, concerned with the need to stick to, or circumvent, heteronomous principles in the form of codes and rules. Together with 'theatre laws' specifying regulations for each theatrical genre and space, such as the compulsory presence of horses in the French circuses until 1860, an ambivalent relationship with the developing bourgeois theatre, which saw with hostility a genre that was adopting similar buildings, practices (such as dramatization) and symbols (gold and silver colours), led to the formalisation and the recognition of the circus, once mainly a business, as a separate form of art.

Moreover, under the ambivalent heteronomous pressure of the theatre regulations in countries such as France (where in the circus dialogues and music playing were banned from the scene, and acrobatics was allowed only on the horses) and England (where the Theatre Act of 1843 allowed only legitimate theatres to represent theatrical pieces, prohibited in entertainment halls which relied on the visual and the physical), the 'traditional' circus codes - the circus tent, itineracy, the inclusion of exotic animals, economic rationalization - were fixed for the next hundred years. Circus' sensational and acrobatic acts celebrated physical strength and extraordinary skills against an ideological and political backdrop of colonialism and spreading nationalism.

However, in the same period the diverse, undefinable, innovative and quickly adapting qualities of the circus emerged as another defining character of the genre: new, successful forms proliferated, drawing particularly on gesture and acrobatic skills (Serena, 2008; Wall, 2013; Wallon, 2001), and the economic success of the variety circuit of music halls from the 1850s showed more advanced entrepreneurial models. These multiple developments strengthened the autonomy of the circus as a field of cultural production, as testified by the birth of specialized reviews, trade-unions, and associations. However, they also led to internal diversification, concerning both forms and venues of the performances, and the social status of the artists. In 1903 a circus theorist named Gerorge Strehly classified performers in three groups, highlighting an internal diversification and hierarchy: the 'proletarians' of the circus performed in streets and markets; itinerant artists worked with travelling circuses and lived in wagons; independent artists performed in elegant variety theatres and stable circuses, were hosted in fashionable hotels, travelled by train or boat (Serena, 2008).

The new image of the circus as the main form of bourgeois entertainment was intertwined with the increasing importance of free time and the consequent attribution of new roles and meanings to aesthetic values – such as the spectacular, the body and physical exploit – and social practices such as sport (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005; Salamero, 2009). In early capitalism, the cult of speed, "pleasure and excitement" (Tait, 2016: 308) sanctioned the decline of the equestrian figure, and the definitive conversion to the itinerant career (Wallon, 2001) and to the staging of spectacular and dangerous feats, shifting from the "skilful" or "graceful" to the "dreadful" or "stomach churning" (Wall, 2013: 159). After half

a century of highbrow circus, in which the circus was as popular as ballet and opera in the taste of the *haute bourgeoisie*, the rise of liberalism and capitalism marked the definitive shift of the circus audience towards the working-class.

The reconceptualization of circus as popular entertainment *par excellence*, and the current resilience of this idea in the collective imagination, is also grounded in the American history of the genre. In 1793, John Bill Ricketts – an English rider, educated by one of Astley's contemporary - opened the first circus venue in Philadelphia. By the 1820s, thanks to J.P. Brown's – a circus producer - invention of the circus tent, America went through its first circus boom. The tents opened up new possibilities, allowing access to smaller towns and further areas in the West, with the canvas rolled up in wagons (Wall, 2013).

Another pivotal character of the American circus history is P.T. Barnum, a businessman who built his fortune and became famous all over the world thanks, first of all, to the opening of Barnum's American museum, the greatest attraction in America between 1842 and 1865, which included collections of all types (he made no distinction between highbrow and lowbrow tastes), exotic animals, demonstrations of Indian dances, exposition of freaks; and then, in 1871, to the creation of the "colossal, crassly commercial, bamboozling, inspiring, joyful, simplistic circus - a three ring show of spectacular overabundance that dominated the American entertainment landscape" and travelled on railway (ibid: 194).

Others, who then became famous, adopted the same model: the big top of the Ringling Brothers at the end of the XIX century sat 14.000 people, and showed nine acts at the same time in its three rings. The 1.000 people in the staff and the 92-car train could be packed and ready to leave in one afternoon. Historians consider this period, until World War I, as the golden age of the circus in the States: in 1902, 98 circuses were travelling across the country, and the circus performers were considered celebrities, like Hollywood actors would be later on (ibid).

As we have seen in this paragraph, the ancient and modern history of the circus shows how heteronomous forces – social mobility and shifting class boundaries, ideologies, laws and policies – constrained and fostered the development of circus as an autonomous field, determining the status of its audience and artists, its venues, its aesthetic codes, political and moral contents, the structure of the show and the organisational forms. As we will see in chapters 4 to 6, this remains true for the contemporary history of circus.

### **1.2.3 The rise of contemporary circus**

After the second World War, many features of the modern circus were acquired by what came to be defined as 'traditional' circus, that is, a form of family entertainment, constituted by a series of acts and different circus disciplines (aerials, juggling, animal taming and training, clowning), composed and connected through the "multimodal" staging of risk and failure (Bouissac, 2012), presented by a ring-master which provided the sole dramaturgical thread, and characterised by a flashy aesthetics.

The circus in this period was a genre in decline in Europe, excluded from the fields of culture and the arts, and closer to the rural world or to the field of commercial show-business and

popular culture. Moreover, the circus in Europe suffered from the competition of TV, cinema, and professional sports, the closure of circus families and communities (Afonso, 2002; Caforio, 1987), and the competition of the Soviet circus, which, since 1919, was supported by the State as a form of propaganda and populist entertainment, and since 1927, when the first national circus school opened in Moscow, has been among the most advanced, in terms of technical mastery and virtuosity, at the global level (Salamero, 2009; Wall, 2013). Centred on multidisciplinary and dramaturgy, the Soviet model will influence the first European circus schools, opened in France in 1974 (Salamero, 2009).

Thus, until the 1970s, the economic field heavily determined the circus sector, sanctioning the abandonment of any form of excellence and a sort of immobility of its 'traditional' characters:

"animals, acrobats, and particularly the flying trapeze artists, magic and clowns [the Auguste and the white clown]. All around, the unity of colours, especially for the trucks, the tent, and the uniforms, with sequin, is essential. Itineracy and a 13-metres-diameter ring are also basic features of this tradition."

(Salamero, 2009, annexes: 21, my translation)

While the popular character of circus distanced it from the highbrow culture of theatre, opera and ballet, the extraordinary quality of its feats established neat differences with the field of sport. Referring to the late 1970s in Britain, Carmeli (2016) states that, while sport "has long been a serious matter" and an important source of identification and gratification for many, with a strong amateur movement, a high consumer expenditure, broad space in newspapers, radio and TV programs, "circus is different. The circus performance itself is confined to isolated, esoteric travellers, and is not regularly practiced by others. The circus is hardly presented in newspaper columns and only seldom on television programmes. A circus show will be attended perhaps once a year when it comes to town" (: 313).

Moreover, circus bodies and circus acts are not shaped and composed to be compared to other circus bodies and acts, like it happens with sport bodies and performances which are inscribed within a specific (bourgeois) social order, regulated by rules and systematically matched with other, similar bodies and performances. They are perceived as dissociated from social relations, hierarchies and from linear time, dramatizing "a unique ontological status of the circus performer" (ibid: 321), the focus being on surprise, sense breaking, danger and deadly risk rather than – like in sport – on interpretation, control, rules, and technical criteria. As such, the mastery of extraordinary feats and seduction techniques constituted an ambiguous, potentially dangerous "subversive attraction" of the circus as "a threat to the social order" (Bouissac, 2006: 5).

As for the Italian developments, while many famous circus artists in Europe had Italian origins, the circus market in Italy has never been among the liveliest of the region, except for periods of particular fame such as the fascist era, during which the National Circus of Ercole Togni produced propagandist shows (Serena, 2008). The second World War ended this phase of growth, and, except for a moment of revival in the 1970s thanks to famous characters such as Moira Orfei, until very recent years the circus sector in Italy survived mainly thanks to public funding and the lobbying action of a trade association, the Ente

Nazionale Circhi (ENC) established in 1949, which obtained the allocation of 1,5% of the Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo (FUS) to traditional family circuses between 1985 and 2016. Nevertheless, an important step towards the official recognition of the sector was moved in 1968, when Law 337 acknowledged, for the first time in the western world, the “social function” of the circus as a possibility to put together different styles and modes of communication with the audience, and an opportunity of aggregation and solidarity (CEDAC, 2016).

Until the 1970s the ‘agricultural’, separated view of the circus prevailed in Europe. On the contrary, today the sector’s development hinges upon the cultural and artistic value of the circus. As we will see, this shift signals (and can be understood only within) broader social, economic and political transformations. Circus historian Pascal Jacob identified six “circus eras”:

“[1] England, with its equestrian and military culture, reintroduced the circus in its modern form (1768-1830), while [2] France has its first heyday in refining equestrian acrobatics and introducing the clown (1830-80). [3] The following period (1880-1930) was polarized between Germany, with its introduction of exotic animals and extreme acrobatics, and the United States, with its freak shows, dime museums, and especially its three-ringed extravaganzas. [4] The Soviet Union (1930-80) introduced elite training and focused on artistic expression; [5] France pursued this artistic project and sought to give social significance to circus from the 1970s to the 2000s with its *nouveau cirque*. [6] Now Quebec, on the coattails of Cirque du Soleil’s globalized success and Les 7 doigts de la main’s circus of individualized ethos, has become the Western nation to emulate or to react against.”

(Leroux, 2016: 7-8)

After the brief overview of the first eras provided in the previous paragraphs, here we will focus on the last two. While the Soviet circus is seen as an example of technical, virtuous excellence and classic aesthetics, the cases of France and Quebec will be illustrated as main references, both in terms of cultural policy and (distinct) aesthetic models, for the changing status of the circus in contemporary society.

In France, the circus remained competence of the Ministry of Agriculture until 1979, when the socialist Minister of Culture and Communication Jean-Philippe Lecat obtained the tutelage of the sector and started its public funding through an Association for Circus Modernization. His successor, Jack Lang, went further and declared the circus of Alexis Gruss (which opened, together with Annie Fratellini’s school, in 1974) ‘national circus’ in 1982, and, in 1985, founded the *Centre National des arts du cirque* (CNAC), which changed the interpretation and writing of the ‘*nouveau cirque*’, favouring the encounter with the practitioners and audiences of other kinds of performing arts, gaining global fame within the circus environment (Wallon, 2001), and starting a process of re-legitimation of the circus genre (Cordier, 2013).

These transformations resulted from the ‘68 wave of social uprisings against the bourgeois spectacle and traditional circus. Happenings, performances, street theatre (including living theatre and the theatre of the oppressed more in general) belonged to the artistic landscape of the time, and in this line the perceived marginality of the circus framed it as a

free medium to express anarchist ideals, in which physicality, adaptability to different settings, and direct contact with the audience granted openness and accessibility.

This political and militant dimension later faded with the 'contemporary' circus' insistence on aesthetic research or dramaturgy (Bouissac, 2006; Moreigne, 2010; Salamero, 2009, annexes). Also Cordier (2013) describes how contemporary circus developed in France both in line with and in opposition to theatrical genres, as it resorted to both dramatization and choreographing, and democratization and popularity, as it is the case of other popular art forms undergoing "multiple, interdependent processes of institutionalization" in a political attempt of rehabilitation of popular culture and promotion of cultural democracy (Shapiro, 2004: 317).

The same happened on the other side of the ocean, in Quebec. Also here, the 60s were a period in which "late avant-garde performance traditions found their way into protest politics [...] with highly theatrical and media-savvy tactics" (Spiegel, 2016: 267). The contemporary circus movement originated from radical street performers and was later structured thanks to the opening of the National Circus School in 1981 in Montreal, and the extensive funding of the government of Quebec, in a moment in which French Canadian identity was "a hot topic" (Wall, 2013: 261):

"Quebec's Quiet Revolution throughout the 1960s famously sparked a popular, economic, and political commitment to the protection and expansion of Québécois culture and its expressions. In this mobilization for a strong, secular, francophone culture, the provincial government committed to funding the growth of local arts".

(Spiegel, 2016: 267)

However, differently from its status as legitimate art in France, in Canada *cirque* became mainly the synonym of a successful multinational company "that practically cornered the "new circus" market on a global scale" (Bouissac, 2006: 7) – Cirque du Soleil. The latter is now a powerful symbol of the convergence between creativity and entrepreneurship, (Leroux, 2016), offering "a fascinating paradox":

"Quebec circus [...] is both athletic and aesthetic. It draws on European circus tradition and *commedia dell'arte* tropes, yet only fully came into its own when it sought to break away from explicit circus codes, drawing on the vocabulary of theatre and dance. It stems from a society much concerned about its distinct culture and linguistic survival [...]. In a sense, circus is very much an incongruous cultural and economic export for a nation whose very existence reposes on these distinctions and its differences from forces of dominance."

(ibid: 8).

In Italy, a large movement against the employment of animals in the circus has recently challenged the survival of 'traditional' circuses in the peninsula. On the other hand, the first Italian 'contemporary' circus productions were not particularly successful, despite the efforts of the *Biennale di Venezia* and the Brescia Festival of contemporary circus (2000-2008) (Jacob, 2001). As we will see in chapter 4, the construction of an Italian contemporary circus field is an ongoing process.



### 1.3 Circus frames: perception and representation of the “timeless” circus

The macro-sociological perspective of the previous paragraphs is helpful to bring into focus how the historical developments of the circus are inscribed within a specific “mood of the age” (Bourdieu, 1993: 32). Circus semiotics scholar Paul Bouissac (2010), on the contrary, sees circus arts as cultural events, not only grounded in historical societal and cultural forces and forms, but also in “human physiology and psychology” (: 177). While the focus of this sociological study cannot be placed on the psychological interpretation of the circus phenomenon, Bouissac’s semiotic perspective sheds light on aspects which necessarily remain overshadowed within the Bourdieusian interpretive framework, in which art represents an interesting object of study due to its embeddedness within overlapping fields’ forces, struggles, hierarchies and structures, and to the artistic implications of specific social and cultural contexts. Unquestionably useful, this perspective overlooks the analytical relevance of understanding performing art as an opportunity to capture the ‘residue’ of meaning that escapes macro-sociological formalisation and analysis.

In this paragraph a semiotic approach represents the starting point to highlight particularly salient symbolic categories, and their role in understanding the “capacities which define humankind” (ibid: 75), communication processes and social life, and underpins a shift towards a more micro level of analysis. Circus practice is seen as rooted “in our deepest evolutionary past”, relying on “actions that were necessarily vital for the common ancestors of all primates who are generally considered to have been social tree-dwelling mammals” and “fossil behaviors and fundamental potentials that a determined training can refine” (Bouissac, 2006: 3). Together with the fundamental human functions of motility and mobility (Bouissac, 2010), these core actions include the negotiation of social situations. This micro-level of analysis enables to focus on issues of perception and representation which underpin the definition of the circus as such, contributing to the clarificatory goal of this chapter, and introducing the debate around different notions of circus authenticity tackled in the following chapters.

Without untying the symbolic relevance of the semiotic and aesthetic categories defining circus from their historical context, the interactionist perspective claims that the “biological relevance of circus performances” (Bouissac, 2010: 28) is rooted in micro-sociological communicative processes, which “embody the values of the society in which they are perpetuated, and often reflect cultural changes and social tensions while trying to symbolically negotiate and overcome such disturbances” (ibid: 163). Circus stages cognitive and social categorizations concerning death, failure and success, specific bodies and notions of otherness. The semiotic perspective does not assume “that circus artists possess an explicit knowledge of tacit cultural rules when they elaborate the structure and staging of an act”, but establishes a significant nexus between the circus progression “by trial and errors” and cultural and social pertinence (ibid: 99-100).

Goffman (1974) defines “primary frameworks” as a tool through which individuals orientate themselves and act in the social world, referring hence to both the “principles of organisation” which govern social events and “our subjective involvement in them” (ibid: 10-11):

“When the individual in our Western society recognizes a particular event, he tends, whatever else he does, to imply in this response (and in effect employ) one or more frameworks or schemata of interpretation of a kind that can be called primary. I say primary because application of such a framework or perspective is seen by those who apply it as not depending on or harking back to some prior or “original” interpretation; indeed a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (: 21).

Drawing on Goffman’s (1974) concept of “primary framework” (see also paragraph 2.4), we could thus identify two different ‘circus frames’: in the first one – which, following Bouissac, I will name the “timeless” circus - meanings are rooted in core, invariable human competences and symbolic functions of “extreme balancing, hanging, jumping, catching, lifting, and subverting through the visual and musical forms” (Bouissac, 2006: 9). The timeless circus frame concerns the performative nature of the circus, it focuses on staging and perception, on the relationship between artists and audience. It constitutes a “primary framework” both for the members of the circus community and for the general audience.

The second frame may be defined as the ‘contemporary circus frame’, and it focuses instead on meaning making as related to the “cultural and ideological language” (ibid) specific of the historical context and socio-cultural conditions at stake. It extends from the performance to a much broader space of circus practice, deeply entangled with social space at large. However, it is also recognized mainly by the members of the circus community, and demands a competent – rather than mass – audience, especially in countries like Italy in which the story of circus as an artistic genre is very recent, definitions are contested, and a multiplicity of circus discourses circulate (see chapter 5).

While the second frame is more relevant for this thesis’ analysis of different practices and genres in today’s circus, it is important to account for what, historically and symbolically, has turned the circus into a clearly recognizable object in popular culture.

The first frame is underpinned by the observation that perception relies on the “physical and moral empathy” (Bouissac, 2006: 2), activated by mirror neurons, which lies at the very basis of human sociality and enables the visceral resonance and the cognitive understanding of circus actions and structures. In this view, circus’ timelessness is also underpinned by the bodily basis of this empathic perception, which explains the seductive power circus performers exert on the audience, often beyond artistic skills, moral contents and educational purposes.

The timeless circus frame blurs “natural” and “social” frameworks (Goffman, 1974: 22), as well as “theatrical” ones (ibid: 124). This is because it plays ambivalently with fiction and reality, failure and success, actual and staged risk, shaking assumptions concerning the presence or absence of a “willful agency” (ibid: 22) in control of the outcomes of the staged events. Moreover, the line between the “staging area” and the “audience region” which characterizes the theatrical framework and establishes that “the audience has neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage, although it may express appreciation throughout in a manner that can be treated as not occurring by the beings which the stage performers present onstage” (ibid: 125), may often be crossed in circus performances: clowns may cross the ring’s boundaries to interact with

the audience, and members of the audience may be invited to take part in the staged acts; danger is real, the audience's appreciation is searched for and acknowledged by the circus artists, and applauses even mark the rhythm of the acts and the whole show.

The timeless circus is thus a social framework in which natural frameworks (for instance, gravity and anatomy) are continuously violated and reasserted; and it is a theatrical framework in which the audience is demanded active, visceral participation, in which fiction is never completely untruth, and in which roles are often questioned. Moreover, the "junctures" (ibid) at which the audience is expected to applaud are not as strictly regulated as in theatre: they are not confined to the end of an act or a show, but are allowed any time the audience appreciates a 'trick', whether this corresponds or not to the performers' expectations.

Hochschild (1983) adds to this perspective by placing emphasis on the nexus "between social rules and private experience" (: 228), and on the strategies that can be put to work to manipulate (provoke, minimize, intensify) the emotions, such as reframing of a situation as an "accident" or an "incident", in order to "avoid emotions inappropriate to a living room full of guests" (: 112) or, in this case, a circus full of spectators. Some of the circus' "typical actions" (: 177) can be effectively connected to the concepts of 'risk', 'action', 'character', 'failure', 'anxiety', which play a central role in these authors' theoretical approaches.

Moreover, this view of reality as a social performance highlights the relevance of the distinction between a front region and "a back region, closed to audiences and outsiders, [which] allows concealment of props and activities that might discredit the performance out front. In other words, sustaining a firm sense of social reality requires some mystification" (MacCannell, 1973: 590-591). In turn, this introduces the concept of 'authenticity' as a construction and a process, which highlights how the attempts to fix the 'authentic' qualities of an individual or a subculture always result, at least in part, in faking, acting or cheating to resemble an authentic construction, as it is represented and shared by the participants in a culture or subculture.

In the following paragraphs, I will focus on those traits in reference to which authenticity is "staged" (MacCannell, 1973) in circus, highlighting the fundamental elements of the timeless circus frame: multidisciplinary; multimodal staging of risk and failure; physicality; spatio-temporal separation; representations of otherness. It is important to remind that the timeless circus frame here is understood mainly as a type of theatrical framework, that is, involving the perspective of an audience, rather than as a practice. While the following chapters will give central importance to the practitioners' experiences, I reckon that this chapter's task of clarifying the object of study can be achieved only as long as the circus in its original meaning of performing genre is explicated.

### **1.3.1 Multidisciplinary**

According to Bouissac, the peculiarity of the timeless circus frame is rooted, first and foremost, in the ancestral underpinnings of this performing genre. The building blocks of circus are

“a set of typical actions that can be assumed to have been essential for human survival in the deep time of the species when extreme situations offered constant challenges not yet mediated by cultural artefacts. Such situations are now modelled in the circus ring, mostly in the form of devices (e.g. circus acrobatic apparatuses) and call for the demonstrated capacity of surviving the dangers they imply through appropriate actions. Each one of these actions forms the core of a circus specialty and they are often combined in particular circus acts.

These core actions include (1) balancing and progressing on narrow surfaces; (2) grasping hanging supports that prevent deadly falls; (3) clearing obstacles by jumping or climbing; (4) throwing or catching objects in a way that allows a person to reach targets or keep a number of valuable items intact; (5) controlling animals both to exploit the resources afforded by some and neutralize the aggression of predators; and, (6) no less important for a social species, negotiating social situations.”

(Bouissac, 2006: 1)

The first five of these typical actions underpin the multidisciplinary of the circus, and are in Bouissac’s view the heredity of ancestral human functions of “mobility and motility”:

“Thus *keeping one’s balance* in spite of drastic variations of the surface upon which mobility is required, *grasping and holding the grip* in order to prevent a fall when the ground is failing beneath one’s feet, *clearing obstacles* that may be gaps or large objects which introduce discontinuities or extreme variations of level into the environment, *throwing and catching implements* and, finally, *controlling predators* form the five basic competencies of our primate heritage upon which all subsequent developments are built”.

Bouissac (2010: 74)

The sixth one relates the circus to salient social contexts and interaction patterns. Thus, mobility and motility functions, the manipulation of the emotions and patterns of social interaction are strictly entangled in circus representation and perception.

Multidisciplinary is partially countered in the contemporary circus frame, since practitioners are defined as such even if they are specialized in merely one of the disciplines which compose the genre: acrobatics (including floor and aerial, individual, duo or group practices; contortion; Cyr and Russian wheel; handstands and trampoline); clowning; juggling; balancing (including props such as stilts, unicycles, rola bola and rolling globes, and apparatus such as tight and slack ropes and wires). In any case, in both frames the practice of circus is defined in strict relation to specialization in the use of certain props, objects and apparatus, which define the different disciplines, and which, in turn, become personalized as they are often adjusted to the size and preferences of the artist.

### **1.3.2 The multimodal staging of risk and failure**

Another central feature of the timeless circus is the multimodal staging of risk and failure. Behind the “seemingly effortless skills” practiced in circus there is an “incalculable amount of effort, embarrassment, and pain” (Wall, 2013: 27) and a full, complete way of engaging the body in all its parts - joints, flesh, muscles, bones, skin, breath, thoughts, ideas, images, emotions. There is, at least among those who choose the circus art as a profession, a “rabid

dedication" (Ibid: 9), "an impulse", a sense of urgency, a strongly persuasive, deeply rooted force, "passion" (Petit, 2014). This is needed as in circus one is constantly pushing physical limits, challenging natural tendencies, self-imposing bodily attitudes and gestures which would elsewhere be defined as extreme, dangerous, or at least awkward.

This 'real' engagement of the circus body with challenges and risks, together with some features of traditional circus performances which are still strong in the collective imagination (for instance the use of lighting which never fades) underpin the common assumptions that the circus – differently from the theatre – is "true and genuine" (Bouissac, 2012: 199), that physical action and dexterity cannot be faked and hence there is no distinction between fiction and reality, between the dimension of dream and everyday life, thus relativizing the notion of representation (Lachaud, 2001; Serena, 2008). The centrality of 'real' risk and danger contributes significantly to this aspect (Goudard, 2013).

However, because they make performances credible, risk and failure are often staged in the circus, underpinning another commonplace, that the circus is a world of lies, illusion and deception (Bouissac, 2010). The audience's willingness to believe the reality of the performance turns "catastrophic outcomes" into something "feared and desired at the same time" (Ibid: 199). While the "performance 'frame' [...] works to distance the audience from what happens inside its frame and thereby to relieve them of responsibility for what goes on inside it" (Stoddart, 2016: 16), "negative experiences" (Goffman, 1974) are also often staged in the circus, contracting and expanding periodically the circus performance frame and regularly confronting the audience with "the actual existences of the performers in moments of danger in which the impact of the show depends on the audience's recognition of the performer's proximity to human extinction, rather than merely untruth" (Stoddart, 2016: 16).

In this sense the relation between illusion and reality is an ambiguous one; the staging of risk and failure in the circus plays with (and exploits) this ambiguity, relying on the audience's perception of the signs of representation and of the non-representative elements. Circus' multimodal discourse relies on the staging and framing of feats "which cause wonderment and embody fantasies" (Bouissac, 2012: 200) on a scale of feasibility organised along sets of opposite values (possible VS impossible, and doing VS non-doing), employing verbal and nonverbal (musical, visual, etc.) modifiers.

This aspect of circus is complicated within the contemporary circus frame. Although physicality and risk still play a prominent role in circus' attractiveness, after the 'representational turn' in contemporary circus, performers became 'circus actors' and started playing the role of characters (David, 2013). This entails that the relevance and authenticity of a contemporary circus performance is judged not solely in relation to the unpredictability of challenging acts, but also to the emotions, feelings, and stories staged by the performer.

### **1.3.3 Physicality**

Thirdly, circus gives prominent value to embodied – rather than theoretical – knowledge, and to bodily rather than cognitive understanding. This is a fundamental character of the

circus, both within the timeless circus frame, in which circus physicality has a metaphysical vocation (David, 2013) to establish symbolic connections to the extraordinary and superhuman, and in the contemporary circus frame, in which the body becomes a unique and intimate (Moreigne, 2010) raw material to realize subjectivity as a project.

The “carnal power” of the circus (Lachaud, 2001: 140) underpins modern and contemporary forms of circus alike, while drawing on different conceptions of the body. If in modern times the circus was the site of the extraordinary body, today “flesh has become a shadow” (Fiedler, 2009), an image, a material to shape through disciplined practice and determination. The circus body, thanks to institutional and ideological reconfigurations, has become something accessible, an opportunity to show character and enjoy life.

Circus performances exploit and manipulate “cultural beliefs about nature, physicality and freedom” in a peculiarly effective way: circus is enjoyed ‘somatically’ and contingently (Tait, 2016), it is “viscerally thrilling rather than cognitively understood” (Tait, 2005: 6). Patterns of perception and representation in the circus rely on specific cultural meanings and embodied learning as well as empathic understanding, “activating deep layers of meaning, thus creating emotions that transcend our capacities for articulate expression” (Bouissac, 2010: 99), and entangling “cognition and emotion” in the experience of a circus act (ibid: 24).

#### **1.3.4 Spatio-temporal separation**

Circus practices and performances involve a sense of time and space which is different from ordinary social conceptions. This was achieved through the creation of a “permanent and dedicated” space (Jacob, 1992: 22) – the ring invented by Astley - which establishes an inedited relation between the scenic space and the audience and persists in today’s performances, training spaces and festivals.

Spatio-temporal meanings are produced through relations of spatial opposition, drawing external and internal, social and symbolic boundaries (such as urban VS circus space, performance space VS audience and the private space of the circus population; and, within the tent, a circus ring constituted by inside VS outside, centre VS periphery, diametric VS circular movement, horizontal VS vertical plane, Bouissac, 2010: 14). And through overlapping conceptions of a ‘cyclic time’ – in the repetitive structure of the acts and the shows (Goudard, 2001) - and of a “time of actions” (Bouissac, 2010). In circus practice, the latter resides in the awareness about spatial arrangements, in the ability to improvise and act in case of incidents, to avoid accidents, to feel (or communicate) pleasure and emotions, to interact with the audience (Moreigne, 2001, 2010).

The ‘spatio-temporal bubble’ created by circus shows and festivals resembles the “magic circle” created by game settings as a “finite space with infinite possibility” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 3), in which specific rules are followed and margins of free responses are accorded to the players (Caillois, 2001), opening up opportunities to create an “absolute present” (Sassatelli, 2010: 122) and experience the “holistic sensation” of the “flow state” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

### **1.3.5 'Otherness'**

Circus plays an important role in fixing, reproducing or disrupting social and symbolic boundaries and identities (for instance, ordinary/extraordinary, human/superhuman, as well as gender and racial boundaries) embedded in its specific historical context: "physical action can present visualizations of power that triumph over social structures [...] it can be disruptive of hierarchies" (Tait, 2005:150). As such, it can dissolve social identities (Bouissac, 2010) and problematize the ontological basis of human identity (Carmeli, 2016).

The concern with diversity, otherness and their representation is a 'timeless character' of the circus. Thus, the 'freak shows' were grounded in the fact of European cultures being "confronted by otherness as colonial empires and technological innovations kept expanding" and in the need of "an institutional locus where novelty could be assimilated at a glance by the masses, in a manner such that its potential disruptiveness could be ritualistically controlled" (Bouissac, 2010: 71).

On the other hand, today's blurring of gender and sexual binaries through the undifferentiated investment in techniques (although some techniques remain traditionally masculine or feminine, e.g. juggling and contortion) and roles (for instance, while still fewer than men, women are increasingly visible as clowns or porters, which are traditionally male roles) are underpinned by new conceptions of gender and sexual difference (Sizorn, 2016), contemporary dynamics of othering based on culture and 'style' rather than the biological body (Ahmed, 2000), and the neoliberal marketization of difference (Lazzarato, 2006).

As well as staging otherness either in support of or in opposition to the collective imagination, the circus as a closed community of life and work, and as the art of performing extraordinary feats, also represents 'an other'. Within the contemporary circus frame, the ambivalent relation of circus performances to diversity underpins one of the supporting arguments of social circus. Framing the circus as a home for the different, the marginal and the deviant enables social circus practitioners to justify and spread the use of circus as a tool for social work in disadvantaged contexts, in which social and cultural diversity often represents a challenge for social cohesion, inclusion and participation (see paragraph 1.4.1).

### **1.4 Defining the 'contemporary circus' frame**

In the specialized literature and common understanding of contemporary circus practitioners, the contemporary circus frame is defined in opposition to a likewise heterogeneous and fluid idea of 'traditional circus'. If contemporary circus practitioners are usually affectively attached to the central components of the timeless circus frame outlined above, traditional circus instead inspires boredom and annoyance, when not hostility. The differences between traditional and contemporary circus can be simplified and summarized in binaries such as presence VS absence of animals; assemblage of acts VS theatrical approach; emphasis on danger and prowess VS emphasis on artistry, research and hybridity of art forms; closure VS accessibility; unique, dedicated space VS proliferation of venues; fear, laughter and amazement VS emotional complexity and authenticity (Bolton, 2004; Guy, 2015; Serena, 2008; Wall, 2013). These binaries are "inaccurate and

restrictive” (Bolton, 2004: 144), and shall as such be taken as a superficial scheme providing a partial account of the historical shift from ‘traditional’ to ‘new’ or ‘contemporary’ forms. Nevertheless, these distinctions have analytical relevance if the dialectic relationship between “social” and “symbolic” boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) is taken into account.

In the documentary *‘Esthétiques du cirque contemporain’*, Guy and Rosemberg (2007) define six tendencies of contemporary circus. Three of them concern the evolution of the genre: the circus tent became a choice, and, generally speaking, a minor choice; rather than seeing the circus as a composite genre, each circus discipline has been gaining autonomy, and the majority of contemporary circus performances displays only, or mainly, one discipline; the ‘outer’ circus: following a tendency characterising all contemporary artistic performances, the circus is an increasingly hybrid show, which requires to mix artistic competences once clearly separated (circus techniques with theatre, dance, video, cinema, puppets, plastic arts, etc.), and blurs codes as soon as they are defined.

Three other tendencies concern the evolution from the artistic point of view: the ‘social calling’, through which art has regained the social and political role of informing, spreading awareness and fostering reflections, through the direct encounter with the spectators; a new form of humour, performed by a diversified range of comic figures, from cruel clowns to burlesque; and, finally, the tendency towards “graphic movements”, in which the visual, choreographic, and bodily aspects (fluidity, form, beauty, bodies as raw material and starting point for creation) prevails on the idea of performance as display of skills and prowess (Guy, 2015; Teruzzi, 2015).

Despite this generic definition, Guy (2015) is reluctant to draw clear-cut boundaries around the notion of contemporary circus. In this view, the definition of circus in general and of contemporary circus in particular can be seen as a merely political and economic stake, determining the work and income of policy-makers, show businessmen, cultural organisers, promoters, and journalists, as well as the performers’. In his view, the building of internal and external boundaries affects the commercial or legitimate circus productions, rather than the ‘circus art for circus art’s sake’, in which artists’ creativity continuously innovates and escapes labels and conventions, showing that there is the same level of diversity within the genre, than between this and other forms of performing arts.

This consideration is partially contradictory, in that this ‘free’ creativity is possible only within specific political and economic contexts – in the case of France, the system of the *intermittence du spectacle*, which, especially if compared to other cultural-political approaches, recognizes the figure of the (performing) artist and grants them relatively good (less precarious and uncertain with respect to other countries) conditions of living and work, or, at least, the possibility to count with a stable minimum wage.

In other words, heteronomy underpins the definition of French circus as a field of legitimate culture and its relative autonomy from the field of power and the economic field, re-asserting itself as a common trait in circus history (Salamero, 2009). In countries like Italy, where the field of circus is not as clearly defined, artists have to mediate with the constraints of the economic field, with the “subfield of large-scale productions” or the pole



of “commercial art” (Bourdieu, 1995b), and with shorter-lasting, project-based public funding and political categories.

Moreover, the contested character of the social boundaries of the circus should not neglect the strong symbolic value of the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ circus, as it is asserted and questioned in the existing circus literature and expert discourse, and in recent research work (cf. among many others: Garcia, 2011; Guy, 2001; Moreigne, 2010; Purovaara, 2016; Salamero, 2009; Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011; Sizorn, 2016; Wallon, 2013a). This conceptual distinction provides a central symbolic resource, and has, as such, an important role “in creating, maintaining, contesting or even dissolving institutionalized social differences” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 168).

As we will see in chapter 2, these authors define “symbolic boundaries” as “necessary but insufficient” conditions for the existence of social boundaries (ibid: 169). The history of the circus highlights the dialectic relationship between social and symbolic boundaries, which pattern social interaction and shape social fields, careers and subjective experiences alike: the distinction between circus and other theatrical or performing genres, and the freedom of creation and representation, has been continuously asserted, shifted, contested, violated, reproduced and constraint, since the invention of modern circus.

Traditional and contemporary circus represent both symbolic and social categories, as they provide important sources of individual and collective identification, of processes of differentiation and exclusion, and of objectified, official labels which structure the access to working opportunities, funding schemes, official legitimization. On the one hand, the conflict between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ circus is underpinned by a changing space of possibles and position-takings (Bourdieu, 1993) in relation to the field of power: for instance, while traditional circus families accuse the gentrification of the ‘new circus’ as a tendency towards the interests of the fields of power and official arts, representatives of the ‘contemporary’ circus movement neglect ‘traditional’ circus for being merely conventional (Wallon, 2013b).

On the other, the attention to the symbolic dimension of boundaries underpins the conceptual focus on subjectivities and identities, the simultaneously powerful and ephemeral nature of subjective and collective meanings and representations. In this sense, Lamont & Molnár's (2002) approach is relevant to this thesis, which, as chapter 3 illustrates, assumes and highlights a strict nexus between the structural and the subjective levels of social life.

#### **1.4.1 Other ways of practicing circus: the social, educational and recreational movement**

Besides the legitimisation and formalisation of circus as a form of art and a profession, the contemporary circus frame includes the recent developments of circus as a leisure, educational and social activity. Intertwined processes related to art for social change, informal education, but also the “commercialisation of discipline and fun” (Sassatelli, 2010) and the pluralisation of sport as an experience of freedom and self-expression (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005) underpin the spreading of social, youth, amateur and fitness circus.

The first of these processes is related to the above-mentioned perception of circus as an open and accessible tool for political and social engagement in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. More recent developments of these trends may be found in the visibility of circus performers in demonstrations, protests, and events, such as Carnival Carmagnole in rural Quebec (Spiegel, 2016), in social movements and activist groups, such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, and in forms of “radical street performances” such as Circus Amok in New York, which – drawing on the centrality of ‘otherness’ in the timeless circus - “makes a spectacle of its performers’ differences” while showing that “the very people who might be labelled freaks, from bearded lady ringmaster to evening-gowned male performers, are revealed to share many of the same concerns as their urban spectators via the lively critique-as-circus that ensues” (Sussman, 1998: 262; see also Sussman, 2016). While only secondary attention is addressed to these phenomena in this thesis, common groundings may be found with what in chapter 5 is named ‘alternative’ circus.

Moreover, the above perception of circus as a tool of social transformation underpins what is today known as ‘social circus’, (more or less) formalized projects offering circus activities to “various at-risk groups living in precarious personal and social situations” (Cirque du Soleil, 2014), with goals of personal and community development rather than the training of professional artists. As such, circus disciplines are employed to enhance self-esteem and trust in others, creativity, participation, and social cohesion, wishing “to equip...participants with useful skills for every-day life” (Dubois, Flora, & Tollet, 2014).

The situations and targets addressed are the most diverse, ranging from disadvantaged urban contexts with high rates of organised crime, youth delinquency, school drop-out or drug abuse, to detained youth and adults, women survivors of violence, refugees, and groups in which diversity concerning ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, class and physical and mental ability represents a challenge to social cohesion.

The concept of social circus dates back to the 1970s and develops simultaneously in different areas of the globe (Bolton, 2004), where circus activities, due to their playful, risky, and bodily character, were found to be particularly effective with targets ‘at risk’: circus provides “the risk and adventure necessary to childhood, in a way that is not antisocial or deadly” (ibid: 162), opportunities to learn by playing and experimenting, and to quickly and effectively build and share trust.

The practice of social circus can thus be inscribed within the tradition of informal art-education, in which individual and community development are fostered through practical, sport or artistic activities, and social change is seen as the outcome of identity building and improved social skills rather than traditional ‘party politics’ (Dal Gallo & Alves de Macedo, 2008). The artistic practice of circus enables the participants to experience ‘other’ ways of being and relating to others. In disadvantaged contexts, this translates into a conception of art as “stimulant of the will to power” (Deleuze, 2002, quoted in Lobo & Cassoli, 2006: 64), as an emancipatory tool to increase self-esteem, autonomy, and creative problem-solving, an opportunity to enact the “resilient body” and “release embodied trauma”, reshaping the participants’ “sense of self”, challenging the “narrative of victimhood”, and changing “the gaze of others” (Lavers, 2016: 518).

Hence social circus breaks crystalized ideas about otherness through the creation of spaces where “affective energies” (Lobo, 2014) may foster spontaneity beyond conventions, opening up opportunities to relate to others in different ways, to re-elaborate conceptions of self and difference, and to cultivate bodies and emotions in ways that counter ‘fixing’, ‘pathologising’ or ‘exoticising’ attitudes (Ahmed, 2000; Lobo, 2014. Cf. paragraph 2.6.3). In social circus, this is the outcome of leaving space for unexpected outcomes to emerge through practice, experiments and trials, suspending assumptions, judgements and expectations.

Finally, the circus amateur movement and the spreading conception of circus as fitness is connected to the tendency of sport pluralisation in contemporary society. We saw above that circus in modern and premodern times was neatly separated from sport, due to the “ideological principle that excluded professionals from being qualified” (Bouissac, 2006: 4) for the Olympic games in the classical Greek tradition, and to the fact that while the circus symbolized an extraordinary, chaotic and potentially subversive world, sport became a vehicle (through the rationalization of bodily practices) and a metaphor (through the idealization of the self-controlled body) of modernisation (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005).

In the second half of the XX century, instead, the democratisation of sports and the spread of free time to the popular classes transformed bodily practices in opportunities of ‘controlled escape’ from everyday life, and of subjective, individualized construction of the self and the body (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005; Shilling, 2003). Opportunities opened up for circus disciplines to be inscribed within the ludic, acrobatic, challenging, expressive and non-competitive sports which became widespread in today’s pluralised and diversified sport culture, characterised by the union of “fun and sweat” (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005: 31), of “hedonism and ascetism” (Sassatelli, 2010), of discipline and search for the authentic self.

Significantly, leisure institutions such as Club Med played a pivotal role in the development of the circus amateur movement in the 1980s: with the “brilliant idea of slipping the trapeze into their usual resort smorgasbord” (Wall, 2013: 170), it shifted the boundary of the impossible and the extraordinary, increasing the accessibility of circus and the range of activities available for the contemporary consumer’s search for fun, challenging and authentic experiences (see paragraph 2.4 and 2.7).

### **1.5 Summing up: ‘authenticity’ in timeless and contemporary circus**

We saw in paragraph 1.3 that – also thanks to the physical, bodily nature of circus - time is experienced in a peculiar way in circus practice, as the “time of actions” (Bouissac, 2010) or as “lived time” (Simpson, 2012). This ‘lived’ aspect of circus practice will be analysed in depth in chapter 7, through the focus on body techniques and learning processes. However, what is still missing here is a conceptual link between the different types of circus outlined above, and between them and the rest of the thesis. The concept of authenticity provides such a link.

While a map of notions of authenticity emerging specifically from this research is outlined in paragraph 5.7, to conclude this chapter I want to clarify the working of authenticity both

in the timeless and contemporary circus frame. Despite the existence of new symbolic references in contemporary circus, heterogeneous authenticity claims, referring to both contemporary and traditional circus, coexist and work in the same, ambivalent way, to orientate individual and collective action within a multiple circus community. Notions of authenticity provide “a persuasive representation of reality” and operate “as a kind of myth”, as guidelines to shape, conform and respond to a determined set of expectations, underpinning “performative strategies of manipulation and impression management” (Grazian, 2004: 138).

When circus indicated mainly a nomadic community of life and work, spatially organised around a tent or chapiteau, living in caravans within a space circumscribed by mobile barriers (easily removable as much as symbolically insuperable), the idea of the ‘authentic circus life’ underpinned the maintenance of the circular structure of circus people’s life, which, always identical to itself, contrasted sharply with a quickly changing environment around it. In the eyes of the outsiders, this separated, ‘other’ but ‘authentic’ life incarnated the illusion and desire of a free life, of an object of envy as well as contempt (Caforio, 1987).

Authenticity as “loyalty to the roots” (ibid: 7) has granted the resilience of the timeless circus, despite the current emergence of new circus genres (Bouissac, 2006, 2010). On the other hand, it has also turned it impossible for the traditional circus families to manage their own transformation, causing today’s crisis. Like in other cultures that “are threatened with assimilation by a larger, mainstream culture”, authenticity is invoked “to maintain pure identity” (McLeod, 1999: 134). However, contrary to contemporary circus, traditional circus families were not able to draw effectively on the timeless circus frame to construct referents to the past that fit effectively contemporary trends.

Contemporary circus, as “the artistic, educational or community circus, which oscillates between activism and aestheticism” (Bouissac, 2010: 15), is instead embedded in a social context where an ‘ideology of creativity’ shapes not only the artists’ experience, but life and work in every domain, creativity and bureaucracy conflate in formalized artistic practices and organisational cultures, and the separation of work, leisure and private life is blurred by a tendency towards the construction of ‘responsible selfhood’, the rationalization and the commercialisation of discipline and fun, and the pluralisation of leisure and sport.

Thus, hybridity, creativity, fluidity, artistry (as care for either dramaturgy, choreography, or social engagement), and loyalty towards one’s ‘true self’ – or “remaining true to the presentation of self one claims” (Peterson, 2005: 1089) - become signals of circus authenticity – being contemporary circus in this thesis both a cultural product, a leisure and artistic practice, a profession, a context and a form of organisation. This reflects broader social values, in that this type of authenticity - bringing about “both continuity and change” (Svejenova, 2005: 949) – is required by the creation of creative, “boundaryless” (ibid: 947) careers in a society in which individuals are considered owners and agents of their trajectories. “Acting in one’s own authority, being truthful to one’s self, achieving congruence between feelings and communication, being distinctive and coherent” (Svejenova, 2005: 950), signal the authenticity of the neoliberal subject, not merely of the contemporary circus practitioner.

Finally, hard work, discipline, sacrifice, physicality and the prominent role and continual presence of “a total risk” (Caillois, 2001: 136) represent common building blocks of authenticity in both circus frames. While risk has been partially domesticated in contemporary circus, and the formalization of circus practice has led to more widespread employment of safety devices, “the decisive sanction of death” (Caillois, 2001: 136) is still present, as recent mortal accidents in contemporary circuses testify. Risk-taking, and the ability to judge – and communicate a sense of – trustworthiness is still a central component of circus knowledge and values, and a unifying element in the contemporary community of circus practice – acting both symbolically and physically.

This chapter aimed to clarify the object of study of the thesis, accounting for the timeless circus frame and introducing the contemporary circus frame before proceeding to the analysis of whether and how these core features of the circus are reflected in processes of identification and distinction in this specific case study. Moreover, some of the main thematic threads and issues of sociological relevance developed and analysed in the following chapters stand out from this focus on the history and central symbols of circus: pivotal conceptual references to this research can be found in notions of ‘field’, ‘community of practice’, ‘frame’, ‘boundaries’, ‘authenticity’, ‘creativity’, ‘risk’, ‘the body’, (creative) ‘careers’. In the following chapter, significant contributions from the existing literature are reviewed to specify these and other, related concepts, and to enable the construction of robust nexuses between theory and the lived experience of the research field.

## **Chapter 2: Conceptual references**

### **2.1 Introduction: moulding a theoretical framework for a 'sociology of circus'**

This chapter accounts for several concepts which are useful to explore the recent transformations within the realm of circus practice, identify the nexus between local communities of practice and global changes, and focus on the roles and meanings acquired by sensing, feeling, reflecting and interacting bodies against the backdrop of the current economic and political moment. The paragraphs below clarify, taking different perspectives into account, the convergence between work and other spheres of life traditionally considered separate, if not opposite, in the construction of social structures and individual subjectivities.

As a conceptual glossary it might, at first glance, seem rather disparate, but sound thematic threads run across the selected voices: how work, discipline and productive logics are expanding to all domains of life, including art and leisure; and how new conceptions of the body, the emotions, fun, authenticity, participation and membership contribute to this process, turning body and emotion work into essential components of everyday interactions and professional trajectories, with disruptive implications for one's health and sense of self.

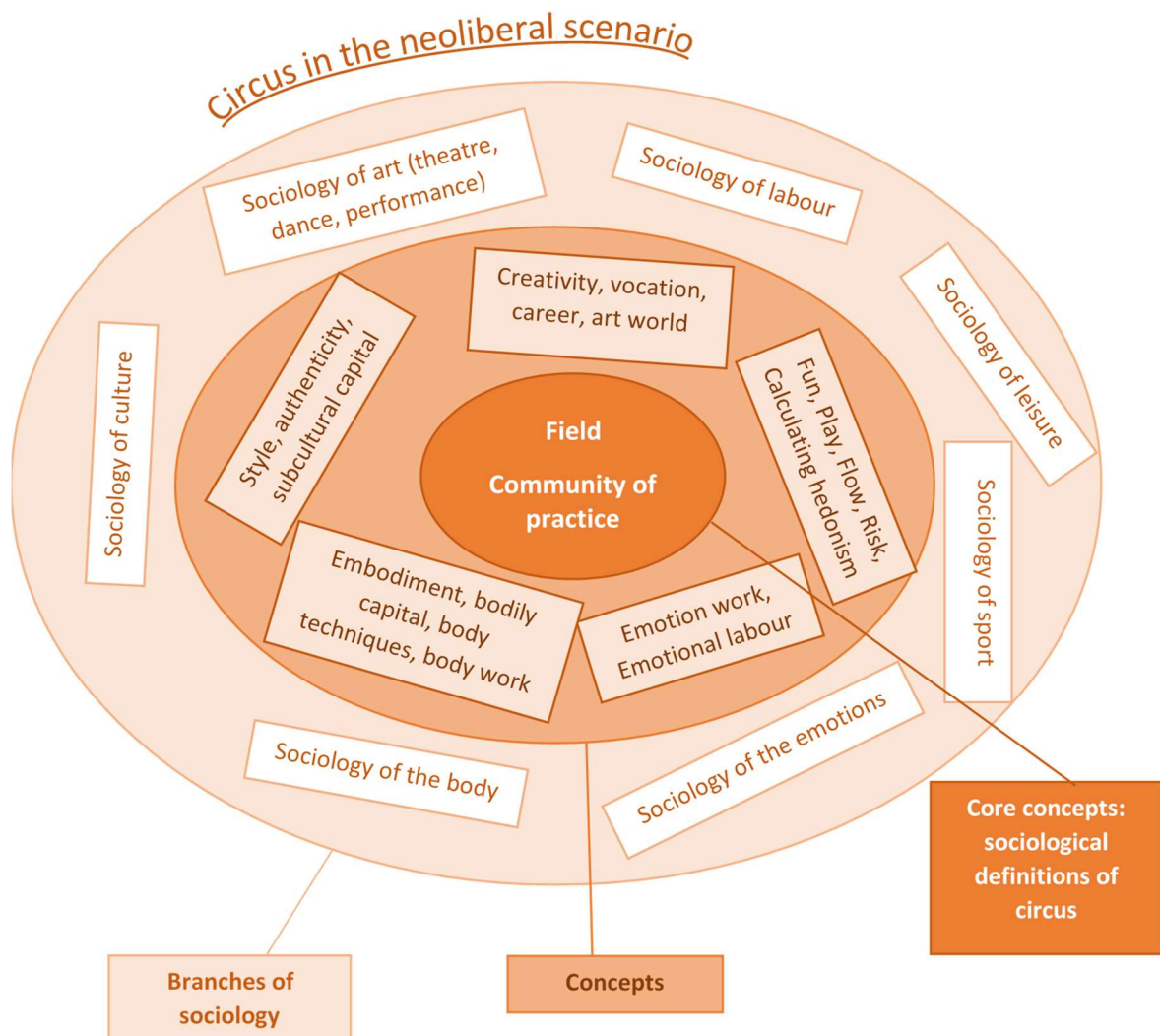
If it existed, the sociology of circus would be multi-faceted. Like the sociology of art, and in particular the sociology of theatre and performance, it could draw on the metaphor of the stage to elaborate concepts and insights into how both subjective (such as individual bodies, emotions, skills, character and modes of interactions) and structural elements (such as dedicated spaces, rituals, labour relations and institutions) shape the show and make it 'go on'. It shall account for the "mood of the age" (Bourdieu, 1993: 32), and particularly the redefinition and reconfiguration of subjectivity, the body and the emotions in late capitalism. Again, like the sociology of theatre, a sociology of circus should study the observer as part of the observed.

According to Wallon (2008), theatre is a 'total social fact': it is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and it enables to study reality at different 'depth levels', including the social and the psychic. It is the same collectivity where theatre is constituted that theatre has its effects. As such, it represents a relevant site to analyse the relationships between individuals and groups, highlight how patterns of interaction, discourses and 'feels for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990) are constructed, and how emotions, gestures and representations take social shapes. In order to explore the influence of society on theatre, and of theatre on society, different theoretical perspectives deserve attention.

However, a sociology of circus must also focus on processes of embodiment, bodily learning, ageing, pain and risk management, drawing extensively on the sociology of sport and dance. The theoretical framework of this research is thus underpinned by multiple references, the main ones being from the sociology of culture and art, of sport and leisure, the sociology of (artistic) labour, the sociology of the body and the emotions. It highlights the processes through which an artist or an art work become acknowledged as such, in relation to the convergence of opinions and interests within an 'art world' (Becker, 1982),

to field forces and position-taking within an artistic field (Bourdieu, 1993), and to the construction of internal and external, social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). It focuses on artistic professions and careers, as well as on the conditions of artistic (circus) production, but it also brings about relevant notions of authentic subcultural membership, highlighting mechanisms of construction of subjectivities and identities, processes of embodiment and the operation of emotion work.

**Picture 2.1: Conceptual Map**



To help the reader navigate these multiple, heterogeneous references, and to facilitate the presentation of the literature reviewed, picture 2.1 visually maps the most relevant conceptual focuses of this thesis. At the centre, I placed the two concepts which best fit the sociological definition of circus adopted in the thesis, and which illuminated the thematic threads followed during the analysis. As the following chapters show, they emerge at a conceptual intersection between the relevant sociological branches for this thesis (in the external circle), and, in turn, provide a starting point to explore other significant concepts which have orientated and given shape to the research (in the middle circle). This conceptual structure emerged from the peculiarities of the circus practice and, importantly, the embeddedness within the neoliberal context. These two forces pushed the concepts,

which I now identify as central, towards their current position in the theoretical scheme outlined above. During their slow cruise, the sensitizing concepts adopted in the initial stage of enquiry underwent the clarification and specification which finally turned them into consistent analytical tools. The following paragraphs focus on the sociological areas of the external circle to discuss the concepts presented in the middle and core circle. The centrality of the latter will emerge throughout the thesis.

## **2.2 Art worlds and artistic fields**

First of all, the sociology of art provides a fruitful frame to look at contemporary circus in Italy, being this for no other reason than one of the strongest claims characterising the recent changes in this domain is its redefinition as a form of art. The words of one of the experts I interviewed, the director of one of the professional schools, are eloquent to this respect, and well reflect Von Osten's (2007) definition of art as “a human capacity to relate intellectual and manual abilities to one another in a specific mode of production, distinguished from activities that are purely a matter of craft” (: 52):

“we do not consider ourselves as a circus school [scuola di circo], but as a circus arts school [scuola di arte di circo], which means that we produce meaning through a matter, we do not only produce astonishment, amazement, or emotions [...], we try to go beyond this”

[Expert interview 1]

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, art in the Western world – once relegated to the domains of the sacred, the ritual and the divine – has approximated more and more to the domain of everyday, mundane life. Late capitalism is characterised, as we will see below, by the blurring of boundaries between relations of art production and other relations of production in late capitalism, and between relations of labour and relations or artistic work - typically instable, precarious and low-paid. However, focusing on the definition of a practice or a product as ‘artistic’ – especially when this status comes as the consequence of recent social conditions - still has high sociological relevance. We saw in the previous chapter that since the 70s the circus has been moving from the domain of popular entertainment and the rural world, to that of avantgarde artistic movements.

Despite the loss of its aura in the mechanisms of capitalist production and reproduction (Turner, 2005), until very recently art has represented a separate category and object of study, in particular in relation to other forms of production, labour, and skills. Insights from the sociology of art may clarify the role and meanings of this separation, enhancing our understanding of this redefinition of circus as an attempt to upgrade the genre, based on the economic, political and subjective rationales outlined in chapters 4 and 5.

Art has always represented a more or less explicit object of sociological interest because of the insights it provides on broader social and historical issues, if analysed as a source and inspiration for agency and as a tool both social actors and sociologists employ to access and build knowledge. To name but a few classical contributions to the sociological approach to art, the sociology of Durkheim depicts art as an aesthetic social fact, carrying central importance as a factor of social cohesion (Bassetti, 2009a): through the reproduction of



collective representations, art supports the generation of a “collective emotion” or “effervescence” (Durkheim, 1912: 218) in rituals.

Simmel stresses the separation between everyday life and the world of art, highlighting the role of the creative process in reconnecting forms and norms of social interaction to human and spiritual aspects of life. As such, art turns sensory perceptions into knowledge about life and the world, and provides a heuristic tool to both social actors and social scientists, outlining an aesthetic paradigm in which what is considered as ‘Beautiful’ allows insights into shared representations and meanings. This reflects the Weberian concern for art as the product of a specific historical moment, providing, as such, important insights into issues of sociological interest (Bassetti, 2009a; Cossi, 2005).

After the second world war, the sociology of art acquired the status of separate field of study, which looked at art as a world, a product or a practice involving peculiar processes of creation and distribution, logics of practice, and careers, and underpinning the reproduction of social structures through taste and status (Bassetti, 2009a). Sociologists like Bourdieu (1975, 1984, 1993, 1995b) and Becker (1982) analysed the social construction of aesthetic criteria and values through processes of creation, production and reception, focusing on institutional and organisational aspects (Zolberg, 1990).

Becker (1982) focuses on the cooperative networks required to turn artistic ideas into a physical form – including the outputs of both art and craft. These networks define skills and provide materials, equipment, and support; include an audience and aesthetic justification; and rely on a certain degree of social stability and on a specific work politics. Artistic (changing) conventions concern aesthetics, technique and the division of work, providing constraints, but also “ease and success” (ibid: 34) to art work; artists can also opt not to follow them at the cost of less recognition and more effort. These elements shape what Becker calls “art worlds”, worlds that are defined as separate by those who participate in them, but which exist in relation to the very art worlds from which they want to be distinguished from, and to the economic, political and organisational contexts they are embedded in.

Becker (ibid) also highlights the distinction between art and craft operated by the members of an art world. Craft skills are required, but not sufficient to produce art. The latter implies something beyond craft, with “a unique and expressive character” (: 72). The opposition and blurred boundaries between art and craft “help us to understand how art worlds work” (: 73), illuminating central dynamics such as “changes in reputation and changes in organisation” (: 72). This distinction also connects to the same author’s notions of “commercial” and “academic art” (in opposition to notions of ‘real’ art), and to Bourdieu’s (1995b) definitions of “commercial” or “bourgeois art”, “social art” and “art for art’s sake” (: 71).

In line with the definition of art provided by the quote at the beginning of this paragraph, as something producing meaning which goes beyond virtuosity and, in the case of circus, mere entertainment through basic emotions such as “astonishment” and “amazement”, Becker (1982), defines the production of ‘real’ art as the outcome of an interest “in the expression of personal ideas or emotions”, rather than merely “in the display of virtuosity” (: 291-292). In the latter case, artists will be more easily affected and subordinated by the

(commercial) interests and requirements of the employer and the audiences. Academic art is instead mainly concerned with the craft skills of an artist, with perfection or accuracy more than with “what is done, the ideas and emotions the works embody and express”. It is “an intermediate and ambiguous case of a tendency that emerges full-blown in commercial art” (: 289).

According to Bourdieu (1995b), “the representatives of 'bourgeois art', (...), are tightly and directly linked to the dominant class, as much by their origins as by their lifestyle and value system” (: 71). As such, they are granted high material and symbolic profits within the field of power. Supporters of the “social art” aim instead to fulfil a social or political agenda, and condemn the other forms of art for their lack of commitment to social change. Finally, representatives of the “art for art’s sake” positions cultivate commitment to aesthetics, “form and impersonal neutrality” (: 75). Art for art’s sake “is a *position to be made* (...) by revolutionizing an art world that excludes it, in fact and in law” (: 76). It must be independent from the economic field and the field of power, “indifferent to the exigencies of politics and to the injunctions of morality, and not recognizing any jurisdiction other than the norms specific to one’s art” (: 77).

These insights are very helpful in the analysis of the interplay between different classifications of circus (as entertainment and business; as propaganda or ‘alternative’, subcultural or marginal form of art and life) in its history and current situation (see chapter 1). Among other circus scholars, Bennet (2016), Hurley (2016), Leroux (2016), Leslie & Rantisi (2016) show how, in line with the historical tendency of circus to fulfil economic interests and rely on marketing strategies, the genre has recently changed “from popular entertainment to premium product” (Bennet, 2016: 95), responding to the neoliberal emphasis on creativity and gentrification, artistry and authenticity. In particular, Cirque du Soleil is often taken as a “paradigm of creativity” (Leslie & Rantisi, 2016: 223), resulting from favourable structural conditions (extensive funding from the Quebec government, the lack of pre-existing circus conventions), and the specific origin of its founders (which were street artists, and , as such, considered able to “tolerate inefficiency and uncertainty – to take risks” – *ibid*).

Furthermore, Bourdieu’s focus on the processes of legitimization of art forms and fields is of particular interest to look at the recent changes in the circus domain. In the work quoted above (1995b), he also talks about the definition of an artistic field:

“The struggles over definition (or classification) have boundaries at stake (between genres and disciplines, or between modes of production inside the same genre) and, therefore, hierarchies. To define boundaries, defend them and control entries is to defend the established order in the field” (: 225)

Thus, innovators and rebels play a central role, since they provide opportunities to establish rules and conventions, and, as such, boundaries to the field (Wallon, 2013b). The acquisition of a label, and its public, institutional recognition, is an essential step in the attribution of prestige to a genre. However, the recognition of the aura – the particularly sensitive essence that allows to classify a work of art as a sacred object “in the museum of exceptional creations” (*Ibid*: 243) – is not merely about policy making: it is part of a broader process of legitimization, which is of peculiar interest for the sociologist, as a clear example

of how “distinction” goes hand in hand with the reproduction of certain social orders and hierarchies.

Bourdieu's (1993) analysis of the field of cultural production sheds light on the conflictual processes at stake, on connections between artistic production, the “mood of the age” and the power relations between different positions in the field, and on the dynamics of position-taking. The latter express the struggles between positions, such as orthodoxy and heretical challenge, and may be internal (stylistic), or external (political).

To this respect, it is important to remind how the dynamics of autonomy and heteronomy play, as we saw in the previous chapter, a pivotal role in circus history. They represent different principles of hierarchisation within a field of cultural production, or, in other words, “the stakes of struggle in the field: the heteronomous principle, based on external factors, and the autonomous principle, based on specific interests” (Bourdieu, 1993: 16). Like Bourdieu highlights, however, this fundamental opposition is not the only one which characterises a field of cultural production: conflicts and competition emerge around different genres, styles, ideologies. In this sense, the degree of autonomy of a field is “the extent to which it manages to impose its own norms and sanctions on the whole set of producers, including those who are the closest to the dominant pole of the field of power and therefore most responsive to external demands” (ibid: 40).

Power relations and position-taking in turn depend on the “space of possibles” – including the options producers and consumers can choose from, and the value of certain productions in relations to other (more or less mainstream, more or less classic, etc.) and on the value and meaning attached to a certain position. They are also strictly connected to the possession of economic and social capital, which determines “the propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them (a condition for all avant-garde undertakings which precede the demands of the market), even when they secure no short-term economic profit” (: 67).

Finally, both Becker and Bourdieu take the separation of the art ‘world’ or ‘field’ from ordinary life, a status well expressed by Becker (1982) as the “romantic myth of the artist” which spread throughout the Western world since the Renaissance. The myth

“suggests that people with such [artistic] gift cannot be subjected to the constraints imposed on other members of society; we must allow them to violate rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense everyone else must follow or risk being punished. The myth suggests that in return society receives work of unique character and invaluable quality” (Ibid: 15-16)

In post-Fordist, neoliberal societies of late capitalism, on the contrary, the definition and boundaries of the world of art have become less clear: art has extended to the domains of ‘regular’ work and careers, and – vice versa – relations of work have become more and more similar to relations of art production. The terms post-Fordism, neoliberalism, or late capitalism are employed by autonomist Marxists (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 2006, 2008; Virno, 2004) precisely to refer to a contemporary historical moment characterised by the increasing commercialisation of everyday life, the growing importance of creativity, innovation and culture in both consumption and production, the movement of governance

and economics to the intimate spheres of the body, affect and the emotions and the blurring of once separated categories of art, labour and politics.

In other words, contemporary capitalist society is characterised by a new discourse around culture and the economy. While modern times saw creativity as the central attribute of the artist's exceptional genius and "special talents, gifts, or abilities" (Becker, 1983: 14), in contemporary capitalism the "combination of an unlimited variety of ideas, creativity-on-call and clever self-marketing" is required of everyone (Von Osten, 2007: 53).

Despite the persistence of the common idea that the arts have a descriptive and critical value in relation to society, and that "art is non-alienated labour, [...] distinct from other kinds of work" (Stephens, 2012: 79), the changing configuration of the relationship between art and work - the issue of the shifting role of the arts and the artist, and of the work they perform - is of peculiar interest to this research. In particular, concepts such as the "ideology of creativity", "immaterial" and "affective" labour, and "virtuosity", point to the increasing participation of the arts in mechanisms of production, consumption, discipline and control, as illustrated in paragraph 2.3.2.

## **2.3 Art and labour in the neoliberal context**

### **2.3.1 Creative Careers**

Specific attention needs to be given, both theoretically and methodologically, to the different trajectories, or 'careers', circus practitioners follow. The term career is to be taken not so much in the traditional, Weberian sense of a product of increasing bureaucratic rationalization, a trajectory determined by the organisation on the basis of specified opportunities of linear ascension, fixed rules and objective positions; rather, today's careers are more fragmented, discontinuous and undetermined, and escape formal, institutional classification, control, and also responsibility (Murgia, 2006).

Recent trends within the cultural sector in Piedmont, as highlighted by the Osservatorio Culturale del Piemonte, point to a tendency to multidisciplinary, commercialization, direct participation and delocalization of culture to unusual sites. The new flexible, creative professions require entrepreneurial skills and familiarity with the new technologies, as well as strategies to manage risk (such as double careers and turning the artistic profession into a hobby) (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011).

Creative, artistic professions often develop within closed communities. Career in the show business does not imply clear requirements or certifications: rules are strict but informal, and competence is defined mainly by the audience and the artistic community of reference. The labour market is closed, depending more on relationships and weak ties than talent, and on tacit rules allowing insiders to protect themselves from the competition of the more external actors, making innovation slow and hard to achieve. This situation provokes struggles to define boundaries and requirements, and to control access to resources and recognition, and entails a proliferation of informal groups, associations and small companies unable to penetrate the mainstream (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011).

Thus, in line with the broader trends highlighted in the previous paragraph, people are increasingly moving between different professional fields, forms and positions and are themselves held responsible to provide a definition and a sense to their professional trajectories, even without any form of wider representation (Murgia, 2006). In order to analyse the new careers, knowledge and skills gained in different ways and domains - including motivation and identification, social skills, embeddedness in relevant networks, skills acquired through life experiences, hobbies, sports, travel, etc. - need to be taken into account as much as professional experiences. In this sense, today careers can be more easily assimilated to a flow than to a position (ibid).

Hence, the concept of career employed here relies mainly on the legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology: as such, it is not limited to the domain of professions but it can be extended to a wide range of situations. It includes different roles, offices and statuses, and a focus on the natural histories (both personal and public) of the actors involved, on the different stages and directions achieved, on the different groups of reference and the norms they foster. This conception of career entails not only vertical ascension, but also the movement between work settings, networks and identities.

In this sense, the term career includes: the objective and subjective dimensions: structural and public aspects of life as well as individual experiences and meanings; roles, identities and personal life as well as professional ascension, positions within institutions and public life; status passages, including unpredictable and non-celebrated transitions, as well as identity changes and variations in interactional roles: careers are "joint matters of "phasing" and "phrasing"" (Barley, 2010: 51); the individual and structural level: on the one hand careers are properties of collectives and can only be defined as such when followed by more than one person and socially recognised. The reference group for a certain career provides models, judgement criteria, and specific terminology. On the other hand, the different careers shape and are experienced by individuals (Barley, 2010).

Hughes (1984) holds "work situations as systems of interaction, as the setting of the role-drama of work, in which people of various occupational and lay capacities (...) interact in sets of relationships that are social as well as technical" (: 294). His main point is that the "bundle of activities" (: 292), the values, social function, and the required skills and roles which constitute an occupation are historically and socially constructed, and as such, always embedded within a historical context. As such, professions represent privileged sites "for observing the formation of groups and the generation of social rules and sanctions" (: 295).

This conception of careers and 'work situations' foresees a close tie between professional life and subjective experience, but also between work and 'the rest' of life. While important social changes occurred since Hughes' (1984) investigation of labour in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the fact of "the ordering in our society" being "very much a matter of a man's [sic] relation to the world of work" is still true. Subjective representations and experiences contribute to the distinction between work and non-work as much as life rhythms, habits, values, moods and decisions of people today. However, in contemporary Western society, the separation between social time in general and labour time, between "a time and place for work" and "times and places for family life, recreation, religion, and politics", and the

respective “mood and frame of mind” (: 124), is blurred, and the analytical separation of the two artificial. Success of a career thus comes to be defined more in terms of balancing personal and professional life, than of achieving a certain professional position (Murgia, 2006).

Chicchi, Savioli, & Turrini (2015) argue that the dedication of all dimensions of life - including ‘sacred’ dimensions such as culture, art, and thought - to work, shows the contemporary pervasiveness of the capitalist logic and its dynamic of real and biopolitical subsumption, but also the increased value attributed to a blending of passions, creative expressions, informal activities, vocations and personal desires. Contemporary individuals have a hugely extensive latitude – and uncertainty - for creating and interpreting their careers as “sequences of position, achievement, responsibility” (Hughes, 1984: 137). However, the downside of this ‘freedom’ is an ever-present uncertainty about the future, and the full responsibility for one’s successes as well as failures. The “limits upon the individual’s orientation of his life, both as to direction of effort and as to interpretation of its meaning” (ibid) are still set by the social order, and, while vague, blurred, and, as such, increasingly ‘invisible’, may function even more effectively as disciplinary factors.

When looking at creative and artistic careers, flexibility is an even more central notion. Like Menger (1999) highlighted, these sectors are characterized by the high value attributed to the products’ originality, by unpredictability and fast changes in the audience’s tastes, and by the intrinsic uncertainty of the creative process. This implies a high flexibility required of creative workers, and high occupational risks (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011). In turn, this “uncertainty of success” is compensated by the high social prestige of the artistic professions, and becomes as such a constitutive part of the “defence mechanism against disenchantment”, which works like “an eternally consoling law”, a collective rationalization inverting “the meanings attached to success and failure” to conceal the considerable inequalities and hierarchical relations between artists, and the conditioning power of the market and competition (Menger, 2014: 111).

The interplay between art and labour allows artists to make sense of their choices and lives, and to qualify as ‘authentic’ artists, not only for the content of their production, but also for the ability to manage high risks and precarious lives, and to navigate the complex interplay between symbolic and material labour. In this sense, according to Stephens (2012), the status of ‘art’ justifies ‘precarity’, thus becoming a “strategy of intimate governance which encourages people to accept these precarious conditions in exchange for the possibly elusive notion of creative freedom” (: 169).

### **2.3.2 Immaterial labour and the ideology of creativity**

Florida (2012) hails creativity as “the real driving force” and “the key factor in our economy and society”:

“Both at work and in other spheres of our lives, we value creativity more highly and cultivate it more intensely than we ever have before. The creative impulse— the attribute that distinguishes us, as humans, from other species—is now being unleashed on an unprecedented scale” (: 5).

This optimistic view is countered by the theorists of the “ideology of creativity”, according to whom it reflects the tendency to perceive work in cultural industries as “creative and self-actualizing”, in contrast “with a reality marked by a strong hierarchy, imposed hyper-flexibility, little autonomy and, in general, few possibilities for self-actualization” (Arvidsson et Al., 2010a: 4). Despite the vocabulary of love and positive emotional qualities (such as deep, passionate attachment, affective bindings, self-expression, and self-actualization) attached to work within the creative and cultural industry and to the identity of creative labourers (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Stephens, 2012) the ‘creative class’ – including well-paid and high-status workers - is actually engaged in increasingly insecure, unstable, informal, precarious and discontinuous forms of work and types of careers. Creative labour is characterised by “a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; [...] and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and ‘keeping up’ in rapidly changing fields” (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 14). In chapter 6 I will explore how these processes apply to and affect the developing circus field in Italy.

The notion of affective labour concerns the production and manipulation of affect in capitalism, but also the affective dimension of work and the opportunities for human contact and interaction. Affective labour engages in ‘passionate work’, that is, work experienced as satisfying, pleasurable, and self-actualizing (Gill & Pratt, 2008). This is significant of “the extent to which emotions, feelings, relationships are ‘put to work’ in post-Fordist capitalism” (ibid: 15), and points to the potentially alienating consequences of imbuing (cultural and creative) work with such a foundational importance for the sense of identity.

Neoliberalism is characterised by the increasing request for emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, 2006) and the “tricky blurring of emotional ties and business relationships” (Stephens, 2012: 125). Here it is important to mention how, according to the autonomist Marxists, the narrative of affect and passion participates in the reproduction of a ‘false consciousness’ in which artists and workers in general are internalizing an external demand for flexibility, personal responsibility and versatility, and which hides the inequalities intrinsic to capitalism behind an appearance of less alienation and more freedom (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Stephens, 2012; Virno, 2004).

As such, the ideology of creativity is functional to the construction of the workers’ subjectivity, but also to the growth of the creative industries. It sustains the instability, precarity and low wages that assimilate relations of labour to relations of art work, since people are encouraged to “accept these precarious conditions in exchange for the possibly elusive notion of creative freedom” (Stephens, 2012: 169). The notions of artistic and narcissistic risk mentioned by circus practitioners reflect the implications of these ideologies and discourses in late capitalism circus (see paragraphs 5.2, 5.4 and 5.8). The affective and emotional meanings attached to the embodiment of circus techniques will instead be treated in paragraph 7.5.

The notion of ‘immaterial labour’ stands for “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 290).

This refers to both a change in labour processes in the industrial and tertiary sectors, relying more and more on skills involving cybernetics and communication, and to the activities that do not normally fall within labour's tasks, such as the production of the 'cultural content' of a commodity. Parallel to this, cultural and creative contents are becoming increasingly central in establishing the economic value of goods and services. For these reasons, Lazzarato speaks about immaterial labour to indicate the incorporation, in late capitalism, of "aesthetic, political and economic practices" into a "single assemblage...of which work, politics and art constitute the different facets or viewpoints" (Lazzarato, 2008: 7). In his view, two trends characterise the shifting role of art and work in the 'globalised' world: the transformation of artists into workers, and of citizens into publics; and the centrality of creation, once specific to the domain of art, in all spheres of social life.

First of all, artists and cultural workers in general "are hailed as 'model entrepreneurs'" (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 3), as living evidence of the actual possibility of personal and economic success. This removes the responsibility for unemployment, low wages, precariousness from the State's shoulders and places it entirely on those of the (should be) enthusiastic, motivated young workers. Moreover, it requires the dedication of all spheres of life to the achievement of professional success, "in ways that might lend support to Beck's arguments about individualization as [...] the drive in capitalism towards a moment in which subjects can work unfettered by relationships or family conditions" (ibid: 14), in which individuals must be their own structures (Giddens, 1991), and rely on "a must try harder and harder ethos" to find "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions" (Mc Robbie, 2001: 3). The relevance of these transformations in relation to contemporary circus as a form of organisation and a category of cultural policy, and as an opportunity of artistic career, will be treated in paragraph 4.3 and in chapter 6 respectively.

Moreover, citizens are substituted by consumers who creatively and actively choose between an indefinite number of lifestyles and the related systems of values, outlining mechanisms of identification, social differentiation and participation which attempt to respond to the "decline of the modern value structure and the ideologies and movements in which it was reflected" (Arvidsson & Pietersen, 2013: 15). While traditional conceptualizations of art and culture stressed their separation from the commercial sphere of consumption and economic value creation, the recent rise of the "participatory culture [...] highlights the fact that cultural participation occurs within the sphere of commercial mediation [...] and through consumer goods" (ibid: 59).

Secondly, creation and creativity today occupy a central position in all spheres of life, due to a dual process: the "re-Taylorisation" or "proletarianisation (...) of cultural and intellectual work" and "the transformation of all work such that it is increasingly dependent on communicative and emotional capacities" (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 8). This challenges the classic and modern conceptualization of art and the artist as separate from everyday life and from capitalist relations of labour and production, and the postmodern definition of art as the opposite of paid labour and financial stability (Stephens, 2012).

Art and the artist are no longer "the very paradigm of freedom, heterogeneity, difference and deviance" (Lazzarato, 2008: 1 quoted in Stephens, 2012: 99), or a source of social and political critique, but a central means of control, capitalist production, and



commodification (Mc Robbie, 2001; Stephens, 2012). The marketization of difference reflects this tendency: in the “societies of security”, diversity and deviance is no longer disciplined or repressed, “on the contrary, the heterogeneity of precepts and affects—of desires—is invested, mobilized, and solicited by and through consumption and communication, resulting in the homogenisation of a subjectivity that conforms to market demands” (Lazzarato, 2006: 3).

Significant of the immaterial nature of labour is, finally, Virno’s (2004) concept of virtuosity. This author points to a shift towards labour which produces relations rather than a final product, and that for this very reason is attributed a peculiar role in providing satisfaction and fulfilment. In this sense, virtuosity indicates the *potential* of the multitude “to produce and produce itself”, rather than what it actually produces (Virno, 2004: 12). Secondly, virtuosity is relational labour in that it “requires the presence of others” and “exists only in the presence of an audience” (: 52). The concept of virtuosity illuminates the extension of labour relations to workers’ “entire life”, including the domain of “unpaid work - the idle time of the mind that keeps enriching, unacknowledged, the fruits of immaterial labor” (: 12).

Within this framework, the performative artist can be seen as the virtuoso *par excellence*, although, like Turner (2005) suggests, live performances to a certain extent escape reproducibility, thus maintaining “auratic qualities”. The modern artist’s need for “unicity without the aura” (Lavaert & Gielen, 2009: 75) is in fact spreading from the aesthetic to the political-economic field.

Hence, “creative workers and the cultural or creative industries more generally are imbued with an extraordinary range of capacities, which relate to wealth creation, urban regeneration and social cohesion” (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 13). Knowledge, creativity and innovation are re-evaluated as solutions to social and economic crises in developed countries, as a model of how economic development is to be pursued by everyone, entailing a need to invest in biographic capital and multiple life skills more than technical competences (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011; Mc Robbie, 2001). Moreover, also national economies increasingly capitalize on the symbolic resources: collective narratives, symbols, traditions, reputations, and ideas “that are collectively held and that confer benefits on those able to make legitimate claims to them in advancing their country’s prosperity” (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011: 2).

The tendencies depicted above underpin the “expansion of economy into all spheres of life” (Arvidsson & Pietersen, 2013: 16), and the reconfiguration of work as fundamentally constitutive of identity and sense of community. This process is underpinned by a logic of self-improvement in which work and leisure must be balanced “productively” and it is increasingly difficult to separate between work and non-work:

“Activities once experienced as private are evaluated by their economic function. The ‘labour-entrepreneur’ must simultaneously become the artist of her or his own life. It is precisely this mystification of exceptional subjectivities – the ‘artist’ whose way of working is based on self-responsibility, creativity and spontaneity – which grounds the slogans of today’s discourse on labour” (Von Osten, 2007: 53)

In the same vein, Wilf (2010) observes “the conflation of affect or creativity and modernity” (: 577), or “of the institutional bureaucratic–organisational infrastructure of modernity and creativity” (: 578) as “an increasingly visible trend in the present historical moment: the bureaucratic cultivation of creativity (as in the case of formalized art education), on the one hand, and the creative cultivation of the modern bureaucratic organisation (as in the turn to the arts in the search for better organisational models), on the other hand—what I call “modern creativity” and “creative modernity,” respectively” (: 564). Wilf’s insights also illuminate the dynamics of formalization of the artistic field of circus, in which creativity and innovation become central components of institutionalized practices.

## **2.4 ‘Calculating hedonism’ in leisure: flow, play, risk, and ‘serious fun’**

We saw in the previous paragraph how not only the artists, but all types of workers are required to break the temporal and spatial boundaries between productive activities and free time, and to act and think creatively as a matter of social responsibility and obligation. In this sense, culture, art and creativity are held as personal challenges providing private solutions to structural problems (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011; Von Osten, 2007). As we will see in this paragraph, the same holds for leisure time, which has been invested with a key role in the development of ‘responsible selfhood’. Neoliberal conceptualizations of leisure pull together ascetism and hedonism, rationality and fun, self-discipline and pleasure, to undertake “serious” or “therapeutic” activities, or “rational recreation” (Sassatelli, 2012: 4-5) and create a space to develop a reflexive project for the self, to cope with daily stress, to take care of oneself and society at large. In order to analyse this new role of leisure, insights must be provided into the concepts of flow, fun and discipline, play, and risk. Paragraphs 5.2, 5.3 and 6.5 explore more in depth these conceptual insights in relation to contemporary circus practices in Italy.

Circus is work, but it is also leisure, both as a form of entertainment and, since recent times, as a fitness activity or an amateur artistic practice. Hurley (2016) argues that, “optimally”, the circus experience produces what (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) calls states of “flow”:

“measures of flow experiences include (1) losing track of time, (2) having a high level of concentration, (3) forgetting personal problems, and (4) feeling fully involved [...] In flow, you are both fully differentiated from others and fully integrated with the social group [...]. You are differentiated or individualized in as much as your own cognitive and physiological systems are working at the top of the game; [...] At the same time, you are fully integrated with the social group as you experience those heightened sensations as part of a collective; indeed, that collective may serve to heighten the sensations even more” (Hurley, 2016: 76)

According to (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), achieving a state of flow is one of the fundamental component of enjoyment and creation, both as a catalyst to and as a product of creativity, although it does not necessarily indicate that an enjoyable or creative activity is being

performed: one can enter a state of flow while performing boring, repetitive activities, for instance in a factory<sup>1</sup>.

Enjoyment in this sense is not a synonym for fun and pleasure. Instead, it refers to 'autotelic' activities which are rewarding in themselves, whose material outcome does not matter, and in which people engage for the peculiar state of experience – the possibility of being completely involved, without feeling bored or anxious - they provide. This "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" is what (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) calls "flow state":

"In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future." (ibid: 36)

Flow experiences merge action with awareness. As such, to be defined as autotelic, an activity requires enough expertise to make one forget about her 'awareness of being aware' of her actions. If focussing on an activity requires aware cognitive, body and emotion work (for instance, in order not to forget any important step, to avoid a usual mistake in the movement of a certain part of the body, or to avoid worrying about other people watching), then the flow state will not be achieved.

This may also explain why, in the learning and teaching of artistic disciplines, creation and improvisation usually follow a phase where the basic techniques are learnt. Creation through improvisation requires a state of flow which is hardly achieved by beginners. In a newspaper article about improvisation in music performances, McPherson & Limb (2016) state that "musicians and rappers can link together many rehearsed action patterns to communicate in creative ways through their art". Training, rehearsing, and expertise in managing certain techniques are essential to be able to improvise because

"to be really creative, you need to avoid critiquing and controlling your actions, and instead, let yourself go in order to get into the moment, regardless of any mistakes. [...] This feeling of being in the zone is called a flow state. When one is in a flow state, everything starts "clicking" – the activity can begin to feel effortless, and one forgets or does not notice that any time is passing." (ibid)

The sense of fusion with the world and loss of self-consciousness is another characteristic of the flow state. However (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) specifies that it is the "self construct that is lost in flow", while the awareness of "internal processes" becomes instead more intense (: 43). This implies that certain social attributes might be moved to the background in situations in which the achievement of flow states is organised and fostered. Moreover, it also has another important implication for this research, pointing

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the technique employed by the main character in the movie "The Working Class Goes to Heaven" (Elio Petri, 1971) to escape boredom and maximise production entails a sort of state of flow, underpinned by a fixed thought and a frenetic rhythm which distractions interrupt.

to the pivotal role of the spatial and temporal dimensions in separating ordinary life from 'other' activities.

While the dimension of space will be treated in more detail below, here I would like to make a point about time. Flow states occur within bubbles of "lived time", or time "that can 'only be lived in the very specific time of its unfolding'" (Simpson, 2012: 427). Differently from clock time, that needs to be checked on a watch, the reference point of this aspect of time is the body and the rhythms that "inhabit us and are embodied in our actions". In states of flow, the internal rhythms (of bodily processes like breathing, the beating of the heart, etc.) are attuned to "the overall beats of the solar system" (Young, 1988 quoted in Simpson, 2012: 429). This is an essential component of enjoyment and pleasure, as it fosters feelings of freedom from everyday routines, enabling an experience of time that is not fragmented nor accelerated, as highlighted in paragraphs 7.3 and 7.4.

Differently from flow, the notion of play excludes productive activities. In the definition of Huizinga (1980) play is:

"a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means." (: 13)

All these dimensions, except for the secrecy one, can also be found in Caillois' (2001) work<sup>2</sup>. Play is thus a "free and voluntary activity" and a "separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life (: 6). Again, time and space play a central role in the delimitation of the play-ground through clear markers of game beginning and end, and material or ideal boundaries around the "magic circle" of the game, inscribing "a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 3). Play also implies "precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules" (Caillois, 2001: 7), and within the clear-cut limits these set it allows for free responses from the players: "This latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure which it excites" (ibid: 8).

As such, play easily generates the conditions for both concentration, freedom from external norms and pressures, and creativity that underpin flow states. However, an important distinction between the two notions is that, while flow states can be achieved at work, playing is considered as different and separate from activities producing goods, services, or economic value. Although this statement might lose relevance in the neoliberal society of 'immaterial labour' and 'disciplined fun' (paragraph 2.3.2), it still explains one of the main

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<sup>2</sup> In his view, when secrecy and mystery are turned into play activities, it is "to the detriment of the secret and mysterious". On the other hand, "when the secret, the mask of the costume fulfils a sacramental function one can be sure that not play, but an institution is involved" (Caillois, 2001: 4).

differences between amateur and professional practice of arts and sports. While professional artists and sportsmen may regularly experience states of flow, the main issue at stake is not having fun but achieving specific goals, becoming famous or being competitive, in order to be able to make a living out of one's activity. Lost in the transition from amateur to professional practice is, then, the informal and free character of play, while the "intensity of, and absorption in" (Huizinga, 1980: 2) the activity is maintained.

The distance from the economic logic of production does not entail a lack of social or cultural significance in playful activities. In the words of Salen & Zimmerman (2004), "as products of *human culture*, games fulfil a range of needs, desires, pleasures, and uses" (: 4). Caillois (2001) identifies four main dimensions of play, depending upon whether the role of competition, chance, simulation or vertigo is dominant: *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*. While Wallon (2013) finds all of them in circus, and although it is true that circus can be practiced in a competitive ways and that the risk of injury points to a fatalistic component of "playing circus", I agree with Caillois in stressing the last two aspects: *mimicry* and *ilinx*.

Although Caillois referred explicitly to the traditional figure of the clown and its function to maintain a connection to reality (reminding the audience that performing is feigning) and a way to circumscribe power by mocking it (function of satire), in my view the aspect of *mimicry* is especially important in contemporary forms of circus, where "theatrical presentations and dramatic interpretations" are attributed an essential role in "fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell" (ibid: 36-37).

*Ilx* and the dimension of vertigo are instead connected to the acrobatic disciplines of circus. *Ilx* includes those games "which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind [...] it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness" (ibid: 23). In acrobatics vertigo is not only an obstacle, a difficulty or a risk, but a drive towards a virtuosity able to overcome and control the panic. The cultural and social function of the quest for excitement will be analysed more in depth below; before that, however, it is important to make a few more points about the social significance of fun and game.

Games are separated from ordinary life, belong to the domain of recreation and are, as such, "in principle devoid of important repercussions upon the solidity and continuity of collective and institutional life" (Goffman, 1961: 17). However, according to Salen & Zimmerman (2004), the playful shift of roles in games (and especially in forbidden games) can transform or reinforce social relations and meanings, re-evaluating the "formal understanding of rules as fixed, unambiguous and authoritative" (: 15).

In Goffman's (1961) view, the very irrelevance of certain social norms and properties in play (for instance, the ones concerning the difference between social classes) is to be seen "as a ceremonial reversal of ordinary practice" (ibid: 30) which reasserts their importance in ordinary life, outside the play frame. However, what is interesting of Goffman's (ibid) analysis is his observation of the social function of fun as something allowing the "ease" necessary for social encounters to sustain existing orders. For people to feel at ease, the situation must be appropriately framed through "transformation rules", that is, those rules,

“both inhibitory and facilitating, that tell us what modification in shape will occur when an external pattern of properties is given expression inside the encounter” (ibid: 31).

The concept of frame is central in Goffman's (1974) analysis of how framing works both in the attribution of meaning to a situation, and in the definition of the actor's involvement in it. As mentioned in chapter 1, Goffman identifies two types of primary frameworks (that is, those elements and processes which enable the individual's attribution of meaning and definition to a situation): natural and social. The first type excludes the causal or intentional intervention of a “willful agency” (: 22), whereas the second type includes events that “incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency” (ibid).

For instance, the theatrical framework is a social framework which provides an “arrangement which transforms the individual into a stage performer”, that is, “an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior, by persons in an “audience” role” (: 124). This framework relies on an inviolable line between the audience and the performers, and prevents and preserves the audience from participating in the staged actions and interactions. Like the game frame illustrated above, the example of the theatrical framework illustrates how the clear-cut separation of time and spaces serves the purpose of facilitating interaction and sustaining social structures.

Chapter 1 identified two different primary frames which effectively illustrate the relevance of Goffman's perspective for a sociological understanding of the circus. The ‘timeless circus’ referred to circus as the blurring of natural, social, and, more specifically, theatrical frames – focusing on the relation between artists and audience. The contemporary circus frame is instead a social framework in a broader sense – concerning the meanings assumed by circus practices and performances in different sociocultural and historical contexts. We could add here that a third frame – the play frame – is relevant to look at circus as an artistic practice, everyday body work, and leisure activity. The ‘serious implications’ (in terms of meaning-making, construction of life and professional trajectories, and management of one's self, body and emotions) of this play frame are illustrated in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

The meanings attributed to ‘responsible’ risk taking concern to a great extent the ability to recognize these different frames. Risk is, first of all, a constitutive part of the challenging or attention-demanding component of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Moreover, according to Lupton (1999), risk in contemporary society is perceived as an individual responsibility, rather than the outcome of fate, like in premodern times, or something to be managed socially, thanks to the intervention of the welfare state, like in liberal-democratic states. The responsibility for taking and managing risks has thus moved to the “responsible and prudential choices and actions” (Dean, 1999: 133) of the individual, as if all risks were economic and required entrepreneurial management: “Risk today is associated [...] with the injunction to make one's life into an enterprise and for the individual to become an entrepreneur of him or herself” (ibid: 134).

Again, Goffman depicts a useful framework to reflect on the role of risk in society. His vision of risk is more connected to a concern about social relations and cultural meanings than to the problems of choice, utility and reason usually faced by philosophy and social theory (see also Sassatelli, 2001). In his essay “Where the action is” (1967b), he defines ‘action’ as

a wilful undertaking of chances in the form of opportunities to gain or risks to lose something serious. In other words, action concerns those activities that are socially defined as ones an individual is under no obligation to continue to pursue once he has started to do so. As such, this kind of activity becomes an end in itself and a direct expression of the individual's "true make-up and a just basis for reputation" (ibid: 185). Action is thus commonly associated to a state of excitement, racy attitudes, and unpredictable situations, or to what Le Breton (2000) calls "the quest for sensation". However, action has its social function, and society in turn provides arrangements and organisational forms that facilitate the undertaking of action.

In particular, action is an opportunity to show one's "character". With this term, Goffman refers to the "constancy-in-spite-of-everything" (Goffman, 1967b: 234). Strong or weak character – implying the presence or lack of courage, gameness, integrity, gallantry, and composure - represent a fundamental aspect of reputation, "essentializing", "fully coloring our picture of the person so characterized" (Goffman, 1967b: 218). Voluntary, aware risk taking has a peculiar relation to character: a demonstration of character out of place will be easily interpreted as immature behaviour, and some circumstances require to show obedience or solidarity rather than character. Meaningful risk taking implies being in control of the risks, not at its mercy (Le Breton, 2000).

Thus, action provides a means to demonstrate, reassert, or change one's reputation, encouraging individuals to renovate their efforts in social moments. As such, action is not an expression of impulsiveness or irrationality but has a specific social explanation. Action is a way to obtain the benefits of heroic, seriously dangerous conduct without the same risks.

For Goffman, risk is intrinsic to human condition, and has to be dealt with in the most convenient way for the safeguard of social structures and order. Thus, actual risk is often overlooked or goes unnoticed (for example when driving) and copings are enacted to construct a situation as devoid of risks in order to maintain a calm and controlled attitude in daily activities, enabling the normal and peaceful unfolding of everyday interaction. What appears as a wilful undertaking of activities or professions that are seen as particularly dangerous also serves a social function of reinforcing and reproducing stability and predictability as normality: self-determination is just an illusion, a reward for people who live particularly risky lives.

Another important sociological perspective on risk highlights the role of risk taking against the backdrop of the increasing importance attributed to the search for an authentic self. As well as means to develop character and body, and to break with everyday routine, risk taking cultivates hidden talents, creativity and style, enlarging one's sensorial field and develop capacities beyond rationality (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005). In extreme sports, for instance, while remaining on the background, risk is what provides "colour and substance" to the event, what demonstrates the authenticity of the experience and of the emotion felt. Risk is also what allows to experience a state of flow in which the body, by itself, finds unexpected solutions and activates unexpected resources, increasing self-empowerment (ibid).

Besides the premises of strength of character and the outcome of enhanced self-confidence, however, another important element is at stake in risk taking and managing: trust. When deciding to play a game, for instance,

“We need [...] some guarantee, somewhere, that no matter what happens in our pursuit of the well-played game, we will not be risking more than we are prepared to risk. Even though I'm aware that I might die as a result of trying to climb this mountain with you, I can accept that as part of the game. On the other hand, when I discover that you're cutting my rope so that you can get to the top first, I find myself much less willing to play” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 13)

Thus, trust is what allows a shared sense of understanding. However, trust in circus has a corporal dimension which is hard to find, at least with the same intensity and diffusion, in other human practices. It is a matter of repeatedly putting one's integrity, health and sometimes life in the hands of someone else, him/her being a *base*, a spotter, a rigger. This entails the embodiment of rules and strategies to determine whether and when a situation or a person is trustworthy, as well as emphasising the importance of bodily 'listening' and 'empathy' (see paragraph 7.5).

In conclusion to this paragraph, I want to draw attention to how the central role of flow and fun in making people feel at ease, while enabling the maintenance of the social order, underpins the commercialization of self-discipline, through which work enters the sphere of leisure, while leisure becomes an opportunity for responsible self-production (Sassatelli, 2010). Sassatelli draws on an ethnographic research within fitness gyms in Italy and England to show how “real fun” is not a “spontaneous event”, but “institutionally organised and socially patterned” (ibid: 120). Thus, fun has a “situated character” and depends on “local articulations of cultural repertoires” (ibid) which regulate the meanings attached to both fitness and pleasure. In line with Goffman (1961), she stresses how, in order to be fun, spontaneous engrossment must imply the immediate, automatic understanding and application of the ‘transformation rules’, with no need to reflect on the meaning of the situation and on one's involvement in it.

Flow in fitness creates an “absolute present” in two ways: it may help to engage in routines in a body-and-mind way, enhancing the focus on details and precision and decreasing the automaticity of the exercise; or it can enable a departure from routine, allowing the mind to “flow away” (ibid: 122). Thus, similarly to play, fitness is seen as a gift to oneself, and happens within a “magic circle” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), enabling to focus on things - and to interact in ways – which are different from the ordinary, according wide margins of free expression to those involved. Differently from play, however, fitness is not an autotelic activity: it is presented as having serious consequences for the client's bodies and health, although it should be carried out with cheerfulness, as if it was not serious at all; it is not a domain of “non-serious seriousness”, but one of “serious playfulness” (Sassatelli, 2010).

In this sense, fitness, like other contemporary forms of sports, combine “ascetism and hedonism” (ibid), drawing on a narrative of the authentic self achieved through personal commitment, strength of character, courage and discipline, but also informality, satisfaction and freedom (Le Breton, 2000; Sassatelli, 2010). Featherstone (2007) speaks



about “calculating hedonism” and “controlled de-control” of the emotions (: 58) to illustrate the ambivalence of contemporary consumer practices:

“Consumer culture necessarily promotes ambivalence, it offers a world beyond scarcity and hardship, the dream of abundance, yet its *modus operandi* is through the commodity form, the calculus of monetary value. It encourages a **calculating hedonism**, a cost-benefit analysis of pleasure, time and other people. Yet it also encourages a calculus of public policies, the consequences of growth, along with the costs to other forms of life and the planet, of our actions” (: XXIII)

Consumer culture thus demands the rational calculus of the individual’s pleasure and time, and of other people’s costs and benefits, and the internalization of more complex and varied hegemonic feeling rules. The latter do not only sanction certain behaviours and feelings, like in the past, but also circumscribe spaces for a socially adequate and responsible search and expression of emotions which were previously forbidden (see paragraph 7.5).

## **2.5 Theories of embodiment: the merging of structure and agency, bodily capital and reflexive body techniques**

As stated in chapter 1, physicality is one of the fundamental characters of the circus both as a performing genre and a sociocultural practice. While paragraph 5.3 identifies the appreciation of embodied – rather than theoretical – knowledge as one of the pillars of contemporary circus practices, and chapter 7 is dedicated to the exploration of circus bodies and embodiment, this paragraph provides the conceptual underpinnings orientating the theoretical approach towards the body adopted in the thesis.

First of all, as it is illustrated in paragraph 3.2, attention to the body plays a key role as epistemological foundation of a “carnal”, non-dualistic approach to sociology (Crossley, 1995: 147). Rationales to entangle agency and structure, and the biological, the symbolic and the social levels of life are to be found in the view of the body and embodiment as the “locus of politics and praxis” (Laurendeau, 2014: 6), and of bodily “scripts” (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) as enacted simultaneously on cultural, interactional and subjective scenarios, highlighting the constant interplay between internal states and social constraints, between emotions, drives, discipline and norms.

Secondly, the concepts of bodily capital and body techniques are pivotal to investigate a sociocultural practice grounded in everyday physical training, body moulding, bodily listening, non-verbal communication, and what Bassetti (2009b) calls “reflexivity-in-action” (see paragraphs 7.3 and 7.4). Investing in the body in circus represents the raw material to realize subjectivity (paragraph 1.3.3), but also to build one’s career and life trajectory (see paragraph 5.3 and chapters 6 and 7).

Thus, the thesis is rooted in both Bourdieu’s and Goffman’s contributions to a sociological understanding of the body.

Bourdieu’s approach highlights how structure and agency merge to shape human practice, and how this entanglement can be explored through the study of embodiment:

“Bourdieu’s philosophy of the social is monist in the sense that it refuses to establish sharp demarcations between the external and the internal, the conscious and the unconscious, the bodily and the discursive. It seeks to capture the intentionality without intention, the knowledge without cognitive intent, the pre-reflective, infra-conscious mastery that agents acquire of their social world by way of durable immersion within it (this is why sports is of such theoretical interest for Bourdieu...) and which defines properly human social practice” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 19)

Lizardo (2007) employs the findings of the empirical investigation of neural processes that account for the production of motor action and the perception of the action of others, to support Bourdieu’s (1990) claim that skills can be transmitted tacitly and automatically between individuals, merely through observation, and that practical action is governed by a ‘feel for the game’. This is possible thanks to mirror neurons, which elicit similar responses to different objects when they afford a similar type of motor, pragmatic interaction: “mirror neurons seem indifferent to the type of object, being more likely to differentiate between different types of objects only if different types of actions are directed at those objects” (Lizardo, 2007: 13).

In this sense, he argues that practical understanding can be abstract, and conceptual knowledge is embodied, and that both include the goal of the action (of others) as well as the (other’s) embodied relation with an object. In this way, fundamental cultural principles, symbols and constructions come to be inscribed “in seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners” (ibid: 15), merely from observation of others’ conduct.

This also explains the physical discomfort one might feel in new cultural contexts. Herzfeld (2009) draws on insights into the involuntary, automatic acquisition of specific gestures, posture, tone of voice, etc. to elaborate a methodological tool for the ethnographer to acknowledge the “cultural politics of gesture” and the “incorporated aspect” (ibid: 141) of cultural intimacy. His perspective shows how behaviour and gesture are incorporated and reproduced automatically after the prolonged embeddedness into a cultural world, and how this can reinforce or reduce the relevance of phenotype when interacting in unfamiliar cultural and social contexts. The following passage is explicative. It depicts the author during a second visit to Thailand, following a first, unsuccessful attempt to make the locals acknowledge his familiarity with Thai culture and language:

“One day some weeks later, a food vendor I knew told a woman who was passing by and expressed surprise that I spoke Thai, ‘He looks Thai too.’ In some perplexity I pointed to my face: ‘I have a farang face.’ ‘That doesn’t matter,’ the answer came back. ‘You have Thai gesture (mii thaa thaang thai). And at that moment I suddenly became aware – discursively educated by my vendor friend – that I was trying not to stand over her, was using my hands in a completely different way, and was experiencing a certain amount of facial muscle ache (presumably because of the greater degree of nuanced smiling through which Thais express a range of social attitudes). I was also vaguely aware, and became much more so in subsequent months, that although – or because – this woman was arguably of lower status than I was, I was hunching myself deferentially as someone who was unsure of his ability to speak properly (the Thai cringe known as jawng-jawng) – an appropriate form of courtesy in that I had no desire to play the equally performative role of either the ‘bandit’ (naklaeng) or the ‘aristocrat’ (nai)”. (Ibid: 141)

The habitus is appropriated through the body, which thus plays a pivotal role in reproducing symbolic values and maintaining social structures (Shilling, 2003). Bourdieu acknowledges the close relationship between certain ways of managing the body and the acquisition and maintenance of status and distinction. To clarify this connection, he introduces the concept of physical – or bodily - capital to indicate the “abilities and tendencies” acquired through embodiment within specific contexts and groups, which function as resources able to produce value and improve one’s position in the field (Bourdieu, 1986; Wacquant, 1995).

Through the acquisition of habitus and the production of physical capital,

“Social differences become incorporated as 'natural' differences, and are misrecognized as such, and it becomes more or less automatic for people to participate in different forms of physical activity which are themselves invested with unequal social value” (Shilling, 2003: 118).

The concept of bodily capital further highlights the processes and products related to the embodiment of social structures by social agents (Wacquant, 1995). The body is thus defined as both raw material, tool for work, and final product, as a way to produce symbolic as well as material value through attentive management. Framing the body as capital also implies focusing on strategies of body work, preservation, conversion and transferability to other forms of capital, or other types of bodily capital (ibid).

Bodily capital is strictly connected to the notion of embodied capital which, even when it is not invested and accumulated intentionally as bodily capital (that is, turned directly into economic capital), represents an important symbolic (and, as such, potentially economic) resource, to be employed both as a sign of membership within the community of circus practice, and as a motor of position taking within the circus field (see paragraph 7.1).

As already mentioned, the connections between the structural and the experienced level of life can be illustrated through the investigation of processes of embodiment of specific habitus. Among others, Wacquant (2004), Aalten (2007) and Bassetti (2009) provide interesting insights into how “we learn by body”, that is, how the embodiment of certain ‘body techniques’, schemata, tempos and routines is central to processes of socialization. Both dance and boxe are underpinned by corporal, kinetic practices and cultures embodied through repetition and imitation in a way that “goes beyond – and comes prior to – full visual and mental cognizance” (Wacquant, 2004: 69).

On the other hand, Goffman’s approach sheds light on the aware and reflexive aspects of embodiment. Crossley (1995) draws on Goffman’s interactionist perspective to clarify the concepts of ‘body techniques’ and ‘intercorporeality’ as introduced, respectively, by Marcel Mauss and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to the latter’s phenomenological approach, (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), the body represents the medium through which people make sense of the world: “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (ibid: 235). The body represents a site of practical knowledge and a source of intersubjective meaning underpinned by the entanglement of contextual elements and sensual experiences.

In line with these insights, Goffman effectively considers both the acquired and the fluid character of body techniques, which, as well as “historical and biographical acquisitions”, are also “on-going practices” (Crossley, 1995: 135), shaped and continuously redefined by spatial negotiations and specific interactional contexts. However, Goffman also takes into account the ways in which what we see, hear, taste, smell and touch orient action not only through the provision of a “perceptual awareness of circumstances” (ibid), but also through a fundamental contribution to the process of acknowledgement and reproduction of an ‘interaction order’:

“it is the actor qua embodied actor (and her body techniques) that are coordinated with the micro-public order and not a subject who is prior to, or in some way divorced from, this corporeal-social order. It establishes that embodied action is the principle of its own intelligibility and its own coordination with the public order, that the exercise of body techniques is directly and immediately governed by the rules and exigencies of their immediate situation” (ibid: 138).

Drawing on Goffman’s contribution, Crossley’s (2006) approach, and particularly his concept of “reflexive body techniques”, highlights “the ‘mindful’ aspect of body techniques” (: 104), the themes of flexibility, imagination and improvisation in bodily action, and the importance of the different contexts where specific body techniques are practiced “to meet the interactive exigencies of specific situations” (: 104). Defining body techniques as ‘reflexive’, Crossley points to the work the body does upon itself through the manipulation of someone else’s body, the use of one single part of the body to modify another one, or the “total immersion in a stream of activity” (: 105). Different techniques combine to form repertoires and routines that allow to convey meanings in appropriate ways and to interact in different contexts.

Focusing on reflexivity leads us to another important concern of the sociology of the body: how subjects, aware of their own interests and desire, manage their bodies and the impressions left on others in everyday, face-to-face interactions, through “face work” and “body work”:

“Face work and body work are, then, critical to maintaining the smooth flow of encounters and the integrity of social roles (...) what I shall refer to as body work is the most immediate and most important form of labour that humans engage (...) Body work is rarely called work, but in cleaning our teeth, washing our bodies, cutting our nails, making-up, or shaving our legs or faces, we are all working on our bodies” (Shilling, 2003: 73-74).

The theoretical perspective outlined thus far indicates that the body, the self, knowledge and culture cannot be separated in reality, and that they must be considered together to gain significant analytical insights. In Gimlin’s (2002) words, “the body is a medium of culture” (: 3) and it is a tool through which “the self is constructed and displayed to the social world” (ibid):

“The shared attitudes and practices of social groups are played out at the level of the body, revealing cultural notions of distinctions based on age, sexual orientation, social class, gender, and ethnicity. But cultural rules are not only revealed through the body; they also shape the ways in which the body performs and appears” (ibid).

The body is thus the meeting point between the social and the individual, from which an acceptable self is articulated and identity is negotiated. In this sense, “body work is in fact work on the self” (ibid: 6), especially in a society in which “appearance symbolizes character” (ibid: 56).

### **2.5.1 The body as project in contemporary consumer society**

In modern times the body as a reflexive project has come to occupy a central position in the construction and maintenance of an individual’s self-identity and in the performance of political and cultural activity (Ferrero Camoletto, 2004; Shilling, 2003). Thus, the body engaged in bodily and performative practices (such as sports, dance, circus, etc.) becomes the site of dreams coming true, of projects that incarnate ideals but also of transformation of these ideals, shifting the limits of time, space, and culture (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005: 7-8).

This has led to the proliferation of knowledge and expertise about the body, and to the potential accessibility of an infinite number of options to pursue self-actualization and improvement. Belonging and identity in high modernity are based on the adoption of lifestyles and body regimes, and, as such, take fragmented, uncertain and discontinuous shapes.

This leads us to another consideration: how the body has become the first place to search for, discover and express authenticity, through experimentation and reflexivity, at the same time as the relations to our bodies are becoming more instrumental. The self can thus be defined as “a body-owner who chooses to discipline the body in order to obtain happiness, freedom, dignity or more simply to realise subjectivity” (Sassatelli, 2010: 14). The body becomes a symbol of “status and character”: “A variety of commodities thus serve as an ever more sophisticated identity tool-kit for the celebration of one’s own identity” (Sassatelli, 2012: 642).

If “somatic modes of attention” are “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas, 2016: 138), the body as a project entails “not only unconscious *somatic involvement* —as tastes are embodied through habituation and imitation —but also more reflexive *somatic investment* in the form of body modification strategies and body projects” (Sassatelli, 2012: 642).

Contemporary consumer culture contributes to this conception of the body as a site to search for both self-discipline, personal value and authenticity, simultaneously promoting “personal gratification, self-control, and individual autonomy” (Sassatelli, 2012: 636). Like the studies on body work and emotional labour (see below) demonstrate, this obsession with control carries risks for the subject’s mental and physical health. This is at least in part because it “is doomed to failure”, given the body’s limits (such as death, injury, illness) and its refusal “to be moulded in accordance with our intentions (Shilling, 2003: 6-7).

## **2.6 A sociological view of the emotions**

The study of circus practice highlights the entanglements between social, bodily, sensory, and emotional aspects of life. In particular, the emotions are key to understand the contemporary circus culture, including internal and external boundaries drawn by the community of circus practice (see chapter 5), professional and life trajectories (see chapter 6), everyday interactions, learning paths, and, through the focus on feeling rules, structures and hierarchies determining positions within the field (see chapter 7). The sociology of the emotions provides conceptual tools to gain significant insights into these facets of circus life.

Recent contributions to the sociological and anthropological literature stress the constructed, cultural character of the emotions, recognizing cultural and social variability and regularities and neglecting the assumption of universality (Caforio, 2007; Von Scheve, 2012). On the other hand, the physiological and embodied nature of the emotions also enters into the picture, since it is broadly recognized that the capability to feel has also a biological and a mechanical basis and that “we both experience and become aware of emotion in bodily ways” (Laurendeau, 2014: 2).

Other authors highlight how the emotions have both a subjective and a collective component, in the sense that they play a central role in the reproduction of shared meanings, social relations and structures (Ahmed, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2014; Hochschild, 1983), and that they can arise in particularly intense forms in certain situations, recalling the collective effervescence of Durkheim (1912) (Collins, 2004; Williams, 2001). Here, emotion is taken as a complex, multi-layered element that acts within, through and upon the body, enabling the experience of social relations, and providing a central site of articulation between self and social structure (Hochschild, 1983; Laurendeau, 2014).

This leads to another important point, countering the Weberian model that separates between rational action – free of passion and emotion – and irrational action – driven by impulses and feelings. The argument here is that the emotions play a central role in the interpretation and understanding of a situation, and represent a source of action that takes into account the meanings, the scripts and the feeling rules of the cultural context of interaction, the contingencies, and one’s position, history and feelings in relation to another or an object (Caforio, 2007; Hochschild, 1983, 2006; Le Breton, 2001; Sassatelli, 2014; Von Scheve, 2012). Finally, active, aware emotion work is undertaken by people engaged in social interaction, and this type of work is incorporated into commercial relations and labour (Hochschild, 1983, 2006; Shilling, 2003; Wolkowitz, 2006).

### **2.6.1 Cultural variability and social function of the emotions**

The emotions are not direct, linear responses to biological impulses, but the way people feel, define and express emotions are culturally and socially constructed. Anthropological studies of the emotion definitely support the argument that the assumption of universality of the emotions, and of the very existence of the category of emotion as a separate, autonomous form of experience, is an ethnocentric one. For instance, the reasons and consequences of feeling shame are very different in different societies; the feeling of

depression does not have an equivalent in many cultures, while in some places rage and sadness are indicated with the same word (Caforio, 2007; Le Breton, 2001).

Intense personal emotions such as pain, desire, and jealousy, find proper means of expression through well definite, collective forms of singing, dancing, and poetry that respect local aesthetic and moral parameters (Caforio, 2007). Thus, ritual expression of emotions in public events or through artistic forms plays an undeniably pivotal social function (Durkheim, 1912; Goffman, 1967a; Turner & Stets, 2006). However, also in everyday life the bodily expression of emotion is embedded in an “ideological matrix and in a shared, everyday cultural universe” (Herzfeld, 2009:133).

Thus, although it cannot be denied that the expression of emotions has a biological, uncontrollable component (easily recognizable if one thinks of uncontrollable physical reactions such as flushing, fainting, and crying in some circumstances), the sociological interest for the emotions mainly concerns the context-specific character of the ways the emotions are felt, expressed and defined. This interest is underpinned by the assumption that culturally appropriate ways of interacting and presenting oneself require the internalization and incorporation of framing rules, but also feeling rules and expressive norms (Hochschild, 2006; Von Scheve, 2012).

Societies in which feelings are freely expressed do not exist, because “self-control is the foundational value of one’s own humanity” (Caforio, 2007: 67). On the other hand, the collective character of emotion does not exclude sincerity, since spontaneity and ‘authenticity’ itself is culturally and socially constructed (Hochschild, 2006; Le Breton, 2001; Sassatelli, 2014). The emotions are culturally and socially specific and variable, and this is true not only for the controllable side of emotions, but also “the involuntary and automatic expression of emotion and the ability to decode facial expressions are crucially dependent on the social environment” (Von Scheve, 2012: 8).

Interaction ritual theories stress the role of the “animated and effervescent interaction” (Turner & Stets, 2006: 32) observed by Durkheim (1912) as a form of collective worship of the symbols holding society together:

“For interaction rituals to increase positive emotional energy, they must activate all the key elements: first, the gathering of individuals in proximate space; next, the emission of stereotyped greeting rituals that raise the level of transient emotions that, in turn, increase the shared mood and focus of attention; then, the ensuing rhythmic synchronization of talk and bodies that increases collective effervescence, followed by rising levels of positive emotional energy. As positive emotional energy escalates, group solidarity increases, leading to symbolization of this solidarity, and with group symbols, particularized cultural capital consisting of the experiences of members in the group increases. Once symbols are built up, conversations or even thoughts reinvolve the symbols and, as a result, charge up the positive emotional energy” (Turner & Stets, 2006: 33).

These rituals represent an important object of study also for the insights they provide into the embodied character of “emotional contagion”, that is, the “tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person” (Von Scheve, 2012: 8), and how these processes underpin

emotional convergence, “affective resonance” (ibid: 8), or the processes of ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim, 1912).

To sum up, the interesting assumptions here are that “not only the expression of emotion but also the elicitation of emotion are closely linked to social structural and sociocultural conditions” (Von Scheve, 2012: 3), and that emotions are “what holds society together – the glue of solidarity – and what mobilizes conflict – the energy of mobilized groups” (Collins, 2004: 103). This perspective thus argues that the emotions are generated through interactions, rather than in the body, and that, once incorporated, they are fundamental to social cohesion.

A number of authors support the idea that the ‘place’ of the emotions is neither inside us – they are not merely an individual, subjective fact – nor outside – they are not atmospheric agents that determine our behaviour and attitude. This is the idea of “between-ness” of the emotions (Seyfert, 2012: 37) as an effect of the articulation between self and social structures. In this sense, the emotions function as a connective tissue between embodied experience, existing social structures, and the construction of subjectivities (Hochschild, 2006: 99).

Goffman's (1967a) analysis provides an example of the dynamics leading societal forces to ensure the maintenance and reproduction of a certain, understandable and predictable social order through everyday interactions. In his view, the way individuals act is completely driven by their social nature, and their – often unconscious - inclination towards safeguarding and reproducing social order and social structures. In other words, for Goffman society is within the individuals themselves, in the form of socially recognized proprieties and shared expectations that shape everyday actions and interactions. Rather than individuality, agency thus celebrates commonality, pushing individuals to maintain, in general, an ‘appropriate’ behaviour in return for stability, predictability, and a reputation of reliability. In this sense, even something broadly considered as individual, personal and subjective (like emotion) is actually social and collective (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

What I want to stress here is that the emotions are relational, in that they only come into being through processes of communication and acknowledgement: in order to be understood, the expression of emotions requires sharing the same symbolic world and affective culture, and specific processes of education and socialization (Caforio, 2007; Le Breton, 2001). To say it with Bourdieu, the emotions are part of the habitus and, as such, shape individual identities and reproduce social structures. The ability to assess the appropriateness of one’s own and the others’ feelings, the expertise about feeling rules and the expectations concerning the emotions imply a shared knowledge of the cultural and interactional context (Von Scheve, 2012).

This is why the emotions cannot be viewed as opposite to rational action, on the contrary, they are a fundamental component of it, in that they help us understand a situation and contribute to shape coherent reactions, with our sense of self and with social conventions. Many authors, and Hochschild (1983, 2006) in particular, show how this calibration or articulation is not a mere automatism, but the outcome of reflexive activity.



### 2.6.2 Emotion work and emotional labour

The concept of emotion work draws precisely on Hochschild's (1983) observation of the aware, active and reflective activity that leads us to feel and show emotions in certain ways. She defines emotion work as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (ibid: 7). Thus, to talk about emotion work means accepting the assumption of a human capability to be aware about one's feelings; to be aware of existing feeling rules, and to follow or ignore them; and to change one's feelings and to decide whether to show them or not, and how.

Hochschild assumes that not only "we disguise what we feel, pretending to feel what we do not" (Shilling, 2003: 104), but we also manipulate our emotions, trying to feel in certain ways. In this sense, through emotion work, the self actively participates in the construction of emotions, subjectivities and social structures. In other words, emotion work is what makes the emotions sociologically relevant.

Hochschild draws extensively on the work of Goffman (1956), adding new insights to his theory. Goffman highlights how the participants in an interaction work to maintain a certain "visible emotional state", in order "to be in tune and tempo with the melody sustained in the interaction" (Goffman, 1961: 50). Like Hochschild (2006) suggests, he depicts a society in which individuals engage in an active and aware negotiation of a personal, unique way of acting, with the result of conforming to social norms. He shows how social norms and mechanisms are interiorized, while personality is reduced to a transitory surface. Goffman draws on Simmel and Freud to state that the participants in an interaction "suppress unsuitable affect" (Goffman, 1961: 22), but does not provide the tools to understand the processes of emotion management leading to suppression. Moreover, according to Hochschild (2006), Goffman only considers a single type of action, the direct, usually suppressive, control of behaviour and of the expression of emotions, neglecting a second type of action: the elicitation of feelings which leads to a certain expression.

Emotion work is possible because individuals are aware that social situations are regulated by feeling rules which specify the appropriate ways of feeling in different circumstances, and how we judge our feelings. Like an interior counterpart to the framing rules that allow us to define a situation, feeling rules allow to internally conform to the situation while simultaneously leaving space for emerging doubts and reflections:

"Like other rules, feeling rules can be obeyed halfheartedly or boldly broken, the latter at varying costs. A feeling rule can be in varying proportions external or internal. Feeling rules differ curiously from other types of rules in that they do not apply to action but to what is often taken as a precursor to action. Therefore they tend to be latent and resistant to formal codification" (Hochschild, 1979: 566).

Feeling rules have a normative, an expressive and a political dimension. The normative dimension concerns what is right and appropriate to feel in a certain situation; the expressive dimension concerns the appropriate ways to express a certain emotion, and the issue of sincerity and authenticity (whether what we show corresponds to something really felt). In the normative context, the focus is on whether a certain emotion is appropriate to

the context and the respective rules, while in the context of expression it is the sincerity of an emotion that is put into question. In the market of the emotions, value is attributed not only on a basis of positiveness (for which, for instance, happiness is generally appreciated more than rage, envy or depression), but also on a basis of authenticity.

The political dimension concerns instead the object of the emotion, and how this is connected to power positions in society, as we will see in paragraph 2.6.3. Hochschild (1979) is interested in the work performed by people in order to feel certain emotions, or, in other words, in how they consciously feel, rather than (like Goffman), in how they struggle to appear. In this sense, according to Hochschild emotion work has implications not only at the expressive and political level, but also at a deeper level, where the roots of our sense of self lie. This implies that society affects identity not only at the level of the skin and the face, but deep down into “flesh” (Hochschild, 2006: 98) and “bones” (Wolkowitz, 2006: 18).

Even spontaneity has a socially and culturally constructed component: it requires work, reflexivity, appropriate interactional contexts and structural conditions (Sassatelli, 2014) and it depends on social meanings attached to the emotions and to spontaneity itself. Thus, if a smile can be interpreted as polite or embarrassed depending on facial expression as well as on shared implicit and explicit knowledge of feeling and expression rules (Von Scheve, 2012), it can also be interpreted as sincere or fake.

Hochschild (2006) explains how the commercialization of sympathy is extremely important for the maintenance of the social order, but has decreased the value of public expressions of sympathy, which are now seldom taken as sincere and true. On the contrary, expressions of rage and envy have a lower social status, but they are also taken seriously more easily. Thus, together with feeling rules concerning the direction, the intensity and the duration of the emotions, authenticity acquires huge value in the market of the emotions.

The call for emotion work is more and more diffused in today's relations of labour. Employees are increasingly required to manage and manipulate their emotions (Shilling, 2003), seeming to love the job is becoming an increasingly important part of the job, and trying to actually enjoy it helps the workers in this task (Hochschild, 1983).

Hochschild (ibid) analyses the case of the flight attendants employed by some of the main airlines in North America. She defines emotional labour as the work of feeling induction and suppression the attendants (more or less consciously) exchange for a wage:

“the jobs that call for emotional labor...have three characteristics in common. First, they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person-gratitude or fear, for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees” (ibid: 147).

The third aspect is particularly problematic in that it “calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (ibid: 7), selling it to others. It leads the workers to ask themselves more

and more often: “Do I really feel this way or do I have to feel this way?” (Hochschild, 2006: 117) and to risk to lose the capability to feel.

Emotional labour requires deep acting, a method defined by Stanislavski and his followers in which “the entire world of fantasy, of subconscious and semiconscious memory, is conceived as a precious resource” (Hochschild, 1983: 40) to recall memories about lived emotions in order to experience them again on stage, offering a good performance. Differently from actors, though, flight attendants and other emotional labourers are asked to perform for the whole duration of their working shift. The total – body and soul - engagement in a performance, which is well circumscribed in time and space, is an issue of daily bread and butter for actors and other performative artists; emotion work is, in these cases, acknowledged as exciting and honourable. On the contrary, for the flight attendants this is a secondary, ‘hidden’ part of a job which in principle merely requires to provide a service, and, as such, entails longer working hours and is not as economically and culturally valued:

“Surface and deep acting in a commercial setting, unlike acting in a dramatic, private, or therapeutic context, make one’s face and one’s feelings take on the properties of a resource. But it is not a resource to be used for the purposes of art, as in drama, or for the purposes of self-discovery, as in therapy, or for the pursuit of fulfilment, as in everyday life. It is a resource to be used to make money.” (ibid: 55).

For these reasons, the costs of emotional labour paid by one’s sense of self in ‘ordinary jobs’ are potentially very high, since they may damage the “signal function” of the emotions. In Hochschild’s view, the emotion, like the senses, communicate information, and make us discover “our own viewpoint on the world” (Hochschild, 1983: 17); in other words, act “as a messenger from the self, an agent that gives us an instant report on the connection between what we are seeing and what we had expected to see and tells us what we feel ready to do about it” (ibid: x). When emotion work turns into emotional labour, this signal function shifts from “private management” (ibid) to social engineering, allowing performances to occupy a constitutive part of one’s sense of self, thus provoking the workers’ detachment from their own feelings.

## **2.7 Authenticity in contemporary consumer culture**

The notion of authenticity represents a central underpinning of this research, in that it provides a common ground for the different meanings circus assumes: as a profession and a leisure practice, as an artistic product and a field of cultural production, including organisational contexts, hierarchies and sets of values. After clarifying the notion of authenticity, I will concentrate on two particularly relevant tendencies to this research: the ‘staged’ character of authenticity, which highlights its defining elements and its constructed character; and the above-mentioned conflation of creativity and bureaucracy, which is reflected in the institutionalization and civilization of certain subcultural and popular practices. These two aspects are strictly tied to each other, since the demand and offer of (staged) authentic experience generally meet in formalized, organised and institutionalized contexts, such as professional circus schools, festivals, training spaces, social circus projects. Like in the case of training jazz musicians’ bodies to liberate them

and enable creativity to emerge (Wilf, 2010), this formalization, commercialization, rationalization of authenticity has a paradoxical character which is normalized in the neoliberal context.

The importance acquired by authenticity as uniqueness in contemporary circus performances and artists is treated 4.2 and 7.3.2 through the analysis of rationalised paths of circus training. In clear contrast with traditional circus performances, based on the reproduction of very similar acts and interchangeable artists, contemporary circus practices insist on the artist's need to be innovative and original, unique and, as such, impossible, or very difficult, to replace. In this paragraph I will highlight instead the implications of circus as a subcultural practice relying on and shaping specific notions of authenticity, based on the emotions felt, self-actualisation, risk, and style.

According to Salome (2010) "the concept of authenticity is an increasingly important element of contemporary consumer culture. There is a "quest for authenticity" (Peterson, 2005), a growing movement to return to the natural, the real thing" (Salome, 2010: 71) which neatly breaks with the past, in which authentic, real life "was unpleasantly real, with wars and poverty" (ibid). The tendency to idealize the past is typical of the "New Consumer, individualistic, independent, well-informed", as opposed to the "Old Consumer, conformist and motivated by a need for convenience" (ibid).

This is because mass production has been questioning the possibility of drawing boundaries and making distinctions through the authenticity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness of the products (or services) offered on the market. This opens up tensions between increasing commodification and 'mainstreaming processes', and subcultural tendencies to value authenticity.

We saw in paragraph 2.6.2 how authenticity has acquired extensive value in the market of the emotions. According to Hochschild (1983), the increasing quest for authenticity in the contemporary context constitutes a call for the conservation of "inner resources," (: 22), of "our "real self," an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard is on our back or whose smile is on our face. We push this "real self" further inside, making it more inaccessible" (ibid: 34). However, achieving cultural and emotional authenticity has become an urgent as much as impossible task, since they have represented the very object of commercial appropriation. Moreover, as a construction, authenticity always entails cultural expectations, notions of authenticity vary in relation to the context, and produce a multiplicity of meanings and references.

For this reason, Salome (2010) speaks about "'senses of authenticity' or 'perceived authenticity'" (: 83), and more specifically about the current customers' search for "a comfortable and predictable sense of authenticity" (: 75). Moreover, "the quest of authenticity can be projected to different actors: an authentic object, an authentic experience or an authentic identity" (ibid: 84). The inner jewel of the "real self" mentioned by Hochschild (1983) corresponds in consumer culture to varying, multiple, and ambivalent tendencies. For instance, in extreme and lifestyle sports, authenticity is associated to notions of "novelty" (authenticity declines when extreme sports become social conventions) and safety (which associates technical improvement to a reduced adventurous character). Moreover, "although subcultures in lifestyle sports seem to

become more fluid and boundaries become vague, there are still tensions between core members of the sports culture and the new consumers" (Salome, 2010: 81).

In urban cultural scenes and tourist settings, authenticity has been associated to notions of front and back regions. The struggles for authenticity imply "deliberate efforts" to create authenticity, or "an authentic atmosphere" (ibid: 82), and in a shift of the power to attribute value to authenticity from consumers and experts to producers and suppliers (ibid). In musical scenes such as the blues scene depicted by Grazian (2003), and the tourist settings described by MacCannell (1973) this results in common criteria to 'stage' authenticity and very similar representations of authenticity in different 'authentic places'.

MacCannell (ibid) draws on Goffman's front versus back dichotomy to illuminate the strategies employed in tourist settings to sustain tourists' belief in the authenticity of a place or an experience. In her view, the mere existence of back regions, "and the possibility of their violation, functions to sustain the commonsense polarity of social life into what is taken to be intimate and "real" and what is thought to be "show"" (ibid: 591). Social structure is in this sense underpinned by "popular ideas of the relationship of truth to intimacy" (ibid) and the increased value attributed to authenticity and closeness, as against rationality and distance – confirming the tendency in today's emotional and consumer culture identified above.

MacCannell's (ibid) idea of a "staged authenticity" reflects contemporary individuals' anxiety to "penetrate the true inner workings of other individuals or societies" (: 593) and the concern that "what is taken to be real might, in fact, be a show that is based on the structure of reality" (ibid). Paradoxically, to enable a 'controlled' penetration of outsiders, back regions have been cleaned up according to a "peculiar social movement" thanks to which "there is no place where their front is down, while at the same time members of the audience become sufficiently entrenched with the society's id to explore the places that had been cleaned up for them" (Goffman, 1956: 159). This is because reality is often different from (staged) authenticity: it is "tacky", or "insufficiently policed by liberal concerns for truth and beauty" (MacCannell, 1973: 599). This tendency has complicated the relationship between front and back, blurring and shifting the boundary between these two poles.

In contemporary circus practices, like in other bodily practices, 'staged authenticity' is connected to the commercialization of experiential goods. As such, the authenticity of circus performances and practices is tied to the degree to which they produce and channel new emotions and sensations, imply relationality, a feeling of 'collective effervescence' and 'elective affinity', and are incarnated, embodied, physically challenging and demanding (Ferrero Camoletto, 2004).

We saw in chapter 1 that circus artists and managers play ambiguously with the risk of death or failure to produce effective, engaging performances. We will see that dealing with different types of risks is still a defining dimension of contemporary circus practices, a symbolic guarantee of the authenticity of circus experience (see chapter 5). However, like in the case of the marketisation of extreme sports analysed by Camoletto (ibid), this tendency towards a symbolic emphasising of risk and adventure runs parallel with the attempt to reduce the actual risk of consuming experiential goods.

On the other hand, circus as analysed in this thesis is never a one-trial activity: the 'authentic' embodied element in it is, on the contrary, strictly connected to continuous, constant and disciplined training. For these reasons, the subcultural aspect of circus may be assimilated both to the cultures generated by practices like dance and boxing (which can be practiced at both an amateur or a professional level), fitness (as a commercialized form of practice), the extreme and lifestyle sports, and other practices traditionally considered alternative and popular (such as hip hop or skateboarding) which are recently undergoing a process of 'civilization' or formalization.

According to Wheaton (2004), lifestyle sports are characterized by the emphasis on grass-roots participation, rather than spectating; by the consumption of technologically new and innovative objects, with fragmentary and diversifying effects within the culture and the forms of identification; by a "commitment in time, and/or money and a style of life and forms of collective expressions, attitudes and social identity that develops in and around the activity" (: 11); and by a "participatory ideology that promotes fun, hedonism, involvement, self actualisation, 'flow', living for the moment, 'adrenalin rushes' and other intrinsic rewards" (ibid: 11-12). These forms of sport often denounce and resist commercialisation, institutionalisation, regulation, and "have an ambiguous relationship with forms of traditional competition" (ibid: 12).

For example, Turner (2013) analyses the case of skateboarding to argue that "funding methods for sport represent a 'civilizing process' which is directly at odds with emerging, alternative sporting forms" (: 1248). Participation in contemporary lifestyle sports offers opportunities of "mimetic experiences", that is, to reject traditional values and standards, and "to escape the constraints of modern life" (ibid: 1249). They counter the values of traditional sports, such as "individual skill accumulation, displays of dominance over other athletes and a clear definition of success and attainment through scoring" (ibid).

However, "as has routinely been shown in a range of traditional sports, (...), such activities are themselves prone to civilizing processes, becoming stale and sanitized as a result of the introduction of complex governance controls, rules and regulations and etiquette systems controlling 'uncivilized' behaviours" (ibid). In relation to lifestyle sports, their increased role in health, education and crime prevention agendas supports these civilized forms of lifestyle sports through official funding.

This contributes to pursue the priorities and objectives of the State in producing an idealized 'active citizen' (able to look after his/her health, manage risks, control the body, build meaningful relations to the others and the environment, etc.) and spreading "a hegemonic message of 'include, develop and achieve'" (ibid: 1257). In this sense, "activities such as skateboarding *can* contribute to the attainment of both 'sports development' and 'development through sport'", carrying the "danger of losing the mimetic properties which make them so attractive to participants in the first instance" (ibid: 1259).

Once again, risk plays a pivotal role, as a central component of symbolic value, one of the strongest sign of authenticity of an experience, but also the first aspect subject to domestication and 'staging'. In the case of white water rafting analysed by Holyfield (1999) adventures are manufactured in an organisational context which provides "scripted narratives and feeling rules" (: 24) to enlarge the experience of strong emotions to novices.

To do so organisers need to limit the danger which characterises those very activities: “commercial adventures [...] may provide today’s novice consumers with just enough security that they can taste the heroic, but as Goffman adds, without taking all the necessary risks” (ibid: 27). Perceived risk, however, count as much as real risk in creating a “symbolic distance between the novice adventurer and routine “other”” (ibid). If, for professionals, authenticity is tied to passion, lifestyle and competition, for novices the authenticity of the experience is more connected to the emotions felt, than to the presence or absence of a manufactured scenery (Ferrero Camoletto, 2004).

Besides its experiential, mimetic function, authenticity plays an important role as a proof of character – which, as we saw in paragraph 2.4 in relation to risk taking, is highlighted by Goffman (1967b). In the words of Holyfield (1999): “Goffman (...) likened adventure to a character contest where emotions are aroused, yet controlled. Character is created, tested, and identities are forged. The defining criteria can be summarized as context, skill, and willingness to accept challenge” (: 25). This increases the importance of the contemporary individual to signal not only social status, but also her or his ‘character’ through “ever more sophisticated bodily markers” (Sassatelli, 2012: 641). This contemporary tendency towards individualization unfolds in a context of instable and fragile social and cultural structures, and “largely means that the sacred is translated at the level of the embodied self” (ibid).

This leads us to another important concept, that of style. Like Simmel (1991) argues, the notion of style has the function to negate the individual nature and value, and the uniqueness of meaning (in the case he refers to, of a work of art), attributing it to a shared, “general law of form that also applies to other works”, and thus relieving it “of its absolute autonomy” (: 64). In this sense, “the stylization of a work contains the note of a generality” (ibid).

This view enables further insights into the dynamics of authenticity, that is, how it comes to be associated to uniqueness: “to say of some things that they are unique, and of others that they are one individual thing out of many, often has only a symbolic meaning” (ibid: 65). The centrality of the symbolic meaning of style is tied to “the fact that style also appeals to the observer at levels beyond the purely individual, to the broad emotional categories subject to the general laws of life, is the source of the calming effect, the feeling of security and serenity with which the strictly stylized object provides us” (ibid: 67).

If, on the one hand, in times of “exaggerated subjectivism” style saves us “from absolute responsibility, from balancing on the narrowness of mere individuality” (ibid: 68), on the other it must co-exist with individuality:

“an environment consisting entirely of objects in one historical style coalesces into a closed unity which excludes the individual who lives there, so to speak; he finds no gap where his personal life, free from any past style, could enter into it or join it” (ibid: 69).

Thus, individually traced paths unite different objects to create “a new whole, whose synthesis and overall form are of a thoroughly individual nature and suited to one and only one specially attuned personality” (ibid).

The same tendency to join a broader unity “if you cannot become a unity yourself” (ibid: 70) has been observed by consumer culture and subcultural scholars. Contemporary Western society is a “consumer society”, as commercialization is the central process through which individuals satisfy their needs, and an increasing number of products and services are made “consumable”, by placing them within the individual’s “structure of needs, thus inevitably modifying and expanding his or her desires” (Sassatelli, 2007: 5). Even more significantly, commoditization and commercialization shape meaning making and identity building, not only because of the symbolic value of the goods and services we consume, but because – paradoxically - “each of us relentlessly tries to preserve personal identities and relations from the logic of the market and price”, and “we find it necessary to de-commoditize objects and services if we want our activities to have meaning for us as human beings” (ibid).

Brake (2003) defines style in consumer society as “one cultural form common in a subculture” (: 11). Style is used symbolically, as a marker of membership and of the “degree of commitment to the subculture” (ibid). Cohen (1965) illustrates how an actor engages with and displays cultural membership and roles through “the kinds of clothes he wears, his posture and gait, his likes and dislikes, what he talks about and the opinions he expresses-everything that goes into what we call the style of life” (: 12).

The function of style is thus “expressive or symbolic” (ibid), connected to one’s role and identity, rather than the achievement of goals allegedly valued by society at large (such as success, material gains, acquisition of mainstream knowledge, etc.): style is, in this view, a way to adhere to “the image one would like to have of oneself” (ibid: 13). This acquires central importance in a consumer society in which the construction of and adherence to styles through the appropriation of objects has become constitutive of subjectivity and identity.

According to Brake (2003), style consists of three main elements: “‘Image’, as “appearance composed of costume, accessories such as hair-style, jewellery and artefacts”; ‘Argot’, that is, “a special vocabulary and how it is delivered”; and ‘demeanour’, which is “made up of expression, gait and posture. Roughly this is what the actors wear and how they wear it” (: 12). In this research, I also refer to the notion of ‘attitude’ to indicate behaviours which are more situational than style, including the emotional colouring of gestures, language, manners and body poses, that is, the ways in which individuals deliver their style in relation to specific interactional and structural contexts. In other words, attitude refers to both style, personality, conditions and circumstances.

According to Brake (ibid), “an important aspect of style is the differentiation of work and leisure”. A peculiarity of creative professions, artistic ones in particular, is that style may indicate belonging to a specific professional community (or to sub-groups within the community), rather than attempting “to define an identity outside that ascribed class, educational and occupational role” (: 12). This is even more true for activities in which the body (as strictly related to ‘image’ and ‘demeanour’) is invested with peculiar economic and symbolic value, becoming ‘bodily capital’ (see paragraph 2.5).

This implies that insiders and outsiders, but also the position of a member in relation to the centre of a subculture, are defined in relation to the skills and expertise in defining “focal



concerns” (Brake, 2003: 15) and employing relevant cultural markers. Together with clothes, “objects and artefacts” (ibid: 14) also play essential roles in the definition of a style. This is particularly important in the case of circus culture, where the relationship with circus-specific objects is central. Types of juggling props, or aerial apparatus for instance, are of great significance to identity amateurs or professionals, traditional or contemporary circus, commercial or artistic performances.

Taken from the “timeless circus”, but also from other artistic fields, objects, props and apparatus have been appropriated and modified,

“reordered and placed in new contexts so as to communicate fresh acts of meaning [...]. The assemblage must not look as though it is carrying the same message as the previously existing one. A new style is created by appropriating objects from an existing market of artefacts [and cultural productions, as it is the case in circus] and using them in a form of collage, which recreates group identity, and promotes mutual recognition for members” (ibid: 14).

In this sense, style marks membership to internal sub-groups within a subculture, and the concept of style relates to dynamics of authenticity and authentication.

## **2.8 Scenes and communities of practice**

The previous paragraph highlighted how, looking at circus as a practice, rather than a profession, provides insights into sense of belonging and rhetoric of authenticity. Communities inevitably emerge around these positions, boundaries and hierarchies, claiming a ‘different’, ‘alternative’ status. Circus in this sense might be situated in between the mainstream culture of fitness, promoting “pluralistic abundance”, accessibility for everyone, innovation and self-experimentation rather than competition, and subcultural practices such as boxe, which produce closed communities (Sassatelli, 2012).

This should be considered against a neoliberal backdrop in which communities are quickly created around loose ties, such as consumption habits, cultural interests and temporary projects; on forms of “weak cooperation (...) built on loose commitments to lofty principles” rather than strong solidarity (Arvidsson & Pietersen, 2013: 17).

First, the concept of scene is particularly useful to highlight the increased “subcultural pluralism and relativism” (Irwin, 1997) in contemporary society and the following increased importance of beliefs, values, cultural meaning as categories of action, that both make up a lifestyle and a cohesive social world. Moreover, they highlight the possibility to attach more fluid and partial forms of involvement to shared perspectives, activities or spaces, more informal rules, including openness towards improvisation, and occasional or even virtual forms of encounter.

According to Straw (2005), scenes are formed either on the basis of their physical location, of the “genre of cultural production which gives them coherence, or the “social activity around which they take shape” (: 412). In this sense, the performative character of the notion of scene is particularly useful to investigate the effervescence of urban cultures, which produces an amount of information exceeding the productive goals at stake,

escaping understanding and fixing. This is not so much due to a process of closure but to the indeterminacy (both in terms of intensity and of direction) of the local energies it mobilizes:

“A scene resists deciphering, in part, because it mobilizes local energies and moves these energies in multiple directions – onwards, to later reiterations of itself; outwards, to more formal sorts of social or entrepreneurial activity; upwards, to the broader coalescing of cultural energies within which collective identities takes shape” (ibid).

Thus, despite their elusive character, scenes are also productive of changes in the existing cultural institutions and in the economic, social and political trends that define the geography of the city. In particular, for what concerns the careers available in artistic fields, knowledge is acquired

“in the movement into and through a scene, as individuals gather around themselves the sets of relationships and behaviours that are the preconditions of acceptance. Here, as in scenes more generally, the lines between professional and social activities are blurred, as each kind of activity becomes the alibi for the other. The “vertical” relationship of master to student is transformed, in scenes, into the spatial relationship of outside to inside; the neophyte advances “horizontally”, moving from the margins of a scene towards its centre” (Straw, 2005: 413).

Learning processes also represent a fundamental defining character of contemporary ‘communities of practice’. I argue that this concept illuminates significant insights into the contemporary circus world in Italy, due to the centrality of the bodily and artistic practices, the learning trajectories and the process of acquisition and management of specific knowledge. Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002) and Paechter (2003) highlight a few defining dimensions of the community of practice.

First, meaning is negotiated to create a body of more or less explicit knowledge and to reify certain concepts as “symbolic artifacts and practices [...] as markers of recognition of membership or otherwise of a particular community” (Paetcher, 2003: 76). This includes processes of acknowledgement and attribution of reputation, both among members and from outsiders. Moreover, this includes local and global aspects of belonging: while practices always unfold in concrete locations, they are also connected to local, national and global configurations, to wider communities and to social structures. Hence, the interconnections between multiple forms of membership to overlapping communities of practice according to time, location, and context, and the intersections between local and global communities of circus practice should be taken into account.

Secondly, (artistic or bodily) practice acquires a central role as a source of coherence: communities are underpinned by “the mutual engagement in a joint enterprise which results in a shared repertoire of performances”: “relations of mutual accountability between those involved include what is important and what is not, what to do and what not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to talk about or leave unsaid” (: 72). In this sense, “the work *on*, *with*, and *for* the body” becomes a central source of meaning within a community of artistic practice, where “the body-in-action is also a body-in-interaction” (Bassetti, 2014: 109). Particularly important in the case of circus, the

acquisition of a habit implies the grasping of a significance in a motor sense.

Thirdly, the learning process represents a bonding factor: participants “become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together” (Wenger et al., 2002: 5). On the basis of this, they develop physical attributes and styles, relationships, ways of interacting, and sense of identity.

Finally, focusing on the concept of community of practice brings to light the dynamics of boundary making: how the community of practice communicates and interacts with the rest of the world, and how it establishes and differentiates between significant markers of membership. According to Paechter (2006) fluid “group boundaries, understandings and norms are developed in relation both to those ‘inside’ the group and those ‘outside’, particularly through activity around the boundaries” or “borderwork” (: 14), which can undermine or reinforce a sense of difference: “the establishment of the boundaries of a community of practice may involve the coercive exclusion of others and a claiming of superiority for members” (ibid: 15).

Symbolic and material power is strictly tied to the possibility to claim legitimacy. Thus, boundaries outside and within a community of practice may be symbolic – that is, “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. (...) tools through which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 168). Or they may become “social boundaries”, those “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. They are also revealed in stable behavioural patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensality” (ibid). In this sense, while both types of boundaries are “real”, as cognitive and structuring tools through which reality is interpreted and shaped, symbolic boundaries are “necessary but insufficient” conditions for the existence of social boundaries (ibid: 168-169).

Moreover, framing circus as a practice requires a reflection on organisational forms and institutions which “generate the external goods necessary to sustain” it (Beadle & Konyot, 2016: 66), while at the same time threatening the nature of the practice with competitiveness and acquisitiveness.

Together with the concept of field of cultural production introduced at the beginning of this literature review, the notion of community of practice is central to frame contemporary circus practices. Both concepts are effective to the goals of this thesis, as they allow to grasp the everyday, interactional and embodied nature of human practice, but also shed light on the organisational aspects and on the processes of formalization and rationalization currently ongoing.

In the following chapters these theoretical implications will be analysed more in depth: after illustrating the research design and the research field, chapter 5 will illustrate the dynamics of position and position-taking involved in the new field of contemporary circus; chapter 6 focuses on circus careers to outline the intertwining of professional and personal trajectories, and the shaping of different conceptualizations of self, art, and labour; chapter 7 will look at how learning trajectories overlap with the acquisition of specific body

techniques and of a circus (symbolic and material) bodily capital, and with the incorporation of feeling rules.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design**

### **3.1 Introduction: the research purpose**

The purpose of this ethnography is to explore the recent transformations within the realm of the circus practice, identifying the nexus between local communities of practice and global changes and focusing on the roles and meanings acquired by sensing, feeling, reflecting and interacting bodies against the backdrop of the current economic and political moment. In this sense, the case of the circus is taken as illustrative of the increasing importance of the “ideology of creativity”, of flexibility and virtuosity, and of passionate, immaterial and emotional labour (Arvidsson et Al., 2010b; Hochschild, 1979; Lazzarato, 2008; Virno, 2004). This in turn highlights a growing continuity between art, leisure and work, and between consumption and production (Stephens, 2012; Sassatelli, 2010 and 2012).

The “intellectual puzzle” (Mason, 2002) underpinning the research draws on insights into the circus-specific way to experience and interpret the body and intercorporeality, and into the construction of circus as a new “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1993). I have been practicing circus arts and working as a circus educator and performer for more than half of my life. As well as a profession and a form of creative expression, in many occasions through circus skills I experienced situations that introduced me into new interactional, social and cultural contexts. Moreover, the practice of circus has profoundly affected my attitude towards space, my own and other bodies, and my vision of social life. Risk and trust acquire specific meanings in circus practices, where learning entails putting one’s integrity and sometimes life into the hands of someone else, and creation and performing rely on skills of ‘bodily listening’ and non-verbal communication.

These dimensions of the circus practice opened up possibilities to experience the ontological implications of physical experience, affecting not only practical possibilities, but also cognitive mechanisms and the epistemological assumptions about reality (Wainwright & Turner, 2004). Insights from the existing literature helped me to clarify this idea.

First, research on professions and careers based on physical capital and ‘vocation’ (such as dancers and sportspeople) highlights the central role of the body in the construction of self-identity, and aging and injury seriously question members’ views and embodiment of the social and cultural world they participate in (Aalten, 2007; Allen Ness, 2004; Wacquant, 1995; Wainwright & Turner, 2004). Secondly, as discussed in paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6, sensory and emotional experiences play central roles in processes of identification, differentiation, and subjectivity construction.

A second reason to study contemporary circus practices relies on the observation of how circus has recently turned from something associated to a marginal and closed community and a stagnating, anachronistic form of entertainment, to a fashionable practice and performing genre. While nomadic and family-centered ways of life underpin traditional forms of circus which often remain at the margins of society, contemporary forms of circus practice (social circus, circus as fitness and leisure, circus as artistic research, circus as

education and career option) trespass into contemporary cultural and social systems, reflecting broader transformations.

During the research process I developed a more critical gaze on circus practices, the structuring of a contemporary circus field, and the careers of circus practitioners, gaining awareness of their entanglement with broader reconfigurations of art, work and the body in the neoliberal, post-Fordist society (Stephens, 2012), and with sociologically relevant notions of the body, the senses and the emotions.

The research builds on expert discourse and on the representations, normative constructions and experiences of circus practitioners at different levels (from beginners to professional artists) and in different settings (social circus projects, circus spaces where amateurs train, professional circus schools) in the northern Italian city of Turin.

The research approach thus draws on both ethnography and phenomenology: circus practice is regarded as potentially generating a culture and a culture-sharing group, and data were collected extensively through participant observation to explore interactions and ways of using space and the body.

On the other hand, this enquiry also employs in-depth interviews to describe and understand the essence of the circus experience from the practitioners' perspective, unveiling subjective meanings, interpretations and representations. Finally, a third approach, among those listed by Creswell (2007), is at stake here. As we will see below, I strategically selected the case study of the metropolitan area of Turin, due to its particularly significant position within the field – still under construction – of contemporary circus in Italy.

### **3.2 Ontological and epistemological underpinnings**

The research design of the thesis builds on ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as strategical choices. The goal is to explore how subjective meanings are negotiated and shaped by the interplay of the multiple dimensions of everyday lived experiences, social interactions, and historical and cultural contexts. The analysis focuses on daily routines, personal histories, spatial relations, the sensory and the emotional, and their central role in moulding perceptions, interpretations and representations of the social world. However, this is also an ethnographic study of a community of practice and an artistic field under construction. Thus, the processes of construction of shared meanings, and the struggles around definitions, resources and the acknowledgement of values and roles – “the space of positions and the space of position-takings” (Bourdieu, 1993: 30) – are also of central interest.

The research draws together elements from different approaches to qualitative research, namely the ethnographic, phenomenological and interpretivist traditions, the abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2010; Mason, 2002), the case-study approach (Blaikie, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003), and facet and sensory methodologies (Mason & Davies, 2009; Mason, 2011).

This reveals ontological and epistemological assumptions assigning central value to constructions, representations, everyday interactions and subjective meanings, but also to the biological and physiological component of bodily experience, and to the connections between the subjective, embodied and structural implications of contemporary circus practices. The paragraphs below present the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this research, highlighting the contributions of these different approaches.

#### **- Focus on meanings and interpretations**

An approach based on representations and subjective meanings, how they are produced and reproduced in everyday life, and how they shape social reality, may be related - following Blaikie (2010) - to “idealist” ontological assumptions (: 93) and constructivist epistemological assumptions. The latter entail that “everyday knowledge is the outcome of people having to make sense of their encounters with the physical world and other people” (: 95). Creswell (2007), associates the “paradigm” or “worldview” of social constructivism to interpretivist research. These traditions “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (: 20) and focus on how “subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically” (: 21), that is, on how interactions as well as cultural norms and settings operate to shape individuals’ lives.

The implication for this ethnography is that specific attention needs to be paid to lived everyday experiences, involving sensory and emotional components of meaning construction, interactions and encounters, but also “shared codes, conventions and structures” (Atkinson, 2005: 19) underpinning circus practice-related forms of social and cultural life.

#### **- Rejecting reductionism**

Rejecting to reduce the complexity of society to fixed, rigid categories, researchers sharing the worldview of social constructionism admit the multiplicity, diversity and fluidity of subjective and collective meanings, and attempt to account for a reality that is both complex and contingent (Creswell, 2007). However, the attention to subjective understandings and ‘structural’ factors (such as institutions, policies, rules, hierarchies) entails that this study cannot simply be inscribed in the phenomenological and interpretivist tradition, but combines them with an ethnographic approach, based on immersion and participant observation in specific cultural and social settings (Mason, 2002).

The research approach in part reflects what Katz & Csordas (2003) call “phenomenological ethnography”, that is:

“the study, through various participant observation-like methods, of the structures of the life-world, meaning the forms, structures or features that people take as objectively existing in the world as they shape their conduct upon the presumption of their prior, independent existence” (: 284)

However, the epistemological perspective of this research is different from radical constructionism, since attention has been paid to the way embodiment affects

understanding, and to the structural changes in which circus practices are embedded. What I want to stress here is the attempt to apply a “non-dualistic” (Crossley, 1995), and “a connective and a strongly anti-reductionist ontology” (Mason, 2011: 78), accounting for the intertwined character of social reality and assigning primacy to “processes of formation” rather than “final products” (Ingold, 2010: 2).

In order to shed light on how “socio-cultural, economic, spatial, temporal, historical, biophysical, natural, animal, spiritual, material, visible, audible, olfactory, haptic, climatic and non-human things, surroundings and environments” (Mason, 2011: 79) are lived and experienced in everyday life, the connective ontological perspective focuses on the connections and entwinements among them, rather than searching for these things separately.

#### **- The centrality of embodiment and intercorporeality**

According to Crossley (1995), a truly non-dualistic sociology implies a “carnal” approach:

“that is to say, [...the sociologist] is not only concerned with what is done to the body in the context of the social world, the ways in which it is acted upon and represented, he is concerned with what the body does in the social world, how it works to construct and reproduce that world show it acts. The body acts and is acted upon [...] sees and is seen, speaks and is spoken to and about” (: 147-148).

The focus on the processes of embodiment and on the body as a tool to understand and interact in social life highlights the interplay between subjectivity, identity building and body politics. Body techniques, spatiality, strategies of self-presentation, and the sensory and emotional perception of objects and others acquire a pivotal role in the critical, conceptual exploration of the body both ‘from the inside’ and ‘from the outside’, substantiating the nexus between the subjective experience of practicing circus skills, belonging to a ‘circus community’ and developing a ‘circus body’ on the one hand, and the cultural, social and political implications of bodily representations and practices on the other. More broadly, this perspective can provide interesting insights into the dialectic relationships between visible and intangible, sensory and structural aspects of meaning-making in social life.

The organic immersion and the physical presence of the researcher in the field underpinning ethnography suggest the latter as an appropriate approach to focus on the body (Thomas & Ahmed, 2004). Ethnographers are able to access illuminating insights into the extent to which the sense of identity, particularly for individuals involved in practices and professions in which the body plays a pivotal role (such as dancers, sportspeople, circus practitioners, etc.), is deeply and unconsciously rooted in the body. Moreover, the direct bodily experience of the ethnographer again challenges radical constructionist assumptions, pointing to physiological and perceptual factors that impose a renegotiation of one’s identity and relation to the body.



## **- Reflexivity**

This research is underpinned by an effort to put to work my 'sociological imagination', connecting lived experience and public, social issues (Mills, 1959). On the one hand, my direct involvement in the topic under investigation facilitated the review of the literature dedicated to the circus sector and the access to the field; on the other, it made shifting from the perspective of biography to that of history a particularly tricky task. Maintaining a critical position and adequate quality standards required accurate and constant reflexive work. In this study, this had different implications.

First, for what concerns meeting validity and reliability requirements, it is important to remind that research as it conceived here entails a process of generation and reading of data in a reflexive, rather than literal, way, and of construction of arguments about situated meaning and mechanisms (Mason, 2002). This view embraces the idea that objectivity is temporary, contextual and always revocable, and that reflexive accounts can contribute to objectivity by means of providing criteria to assess the validity and the reliability of the research findings, reporting the degree of uncertainty of the information acquired, and encouraging methodological creativity and awareness (Cardano, 2014).

Thus, the researcher's standpoint not only needs to be acknowledged but to remain visible throughout the written text, giving the audience the possibility to assess the interactive process of acquisition of data through a reflexive account of the objects and contexts under observation, the relationship with the participants and the research site, and the processes of interpretation, reporting and writing (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

Secondly, it implies stimulating and employing the participants' reflexive capacity to generate relevant data, for instance taking my findings back to the field and opening them for feedback and discussion through interviews and conversations. Finally, as I will clarify in paragraph 3.8 below, reflexivity concerns the fulfilment of ethical standards, undertaking the responsibility to report the different and divergent points of view at stake, to account for problems, dilemmas and solutions found, as well as personal, emotional and political commitment (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Emerson, 2001), to unveil power relations (Burawoy, 1998), and to avoid assumptions of empathy, mutuality, and accessibility of the participants (Lather, 2009).

## **- Dialectic relationship between theory and data**

This research is the result of the interplay between direct experiences, concepts and research design, that is, of an abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2010; Mason, 2002) where starting sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969) have been defined, specified or transformed over the course of the research process, in interaction with "everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts, and social science explanations" (Mason 2002: 180). The abductive strategy aims to describe and understand social life in terms of the actors' meanings, and, as such, implies a dialectic, creative interaction between data and concepts and the simultaneous development of conceptual insights, data generation and data analysis (Atkinson, 2005; Mason 2002).

This is particularly important due to my position as an insider within the circus community of practice, as it allowed me to develop tools to look critically at the circus environment, bringing into view struggles, conflicts, and ambivalences. In this respect, the continuous dialogue between theory and observations, the interplay between technical and lay descriptions, and both contradictions and correspondences between my own, the participants' and the academic perspective were pivotal to delineate the conceptual and methodological structure of the thesis. Moreover, feedback from the participants has played a pivotal role both in defining and redefining the research tools, such as the interview questions and observations guidelines, my role as a participant researcher, and the conceptual and analytical apparatus in general.

### **3.3 Research questions**

In line with the research purpose and epistemological and ontological assumptions presented above, the main, exploratory research questions concern the ways in which the "social and sensual logic" (Wacquant, 2004: 7) that informs contemporary circus practices is significant of the reconfigurations of art, work, leisure and the body in today's society. This implies a twofold focus, on the nexus between the recent transformations of the modes of practicing and consuming circus and society at large, and on the processes and meanings involved in the embodiment of circus-specific body techniques.

Answering the first sub question requires a preliminary exploration of the recent transformations of circus in Italy, including the following aspects: the meanings, representations and definitions of circus today in Italy; the internal and external boundaries of the circus community/ies of practice; the types of career developing within and across different circus practices; the ways circus spaces and values have changed; the characteristics (forms of organisation, policies, resources, institutions, roles and positions) of circus as a new field of leisure and cultural production.

The second sub question entails instead a focus on the process of reflexive acquisition of circus body techniques, to elucidate the practical understanding entailed in the circus practice: if the body and embodiment are vague and abstract concepts, body techniques represent a concrete, researchable object (Crossley, 2007). In practice, this question implied taking into account: the ways in which bodily interactions unfold and intercorporeality is experienced and interpreted; the relations between different body techniques, and the ways in which they are taught and learned; the role of the emotions and the senses; the ways risk and trust are defined and experienced; the uses of space, the movements within and between circus spaces.

### **3.4 Case selection**

Case study research requires detailed, in-depth, multiple sources of information, descriptive or exploratory purposes and thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2003) stresses its pertinence when studying contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when the contextual conditions are not clearly distinguishable from the phenomenon under investigation. As explained above, the research design responds to a methodological and substantive interest in circus as a critical case of recent

reconfigurations in sociologically relevant realms of work, art and the body. The current circus scene in Italy represents a peculiar case when looking at the transformations of circus as a globalised phenomenon, while the case of the metropolitan area of Turin represents in turn an instrumental case to study the recent developments of circus in Italy.

On the one hand, in the last ten years the development of different institutions and expert discourses concerning circus in Italy attempts to reflect the changes occurring in other western countries such as Canada, France, and Belgium. While other countries extensively support the circus sector and produce famous circus shows, I mentioned these three countries because of the specific model role played by their circus companies, schools and organisations for the Italian public: Cirque du Soleil (Canada) and Cirque Plume (France) were among the first ‘new circus’ companies to bring their shows to the peninsula in the late XX and early XXI century, opening the way to the development of the Italian ‘new circus’ scene and the creation of professional schools, trainings for trainers, amateur courses, and workshops for children; Canadian, French and Belgian schools were also attended by the first Italian ‘new circus’ artists and circus educators.

As described more in detail in chapter 4, at the institutional level Italy is slowly adjusting to the legislation of other European countries, limiting the use of exotic animals in travelling circuses and supporting contemporary forms of circus: for instance, in the last two years, increasing pressure has been put on the institutions in order to cancel progressively the actual economic support provided to circuses that exploit exotic animals (Senato della Repubblica, 2015); and in 2015 for the first time contemporary circus companies and residencies were acknowledged and supported by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (LaPresse, 2015; Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, 2015).

On the other hand, the circus scene in Italy is still inhabited by charismatic figures of the traditional, family-based circuses, as it is clear from a popular imagery referring to the well-known face of Moira Orfei (the “Queen of Circus”, who died in November 2015) and the posters depicting crocodiles, elephants and tigers. The ‘traditional circus’ seems to remain outside the recent transformations that the ‘new circus’ underwent, as if attached to old values, rules and work ethic. The audience crises inevitably pushes for innovation and change, but the direction that traditional circus families in Italy have taken is still unclear (Serena, 2008). Moreover, the undergoing process of formalisation and institutionalisation of circus as a form of artistic research and product, of education and training for trainers programs, of national networks and media, produced a proliferation of (sometimes conflicting) expert discourses, struggles to define ‘authentic’ circus, and hierarchies.

For ‘traditional circus’, the most important organisations at the institutional level include lobbying organisations, archives, and training institutions, such as:

- Ente Nazionale Circhi: founded in 1948, it is still a reference for the traditional travelling circus in Italy.
- Accademia d’Arte Circense, created in 1988 in Verona and considered by the then-Ministry for cultural activities as a centre of excellence for circus training.
- Centro Educativo di Documentazione delle Arti Circensi – CEDAC, created in 2003 in Verona.

The voice of 'contemporary' or 'new circus', at the time the research, was instead taken forward mainly by the professional schools, informal groups, a media project and the representative of circus associations:

- FLIC scuola di circo: circus school for professional artists, created in 2002 in Turin, and recognised by the European Federation of Circus Schools (FEDEC)
- Cirko Vertigo: circus school for professional artists, created in 2002 in Grugliasco (TO), and recognised by the European Federation of Circus Schools (FEDEC)
- FISAC: Italian Federation of Circus Schools, created a few years after FLIC and Vertigo. Although its activities and functions are not clear, it can be mentioned as an important attempt to formalise the sector.
- Bangherang platform: an attempt to create live and online occasions for the existing realities of contemporary circus to meet and discuss.
- Juggling Magazine: a nationally spread, well-known review on contemporary circus.
- Associazione Giocolieri & Dintorni: umbrella organisation for the associations that do educational and social circus in Italy. It organises training for trainers, the annual national meeting of circus operators, and research projects; it serves as a medium to connect Italian youth and trainers to European networks (such as EYCO and Caravan) and international institutions such as Cirque du Soleil.

Turin and Piedmont in general, known as main reference poles for the contemporary circus scene in Italy, represent a meaningful research context. Different elements characterising contemporary circus have been developing simultaneously in this city. Important theatres have started including 'contemporary circus' shows in their programs, circus performers invaded streets and public events, social and youth circus programs reached different parts of the city and its surroundings, and amateur courses and training spaces spring up like mushrooms.

Among the five professional circus schools existing in Italy (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2016b), only two are recognised at the international level and members of the European Federation of Circus Schools (FEDEC). Both of them opened in Turin in 2002. These are attended by international students and turned the city into a national and international reference for the development of the circus arts. Moreover, a number of spaces for creation and residencies, seminars, courses, and performance represent important poles at the national level.

The relatively well-known and acknowledged status of circus (despite the broad range of cultural, artistic and sport activities offered), and the co-existence of different planes and diverse people practicing circus, turn Turin into an appropriate research case. The data below provide more detailed – but still partial – information about the circus scene in Italy and Piedmont:

- 22% (14/63) of the amateur circus schools existing in Italy<sup>3</sup> are located in Piedmont (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2015b, 2015c).

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<sup>3</sup> These data are to be seen as merely indicative, as not every amateur school is included in the National Register. For instance, surveys I conducted in the regions of Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany point to, respectively, at least 29, 25 and 19 amateur schools, of which only 14, 9 and 11 are included in the Registers.

- 2 of the 5 professional schools existing in Italy are based in the metropolitan area of Turin (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2016b)
- 17% (41/239) of the subscribed artists to national registers are based in Piedmont (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2016a; CITA, 2016; FNAS, 2015b)
- At least 2500 amateurs, including educational and social circus projects participants, practiced circus in Piedmont in 2015<sup>4</sup>.
- In 2015 – 2016, around 130 students enrolled in professional training paths in Piedmont<sup>5</sup>.
- 3 of the 19 festivals dedicated to contemporary forms of circus arts in Italy are located in Piedmont (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2015a).
- As clearly depicted in picture 3.1 below, the highest number (15/80, almost 20%) of companies situating themselves within the contemporary circus genre are based in Turin (Malerba & Vimercati, 2016).

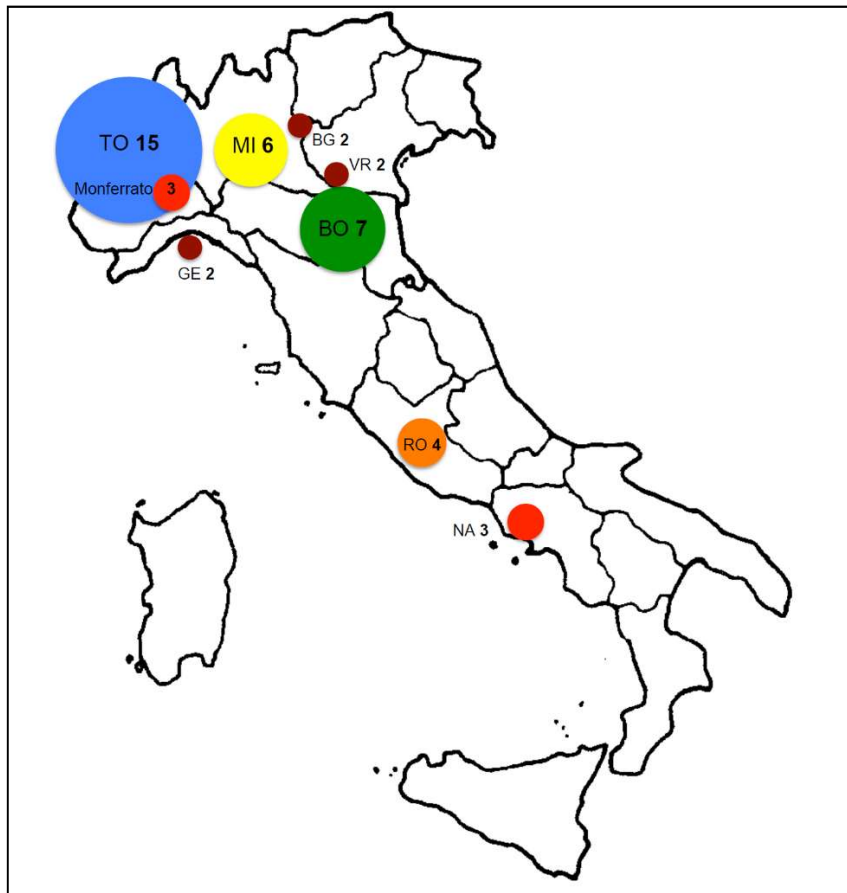
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It must also be noted that these surveys do not account for the growing number of gyms and fitness centres offering classes of circus disciplines, in particular aerial acrobatics.

<sup>4</sup> This information is based on a survey I conducted with professional and amateur schools and social circus programmes existing in Piedmont. This included: the schools reported by the National Registers (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2015b, 2015c); other schools the existence of which I acknowledged during the research process, thanks to document analysis, interviews, and observation. Again, it must be noted here that this survey does not account for the growing number of gyms and fitness centres offering classes of circus disciplines, in particular aerial acrobatics.

<sup>5</sup> See previous note.

**Picture 3.1: Distribution of contemporary circus companies in Italy**



Source: Malerba & Vimercati, 2016: 6

Table 3.1 below resumes the figures available from Association Giocolieri e Dintorni, the umbrella organisation in Italy for contemporary, youth and social circus. The account provided is partial and data are to be taken as approximate and merely indicative, since, especially for what concerns artists and companies, festivals, and amateur schools, the actual figures (including less well-known and/or recently born realities) are realistically much higher.

While big, stable and formally constituted companies of ‘pure’ contemporary circus are still rare in Italy, the recent spread of a circus culture and the increase in the number of circus students produced a proliferation of artists and – to use Stephens' (2012) definition - “professional amateurs” that work alone, in duo or in informal small groups. Many times, these realities do not have the resources needed to improve and distribute their shows and remain outside the formal circuits of cultural production in Italy, doing street performances and working in private events or abroad.

**Table 3.1: Figures of contemporary circus practices in Italy in 2105 according to Association Giocolieri e Dintorni**

| Region                | Amateur schools<br>of circus<br>arts/disciplines | Professional<br>trainings | Social circus<br>programs | Contemporary<br>circus<br>Festivals | Juggling<br>conventions | Residencies<br>and creation<br>spaces | Companies<br>and artists |
|-----------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Abruzzo               | 1  |                           |                           | 1                                   |                         |                                       |                          |
| Basilicata            | 1  |                           |                           |                                     |                         |                                       |                          |
| Campania              |  |                           | 1                         |                                     |                         |                                       |                          |
| Emilia-Romagna        | 4  | 1                         | 1                         | 3                                   |                         |                                       | 1                        |
| Friuli Venezia Giulia | 2  |                           | 1                         | 1                                   | 1                       |                                       | 1                        |
| Lazio                 | 4  | 1                         | 1                         | 3                                   | 1                       |                                       | 3                        |
| Liguria               | 3  |                           |                           | 1                                   |                         |                                       |                          |
| Lombardia             | 9  |                           | 4                         | 1                                   | 1                       |                                       | 4                        |
| Marche                | 3  |                           |                           | 1                                   |                         |                                       |                          |
| <b>Piemonte</b>       | <b>14</b>  | <b>2</b>                  | <b>4</b>                  | <b>3</b>                            |                         | <b>3</b>                              | <b>8</b>                 |
| Puglia                | 2  |                           | 2                         |                                     |                         |                                       |                          |
| Sardegna              | 1  |                           |                           |                                     |                         |                                       |                          |
| Sicilia               | 2  |                           |                           | 3                                   |                         |                                       |                          |
| Toscana               | 11   |                           | 2                         | 1                                   |                         |                                       | 1                        |
| Trentino Alto Adige   | 4  |                           |                           | 1                                   |                         |                                       |                          |
| Umbria                | 2  |                           |                           |                                     |                         |                                       | 2                        |
| Veneto                | 3  | 1                         | 3                         |                                     |                         |                                       |                          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>63</b>  | <b>5</b>                  | <b>19</b>                 | <b>19</b>                           | <b>3</b>                | <b>3</b>                              | <b>20</b>                |

Sources: Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b)

### 3.5 Research settings

Within the metropolitan area of Turin, different settings and actors were selected as representative of the different facets of contemporary circus in Italy: circus as fitness and amateur activity, as a profession, as social and educational tool, as a way of life. In this sense, the sampling technique is purposeful, although the aspect of accessibility was undeniably at play too.

Fieldwork in Turin was undertaken over the course of one year and involved different settings, groups of people, and careers. The research settings included:

- A training, performing, and leisure space and meeting point for professionals, amateurs, youth and children from the neighbourhood. This functioned as an open training space open daily to everybody, and it hosted courses, festivals and cabarets.
- A social circus organisation based in a disadvantaged area of the city, offering free workshops to youth and children in its own space and outreach programs to other 'problematic' urban areas.
- The two professional circus schools, offering professional training as well as courses and workshops for amateurs.
- Two circus festivals, one of the most well-known festivals of contemporary circus in Italy and a reference Festival of street theatre in France, where I shadowed an Italian circus artist.
- Another circus space dedicated to artistic residences and creation, open training and courses for amateurs.

Moreover, following the different types of careers and groups which develop within, and shape, the circus practice (professional artists, students in circus schools, teachers, project managers, agents, social workers, amateurs, volunteers, etc.) entailed crossing other circus spaces such as circus schools, gyms, *chapiteaux*, theatres, festivals, training, creation and research spaces.

### 3.6 Methods of data generation

In the attempt to account for the complexity of the object and context of enquiry, I outlined different facets implicated in the research puzzle. This process helped to disentangle and clarify the object of study, highlighting different lines of enquiry as well as points of intersection and articulations. Mason (2011) draws on the visual metaphor of the gemstone to describe what she calls "facet methodology":

"In facet methodology, the facets in the gemstone are conceived as different methodological-substantive planes and surfaces, which are designed to be capable of casting and refracting light in a variety of ways that help to define the overall object of concern. They will involve different lines of enquiry, and different ways of seeing. [...] The aim of our facet methodology approach is to create a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions: not a random set, or an eclectic set, or a representative set, or a total set. The rigour of the approach comes ultimately from



researcher skill, inventiveness, insight and imagination – in deciding how best to carve the facets so that they catch the light in the best possible way” (: 77)

Focusing on the different facets enabled to highlight similarities and commonalities between different ways of practicing circus (as a form of art, fitness, or work, as leisure or social and educational activity, etc.), to specify different focuses of analysis, in terms of settings, actors and objects, and outline the most appropriate methods of enquiry, as specified in table 3.2. The facets outlined here are not to be seen as permanently carved in a gemstone, but rather as useful tools to clarify the conceptual and methodological apparatus of the thesis and move the first steps towards an analytical strategy. I included my personal experience as a facet due to its transversality and pervasiveness, and its particularly illuminating and problematic character in this research.

**Table 3.2: Facets of enquiry**

| Facet   | Settings   | Actors  | Methods  | Types of data   | Research focus   |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Transformations of representations, definitions and meanings of circus</b> | Professional schools<br>Workshops and courses for amateurs and pro<br>Circus Festivals<br>Social circus project    | Circus students<br>Amateurs<br>Artists<br>Teachers<br>Experts | Documents/expert discourse analysis<br>Interviews<br>Photo elicitation<br>Observation    | Institutional documents<br>Articles, manuals, proceedings<br>Videos and pictures<br>Transcripts<br>Fieldnotes | National and international context<br>Definition of circus as art/sport/leisure activity/ form of social work<br>Redefinition of circus spaces<br>Aesthetic criteria, values   |
| <b>Embodiment and intercorporeality</b>                                       | Open training space<br>Workshops and courses for amateurs and pro<br>Social circus project<br>Professional schools | Circus students<br>Amateurs<br>Artists<br>Teachers            | Interviews<br>Object and video elicitation<br>Participant observation<br>Autoethnography | Transcripts<br>Videos and pictures<br>Fieldnotes<br>Personal experiences and reflections                      | Use of space (rules, norms, spatial relations)<br>Body techniques (learning and teaching, movement, use of space, timing)<br>Routines<br>Interactional norms<br>Involvement of the different senses<br>Feeling rules<br>Definitions and norms about risk, safety and trust<br>Aesthetic criteria |
| <b>Circus as work and profession</b>  | Open training space<br>Professional schools<br>Circus Festivals<br>Social circus project                           | Circus students<br>Artists<br>Teachers<br>Experts             | Shadowing<br>Interviews<br>Observation   | Fieldnotes<br>Transcripts   | Careers  |

|   |  |   |   |  |  |
|---|--|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Circus as a community of practice</b>          | Open training space<br>Professional schools<br>Workshops and courses for amateurs and pro<br>Circus Festivals<br>Social circus project | Circus students<br>Amateurs<br>Artists<br>Teachers<br>Experts | Interviews<br>Photo elicitation<br>Participant observation<br>Documents/expert discourse analysis | Institutional documents<br>Articles, manuals, proceedings<br>Pictures<br>Transcripts<br>Fieldnotes | Internal and external boundaries<br>Positions, hierarchies, normative constructions<br>Conflicts and debates<br>Aesthetic, ethical and moral values  |
| <b>Circus as researcher's personal experience</b> | Open training space<br>Professional schools<br>Workshops and courses for amateurs and pro<br>Circus Festivals<br>Social circus project | Participant researcher  | Autoethnography   | Fieldnotes<br>Personal experiences and reflections<br>Biography                                    | Use of space (rules, norms, spatial relations)<br>Body techniques (learning and teaching, movement, use of space, timing)<br>Involvement of the different senses<br>Feeling rules<br>Interaction, creation and improvisation (rules, techniques, perceptions involved)<br>Meanings of risk, safety and trust |

As well as articulating the facets of enquiry, the table above introduces the methods of data generation employed in this thesis, as they are illustrated in detail in the following paragraphs.

### 3.6.1 Analysis of documents, expert discourse and public image

The analysis of organisational documents and of expert discourse on specialised media aimed to highlight the different interpretations and definitions of the circus practice as produced and reproduced by institutions of reference, founders and models (for instance, 'traditional' or 'classic' circus, 'contemporary' circus, 'neoclassic' circus, 'nouveau cirque', 'circus-theatre', 'circus-dance', circus fitness, creation and research circus, educational and social circus), normative constructions, existing hierarchies and struggles for authenticity, and processes of legitimation. TV programs, movies, and videos circulating on video-sharing websites, as well as commercial posters of circus shows and schools were also viewed in order to account for the visual culture and public image of circus.

Although the analysis focused mainly on the Italian context, a partial account was provided for significant legacies and connections to documents produced by international organisations (such as Cirque du Soleil) or influential institutions from abroad (in particular those areas where contemporary circus is well developed and structured, such as France, northern Europe, Canada). For the national context, the main data sources were:

- **"Juggling Magazine"** (number 65, December 2014 to number 69, December 2015): a national quarterly magazine about juggling and contemporary circus arts, established in June 1998, and broadly recognized as a reference for the sector: most of the existing circus schools and projects subscribe every year to the association that publishes the review, to be included in the **National Registers** of youth and professional circus schools, social circus projects, and open training spaces. Enquiry into this source led to the identification of significant data employed in this thesis, in particular: Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b); Frasca (2015); Juggling Magazine (2016a, 2016b); Rossomando (2015); Teruzzi (2015). Data were in turn analysed as specified in paragraph 3.7.
- **Leaflets and documents** such as presentations, proceedings, guidelines and missions produced by circus schools (in particular, the two professional circus schools in Turin, Flic and Vertigo) and events (social circus conferences such as "AltraRisorsa" social circus conference, March 2015 and "Convegno Circo Sociale Arte – Educazione – Società", February 2016; contemporary circus festivals such as "Sul filo del circo", June 2015; "Mirabilia Festival", July 2015; "Circumnavigando", December 2015; Circus instructors' meeting, September 2015). For what concerns the schools, relevant data were found in Cirko Vertigo (2010, 2016a, 2016b), Flic scuola di circ (2015, 2016), Scuola di Cirko (2006). The events I took part in were instead recorded and described in the fieldnotes. Insights emerged through thematic analysis (paragraph 3.7).
- **Websites and social media** of circus schools in Turin, and local as well as national projects concerning classic, social and contemporary circus in Italy, such as

- the website and facebook page of Progetto Quinta Parete for circus audience development. These sources were particularly significant for the data provided in Quinta Parete (2015, 2016).
- the website of the project “Corpi e Visioni” to promote contemporary circus in Italy, and particularly data found in De Ritis (2015) and Malerba & Vimercati (2016).
- **Advertisements** of circus shows, schools, fitness programs, collected, photographed, or described in the fieldnotes. Of particular interest to the research were the terms employed to name and describe the circus activities offered.
- **Documentaries, videos and movies** such as:
  - Historical video documents
  - TV programs
  - Reports on important circus-related facts
  - Videos and documentaries issued by international organisations or referential organisations abroad (Cirque du Soleil, Canada; Crying Out Loud, UK; Circostrada European Network; Raw Art, Ukraine; Hors les Murs, France)
  - Short presentations, trailers and documentaries produced by the two professional circus schools.
  - Movies (Charlie Chaplin, “The Circus”; Francis Lawrence, “Water for elephants”; Philippe Petit, “Man on Wire”; Federico Fellini, “The clowns”; Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, “Madagascar 3. Europe’s most wanted”; Horacio Alcala, “Grazing the sky”; Tod Browning, “Freaks”; Sam Armstrong and Norman Ferguson, “Dumbo”; Alex de la Iglesia, “The last circus”).

Again, data acquired through these sources were recorded in fieldnotes and insights emerged through thematic analysis, as described in paragraph 3.7.

In order to build a realistic framework of circus in Italy as a field under construction, I also looked at existing Registers of circus schools, artists and festivals, such as:

- Registro Nazionale Scuole di Circo Ludico-Educativo (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2015b)
- Registro Progetti di Circo Sociale (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2015c)
- Registro Scuole Pro e Residenze (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2016b)
- List of festivals in Italy (Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni, 2015a)
- Registro Soci FNAS (Federazione Nazionale Artisti di Strada) (FNAS, 2015b)
- Registro Soci CITA (Cooperativa Italiana Artisti) (CITA, 2016)
- UISP (Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti, one of the main institution for the promotion of amateur sports practice in Italy), national regulation for the circus sector (UISP, 2015)
- Qanat documentation centre, list of artists (Qanat arte e spettacolo, 2016)

### 3.6.2 Participant observation

According to Blaikie (2010), participant observation is the ethnographic method *par excellence*. Employing a participatory method is based on the epistemological claim that there is “some otherwise inaccessible understanding to be gained of human movement as

a cultural phenomenon, through the methodological shift to embodied practice” (Allen Ness, 2004: 124). According to Pelias (2008), embodiment enables a more “profound” understanding: “sensuously, human to human, fully present, open, ready to take in what others have to offer” (: 192).

Since circus is a bodily practice, its understanding is even more inseparable from the direct experience, with my own embodied self, of the spatial, temporal and sensory aspects of the research sites, of the sensations and emotions connected to the circus practice, of the importance of certain body techniques, of the process of acquisition of embodied, kinaesthetic knowledge, and of the interactions and social mechanisms at stake (Bassetti, 2009a; Sassatelli, 2010; Stephens, 2012). While different styles of observation can be combined, the research focus on the body, the sensory and the emotions suggests an approach that Wacquant (2004) calls “observant participation”, in the embodiment of body techniques, feeling rules and meanings attached to everyday experiences.

This provides insights into the “embodied sense of rhythm and timing” that underpins movement in most practices and “requires a highly developed awareness of sensations emanating from organs, particularly the skin, ligaments, tendons and muscles” (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009: 224). As such, fieldwork entailed moving from one circus space to another, training and learning new techniques, participating in performances, workshops and events, and assisting educators of social circus projects.

Moreover, the research diary served as a “scaffolding tool”, “a repository for reflections and thoughts, as well as my ‘expert other’” (Engin, 2011: 304) which enhanced the possibilities to maintain my role as a researcher, broaden the insights into the complexities of the research process and topic, and acknowledge the emotional and sensory experiences affecting my understanding of the research settings (Emerson, 2001).

Participant observations concerned the period from January 2015 to February 2016 and focused mainly on the open training space, where I looked at:

- How different types of circus are defined and represented;
- Circus careers and how they are entangled with the body, with notions of art and work, passion, fun and pleasure, and risk;
- Circus as a community of practice, and more specifically:
  - o rhetoric of authenticity and claims for resistance;
  - o how acknowledgement and legitimacy work within and outside the circus community;
  - o specific expertise and values;
  - o definitions of boundaries and hierarchies, and interconnections between different communities of practice;
  - o issues of style and how the circus practice marks the body;
  - o circus-specific mechanisms of interaction.
- Embodied competence and images, moves, strategies used to teach and learn body techniques;
- How emotions are managed and displayed;
- How risk is defined and lived.

### 3.6.3 Autoethnography

Like Ahmed (2000) suggests, memory work and personal accounts are an essential presence in every ethnographic document. Reflexivity can bring to light personal assumptions, beliefs and experiences, and as such plays a central role in the definition of the research puzzle and design and throughout the interpretive process. Moreover, personal, reflexive narrative clarifies the standpoint of the researcher, mediating between her professional, “scientific authority”, as stated in the report of analytical insights and research outcomes, and the personal authority at stake in fieldwork, anchored in the “subjective, sensuous experiences” of the “speaking and experiencing subject” (Pratt, 1986: 32). This mediation ensures the visibility to the researcher “as both social actor and embodied inquirer, thus enhancing “authorial responsibility”” (Emerson, 2001: 134).

In this research, due to my role as a full member of the community under study, drawing data from personal experiences and subjective insights represented a challenging but essential part of the research. Besides facilitating the identification of key actors and sites, the understanding of specific terms and implicit references, and the access to the field, I attempted to draw on subjective and emotional insights to identify and establish connections between different lines of enquiry and between data and theoretical insights. In this sense, rather than the emotion-centred form of autoethnography claimed by Ellis (1991 and 1995), where the whole research and writing process is based on “systematic introspection” and intimate conversations, I attempted to apply what Anderson (2006) calls analytic autoethnography, that is:

“ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (: 375).

Managing a dual role, the ‘circus practitioner’ and the ‘researcher’, implied a constant, attentive effort to deconstruct meanings, representations and routines until then taken for granted. Moreover, it required handling a dual goal, that of training to improve my circus skills, and that of observing others, cultivating the most useful relationships to gain access and data, asking questions. This sometimes meant violating the norms of the circus space, at least those that seem to regulate the practice of experts and hardworking learners (long sessions, high concentration on one’s work without paying too much attention to what others are doing, stopping only when concentration lowers or when required by the training rhythm), to fulfil research tasks.

Finally, the “anti-culture”, deconstructive and “irritating” effect of phenomenologically influenced sociological ethnography, attributed by Katz & Csordas (2003) to the discrepancy between culture as everyday life and culture as a construction and representation, further complicates this multiple role. During the research process I developed a critical gaze on what my circus colleagues and friends do, and on the discourse employed within the circus community, questioning my relation with the other members of the circus community of practice, and constantly renegotiating my own role, views, and identity.

### 3.6.4 In-depth interviews

Interviews represent an adequate method for this research, due to the interest in “people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences”, perceptions and interactions (Mason, 2002: 63). In-depth, unstructured interviews revolving around the oral histories of circus practitioners and reinforced, where possible, by personal documents such as pictures, videos, costumes, objects, highlighted actual careers crossing or developing within the circus practice, notions of circus authenticity and relations between the different branches, disciplines, and modalities of the circus practice, as well as the ways legitimating discourses, models, institutions and media are employed by circus practitioners. Through oral histories, “individuals are asked to recount aspects of their lives and/or lives of their contemporaries, and to discuss their perception of the processes involved and changes they have seen” (Blaikie, 2010: 207). In this sense, if participant observation accounts for the current situation of the interviewees, the biographical perspective completes the picture placing the individual and her reflections, bodily and emotional experiences at the centre, interrogating the nexus between the personal, the social and the historical.

The interviews took into account the variety of circus practitioners’ backgrounds in terms of age and sex, and careers. As well as a tool to collect data, they were used to take the first findings back to the field and redefine the focus on observation.

Between July and August 2015 I conducted two pilot interviews in order to develop the interview protocol, improve the interview guide, and to learn how to draw on object, photo and video elicitation as effectively as possible. From September 2015 to February 2016 the sample of practitioners was completed trying to account for gender, age, and variety of roles and positions covered within the circus community or practice. The sample amounts to 39 practitioners based in the metropolitan area of Turin, and was shaped through convenience, snowball and purposive sampling techniques. The interviews’ average duration was 93 minutes, the shortest being 57 minutes, the longest 167 minutes. Besides the interviews to circus practitioners, I interviewed two key respondents as experts, due to their important roles at the political level on the contemporary circus scene. The following tables sum up some of the main characteristics of the selected interviewees.

**Table 3.3 and 3.4: Interviewees**

| Age        | M         | F         | tot       |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 18-29      | 6         | 8         | <b>14</b> |
| 30-39      | 7         | 7         | <b>14</b> |
| 40+        | 6         | 5         | <b>11</b> |
| <b>tot</b> | <b>19</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>39</b> |

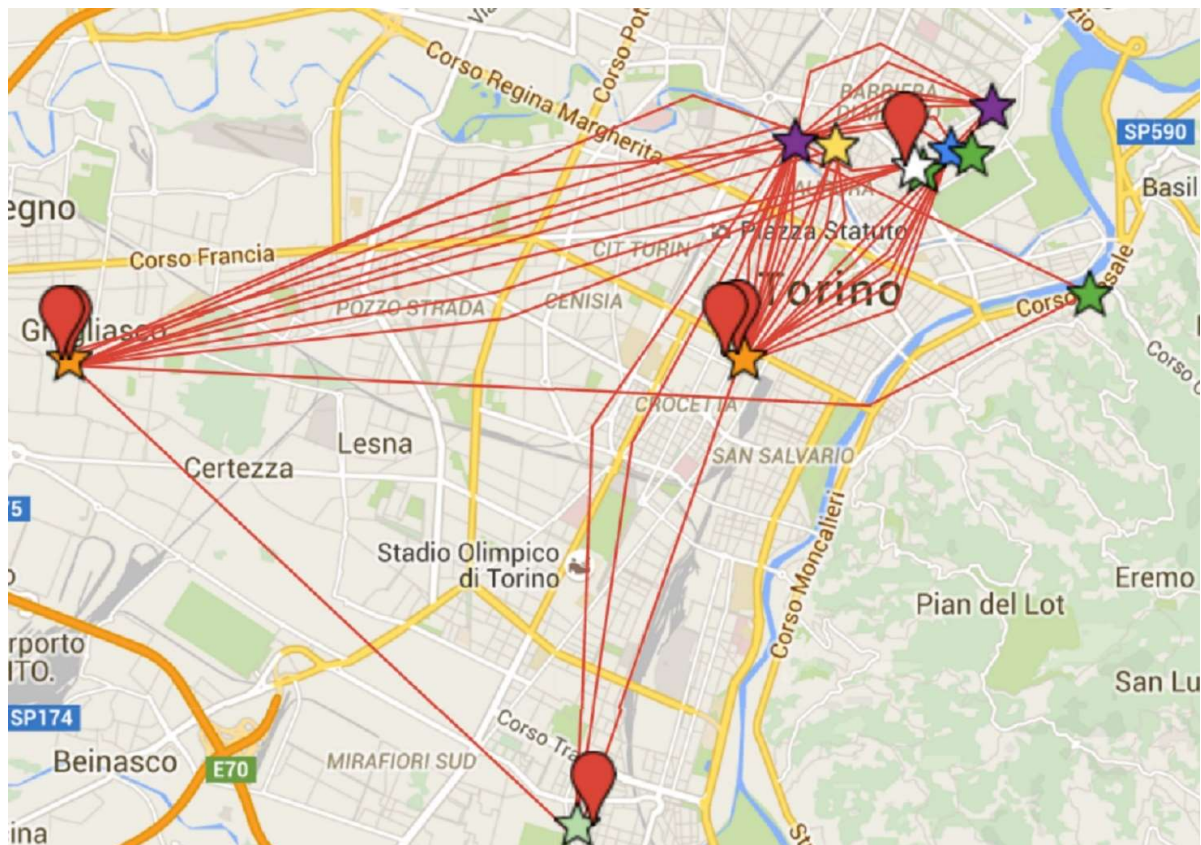
| Role  | 18-29     | 30-39     | 40+       | tot       |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| amateur   | 5         | 3         | 3         | <b>11</b> |
| artist or student                                       | 7         | 7         | 3         | <b>17</b> |
| other professional (teacher, director, project manager) | 2         | 4         | 5         | <b>11</b> |
| <b>tot</b>  | <b>14</b> | <b>14</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>39</b> |

Interviewees were also selected in the attempt to include representatives of the different types of practice and circus spaces. The map below (picture 3.2) illustrates the circus space in the metropolitan area of Turin, placing the interviewees within their everyday context and partially accounting for their movements between different circus spaces. The stars



represent the main circus realities existing in the area of Turin, while the red lines represent the interviewees' movements between circus spaces over the course of their 'circus lives'. The function of the map is merely illustrative, it provides a glimpse into the mobile and blurred boundaries of the different circus spaces, which – despite representing, as we will see in chapters 4 and 5, different definitions of and discourses about circus - are continually crossed by the community of circus practitioners. The direction of the movements is not relevant in this case, as most interviewees move back and forward from place to place (for instance, they might take classes in a space, and attend free training or workshops in another one). Only 6 interviewees attend one circus space only.

**Picture 3.2: Circus space and movements**



Source: researcher's elaboration of Turin's map (retrieved from Google Maps)

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| ★ Open training                     | ★ Social circus and amateur training      |
| ★ Amateur training                  | ★ Open and amateur training               |
| ★ Social circus                     |   |
| ★ Professional training             | — Movement of interviewees between spaces |
| ★ Professional and amateur training | ● Interviewees attending one space only   |

### 3.6.5 Shadowing

In this study shadowing allowed to account for the nomadic, emotional and relational aspects of circus work, against the backdrop of a specific organisational setting. During five days, from August 18<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, I shadowed an Italian artist travelling with her circus-theatre company to a well-known street theatre festival in France, gaining insights into:

- fundamental differences between the Italian and French context, enhancing my understanding of the organisational and institutional context in Italy;
- the peculiar spatial and temporal dimension of the festival;
- forms of work and organisation; resources and roles the artist needs to acquire and enact, tasks she needs to fulfil;
- peer and hierarchical relations, power dynamics;
- interaction rituals, dialogues, body language
- emotional reactions, mood
- language, explanations and expressions

According to Quinlan (2008), “shadowing entails a researcher closely following a subject over a period of time to investigate what people actually do in the course of their everyday lives, not what their roles dictate of them” (: 1482). Thus, data generated from shadowing capture behaviours and opinions, the influence of structures and power, the enactment of roles in everyday life (Gilliat-Ray, 2011). Shadowing as a method “to investigate roles and perspectives in a detailed, qualitative way” (McDonald, 2005: 461) fits particularly well the research facet concerning circus as work and career option. Its appropriateness to study “the ways of work and life of mobile people living in contemporary societies” (Czarniawska, 2014: 44) and “to capture the brief, fragmented, varied, verbal and interrupted nature of organisational life” (McDonald, 2005: 458) turns it into a particularly useful method to account for the flexible, multiple and mobile forms of organisation in which circus artists operate.

Despite being a very demanding method, requiring a full-time following of the subject and continuous recording of data (Gilliat-Ray, 2011; McDonald, 2005), “shadowing offers the possibility of an especially holistic view of the life and work of a particular individual, and where this is contextualized socially, politically, and culturally, there is the potential for the gaining of unexpected insights” (Gilliat-Ray, 2011: 471).

Shadowing requires “relational work of an intensive and unique kind” (ibid), due to the close and intrusive relation between researcher and shadowed person. Sclavi (2005) takes the emotions as point of departure to account for these interpersonal dynamics. In her view, the researcher should not pretend neutrality but use her own reactions to the observed subject as a research tool, in a continuous effort to recognize the alterity of the other and avoid taking empathy and accessibility for granted. On the contrary, the difference between what observers and participants see can be taken as data (Czarniawska, 2014) and resources to enhance the understanding of self, others and society at large (Sclavi, 2005). In this sense, it is important to maintain a “critical proximity (Gilliat-Ray, 2011) to the researched, engaging in the task of understanding her reality through self-aware and reflective reasoning.

Here again my role as a full member created exceptional conditions both in my relation to the shadowed person and context. Since I knew the shadowed artist before the research started, the problems connected to the initial strangeness of the shadowing situation, and to the discrepancy between insights gained through shadowing and the everyday life of the researched person, who is also taken “out of the normal chronological stream of events and routines” (Gilliat-Ray, 2011: 482) due to the unusual proximity of a stranger, were partially avoided. Secondly, my engagement with the context was active and participant, differently from what is usually recommended.

Although an active membership role may be inappropriate or impossible for the researchers engaged in shadowing (ibid), my role as a member of the circus community of practice required in some cases my direct participation to the observed activities. I was asked to help with the very activities I was shadowing, distributing fliers, making sure there were no technical problems or other interruptions during the show, helping with building and tidying up the sets and technical equipment, finding missing objects for the show. This sometimes delayed the record of fieldnotes, but it facilitated my acknowledgement as a member of the community, providing opportunities of ‘real’ interactions and direct, embodied experiences of life as it is lived by the observed social actors.

### **3.6.6 Sensory approach and photo, video and object elicitation**

As previously stated, this study aims to account for the actors’ meanings and representations, but also for the embodied and intercorporeal dimensions of lived experience. As such, a ‘sensory methodology’ was employed to help the participants “to evoke their sensory and corporeal worlds, and to reflect on their tangible and intangible experience” (Mason & Davies, 2009: 590). The underlying assumptions are that the different senses are entangled between themselves, that the sensory is inseparable from the external (social, cultural and political) world it perceives, and that sensory experiences involve both tangible and intangible outcomes (Mason & Davies, 2009; Pink, 2011a).

For example, different senses are employed simultaneously by circus artists, entailing both tangible feelings (touching the others and the space) and imagined, intangible ones (body control, frustration and fulfilment) (Petit, 2014; Wall, 2013). Moreover, if on the one hand “the sensory is likely to be ‘classed’, ‘gendered’ and so on” (Mason & Davies, 2009: 601), the opposite is also true: sensory experiences contribute to reproduce the different axes of social differentiation. In this research, using a sensory methodology translated into:

- drawing on my own “existing biographical experiences [...] in order to imagine and recognise [...] sensory embodied responses to other people, objects, textures and more” (Pink, 2011: 266), thus enabling a deeper understanding of the multisensory experiences entailed in perception, understanding, and meaning-making.
- ‘observant participation’ and focus on techniques of the body (process of learning, embodiment).
- active reflexivity to improve the understanding of “skilled sensory processes” (Pink, 2011: 267) and implications of the physical involvement required by circus activities (improvement or loss of strength, fatigue, breath control, perception of space, sound,

grip, smell, blood circulation, sweat, rhythm and speed, improvisation, expression, pain, fear, etc.), while at the same time avoid taking meaning for granted.

- strategies to focus on perception (tactile, visual, olfactory, auditory, kinaesthetic dimensions); for instance, during the interviews, images, videos and objects were employed to convey a clearer idea of the object of study, stimulate reflection and discussion, and unveil ambivalences, conflictual interpretations and subjective meanings. The same devices provided data to be analysed.

The last point deserves further explanation. The underpinning assumption is that relevant conceptual categories, such as creativity, career, normative conceptions of the body and the emotions, do what Svejenova (2005) states for authenticity: “it provides energy to action and, simultaneously, continue to discover and reshape itself in action” (: 950). According to this author, “identity is ‘created’ through language as well as other representations, for example photographs” (ibid). This research draws on the relevance of photographs, videos and objects in building identities and ‘senses of authenticity’ (Salome, 2010), and in rationalizing or making sense otherwise of life trajectories, subcultural boundaries, notions of art, work, labour and leisure.

On the one hand, interviewees were asked to look at pictures depicting different ways of practicing circus or similar activities (picture 3.3). This was very useful to explore matters of functioning and organisation, artistic and aesthetic values, issues of style, boundaries and hierarchies between and within practices, in other words, to elicit personal narratives and trigger and construct meaning (Schwartz, 1989).

Moreover, in order to gain insights into the embodied and kinaesthetic aspects of the circus practice, every interviewee was asked to bring:

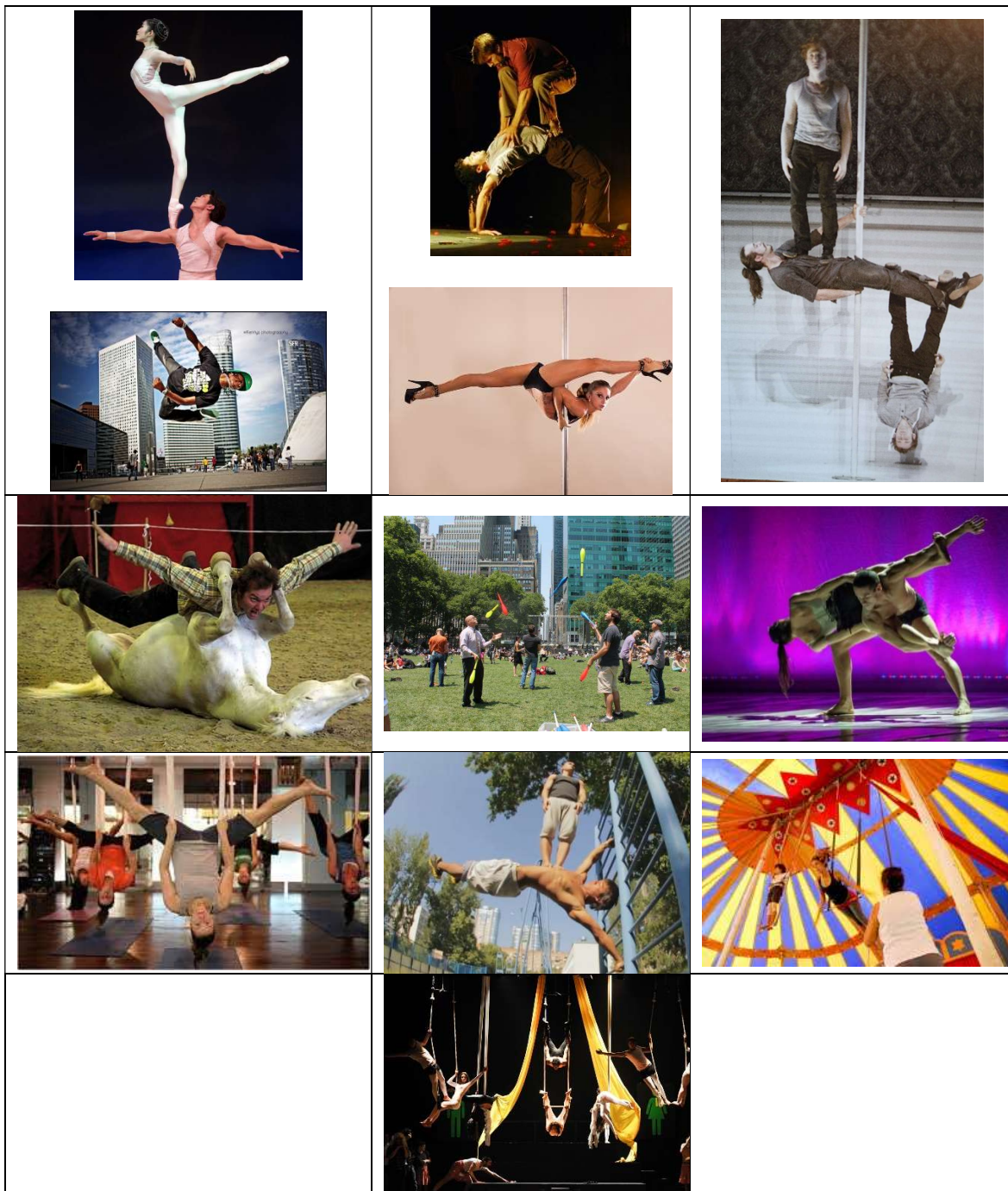
- A circus object he/she considered important
- A photo he/she considered representative of his/her own circus practice
- A video representing everyday circus practice

These devices were used to elicit answers about personal choices and views, subjective meanings and definitions of self, embodied, sensory and emotional experiences. Images and “evocative objects” represent catalysts and repositories of meaningful human experience, intertwined with lives, identities, memories, and desires (Turtle, 2007). They help participants to make sense, express experiences and emotions which are difficult to articulate, and reflect on the connections with the context of practice and with “society, culture and history” (Harper, 2002: 13).

The process of selecting, viewing and discussing images, and of touching and telling the story of an object, provided insights otherwise inaccessible, due at least to three reasons. Firstly, it allowed a deeper understanding of sensory categories and of the state of ‘flow’ circus practitioners go through when training and performing. Vision is not isolated but it happens in interaction with other senses, and images are both the outcome and the reminder of multisensory experiences (Pink, 2011a). For this reason they are particularly useful to recall aspects of physical effort, body use, perception and feelings, timing and spatial relations, and to investigate the “personal meanings correlated with each phase of effortful movement” (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009: 230). Moreover, vision is “skilled”, it

depends on social constructions, routines and interactional contexts, practical knowledge, power relations, and the role and position within or in relation to a certain community of practice (Grasseni, 2010).

**Picture 3.3: Pictures for photo elicitation**



**Sources:** 101 things to do, 2015; ABC Allenamento, 2013; Bryant Park, 2013; Circo Corsaro, 2014; Circondriacos, 2014; Danzaeffebi, 2014; Deviant Art, 2013; Grey panthers, 2014; Kiss Kiss Bank Bank Technologies, 2016; Maggie's notebook, 2014; Pole Dance Italia, 2012



[illegible]

Using pictures to evoke multisensory experiences and interrogate socially constructed understandings permits to grasp the sensory categories that the participants use to understand and communicate their experience.

Secondly, due to its concrete character and “intrinsically collaborative” nature (Lapenta, 2011: 202), elicitation helped to overcome the “strangeness of the interview situation” (Schwartz, 1989: 151) and to access subjective meanings in an easy and spontaneous way, without the need to ask awkward or intrusive questions.

Finally, the material collected in this way provides important insights into the material and visual culture associated to contemporary practices of circus. This is particularly relevant due to the recently diffused employment of video and images both to learn and train (to imitate tricks, correct mistakes, check how something looks from the outside), as a support or complement to performances, and to promote and sell one’s work. Moreover, besides bringing the biographical, the emotional and the sensory into the interview, facilitating the discussion of subjective meanings, object elicitation stressed the peculiar relation with specific objects (or the employment of ordinary objects in a certain way) that characterizes the practice of circus.

Picture 3.4 above shows some of the objects and photographs selected by the interviewees as representative of their practice. The close relationship with objects, props and apparatuses is evident at the first glance, as well as being supported by one of the core characteristic of circus practice, its strict relationship to the use of props, objects and apparatus, which become defining features of different circus disciplines, and which are personalized and attached high affective value.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

Data has been analysed and generated according to a bottom-up and theory-driven, abductive research strategy, where concepts and processes of data generation and analysis, as well as the participants’ and the researcher’s points of view, constantly interact (Blaikie, 2010; Mason, 2002). Thematic analysis enabled to unveil specificities and common patterns throughout the different sites. The flexibility of this type of analysis fits both the type of data generated and the research strategy adopted (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Paré, 2014).

As well as providing adequate lenses to narrow down the focus of the research, coding enabled to reflect on the data, expanding and deepening their relation with theory (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). As such, codes derived from the ways the field reflected the concepts employed, and, in turn, they orientated the literature review.

In order to proceed to systematic analysis I employed a software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo), and started drawing analytical categories based on the main emerging thematic threads since the very first phases of the research process, as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994). Moreover, using drawings, schemes, memos, and highlighting significant vignettes, I kept trace in my research diary of the shifts in focus and changes in the definition of thematic areas, and of the reasoning behind the new nexuses established



among conceptual insights into the data. A preliminary analysis highlighted the following thematic areas and subthemes:

“Circus careers”

- Boundaries and crosscuts between different types of career
- Types of work and competences required
- Formal and informal career paths
- Entanglements with the body
- Entanglements with pleasure and passion
- Entanglements with risk (physical, artistic, and connected to precariousness and uncertainty of work conditions)

“Circus communities of practice”

- Rhetoric of authenticity and claims for resistance and social change
- Specific expertise and legitimate activities
- Circus-specific mechanisms of interaction
- Use of time and space
- Interconnections between multiple forms of membership to overlapping communities of practice
- Connections between participation in a circus community of practice and life outside the circus space
- Intersections between local and global communities of circus practice
- Ways in which belonging to the circus community of practice marks the body

“Embodiment of body techniques”

- Images, moves, strategies used to teach
- Embodied VS cognitive competences
- Relearning body use and embodied agency
- Change in perceptual, affective and cognitive structures
- Normativity of body techniques in learning contexts

“Definitions of circus”

- Art/Entertainment/Sport
- Public image
- Internal boundaries
- External boundaries
- Struggles for resources and recognition

“Emotions”

- Emotion work and feeling rules
- Difference between being on or off stage
- State of flow

## “Risk”

- Types of risk
- Definitions of safety
- Role of trust

Secondly, I focused on the analysis of symbolic and social boundaries within and outside the circus community, and their entanglements with relevant sociological processes unfolding in the circus field under construction, formalization and commercialization in particular. This enabled more specific and significant thematic categories to emerge. Notions of authenticity, as related to creativity, uniqueness, artistic risk dedication and loyalty to one’s true self emerged as central in contemporary circus, in opposition to the mere virtuosity, prowess, physical risk and technicity attributed to commercial or traditional circus.

Popularity, participation and extensive accessibility emerged instead against the too ‘academic’ and avant-garde character of institutional circus. These distinctions were reflected in normative conceptions of art, work, labour and leisure, as well as the body and the emotions, shaping in turn the participants’ careers and learning processes. The final thematic categories are mirrored in the structure of this thesis: processes of formalization moulding a new field of contemporary circus; authentication and the resulting typology of authenticity; internal and external boundaries shaping the community of circus practice; amateurs’ and professionals’ life trajectories and careers throughout the circus world; the embodiment of body techniques and feeling rules; body and emotion work and emotional labour.

Besides this attempt at coherent systematization, transparency of the research process and accountability and reliability of the research outcomes, the underlying epistemological assumptions remind that, in all ethnographic research,

“the plausibility of a story concocted in the study, a story that elides some of the mistakes and gaps of fieldwork, is not necessarily the same as something one might very tentatively and diffidently call truthfulness. Verisimilitude is in part artfulness and one must be constantly beware of imagining that the first attempts to give coherence to data are the same as a reproduction of the social world itself [...] Verisimilitude, too, is usually obtained by simplifying, forgetting, neglecting the difficult anomaly, and making everything coherent and orderly. The ability to write must be recognized also as an ability to deform and censor, and anomalies are best confronted rather than circumnavigated” (Rock, 2001: 36).

A particularly problematic issue in this research was language. I conducted interviews and took field notes in Italian, my mother tongue, and successively translated the quotes employed in this final report into English (my second or even third language). Because of the specificity of the subcultural terms employed and the centrality of idiomatic expressions to grasp and express meaning, this was not an easy task. Hence, the problem was specifically linguistic, as well as generally ‘semiotic’, semantic and ethnographic (Manning, 2001).

If, on the one hand, ethnography is always a form of translation, the issue is even more salient in this thesis due to the double problem of conveying meanings of the circus culture, and translating them to another language, which is not my mother tongue. This is in a sense opposed to the usual problem of translation: “to reproduce the structure of an alien discourse within the translator’s own language” (Asad, 1986: 156). In my case the problem was, first of all, to reproduce the ‘circus language’ – and the practices, visions, and forms of life in which it is embedded - through academic codes, norms and rules. A first layer of the problem was then to translate between two languages (circus and academic) which I master (as a circus practitioner and a PhD student), but with translation skills that sometimes revealed to be scarce, particularly due to the tendency full members of a cultural group have to take for granted assumptions and beliefs. Secondly, it was about translating these familiar forms of language into English, a language that I do not fully master.

The first side of the problem is common to all ethnographers, as Rock (2001) well illustrates:

“At first, one is daunted by the sheer difficulty of reducing all that one has learned and seen to a unilinear argument that cuts a path through what is invariably sensed as a totality with parts that are not separate at all but features of a fused and simultaneously interacting whole. One will be all too conscious, too, that it is difficult to translate a vivid world of noises, sights and smells, a world of embodied people where the visual is as important as the oral, to writing which is confined to the oral alone. There is a sense of future betrayal, that what was so exciting and dramatic may become unfaithful, monochromatic and dull, very unlike the original”. (: 36)

As well as a sociological translation of the circus world, however, this research posed a question more strictly related to linguistic translation. Rather than within the critical frame of the “relations of “weak” and “strong” languages that govern the international flow of knowledge” discussed by Clifford (1986: 22), and besides the ethical issues concerning power relations between researcher and researched, which will be the object of the next paragraph, the problem here posed pragmatic questions. I had to “preserve [the] very foreignness” (Crapanzano, 1986: 52) of language, while, as an Italian speaker being the foreign myself. Moreover, translation is a crucial and problematic issue because it refers not only “to linguistic matter”, but also “to the “modes of thought” that are embodied in such matter” (Asad, 1986: 142)

Because circus language was so fundamental in conveying meanings specific to the circus community, the translation approach employed here could not be an “exact translation into grammatically and syntactically ‘correct’ English” (Stone & West, 2012: 654), and had to take into account “what the listener [...] can infer from what has been said” (: 655). Some terms were particularly difficult to translate, due to their specificity and technicity (such as particular disciplines, props, movements), or to their idiomaticity (for instance, the term ‘marchetta’ in Italian means a ‘dirty’ or commercial job done just for the money, but it also has a sexual connotation, as it is originally employed in reference to prostitution; the term ‘madonne’ may be employed within the circus domain as a way to indicate extremely high technical levels, or very difficult tricks, but it also has a religious, transcendent and ecstatic connotation). To solve the most problematic situations, I asked the help of native speakers (both in English and in circus language). In general, however, for both financial and time

issues, I translated the quotes drawing solely on my linguistic and (sub)cultural competences, sometimes – due to limited translating skills - having to stick to the ‘literal’ meaning and giving up the rendering of further semantic layers.

The problem for the fieldworker is usually being aware of the “assumptions, feelings and values” carried in “almost any utterance” (Temple & Young, 2004: 165). For me it was about translating these deeper meanings into written text, and, especially, into another language.

### **3.8 Ethics**

This research does not, in principle, raise serious ethical issues. The main problem in this respect concerns the personal involvement of the researcher in the topic and pre-existing connections to the settings under investigation. However, before the beginning of fieldwork, I was not involved with the selected research sites: I had never collaborated with the social circus project, I started training with continuity in a space I had until then attended only sporadically, I focused on professional artists which are not colleagues and I had never worked with before.

Moreover, I unveiled my role as a researcher during fieldwork and obtained written informed consent before the interviews, and all the names of the interviewees have been changed. Methods like shadowing and participant observation (or ‘observant participation’) entail that it is not always possible to predict who the researcher will have to deal with in the field (Quinlan, 2008). However, I disclosed my identity as a researcher to the main actors involved and to those directly involved in conversations, and obtain their consent for using the material collected. These precautions allowed me to compensate for the problematic aspects of being both an insider and an observer while still exploiting the resources I own as a circus practitioner, such as being able to understand fully the terminology employed, the importance of bodily competences, the gestures and the symbols adopted.

A more general ethical reflection concerns research in general as the main site of contact between sociologists and ‘the external world’:

“every version of an “other”, wherever found is also the construction of a “self”, and the making of ethnographic texts (...) has always involved a process of “self-fashioning” (...) Cultural poesis – and politics – is the constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices” (Clifford, 1986: 24).

These complex dynamics are complicated, in this research, by the fact that the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ are blurred since its conception, due to my double membership within the academic community and the community of circus practice. Acknowledging the researcher’s standpoint thus acquires central ethical value. In terms of practice, this means that the researcher must acknowledge the influence of her embodied situatedness, by which beliefs, background and history have become lived flesh, on the process of interpretation (Blaikie, 2010; Creswell, 2007).

My status as a doctoral candidate adds to a number of roles and identities I collected over the years: as a performer, a student, a circus teacher and educator, a community and development worker, a social circus expert. This position enabled insights and awareness that facilitated the research process, but, despite the selection of research sites in which I was not involved before the beginning of fieldwork, it also posed serious challenges, such as managing a dual goal and continuously questioning my own assumptions, avoiding taking meanings for granted. For this reason, I applied an analytical approach to autoethnography, attempting to produce data from my personal experience (both previous to and during the research), acknowledge past encounters when needed, establish meaningful connections with broader themes and others' subjective meanings, and making these processes explicit in the field notes.

Finally, maintaining a critical position and the possibility of 'being surprised' implies questioning the researcher's knowledge and pre-conceived assumptions (Bourdieu, 1992), accounting for the 'cultural politics of gesture' and embodiment (Herzfeld, 2009) - that is, for postures signalling power differences or else belonging to the same social space - and pay attention to exceptions and unexpected turn-ups.



## **Chapter 4: Vaulting on the iron cage: the construction of an Italian contemporary circus field**

After illustrating the main theoretical references and the research design, in this chapter I will describe the research field more in depth, introducing the first relevant nexuses between conceptual insights and collected data. Bourdieu's description of the "struggle for the dominant principle of hierarchization" (Bourdieu, 1993: 40) provides a useful theoretical framework to start delving into the field. The institutionalization of contemporary circus, including the funding of training, artistic research, and audience development, and the formalization of circus education following the "recent trend toward conflating bureaucracy and socialization into the creative arts" (Wilf, 2010: 564), is underpinned by the combination of "Romantic notions of self-realization and autonomy" (ibid) and an emphasis on the importance of effective organisation and (re)structuring of the circus sector.

In Bourdieu's perspective, the construction of a field is the outcome of differentiation and struggle between a heteronomous principle of hierarchization, "favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically", and an "autonomous principle [...] which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital [recognition] tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise" (Bourdieu, 1993: 40). The current construction of a circus field highlights instead the alignment between the two, in line with a situation in which scarce monetary recognition of labour is compensated with the increased importance of immaterial and identity value, enabling the concurrent development of subjectivity and capitalism (Arvidsson et al., 2010b).

More specifically, this chapter explores the reconfiguration of public priorities (and funding), the construction of an institutional circus sector, the structuration and bureaucratization of professional and amateur training, and the transformations of the local circus scene in Turin as insightful nexuses between these processes and the current institutionalization of a new circus field within the neoliberal context.

### **4.1 The construction of a new circus field: structuring principles and "confusion"**

Following a trend initiated in France, Canada, and northern Europe, the Italian circus is attempting a renovation and a re-definition: from popular, simple form of entertainment addressed to children and families, and from a closed community at the margin of society, to, on the one hand, an artistic genre, and, on the other, an artistic and sport practice anybody can benefit from<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The social media facilitated the circulation of information about new ways of doing circus through videos which achieved extensive visualization. To this respect, the case of the Raw Art project is particularly significant: this Ukrainian collective of artists created in 2005 published a number of videos which they inscribe within the "post-circus" trend. Of particular interest is the video "Raw Art. Forget about circus" (Raw Art, 2013) in which they present their project with the words: "Forget about circus. Forget about glittering

This has been recognized as a nexus between lifestyle sports and cultural politics in the study of other contemporary practices such as parkour (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011), skateboarding (Turner, 2013) and hip hop (Shapiro, 2004), which are increasingly acknowledged as potentially enlarging social inclusion and democratic participation. Within the context of circus, Italy is still considered by contemporary circus practitioners as the “third world of [contemporary] circus in relation to the rest of Europe” [Leonardo, 23, professional student]: the influence of France and other European countries like Belgium is still strong, while the idea that in Italy circus as an artistic sector is still underdeveloped is widespread.

“in Italy the reference points today are Belgium and France [...] more and more people go there to train, take them as examples, festivals take companies from there, companies copy things from there [...] I don’t think there are big references points [within Italy]”

[Marco, 36, professional]

However, a number of signs, besides the capturing of public attention and funding, prove that the circus world is undergoing a reconfiguration also in the peninsula, where the growing number of contemporary circus artists, companies and festivals show that “an Italian character of contemporary circus” is emerging [Emanuele, 36, professional]<sup>7</sup>; circus performances are more and more visible in mainstream media and cultural events such as talent and reality shows, advertisements, pop stars’ exhibitions<sup>8</sup>; circus disciplines are increasingly offered as alternatives to sport and fitness activities; and circus is slowly entering the world of ‘official’ arts: it has recently accessed famous theatre and dance festivals, although in a ‘disguised’ way:

“there is a change, the fact that they chose this show, it is not so much the fact of having been there [...] but the fact that under the label dance there was this show, you know, that is the change, and also here in Turin it is being felt because ‘Teatro a Corte’ is a contemporary theatre festival but they are including a lot of contemporary circus. ‘Torino Danza’ is a dance festival, and they included two or three circus show, making them look like dance, there is a bit this thing, as if they didn’t want to get their hands dirty saying that

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costumes, caged animals and clowns with their old hat jokes. Circus can be alternative”, underlined by images of “masterly tricks” (Raw Art, 2016) against an urban background.

<sup>7</sup> The Census on Circus in Italy collected data from October 2015 to February 2016 about 80 contemporary (as “non-classic/traditional”) circus companies (including artists, formal and informal groups which employ the circus disciplines as a stage language) in Italy, 70 of which were born after 2000, and 35 after 2010 (Malerba & Vimercati, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Among the finalists of Italia’s got Talent editions of 2015 and 2016 there were three and two circus performances respectively. In 2015 these included the contact juggling of Simone Al Ani, who won the edition, the aerial and acrobatic performance of Les Farfadais, and fire dancing of Lux Arcana. In 2016 the acrobatic, juggling and balancing act by Alessandro Maida and the Roue Cyr of Kira. A third act, presented by “Società Ginnastica Acrobatica Grugliasco”, belongs to the world of sports (particularly gymnastics and acrobatics), although it may resemble a ‘traditional’ circus troupe’s performance for the costumes and the large number of acrobats involved. The reality show “Si può fare!” included a diversity of circus disciplines (RAI, 2015); Italian rock star Ligabue hired for his 2007-2008 tour aerial acrobat Elena Burani for a silks exhibition during one of his songs.



they are really circus, but they are circus. Also other programmers in Italy are helping with this epochal shift for Italy, we are all working for this [...] to understand that in Italy there is something new, that it exists, that in Europe it has been there for many years, so it's not even new, but we didn't realize it exists"

[Elisabetta, 40, director]

The perception of a starting "epochal" shift is sustained by the recent shift of public attention towards contemporary circus (as both artistic genre and professional option). New criteria for the allocation of funding stressed the value of artistic quality and innovation, meant specifically to support contemporary forms of circus which do not employ animals, and to promote research and the undertaking of artistic risk (MiBACT, 2014a).

In July 2014 a decree (MiBACT, 2014a), and particularly article 45, reconfigured the priorities of the artistic residencies, the main institutional, public instrument of support and funding of artistic productions in Italy, around key words such as multidisciplinary research and interregional collaborations, new generations and emerging artists (Lombardo, 2015; Residenze Artistiche, 2016). In Piedmont, of the five residencies identified for 2015-2017, two are dedicated to contemporary circus, two to theatre and one to dance (Regione Piemonte, 2015). This marks a pivotal step in the Italian history of contemporary circus, providing public support not just in the form of "economic instruments", but also "instruments of relationship, organisation, method", to "share knowledge, awareness" [expert interview 1] and continue a work of promotion and diffusion of the circus arts which has thus far been carried on mainly by private institutions.

Later, in July 2015, a legislative decree issued by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism - MiBACT (MiBACT, 2015) shifted a considerable amount of resources of the 'Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo' (FUS, the governmental funding mechanism for the show business) until then allocated to traditional, family circuses, to contemporary circus institutions. For the first time, for the period 2015-2017, FUS recognized and funded extensively two contemporary circus companies (with amounts around 40.000 euros each), two schools, Flic and Vertigo (whose funding increased from 33.000 and 60.000 euros respectively in October 2014, to 130.000 ad 189.000 euros in July 2015 - FNAS, 2015; MiBACT, 2014b, 2015) and a number of contemporary circus festivals.

The recent interest the institutions have directed towards circus is due to the perception that

"some domains of the show business are kind of asphyxiated and within the circus, the so called traditional circus doesn't express any value anymore, any possibility of artistic or personal growth. There is a dramatic, embarrassing, stagnation within traditional circus, also with the scandals that we have recently followed on the newspapers, linked to illegal immigration, to tax evasion in the artists' pay..."

[expert interview 1].

The recent awareness – enlightened both by the media, by local administrations and national institutions - of the problematic exploitation of animals and illegal migrants within

traditional travelling circuses (cf. for example, *Il fatto quotidiano*, 2015; Salvia, 2016) has resulted, rather than in the decision to “erase” a sector [expert interview 1], in an intention to renovate it, similarly to what happens for the other performative arts, shifting the attention towards the avant-garde movement within Italian circus. According to the actors who benefited the most from this shift, this is due to the realization, on the side of the policy makers, “that circus shows have an attractiveness and a capability to communicate with the audience that in this moment in Italy other forms of performing arts hardly have”. The other performing arts are also opening to the circus, both through the inclusion in festivals we saw at the beginning of the chapter, and through the “so called multidisciplinary [residence] projects”, overcoming the prejudice which frames the circus as a mere form of entertainment, and “the fear for the technical aspects of circus” [expert interview 1].

This political shift subverted the precarious balance of the circus world, in general terms contributing to the development and the visibility of the contemporary circus, but also furthering the concentration of resources and the fragmentation of the sector, as well as the exclusion of both traditional circuses, and “alternative” forms of practicing circus. This reflects what Bourdieu (1993) states about the struggle for the dominant principle of hierarchization, which is “inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class to impose the dominant principle of domination”:

“in this struggle, the artists and writers who are richest in specific capital and most concerned for their autonomy are weakened by the fact that some competitors identify their needs with the dominant principles of hierarchization and seek to impose them even within the field, with the support of temporal powers” (Ibid: 41).

Within the circus, traditional families for years were protected from the audience crisis of the sector by public support (Serena, 2008). However, since ‘contemporary’ circus has been responding more effectively to the dominant principles of hierarchization (see chapter 5), traditional circus families were relegated to a marginal position not only in relation to society, but also to these more up-to-date forms of circus, and are watched suspiciously with the fear that they might (as it is allegedly typical of them) take the shortcut to easy money, “killing all the animals” (to requalify for public funding) or reproduce the commercial format of the “circuses of horror” (to sell more tickets) [expert interview 2].

The two professional circus schools represent the strongest institutions in terms of access to resources, structures, and legal permissions. They were able to satisfy the strict criteria of the Ministry and “enter the Ministerial domain where you need to have some employees, etc., but this is the way the world goes, you have to make them understand that you have a structure” [expert interview 2]. As such, they represent “the biggest structures at the moment, more stable, with their feet on the ground so they are able to...to create a point I don’t know whether a point of reference but a point, they are there, do the work, [...] while the rest remains a bit too...open” [Marco, 36, professional].

This concentration of public support goes hand in hand with a conjugation of the projects offered by circus institutions along different lines, such as education, creation, and distribution of shows. To give but one example, circus school Vertigo encompasses a Cultural Association (Qanat Arte e Spettacolo) in charge for creation and production; a

professional training Agency (Forcoop agenzia formativa); a Sports Association (Scuola di Circo Vertigo ASD), offering amateur circus courses; and a Private Company (Moving Art srl) legally able to sell show and festival tickets.

This tendency to concentration and fragmentation of the services provided follows a broader trend in the show business in a region and a city in which economies of variety are becoming more important than economies of scale, and in which differentiation represents a risk management strategy. In order to survive high competition, and unstable and highly demanding working conditions, theatre and dance organisations need to satisfy managerial, entrepreneurial, artistic and social requirements, leading to a great differentiation of the services offered, and of the projects sold: some of these are exclusively artistic (shows as a result of specific research and experimentation), others are more engaging with the social (workshops, outreach work, entertainment); others still to the distribution of shows or the organisation of events and festivals (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011: 59).

This situation provokes a fragmentation which can be excessive, especially for the smaller circus realities which do not have enough economic and human resources to operate in these very diverse domains at once. This results in the further concentration of funding and political power in the hands of the organisations which are already strong enough to diversify the services provided. When concrete issues of competition for acknowledgement, space, resources and funding, entitlement to work and train others, provide insurance coverage are at stake, this vitality creates a number of labels and categories (circus as sport, as performing art...) which can generate a “confusion” around the definition of circus and degenerate into tensions and conflict: for instance, insurance matters and requirements for teaching skills are very different when offering sport activities, or training professionals, or producing and distributing shows, being for no other reason that they fall under different laws, regulations and domains at the national level.

“The problem is that there is a lot of confusion, it’s hard to know where many of the Sports Associations actually do sport or show business [...] these are two levels which cannot be confused, one thing is to do a professional academy, another one is doing sport. [...] there are many realities which put up a Sport Association to have fiscal advantages, but what they do is show business, it’s not sport. CONI [the Italian National Olympic Committee, responsible for the development and management of sports activity in Italy] got angry because of this...”

[fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2015. Conversation with the director of an important youth circus]

To provide another example, during the XIV National Meeting of Circus educators a letter was drafted by a group of operators against one of the main organisations to which circus amateur associations subscribe in exchange for services and visibility, UISP (Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti)<sup>9</sup>. The problem to be addressed was that “nobody covered activities such as

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<sup>9</sup> A clarification concerning the complicated organisation of the sports sector in Italy might be worth here. The different governments have been giving varying importance to sport, with the last Minister of Sport, Luca Lotti, appointed on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, after three years (the previous Minister ended her mandate in June 2013) in which sport was a subject managed by the Department of Regional Affairs, Autonomies and Sport.

trapeze or aerial acrobatics; only juggling, gymnastics and floor acrobatics are covered. A letter was prepared and signed, saying that a number of associations will exit from UISP because there is no adequate insurance covering for circus activities, despite the increasing number of associations offering circus courses" [fieldnotes, meeting, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2015].

To follow up on this issue, and to gain reliable figures and a clearer picture of the recent developments of the amateur circus movement nationally wise, the following October I went to talk to a director of a youth circus who was also a former member of UISP's local council, and who, after the organisation erased the activity code of circus in August 2014, decided to leave her place:

"People don't know what circus is, they are afraid because of the increasing numbers [of people engaging in these activities] and for the risk involved, thus they overturn the responsibility on the Associations [...] one thing is if you just do a little course in a gym, with two acrobatic positions, some juggling [...] but here you need to know how to move underneath a circus tent, we have the aerials, a flying trapeze [...]. After one year that I had asked about the insurance coverage [to UISP] they replied that circus activities are not covered".

[fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2015]

Circus organisations navigate a curvy terrain without fixed points of references, clear definitions, pre-established routes, guarantees of security and stability. This leaves broad grey areas to free interpretation and, as such, possibilities to find creative solutions (often at the cost of emotionally and time-consuming work), but hinders an organic, formal development of the sector in Italy. As a consequence, the tendency towards formalization arouses ambivalent reactions, ranging from mistrust, to shy hope, to enthusiasm, among the very different actors and organisations involved. Among the latter, some see the Organisations for Sports Promotion (and in particular UISP) as an opportunity to lobby for the formalisation of the circus sector (in particular, for the recognition of circus teachers' training and insurance coverage criteria). However, not all the Associations offering circus classes fall under a single Organisation. On the contrary, the scene is still highly fragmented and contested<sup>10</sup>.

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On the other hand, CONI – the above mentioned Italian National Olympic Committee – has been playing a central role in the organisation and management of sports activities in Italy since its creation in 1914. Today it is monitored by the Government and represents a Confederation of National Sports Federations and associated sports disciplines. Circus activity has never been included among the sports disciplines recognized by CONI, as there is no National Federation for Circus activity. However, this does not prevent that some Organisations for Sports Promotion - which are national associations recognized by CONI for the promotion and organisation of sport activities at the recreational and educational level – can address multidisciplinary activities – such as circus - which are not recognized by CONI.

<sup>10</sup> As I am concluding this thesis, important initiatives are being carried on by institutional actors in the field of circus. Flic (professional circus school) has organised, in collaboration with an Organisation for Sports Promotion (Attività Sportive Confederate – ASC) the first Italian training course for Circus Aerial Disciplines' Instructors (Istruttore Discipline Aeree Circensi – IDAC). In the meanwhile, another Organisation for Sports Promotion - the above mentioned UISP - has reintroduced the code 'circus arts', under the activity named as "gymnastics" ("le ginnastiche"), and issued a call for the affiliated Associations to participate in a meeting on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, with the purpose of "structuring and organising the sector" and the training for trainers

It is mostly the stronger organisations, with a more stable, long-standing and bigger structure, that are able to take advantage (although with a large counterpart of public relation, fund-raising, evaluation work) of the recent increase of attention to contemporary circus by policy makers, as in the case of the two professional schools (paragraph 4.4.2), or the umbrella organisation Giocolieri & Dintorni (which recently gained an extensive amount of funding for an audience development project in 2015-2017). Moreover, due to the lack of broadly recognized structures, strong single organisations are, at least in part, free to make their own path independently of bigger actors, as it is the case of a long-standing youth circus organisation which, seeing its claim to provide formal training for circus trainers, and to be granted insurance coverage for circus activities, unrecognized by one of the main organisations gathering sports associations in Italy, opted to exit and enter another such union, without pitfalls on their activities [fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2015].

The smaller organisations do their best to collect information and remain within the legally defined domain, often at high costs due to experts' consultancies, ever-present risk of fines due to strict requirements and – as such – easy-to-commit mistakes in administration work, long hours of unpaid work [fieldnotes taken at circus educators' meeting in September 2015, observations and conversations].

The choice of structuring one's activity into a formal association may carry an ambivalent value in terms of independence and autonomy, as it is a way to gain the acknowledgement of institutions, but also one of the only options to "exist professionally" independently of the stronger institutions, and to assert an alternative status, with a disturbing function of 'bourgeois values' (Garcia, 2011). Maybe for this reason, even those organisations situating themselves outside the formal system of funding and politics, like for instance at least two of the alternative circuses described in paragraph 5.5 (Side and El Grito), created formal Cultural Associations, and usually organise their events with the support, or at least the formalized acknowledgement, of local administrations.

The complexity of this situation, the diversity of manifestations, political positionalities, polemics in relation to the more recognized and stable formal positions, may be effectively inscribed within the conceptual framework of a field under construction, that is, a "field of position taking": "when we speak of a field of position-takings, we are insisting that what can be constituted as a system for the sake of analysis is not the product of a coherence-seeking intention or an objective consensus [...] but the product and prize of a permanent conflict" (Bourdieu, 1993: 34).

As such, the field of contemporary circus is developing both in opposition to the previously dominant traditional/classic circus, in line with very 'practical' issues such as insurance and recognition of trainers' training, and in accordance with what are framed as broader social priorities dictated by an ideology of creativity, innovation and authenticity. The institutionalization of circus education and the building of a local circus scene in Turin provide insightful examples of how the contemporary circus field of position taking and the

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for year 2016-2017 (UISP, 2016a). During this first meeting, an (informally recognized) provisional working group of representatives of UISP associations offering circus activities was created, and since then further meetings have been held to discuss three main points: 'regulation', 'training' and 'safety' (UISP, 2016b, 2016c).

community of circus practice interact and shape each other, drawing and undermining a more stable space of formal positions.

#### **4.2 The institutionalization of circus training**

Being a community of both life and work (Caforio, 1987), traditional circus saw education as a responsibility falling entirely on the shoulders of each circus family: the incorporation into the circus labour universe corresponded to the integration of a child into a family and a community. Peculiar processes of socialization placed great emphasis on circus skills and rendered formal education useless (Afonso, 2002).

In the late 70s street artists and the amateur juggling movement started growing in the Western world, employing free sharing and informal meeting as ways to produce and spread practical knowledge and theoretical literature about the circus arts (Wall, 2013). The community of jugglers and street artists was very active in Italy in the 80s and 90s too. After the European Juggling Convention was hosted in Turin in 1997, 1998 saw the first Italian Juggling Convention which, until its 8<sup>th</sup> and last edition in 2005, represented an important meeting point for national as well as international practitioners.

Local regular meetings of jugglers, for instance in big cities like Turin and Milan (where squats such as Torchiera played a central role in the development of the juggling movement), also provided important starting points for the spread of this practice through the idea that “juggling is to be learnt on the road, truly in the street” [Valeria, 39, professional] rather than in formal settings or schools.

The belief in the value of a sharing culture of informal knowledge, framed as escaping any label and crossing every boundary between disciplines, arts, genres, holds “a social appeal, especially among supporters of the counterculture” (Wall, 2013: 81), and is still very strong. Evidence of this can be found in the different juggling conventions and the main reference meeting for circus educators in Italy (Meeting Nazionale degli Operatori di Circo): in these occasions trainers freely share their tricks, techniques, and teaching methods with other practitioners, both through workshops and, in the case of the Meeting, opening circus classes with children to external observers.

This tendency responds to the idea of a community of practice as a learning process “in itself” (Paechter, 2003: 75), in which membership and identification rely on the ability and willingness to continuously work with the community to develop collective understandings and values, and seems incompatible with the formalization of circus education: “the problem is that we are an anarchic world. At the beginning, I spoke about structuring the classes and they looked at me like I was a Martian from outer space” [fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2015].

Moreover, despite the recent attempts at fixing knowledge, competences, and authority within the circus sector (see, for instance, Cirque du Soleil, 2011, 2014; Dubois et al., 2014; FEDEC, 2010; Heller, 2005 among many others) circus moves, tricks and teaching methods remain, to a large extent, subjected to different definitions and interpretations (especially if one compares the language of circus to that of dance or gymnastics).

Nevertheless, the formalization and professionalization of circus training is acquiring increasing importance in today's circus world, underpinned by specific competences and competitiveness. The first professional circus school opened in Turin in 2002, with the intention to provide the "passion for work, training and research", the techniques and "the rigour needed to grow" to a practice attributed to hippies, and to a form of art still without its own "dignity" [expert interview 2].

However, a great part of the first generation of artists trained in Italian circus professional schools was initiated to the passion for circus in the above-mentioned meetings and conventions. They were attracted by the opportunity to improve their "circus techniques but also cross-sectoral skills of movement and word", to create "shows, acts and enchainment of acts" [expert interview 1].

The opening of professional schools marked a decisive landmark in the Italian history of contemporary circus, as for the first time the circus arts entered the world of formal education, opening the possibility – until then mainly reserved to the children of circus families like "Togni, Medini, Orfei" or to those informed enough and willing to emigrate [expert interview 1] - of undertaking a professional career, and asserting the need of organised and rigorous learning:

"Clearly, from the opening of the schools on everything changed, they didn't talk about street arts and street artists, about juggling, they talked about circus so the physical preparation required increased exponentially and the circus arrived with all its rigour, discipline, physical practice, the addition of technique, and that was a fundamental step".

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

This trend run parallel to the institutionalization of amateur training. A good reason might be that the two tendencies feed into each other, creating synergies in which professional students were often initiated in youth circus schools, and professionally trained artists work as teachers in amateur courses. Again following drives from abroad, the first circus schools for children opened in those years in Milan and Alto Adige, while in 1998 Juggling Magazine (which later founded Association Giocolieri & Dintorni) started to promote projects and trainings for trainers in this area (Associazione Giocolieri & Dintorni, 2016).

Formalization of training in this sector happens in a peculiar way, on the one hand through informal meetings and sharing as we saw, on the other spreading the idea that to do professional educational and technical teaching, lessons need to be structured, "one needs to know, plan, it is not enough to juggle three balls" [fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2015].

In the previous paragraph a pivotal connection between circus practice and the field of sport was highlighted. However, we also saw how circus in recent years has been claiming the status of artistic form. In this line, the formalization of circus education raises concrete questions related to sport practice (such as safety), but also the contradictory issue of the rationalization of "artistic creativity": "How, then, could artistic creativity, which, according to the Romantic ethos, depends on being in touch with one's unique inner nature and voice rather than conforming to outside models of being, be cultivated within the *rationalized* bureaucratic organisational structure?" (Wilf, 2010: 564).

Students' authenticity and creativity play a central role throughout the whole educational path. In France, which is often taken as a reference at least for the organisational and structural aspects of the Italian circus sector, candidates are selected on technical skills but also "on traits such as passion, presence, charisma, generosity, identity, personalization of what one does, [...] originality, research, the intimate" (Garcia, 2011: 83-84), and the work on the students' subjectivities is considered as important as the teaching of technical skills, to the point that "savoir-faire" and "savoir-être" are constantly confused by the educational institution (Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011: 91).

Moreover, these two pillars of contemporary artistic creation are rationalized and taught through specific strategies. Like for other art practices (for example jazz in Wilf, 2010), creativity and artistry follow the embodied mastery of a technique, as only once technical excellence – virtuosity - is achieved, it is possible to learn to improvise: "it is only at this stadium that the retroactive control of the ongoing action can fully manifest itself in the very moment of the realization of the prowess, that is, the ability to improvise and to adapt which allow interpretation" (Goudard, 2013: 25).

The same idea is conveyed by the programs of a number of professional schools, which dedicate a first phase to the embodiment of physical dispositions to shape an effective body, a second phase to technical reinforcement and specialization, and a last step to developing artistic skills (Flic scuola di circo, 2015; Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011; see chapter 7).

Thus, 'technique' as it was defined above provides the basis of 'artistry', something to be learnt and mastered before starting improvising and interpreting, or, in Cohen's terms, "choreographing" (2009: 38), associating motivations and thoughts to a movement. These two dimensions are perceived as equally important in circus education, as it is clear from the following quote which explains the pedagogical strategy of a professional school:

"For those who find themselves doing this type of work for the first time, they find themselves bombarded from morning until night with information concerning bodily awareness, but from the acrobatic point of view, so they have the tendency to stiffen a lot. I mean acrobatics leads you to have a certain type of positions which are held, precise, well defined and so we try to link this type of bodily control with a broader control, which concerns a certain quality of movement, a continuity of movement, a...a certain grain which is very thin [...] so it is as if we created marble blocks in the acrobatics classes, and then the students have slowly to shape with sandpaper. And the difficulty lies in ... in having a body awareness and be able to do things beyond - or even hiding – a position you are holding [...]. [Circus performers] develop a certain awareness of the body that allows them to hold certain positions, to have what acrobatics requires but hide it under a dress of quality of movement".

[Paolo, 30, professional]

Both technique and quality of movement are reached through a process of "formalized procedural manipulation of the body" (Wilf, 2010: 564), for instance working on "breath" and a "physical approach to the emotions" [Emanuele, 36, professional], and an identity process sometimes perceived as "a form of symbolic violence", aiming at changing the students' self-conception, both destabilizing and reinforcing self-confidence (Salamero &



Haschar-Noé, 2011: 83): “the acrobat has to put her/himself at risk, ...but an emotional risk, he/she must not show strength, but has to be weak on the scene, has to be honest, has to be real” [Emanuele, 36, professional].

Thus, in addition to shared normative embodied practice, circus educators “succeed in training students in creative practice that emphasizes differentiation and regeneration” (Wilf, 2010: 564), emotions and authenticity, which escape the exclusive domain of artistic self-expression to become a matter of ‘virtuosity’ (Virno, 2004), of acquirable, reproducible and transmissible skills and techniques. This, like the embodiment of techniques, requires determination and hard work, “spending hours and hours practicing with a prop” [expert interview 2], experimenting with one’s body, and

“going to explore new boundaries, I mean, those that for you are new boundaries. If I decide that [...] I want to do the trapeze with the ropes tied in a knot, I can do it, and that is the limit you put, ok? It can become a little bit like a boundary and so the fact of taking the risk of of...of getting lost, of not finding anything,”

[Maura, 33, professional]

The institutionalization of artistic training provides, together with the culturalization of the economy and the economization of culture, significant examples of the conflation of “creativity and modernity” (Wilf, 2010: 577). Rather than getting “lost”, as it was the fear of an interviewee, the sharing, freely circulating and creative culture of circus are channelled towards formalized organisations, methods, and strategies, in line with the dominant principles of hierarchization.

However, creativity is not the only organising principle of the circus field. Safety also plays a pivotal role, and not only in relation to physical risk, but also to artistic, narcissistic, and entrepreneurial risk (see chapter 5). After focusing on the formalization of circus training, the following paragraph introduces themes connected to the rationalization of artistic labour and the ways circus practitioners deal with these diversified forms of risk in the circus field.

### **4.3 The ‘official invisibility’ of the Italian contemporary circus sector**

Official classifications and statistics generally fail to capture the dynamics of artistic work, and of the circus sector in particular. In these domains, precariousness is taken as implicit, and, as such, it becomes invisible. According to recent data (Chicchi et al., 2015), incomes in the Italian show business sector are a little above the poverty line and access to even basic forms of welfare is difficult, while employers are released from all responsibilities of the labour relation. Moreover, time and effort need to be spent looking for strategies to bend the existing juridical instruments to fit the peculiar, fragmented and multi-client condition, while claiming acknowledgement for one’s work and preserving professional autonomy.

This opens up grey zones between national and local, cultural and fiscal policies, and their actual implementation by different actors, agencies, and institutions, in which the workers have to manage projects, be flexible and autonomous, assume total responsibility and

submit to very precise working schedules and places, and which often represent the only way to satisfy both the need to work and the desire to act outside capitalist logics, express one's talent or follow one's passion, to perform a self-actualizing, but also legitimate activity. Actors and agencies in the field are forced to exploit these grey zones to navigate the unclear (not to say hostile) political environment, most of the time simply to be able to survive.

The fact of being constantly on the edge of legality is confirmed by the often differing opinions of experts, accountants, and social insurance institutes about the correct procedures Associations should follow: while the latter are supposedly without lucrative aims, they are also the only instrument allowing small companies and single artists to work and earn, as they are attributed a VAT registration number and, as such, provide possibilities to release and receive invoices, and buy and sell performances, but are also formally recognized organisations able to establish legitimate subordinate relationships (Chicchi et al., 2015), and to offer a partial insurance to cover circus activities. For these reasons, they represent the most popular juridical form acquired by circus companies and amateur schools (Malerba & Vimercati, 2016)<sup>11</sup>.

Secondly, the diversity of national policies provoked a proliferation of labour market mechanisms and of collective definitions of the social status of these professions (Freidson, 1986), which make it difficult to classify artistic professions as a coherent "bundle of tasks" (Hughes, 1984: 313), socially organised according to competences and vocations. Freidson's (1986) example of the two different cases of the Soviet Union, in which the definition of 'artistic' activities, competences and status was provided by the State, and the USA, in which the cultural authority and economic power related to arts are based on the model of free market, fluid careers and flexible labour conditions, and on principles of engagement, identification, and disinterest, is illustrative of this complexity and variety.

Thus, while artistic practices undoubtedly represent a professional option for certain individuals, professionalization alone cannot account for the ways in which artistic careers unfold in the Western world. The modes of engagement are infinite, as it is demonstrated by the high number of "professional amateurs" (Stephens, 2012), who (more or less) occasionally draw part of their income from circus work, and by the lack of a single, universally (or even nationally) recognized, necessary and sufficient educational path to undertake a career in which practical and informal experiences continue to play a central role (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011).

This is because, differently from craftsmen, artists are, on the one hand, intellectual workers, creators with complex competences deserving the admiration and consideration of cultivated subjects (Freidson, 1986). On the other, they are innovators rather than imitators, they operate outside conventions, they are talented in unique ways, they rely on a subjective engagement, a deep personal implication, and follow a somewhat sacred,

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<sup>11</sup> Data in support of these statements were also drawn from fieldnotes taken on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, when I visited a reference organisation for the youth circus sector in Italy and had a conversation with its responsible, who is also considered an expert for what concerns insurance and administration of circus amateur schools; from my own experience as a participant to Circus educators' meetings; and from the survey I conducted among the existing amateur and professional schools in Turin (see chapter 3).

rather than merely economic, logic. Following Hannah Arendt (1959, quoted in Freidson, 1986), they can be defined as work, rather than labour, although as we saw the separation between these two domains seems to be shrinking in post-Fordism.

Research concerning the careers of professional artists in the Italian sectors of dance, theatre, or performance in general (such as Bassetti, 2009 and Luciano & Bertolini, 2011) significantly employ data drawn from official national statistics to illustrate the working and living conditions of performers, and the unfolding of their careers. This is very difficult for what concerns the contemporary circus sector, probably due to the indefinite character of this recent field, still under construction. Thus, it is difficult to draw on official data to outline salient aspects of contemporary circus artists' careers, especially if, as it is the case here, the necessity is to separate them both from other performers (dancers, theatre actors, musicians) and from traditional circus artists, to highlight the analytical specificity of this new field. In this paragraph, I will compare literature on theatre and dance with information emerging from my research, to outline at least a partial, superficial, indicative frame, and highlight the gaps requiring further investigation.

As we saw in chapter 1, the 1968 wave contributed a great deal to the birth of the new circus and street theatre movement in France. In Italy, and more specifically in Turin, the social movements concerned mainly other performing genres, and until very recently the history of circus remained separated from that of dance, theatre, and music, and from the process of professionalization and organisation these underwent. In their book about professionals and enterprises in the Italian show-business sector, in which there is significantly no mention of the contemporary circus movement, Luciano & Bertolini (2011) describe the cultural and social idealistic influence of the 1968's movements on the theatre production.

Theatre companies started to address an audience until then excluded from the genre - the popular and young segments – and to develop a closer relationship with local institutions. The 1990s saw the proliferation of Cultural Associations, which, together with Sport Associations, enable circus practices to maintain symbolic coherence while searching for economic viability. In the 1992, Associations became the juridical form preferred by theatre and music organisations, due to the possibility they provided to access public funding.

As a result, with recent important exceptions which point to the changing status of the circus arts<sup>12</sup>, contemporary circus today is still, in general, seen with indifference or diffidence by the most well-established cultural (dance and theatre) institutions, and generally associated with the informal, non-professionalized sector of street theatre, or confused with the travelling enterprises of traditional circus. To this respect, it is important to mention the difficulty to trace data concerning contemporary circus artists in the national official statistics, due to the recent changes in the cultural practices, policies and

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<sup>12</sup> I am referring in particular to the inclusion of contemporary circus companies in the programs of well-known, prestigious theatre and dance festivals (Torino Danza, Festival delle Colline Torinesi, Festival Teatro a Corte), and the recent involvement of contemporary circus companies in the initiatives of Foundation Piemonte dal Vivo, a reference organisation for the live performance sector in Piedmont (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), and of a circus-theatre company in the traditionally very close circuit of youth theatre, through the residency in the Casa Teatro Ragazzi, based in Turin.

field, and to administrative delays in adapting to these changes to account for a growing, but still marginal, contemporary circus sector.

The recent reorganisation of the Social Security system further complicates the search of official data and certain information in the current moment of transition. Enpals was the National Social Security Institute for the workers in the sector of the show business; in 2011, its functions were transferred to the National Institute for Social Security (Inps), in a separate section named Inps ex-Enpals. In the methodological note to the documents “Activities of the enterprises in the world of the show business and professional sport” (Inps Gestione ex Enpals, 2012) and “Workers and Enterprises in the show-business and professional sport: main occupational and remunerative data” (Inps Gestione ex Enpals, 2013), Inps lists circus artists among the ‘Actors Group’ of reference for workers in the show-business, together with prose actors, mimes, cinema and tv actors, dubbing actors, variety shows actors, prompters, illusionists, puppet theatre actors, acrobats and contortionists (which are thus considered separately from circus artists, although in the same category), stuntmen.

As for the sectors of activity, the Ex-Enpals mentions Cinema, Music, Theatre, Radiotelevision, Various entertainment and polyvalent shows, Sport, and Various. While the group ‘Travelling shows and circuses’ is included within the ‘Various entertainment and Polyvalent shows’ category, it refers to amusement parks, zoos, equestrian circuses, which, as we saw before, have little to do with contemporary circus. Performers belonging to the latter sector might feel more at ease with the Theatre category, as it emerges from this research and from the remark of Luciano and Bertolini (2011: 115), according to whom Italian organisations have recently participated in European funding schemes for the performing sector mainly through street theatre and clowning proposals, in collaboration with French organisations among which contemporary circus is much more popular and recognized. For instance, according to Gwénola (2006), circus represents an important part of the shows performed in the public space in France: already in 2003, 42,5% of the companies and artists belonging to the circus sector also belonged to the street arts (: 36).

Coming back to Italy, since 2005, street shows are included in the Travelling Show category, but only when they are realized as official business activities (excluding, for instance, the widespread practice of busking) they are registered by official authorities and accounted for in official statistics (FNAS, 2016). Moreover, in one of the few documents concerning circus in the official website of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MiBACT, 2007), contemporary circus is not even considered, except for the mention of the fact that “a new way of doing circus, without animals and phenomena, where virtuosity is not an end in itself but a way to tell a story or communicate an emotion, is currently spreading”, and that the circus arts are currently starting to be employed with pedagogical and recreational ends.

However, among the official training institutions only the Academy of Circus, a reference for the traditional circus world, is mentioned, while the professional contemporary circus schools are completely ignored; only the circuses “of historical interest” (that is, the ones belonging to traditional circus families) are named; and, as for social circus, the only examples reported are Northern Europe and Canada, completely overlooking the Italian

movement. This example further highlights the inadequacy to account for the recent transformations in the Italian circus field mentioned above. Contemporary circus blurs the official categories of theatre, street theatre and travelling circuses, but neither of them, taken separately, is adequate to capture the specificities of the careers of contemporary circus performers.

The lack of official recognition of contemporary circus characterises the data collected by other institutional actors too. Santonomiero (2008) analyses the data collected by SIAE (the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers) in 2007, arguing that circus is included in the aggregate “theatre activities” because “the performances realized in the last years – particularly at the international level – employ actions and staging of clear theatrical inspiration”. She states that the circus sector produced 20.859 shows in 2007, corresponding to 12,33% of theatrical production, and that the audience expenditure for theatre activities increased by 8,28%, despite the drop in the circus sector (- 54%), as a consequence of the absence of stops, in Italy, of not better specified “important international staging”. Moreover, despite a reduction of the number of circus shows (- 2,95), Santonomiero states that the circus sector, following international trends of new artistic contents and choreographies, registered the most radical transformation. Again, however, the mixing of the new genre with theatre and with traditional, family circuses, makes it difficult to employ these data to analyse the specific situation of the contemporary circus sector, and to outline an updated profile of the contemporary circus artist’s career.

The Ministry also clarifies the definition of ‘circus activity’ and ‘travelling show activity’ (MiBACT, 2015). The first one is undertaken by “enterprises which, under a tent, in one or more rings or in arenas without tents, or inside stable structures, present shows in which clowns, gymnasts, acrobats, trapeze artists, illusionists, exotic or domestic animals perform”. The second indicates instead “travelling or fixed, indoor or outdoor, spectacular activities, entertainments and attractions, or amusement parks”.

This distinction reminds of what Salamero (2009) states about the “invisible” character of the criteria through which art is recognized as such, and State support provided without taking responsibilities for artistic choices (see paragraph 6.1): in the last years the performing spaces of circus artists have undergone extensive diversification, owning or working in a circus tent is the exception rather than the rule for contemporary circus artists, and the two forms – circus activity and travelling show - are blurred, since many artists perform in the street, parks, or other public spaces.

However, the official categories do not take into account this reality, and while announcing the goal of developing multidisciplinary and free innovation (Lombardo, 2015; Residenze Artistiche, 2016), and asserting that the show-business sector cannot be considered a uniform and autonomous matter, “being multisectorial and multifunctional by definition” (Morrone, 2008), they ‘invisibly’, on unclear basis, establish criteria which contribute to shape and constrain cultural production.

The feeling of belonging to a non-existent category is common among contemporary circus artists in Italy:

“Circus work is a kind of work that needs to be invented, because [...] beyond the thousand classifications, there are a thousand ways to be a circus artist, there’s the circus artist who lives in a camper van, who travels seasonally and just trains during the winter, there is the circus artist who lives at his/her place and they call him/her for tours and lives in hotels and works in big companies, there is...just to mention the two extreme cases, there are very diverse ways so it is something to make up, and it’s a beautiful side of it”.

[Chiara, 32, professional]

However, in the long-term this lack of references and frameworks among the labour market regulations can become a reason for frustration and concern:

“In Italy it’s hard because besides this broad frame in which one can feel without reference points, there is no social or cultural network of reference, I mean it is not recognized as a profession, you have no framework, it is not recognized as a job, both from the social and cultural point of view, and from the social point of view it is even more difficult because if you do this job they tell you “But how do you get by?” [...] and in terms of work because you don’t have a framework and [...] I mean maybe it is complicated for everybody but the [blue-collar] worker knows he/she is doing a certain kind of work and that he/she has to refer [to the institutions] in a certain way.

[...]

“I don’t feel I belong in any [reference group] [...] in Italy I don’t feel I am a street artist, I don’t feel I’m a theatre person, I don’t feel...yes, a circus person, but what does that mean in terms of job classification? [...] I don’t have this [framework of reference] and I’m really starting to suffer from this, and I don’t know how to reply to this thing in this moment”.

[Chiara, 32, professional]

The quote above suggests that the social and cultural malaise due to the indifference from the institutions is exacerbated by a common neglect of circus professions in the collective imagination of Italian people, many of whom “do not distinguish between a juggler and a window cleaner” or “a beggar” [Giacomo, 38, amateur], still think that “circus is the sideshow” or “the circus with animals” [Michele, 29, professional] and “don’t know that artists are often paid with a fee [...] that you are a professional that issues invoices, has a contract, works with certifications” [Pietro, 32, professional].

Things are slowly changing, also thanks to the professionalization of the circus arts: “while in Italy this world didn’t exist before, it has suddenly become a job [...before] when you talk[ed] about a street artist they wouldn’t know whether it was a job, [...] until 2003 at least when the first professional circus schools opened and people started to talk about this as a job”. However, the common assumption is still sceptical in framing circus as a profession. Rather, it is conceived as “a ludic moment and so it is not really credible [...] theatre actors are more recognized than circus artists I think, in terms of seriousness and professional credibility, not so much in terms of what they produce but of being able to make a living out of it” [Giovanna, 49, project manager].

In this sense, circus artists still struggle against the prevailing view, in the collective imagination, that occupations which are ‘fun’ and stimulating cannot, and should not, be remunerative. Because professional credibility is still centred on material gains, and because this idea resists in part the ideology of creativity and passionate labour, circus artists occupy an apparently ambivalent position, in that they claim both “seriousness” in terms of professional and official recognition, but also the importance of not being forced to give up fun, passion, and creativity.

Hence, their claims fit an ideological context in which ‘traditional’ and neoliberal conceptions of labour overlap, defending the credibility of their profession both based on the hard, serious, systematic work it requires, and on its open, fun, stimulating, artistic and creative nature. As we will see in chapter 6, the tension between symbolic and material gains, and the inversion of values and meanings attached to them, is a defining character of circus careers.

After delineating the new circus field in relation to broader structures of labour, education and the arts, I will now illustrate the research field more in detail.

#### **4.4 Turin’s circus scene**

If cultural scenes are, by definition, flexible and elusive (see paragraph 2.7), the contemporary circus scene – which like the circus field under construction, both crosscuts and claims independence from the domains of sport and the arts - is extremely mobile and difficult to fix. This is due to the high mobility of the members of the developing circus community, used to travel from working places to training places to the few available spaces for creation, or by amateur practitioners whom, with their movements across the city, draw an intricate web connecting theatres, squares, parks, festivals, events and other sites of circus performance; and intersect fitness gyms, circus schools, cultural, arts and sports associations offering courses, classes and workshops in circus disciplines and techniques.

With the exception of stronger institutions such as the professional schools and the longer-standing, financially stronger and politically acknowledged associations, projects and festivals, circus spaces and events spring up like mushrooms and may as quickly disappear, change configuration or move, depending on the intermittent availability of resources, funding and support of local institutions or public authorities. Thus, circus practitioners are used to modify their routes and habits based on the frequent changes and the shifting reputation of these points of references.

##### **4.4.1 The origins**

The origins of the circus scene in Turin as it is delineated today date back to the encounter, in the mid-nineties, between street theatre artists and entertainers (such as jugglers, fire dancers and stilt walkers), the world of sports and cultural associations and voluntary work, and actors with established positions in the fields of sports and the show business. Against the backdrop of this encounter, pivotal was the influence of the international circus scene, and in particular the echo of a very lively movement coming from near-by France.

Since 1996, Turin is among the few street artists-friendly cities in Italy (Di Cori, 2015). The free expression of artists (including “jugglers, mimes, dancers, puppeteers, acrobats, skaters, singers, musicians, painters, writers, body artists, and similar”) is granted by a regulation approved by the local police (Città di Torino, 2016). This is an important aspect which has attracted a number of street and circus artists to the city:

“Then another thing that created this affluence of circus arts, street artists, was the fact that Turin allows artists to perform in the squares without the need of permissions and this is very important because you go... maybe nowadays this is possible also in some other cities, yes, but very little...I mean the core is here. There are people [...] that are quite well-known by a lot of people, I think these people remain also because there is a good street market, I mean in the end Turin is the capital of circus artists, in Italy”.

[Emilia, 29, professional]

A first key step towards the development of contemporary circus in Turin was marked in the second half of the 1990s by the first courses for entertainers, which “included some juggling, stilts, fire-eating...and a little bit of clowning, just enough to do some entertainment” [Valeria, 39, professional], and the first outreach social projects employing circus and street arts. Both were organised by Turin’s association Just for Joy<sup>13</sup>;

“That course [for entertainers] was actually taught in 1995 by Association Just for Joy, which was the only one which had a juggling shop I think in Italy at the time, juggling and for left-handed people, that is, with a lot of weird objects ... and in that course they taught how to juggle.”

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

By providing courses of circus and juggling, Just for Joy “opened the doors of the street arts to a lot of young people” [Emanuele, 36, professional], some of whom then undertook a professional career as entertainers or artists.

The same Association also moved a second pivotal step by organising the 20<sup>th</sup> European Juggling Convention in Turin, in 1997. Thus, “the most popular happening in Europe, in which jugglers from all nations came and brought this colourful jungle of people with circus props” arrived to Italy for the first time, providing “the people from the city” [Emanuele, 36, professional] with an opportunity to see a new way of juggling and doing circus. Juggling conventions played a central role in the development of a circus scene, not only in Turin, but nationally-wise:

“I think the conventions in Italy were one of the things that developed love, the first love for the circus worlds started also from the conventions. There I heard about the first training of a professional circus school in Italy, there were a lot of people that knew about the school in that context of the conventions which is quite bizarre in the European world”

[Marco, 36, professional]

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<sup>13</sup> Association which has also organised, since 2002, the International Festival of Street Arts in Turin.



This reaffirms the importance of the sharing, informal knowledge and learning at the origins of Turin's circus scene, but also of the contemporary circus movement in Italy. Finally, a third important element was the starting of regular meetings of jugglers - every Tuesday evening - in one of the city's central square.

"Me and R. founded the first meeting of jugglers in Turin in Palazzo di Città square, this created a wave of movement that lasted for 10, 12 years and I know now it's over but it allowed those who didn't know about the courses to become acquainted with the art of juggling and there were meetings of jugglers really that passed knowledge to each other.

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

As such, through fortunate encounters and the participation in meetings and events, more and more people were introduced to the skills of juggling and balancing (such as stilt walking), which sometimes, besides an amateur practice, became an opportunity to make some money through paid work as entertainers in public and private events or through street work and busking. Moreover, as we will see below, some of these people participated in the creation of institutions which are today key on the urban circus scene. This happened particularly due to the interest of actors with already established careers in the sectors of sports and the show business, and to influences from abroad.

If Canada, and particularly Cirque du Soleil, became one of the references for a new way of doing circus worldwide, even stronger was, at least in Turin, the influence of a neighbouring country like France. In particular, one of the most well-known theatres in Turin hosted, for the season 2001/2000, four French shows presenting a commingling of circus disciplines, live music, dance and theatre. These included productions such as *Mélanges* (Opéra Plume), by company Cirque Plume, and *IxBE*, directed by *Jérôme* Thomas, which were among the main exponents of the *nouveau cirque* and *jonglage contemporain* movements in France. Undeniably, the opportunity to assist these shows marked a pivotal moment in my own circus career, a definite falling in love with the genre. However, what is relevant here is that for the first time an important institution within the theatre scene in Turin, Teatro Stabile, included circus shows in its international project section, contributing considerably to the shifting of circus from the domain of traditional, popular and family entertainment to the status of innovative artistic genre, side by side with dance and drama (Teatro Stabile Torino, 2001).

Finally, a pivotal role was played by the civic sector. If this is particularly true for what concerns the amateur and social circus movement, 1995 also saw the creation of a non-profit cultural centre which is now nationally and internationally recognized as a professionalizing educational programme for the performance arts: Philip Radice's physical theatre Atelier (Atelier Philip Radice, 2013).

Thus, besides those mentioned above, other cultural and sports associations promoting amateur courses and social projects were created in Turin in the 1990s, some of which still exist today. Important to this respect were actors whose careers crosscut the domains of education, sports, and volunteer work, who saw circus as a way to promote "motor

activities for the people” [Franco, 60, project manager] and for educational and social work in hospitals and other disadvantaged contexts<sup>14</sup> [Sonia, 35, project manager].

Other countries provided inspiration for the creation of organisations and networks employing circus as a tool for social and outreach work in disadvantaged contexts and for the promotion of cohesion in areas of conflicts and crime:

“With the Association of hospital clowns I had the opportunity to go abroad...when we went to Brazil we got to know realities of social circus so I told myself “Ah besides clowning there is this, and that, and it rocks even more”, I told myself “wow” ...and when we were back we thought ok it’s great to do projects abroad, super cool, but on the other hand we thought there are needs also here in Italy and slowly we trained to have the required competences, artistic, educational, and start a social circus project in Italy”

[Sonia, 35, project manager]

#### **4.4.2 The circus scene in Turin at the time of the research**

Fifteen out of the eighty circus companies identified by the census on the current circus landscape in Italy are based in Turin (Malerba & Vimercati, 2016), while according to the data I collected during the fieldwork, at least 1500 circus practitioners, including professionals and amateurs of all age, were based in Turin (and the neighbouring town of Grugliasco, where one of the two professional schools is based) in 2015<sup>15</sup>. According to this research, circus practitioners do not draw a fixed, stable picture of the local circus scene, but rather attend more than one place, or move from place to place depending on the activity offered: free training, a particular class or workshop, an opportunity to perform or to attend a show. However, a few main traits might be highlighted.

Among the main actors on the local circus scene in Turin the following may be mentioned: the two big poles of the professional circus schools (Flic and Cirko Vertigo); the physical theatre school (Atelier Teatro Fisico Philip Radice); an important social circus foundation (Uniti per Crescere Insieme); the headquarters of FNAS - the National Federation of Street Artists which only in November 2015 moved from Rome to Turin; an increasingly important cooperative of artists (CITA); at least two well-known and established sports association providing amateur courses (Teatrzione, Vertigimn); and, following broader trends within the cultural sector in Piedmont (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), a proliferation of informal groups and smaller associations and companies, either pursuing commercial success (such as Sonics, a troupe of aerial acrobats) or alternative ways to “live the circus” [Chiara, 32,

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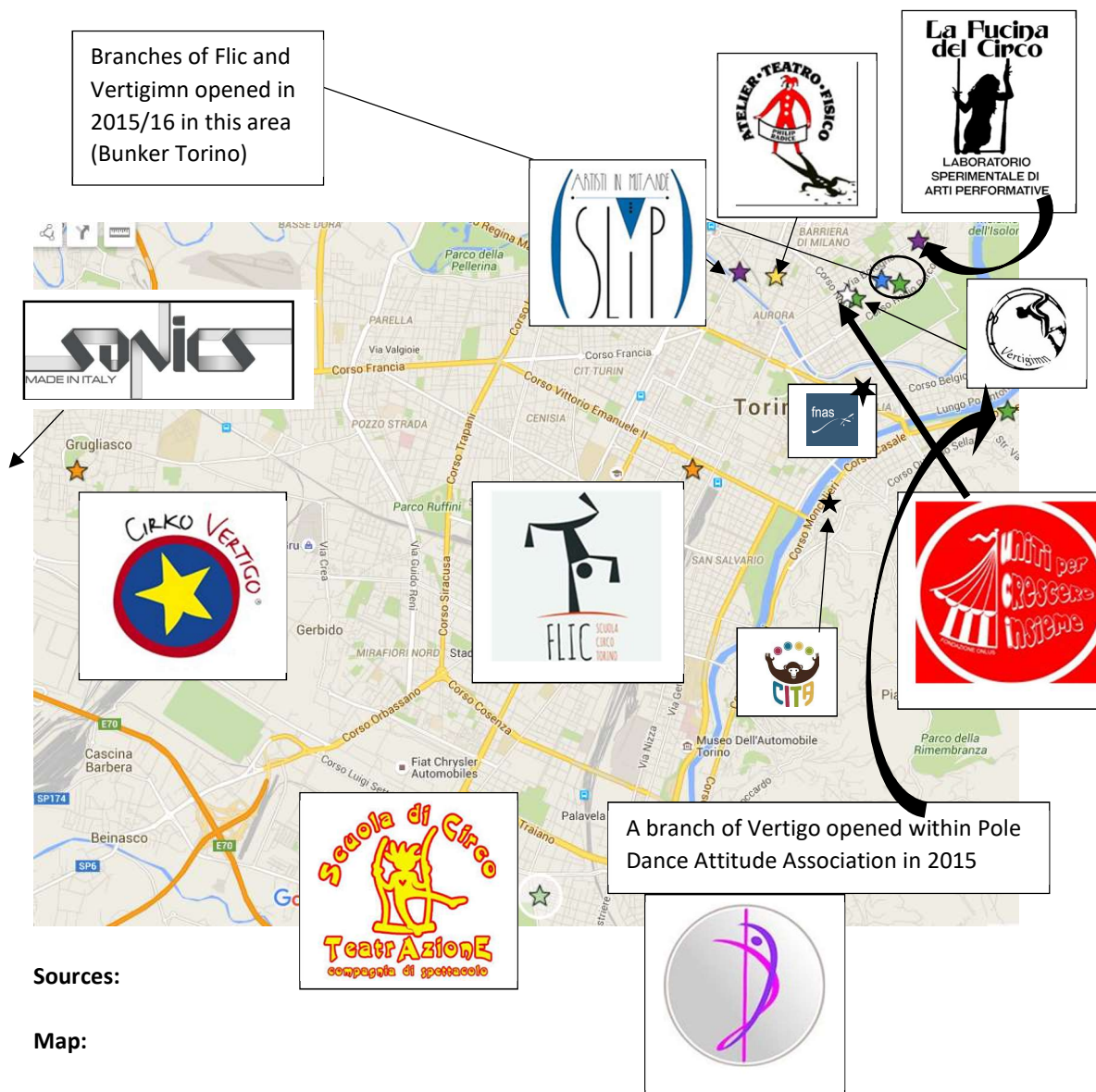
<sup>14</sup> The first VIP (Viviamo In Positivo) Association, today a federation of 57 Associations all over Italy and a well-known reality within hospital clowns, opened in Turin in 1997 (VIP Italia Onlus, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Data for amateur practitioners at the national level range from the 6015 membership cards issued by UISP (Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti, which as we saw above is one of the main institution for the promotion of amateur sports practice in Italy, to which a significant number of amateur circus schools in Italy are affiliated) in 2014 [fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2015. Email from UISP employee], to the 13.570 people which attended circus courses, workshops and open days from October 2014 to September 2015 (QuintaParete, 2016). The first figure is most likely too restricted, as it excludes the affiliations to other sports unions, as well as the independent practitioners, while the second one is probably too high, since even casual participants to a workshop or open day were included.

professional], such as Fucina del Circo and Slip, which offer spaces for both free training, courses, performances and workshops.

Picture 4.1 provides a visual representation of the circus scene in Turin, including the main poles around which the participants in this research gravitated, or which were named as references for the sector (in particular schools, companies, organisations, training and performing spaces). The logos reported in the picture – which will be analysed more in detail in the following pages - suggest how the ‘boundaries’ of the circus scene stretch to include or exclude not only social circus, sports and recreational associations, free training and creation spaces, professional schools and companies, but also other activities such as physical theatre and pole dance. The logos of the youth and social circus associations (Uniti per Crescere Insieme and Teatrzione), addressed to an audience of children, stand out as particularly colourful and ‘playful’, stressing the ludic dimension of their practice.

**Picture 4.1: Turin's circus scene (associations/companies based in Turin attended or named by the interviewees)**



**Sources:**

**Map:**

Google maps: <https://maps.google.it>

**Logos:**

**Facebook pages**

- Cirko Vertigo: <https://www.facebook.com/CirkoVertigo/?fref=ts>
- CITA Cooperativa Italiana Artisti: <https://www.facebook.com/citacoop/?fref=ts>
- Flic: <https://www.facebook.com/FLIC.Scuola.di.Circo/?fref=ts>
- FNAS Federazione Nazionale Arte di Strada: <https://www.facebook.com/fnasartedistrada/?fref=ts>
- Fondazione Uniti per Crescere Insieme ONLUS (UCI): <https://www.facebook.com/Fondazione-Uniti-per-crescere-insieme-ONLUS-112566352088997/?fref=ts>
- Pole Dance Attitude Torino: <https://www.facebook.com/pole.turin/>
- Slip: <https://www.facebook.com/progettoslip/?fref=ts>

**Linkedin page TeatrAzione:** <https://ar.linkedin.com/in/scuola-circo-teatrAzione-83085684>

**Webpages** Fucina del Circo: <https://lafucinadelcirco.com/>

Sonics: <http://www.sonics-acrobatics-aerial.com/>

The paragraphs below describe in depth the most relevant actors on Turin's circus scene, in relation to the settings and actors selected as representative of the different facets of contemporary circus in Italy (see chapter 3): circus as a professional, education and career option; as a fitness and amateur activity, and as social and educational tool; and as ('alternative') choice of life.

### **Professional schools**

Even if the movement of street and performing artists towards Turin started well before the creation of the two professional circus schools, the existence of well-known professional training poles, recognized by FEDEC (European Federation of Professional Circus Schools), is a central underpinning of the image of Turin as "the capital" [Emilia, 29, professional], or the main reference for circus in Italy. Originally, the two schools were born as a unique project, the School of New Circus (Scuola di Nuovo Cirko) in 2002, and after only one year, due to internal disputes<sup>16</sup>, they separated in two different institutions: Flic scuola di circo remained in its original location, within an important gymnastics society in the centre of Turin, while Scuola di Cirko, later renamed Cirko Vertigo, moved to a suburban town west of Turin.

The two schools coexist peacefully on the public scene, enjoying for instance equal visibility during major events organised by the City, such as the Christmas "Natale coi Fiocchi" in one of the main squares of Turin. However, they built separated references (each school, for instance, organises a contemporary circus festival in different locations and with different companies), and draw on different artistic inspirations on the national and international landscape: Flic collaborates to Brocante festival in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, while Vertigo is a partner of festival Mirabilia in Piedmont. Internationally, Flic's main reference is "not a TV circus but a circus of the emotions, a 'cosier' circus. Also Cirque du Soleil, it is not our example, we remain on the smaller, the more human, ...the French circus of Roberto Magro, who is an Italian" (Tracce di Sport, 2011); they often invite teachers from the French scene (in particular from Le Lido school in Toulouse).

Vertigo's international references are less clear: on the one hand, they seem closer to the Canadian universe, since their artistic advisor studied in Montreal's Ecole Nationale de Cirque, they appear in the documentary "Grazing the Sky" ("An intimate look at the lives of

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<sup>16</sup> The official reasons for this scission remain unknown. A motivation named by one of my interviewees was a disagreement due to "different philosophies in relation to the way students should be considered, and the bigger or smaller priority they should have: whether each student counts, or whether it is the growth of the name of the school which should receive the greatest attention even if in spite of the single student's growth" [expert interview 2]. On the other hand, in an interview on an online theatre magazine the director of Cirko Vertigo states that "there could be no cohabitation with a reality involved in [sports?] competition" because "he wanted to dedicate himself only to training" (Roma, 2015).

modern circus performers in and out of Cirque du Soleil” - IMDb, 2015), and the school was involved with Cirque du Soleil’s tours to Turin (Cirko Vertigo, 2010; Scuola di Cirko, 2006); but also to contemporary dance and dance-theatre (like the work of BluCinque, a company strictly connected to the school testifies), and the radical dance theatre of Alain Platel (Cirko Vertigo, 2016b).

Further information might be elicited through a closer look at the logos of the two schools (picture 4.1): while Flic’s logo breaks neatly with the imagination connected to traditional circus, reminding of a simpler, “cozier”, circus and an embodied form of research, Vertigo’s may be more easily associated to the ‘classic’ big top, to a bigger and more “commercial” type of circus [Leonardo, 23, professional student].

Moreover, the representatives of the two schools never appear together in public, and their students do not generally mingle. This is partly due to the simple fact that professional circus training is often so intense and time-demanding that leaves little time and energy for students to attend other places of circus practice besides their schools. Students train and study eight hours per weekday and some of them work during the weekend, hence little time is left for a circus life outside the school’s circuits: “I do only this, I’m at school five days a week and the other two weeks I work with this [circus] at the traffic light” [Leonardo, 23, professional student].

Moreover, attending the same circus school has strongly cohesive effects. Circus students from each circus school create groups which turn out to be “kind of like a family” [Arianna, 20, professional student], or a “pack [of animals]” [Matteo, 31, teacher] with their own distinctive traits.

“the students from the professional course, you notice them quite a bit because they band together a lot, but like anyone doing school eight hours per day always with the same people, so you have a way of moving, a way of speaking, although now it’s gone lost a bit, but...it went lost in the years, but the first years there was this thing a lot, it was very funny!”

[Matteo, 31, teacher]

The professional physical theatre school has a different status, as it cannot be straightforwardly included in Turin’s circus scene, but rather, as its logo clearly points out, to the theatrical universe. However, we have seen before that its presence contributed to the development of a circus movement in Turin (it is worth reminding that Philip Radice was the artistic director of the first, still unified professional circus school, too), and the careers of many former students of both the circus and physical theatre schools (including a number of interviewees) cross both environments.

### **Amateur movement**

The amateur circus scene in Turin has at least two different souls: I will name the first one ‘circus fitness’, referring to Vertigimn<sup>17</sup> and the amateur branches of the two professional

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<sup>17</sup> I included this Association in the current scene because it is a well-known circus actor in Turin, because of its position within the circus and sport fields (it is one of the only organisations, to my knowledge, which

schools (including the courses at Pole Dance Attitude, organised by Vertigo). An interviewee named these as the “many smaller schools...very commercial, more for the amateur courses”, where circus “is an alternative way to keep fit” [Emilia, 29, professional]. Here circus becomes as ‘serious’ as sport, to the point that Vertigimn organised aerial contests, “placing circus on a competitive level”, generating controversial reactions [Franco, 60, project manager].

Amateur training in these spaces is also represented as more “technical” and “punctual”, a method that “for sure makes you develop your physical qualities more”, but in which one cannot have “as much fun”, and feel “the passion as much” as in the ‘alternative’ environments [Mara, 25, amateur]. In partial contrast to these external representations (Mara had never attended amateur courses within professional schools), participants in the amateur courses within one of the circus schools were also described as “overwhelmed” by the circus wave of passion [Matteo, 31, teacher], to the point that some of them formed a professional-amateur performing group.

The second ‘soul’ is represented by social circus and amateur schools mainly addressed to youths (Foundation Uniti per Crescere Insieme and Scuola di Circo Teatrzione). These associations employ circus as “communication rather than competition” [Franco, 60, project manager], as a playful activity accessible to all types of audiences, and insist on the effectiveness of circus as a tool for educational and social work:

“we employ the circus disciplines as an educational tool, that is, in a fun, ludic way in a group dimension. We build paths together with some youths, in 90% of cases they are youths with various types of problems, with and thanks to the circus disciplines we draw a path of growth with them”

[Sonia, 35, project manager].

The logos of both these realities are very colourful, suitable to capture the attention of a young and very young audience.

### **“Alternative” voices**

Finally, a third component is represented by those associations promoting an “alternative way to live the circus” [Chiara, 32, professional]: smaller organisations which attempted to assert their position as alternatives to the professional schools - seen as more powerful, expensive and hierarchically organised, involved in “politics” rather than “the arts” [fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> February 2016, conversation with circus professional and circus space manager] - and to the commercial, fitness circus activities. Interviewees training in these spaces appreciated the atmosphere of “freedom” and openness to different types of people (“this aspect of sharing, accepting diversity” – Emilia, 29, professional) which allowed you to “know a lot of people that were doing circus, hence a lot of experiences, a lot of things, a lot of inputs” [Mara, 25, amateur].

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organised aerial contests in Italy for three years 2014-2016), and because it has existed since 2005. However, this is the only one, among the main circus organisations in Turin, which did not participate in the research, despite the attempts of the researcher to involve its representatives or participants.

In Turin this role can be attributed to SLIP and to Fucina del Circo, which provided both open training spaces, courses, classes, workshops, and open stages attended by amateurs and professionals alike. While the logo of SLIP does not hint at the circus universe, the logo of Fucina draws on an image of artistic, dance research and expression of emotions on a circus aerial apparatus. The experience of this “alternative” soul of circus will be presented in the following paragraph through the detailed account of the SLIP experience.

In conclusion, although occupying a marginal position in a very different sense, it might be worth noting here, among the actors on the circus scene in Turin, the company Sonics. They locate themselves outside the circus category, but within the “nouveau cirque” tradition, drawing on Cirque du Soleil as main artistic reference [Davide, 31, professional]. Secondly, their commercial success (their acrobatic shows tour big events and theatres in Italy and abroad) places them at the margins of the circus field under construction, in which artistic research - rather than what is ‘easily’ appreciated by the audience (the spectacular, the prowess, the virtuous, etc.) - is the priority (see chapter 5).

Thus, while the ‘alternative’ model proposed by Fucina and Slip follows an “autonomous principle” of hierarchization (Bourdieu, 1993: 40), attributing “temporal failure” to political reasons (in this case, not having access to enough resources and power, mainly when compared to the professional circus schools), and the specificity of their capital in relation to the economy, what excludes Sonics is their pursue of audience success, or the “heteronomous principle of hierarchization” in “the field of large-scale production, which is symbolically excluded and discredited” (ibid: 38-39). However, because the circus field is still under definition, and the variability in relevance and number of the actors involved very high, the interplay between autonomous and heteronomous principles continually deconstructs meanings, shifts boundaries, reshapes positions and position-taking.

#### **4.5 Circus as space: fieldwork among “artists in their underwear”**

The SLIP project and space represented the gravitational centre of this research, as well as an illustrative case of dynamics of position-taking, as a representative of the “alternative ways to live the circus”. Its story is representative of the moment the Italian contemporary circus movement is currently facing. As a project and a space, SLIP – Spazio Libero di Partecipazione e Incontro (free space for meeting and participation) for artists “left in their underwear”<sup>18</sup> – started its activities in Spring 2013, and acquired legal status as sports and social promotion association<sup>19</sup> in September 2014 (SLIP A.S.D. & P.S., 2015). SLIP was born as a claim for alternatives to the existing circus spaces – depicted as too rigidly organised, closed and expensive. It also envisaged attending to the need of professionals to work during the winter (less mobile) months, improving their shows, maintaining physical shape, and finding or keeping contacts for the following season.

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<sup>18</sup> The choice of this name is based on a wordplay: ‘slip’ in Italian means underwear, while ‘being left in one’s underwear’ is an expression used to indicate someone who has lost everything. SLIP’s motto was ‘artists in underwear’, in that it provided a cheap opportunity to train and create to artists who often lack economic resources to rent or buy a space on their own.

<sup>19</sup> Associazione Sportivo Dilettantistica e di Promozione Sociale. This is one of the legal statuses Associations in Italy can acquire.



This project was the outcome of the encounter between circus artists – especially those who had recently graduated from the circus and physical theatre schools in Turin - in search for a training space, therapists interested in body techniques, and the ‘multicultural hub Cecchi point’, a former warehouse turned into ‘casa di quartiere’<sup>20</sup> in the city district called Aurora, (Progetto Slip, 2015) north from the city centre (picture 4.2).

The SLIP project concretized into a training space, a place meant to belong to the community and be accessible to everybody (Progetto Slip, 2015; SLIP A.S.D. & P.S., 2015), equipped with circus props and suitable for contemporary circus, theatre and dance practices. The desire of the founders was to contribute to the development of arts in general and the circus sector in particular, providing “a public space where everybody can train” [Elisa, 33, professional/project manager], cheap and friendly opportunities to learn and teach, create and present one’s work; and to set up a space of encounter for realities and people which wouldn’t normally interact or exchange:

“[the SLIP project] was born from the idea, initially, to say ok let’s train for free, in inverted commas, and keep it open to others, then this concept doesn’t exist I mean you stop training but the idea came from that, to share with people because one of the things that I had always found difficult in the circus school [...] was that I didn’t interact with anybody else who was there training...there was no exchange and this was horrible, I mean if we are there in the same room, we’re sharing a room and sometimes you are preparing something and I would stop and look a lot, I like to observe”

[Elisa, 33, professional/project manager]

At least in part, these goals are due to the founders’ previous experience reflecting the difficulties, encountered by many artists not only in Turin but all over the country, to access the more closed circus spaces controlled by the circus schools. For instance, it took the interviewee above “a month and a half to go training at [circus school]. Every morning I would go and wait outside and [director] would tell me whether on that day I was allowed in or not [...] because he had to understand whether it was important for me to train or not”.

This difficulty relies on the premise that, as a practice, circus demands a space with peculiar requirements, which are more difficult to satisfy than, for instance, in dance or theatre. Although it can occasionally be practiced “anywhere” (in the park, in one’s living room, etc.), as long as one is able to concentrate, training in a regular and “orderly” way [Michele, 29, professional], especially for certain disciplines, demands a certain size and height, and empty, clean, “looked-after” [Arianna, 20, professional student] and warm or cool enough places, smooth floors, structural and safety devices, and the presence of specific objects and tools (such as aerial or balance apparatus, mats, and rigging points on the ceiling, floor and walls).

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Case di quartiere’ (‘urban district homes’) is a project developed by the local government in partnership with associations and social cooperatives as part of a broader program of urban requalification of Turin’s outskirts. The nine ‘homes’ existing in Turin provide social and cultural activities and opportunities to meet the neighbours and participate in public life (Coordinamento Rete delle Case del Quartiere, 2015a).

**Picture 4.2: Cecchi Point, location**



Sources: Google maps; Coordinamento Rete delle Case del Quartiere, 2015b

For safety reasons, it may sometimes be better to practice in the presence of other people, and generally there needs to be enough distance from other practitioners and from the walls.

“The training place needs to be comfortable otherwise you cannot do the circus”.

I: “What do you mean?”

“That circus has some requirements that need to be respected, I mean if I want to do the wheel [roue Cyr] in a place it means that I need a place that it's not wet, not too cold otherwise it would slip away, the floor must be smooth, not to ruin the wheel because if I go on the concrete I ruin the rubber completely, it shouldn't be too cold otherwise it is difficult to train and these are the basics to survive”

**Picture 4.3: SLIP spaces. Free training space (top row), class (bottom, left), and theatre (bottom, right)**



Source: Pictures taken and provided by one of SLIP's founder

Moreover, bureaucratically speaking, managing a circus space can be more difficult due to issues of safety and insurance, which, to a large extent, are not yet subject to clear laws and explicit rules.

Within this framework, the service provided by SLIP clearly responded to urgent needs and problems raised by the circus community. It offered an adequate, trustworthy solution for artists and amateurs to train, and a place of exchange among different types of circus practitioners.

First of all, SLIP represented the only sustainable (both in terms of price and quality of the service and space provided, including a friendly atmosphere, safety and maintenance of the space and the props) opportunity to train for artists who can normally count on unstable, discontinuous incomes.

"Turin in Italy [is one of the main reference points for circus in Italy]...there are realities like SLIP which is something awesome...they were great they made this place for training and in the end we all met there, professional artists, amateurs and just passion but everybody sharing things, and there were also those who passed by and said "this place is really cool", there are people from Spain telling me that there is no such thing because you find squats but they are not fixed as well as that place"

[Emilia, 29, professional]

In October 2015, during an open assembly, the board of the Association managing SLIP officially announced the (mainly political) reasons why the space had to shut down and move out of the Cecchi point<sup>21</sup>. Evidence of the pivotal role played by SLIP within the circus community can be found in the fact that, in the months following its exit from the 'cultural hub', many of my interviewees and other actors in the field mentioned the difficulty to find other spaces to train. Two of my interviewees, once SLIP shut down, decided that it would have been easier and cheaper to go abroad to train during the winter, rather than staying in Turin without the certainty of being able to train or give private classes, putting at risk their artistic careers:

"Now in Turin there are not as many training spaces, last year SLIP was there and it allowed us to train every day, this year there are less possibilities to train, I'm doing websites again...and promotion for the show but less and less training because there is no space"

[Pietro, 32, professional]

Others had to look for alternative solutions in the city, but often these were not as comfortable and warmed-up, or not as cheap ("I'm afraid that with the circus school the management will be different and they will ask for much more money" - fieldnotes, 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2015).

Space thus plays a pivotal role in shaping and redefining the circus scene in Turin: the availability and accessibility of a physical space marked by specific attributes, informed by circus and safety apparatus, and organised in an orderly and safe way, may function as a pole of strong attraction for different types and levels of circus people. As such, physical space becomes the catalyst of reconfigurations of circuits and membership, shaping and redefining the routes drawn by circus people across the city, as well as the boundaries of the communities of circus practice, stretching or shrinking overlapping zones and opportunities of encounter.

The specific requirements of the circus space in terms of size, type, objects and apparatus, safety devices and insurance coverage, turn it into something rare and precious for the community gravitating towards the circus scene, something essential to realize a project concretely, to meet and encounter others, to do things (train, create, perform) together, to build connections and enlarge one's web of contacts. To be able to work and either make a living or improve one's position within the community of practice. Physical space is thus key to the development of the circus scene, locally speaking, and of the Italian circus field more broadly.

"Before I thought that SLIP was only a philosophy, that is an idea. Actually, it is a space, we realized that it is a space, I mean it means 'free space for meeting and participation' but we thought about it at the high level, I mean that a space that can be a space of encounter and it can be a garden, it can be a thought, it can be something else. Instead, we realized

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<sup>21</sup> As I am completing the thesis (December 2016), a new SLIP place has been opened and functioning since September in another area of the city, with an almost completely new board and the same type of activities.



it is substance, it is actually a space, a place [...] if you don't give them a place to develop, this doesn't exist. Ok, so it is a space while before we didn't think the space was that important..."

[Elisa, 33, professional/project manager]

SLIP marked an important phase in the recent developments of the circus scene and community of practice in Turin because of the opportunity of encounter and exchange among different types of people it provided in its "neutral space".

"I think that SLIP represented the first space in which there was a connection between the different schools ... it was a place where you entered and in inverted commas it wasn't a defined place, it wasn't Flic, it wasn't Grugliasco, there was no strong identity supporting it but there was an open place...I remember that when we first opened my greatest fear was that you arrived and nobody would say hi to you... once people started to share this view there was no difference between the ones from Philip, from Flic, or from Grugliasco so that was a neutral space I think."

[Elisa, 33, professional/project manager]

Thus, the differences this space put together concern the provenience, in terms of schools and performing style (ranging from street theatre, to cabaret acts, to circus-theatre and circus-dance shows, to contemporary and research circus performances<sup>22</sup>), of the people attending the free training sessions. However, this variety also intersects 'horizontally' a number of disciplines, including aerial acrobatics and Chinese pole, floor acrobatics, hand to hand, slack rope, juggling and manipulation, clowning, contortion, handstands, dance: "while you were on the tissue there was also the juggler or the one practicing handstands" [Mara, 25, amateur]; and crosscuts 'vertically' different roles and levels, including amateurs that "would give advice to the professionals" [Elisa, 33, professional/project manager], questioning and shifting boundaries in all directions.

Moreover, as well as a space of training and encounter, SLIP represented for some professional artists an opportunity to compensate for the months in which paid work is less available. In the words of one of the former members of the SLIP Association's board:

"[The attempt was to] give life to a space in which circus could be lived in a certain way...it's as if there are two different worlds I would like to conciliate in my life: the fact of leaving and spending periods away and the fact of having a basis where there is fertile terrain where one can train, teach in those periods in which you are calmer or...for me SLIP represents the conjunction between these two things because even in those nice times in which I was working abroad for many months when I was back in Turin I had to start again looking for a job...[I hoped SLIP] could become something concrete and also an opportunity to work so yes, the point is that ... you need a lot of other things that can function as a buffer in those months in which you don't work to have some kind of income"

[Chiara, 32, professional]

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<sup>22</sup> See chapter 1

The success of the SLIP project is evident from the results achieved in terms of number of participants: 196 people in 2013/2014 and 330 in the first months of 2015 subscribed to the open training activities (including 52 foreigners) and around 130 people took part in the different courses offered in 2015 (SLIP A.S.D. & P.S., 2015). This means that, in only two years of activities, SLIP was able to reach the numbers that took years for other circus schools to achieve. According to the survey I conducted among the existing amateur and professional schools in Turin (see chapter 3), one of the professional schools, born in 2002, had, at the beginning of the last school year (October 2015) around 150 amateur students and 80 professional students, while one of the oldest amateur and social circus organisations, existing since 1992, counted with 170 subscriptions at the end of 2015.

Although other complex dynamics are at play, the SLIP experience shows that the circus scene may organise around relatively closed communities of practice also due to the mere lack of “neutral” spaces where to meet and exchange on a daily basis. SLIP responded to a need transversal to artists and practitioners at all levels, enabling the encounter of different styles, disciplines, and generations. Without a space it is more difficult to keep focused on one’s goal and make things happen:

“I realized this especially in the last months after all the efforts, the struggles...when we finally realized the fact that we didn’t have a space anymore...everything became tiring, talking to each other, listening...there was a difficulty in the relationships among us due to the fact that we didn’t have a goal, that it wasn’t given by the space anymore, because ok you still have your goal but you don’t have a space...”

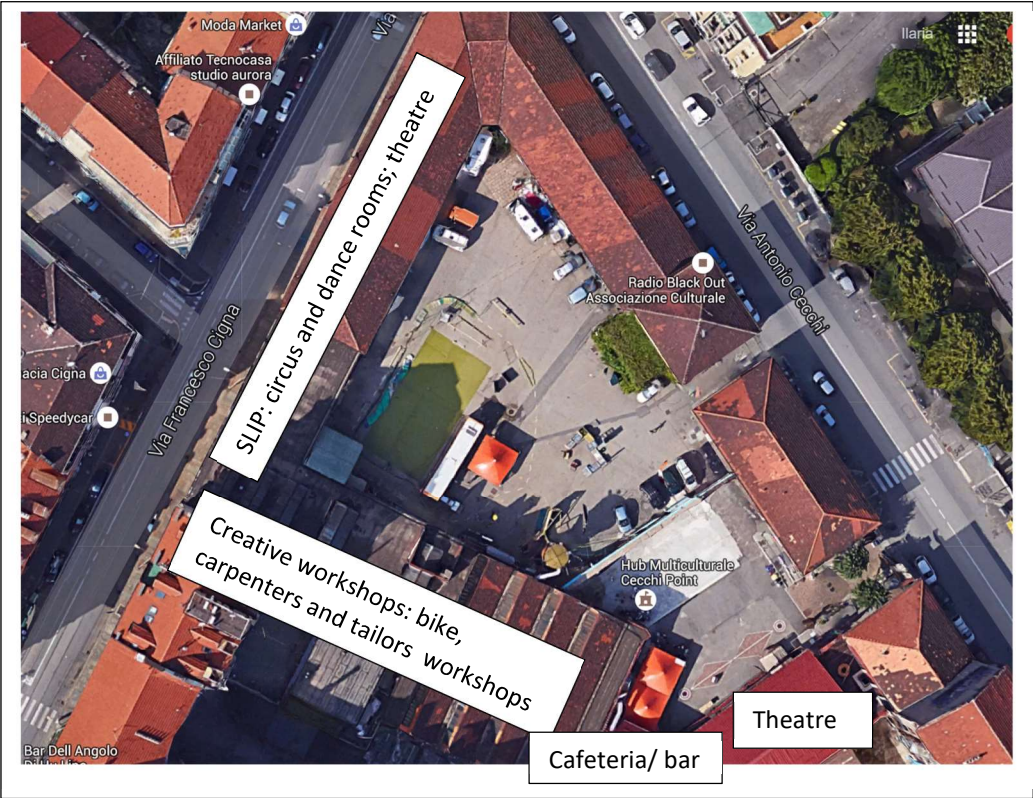
[Elisa, 33, professional/project manager]

Of course, besides the skills, networks, and good intentions of its founders and contributors, what contributed the most to this success is the fact that SLIP responded to specific needs, placing itself, more or less consciously, in a specific spatial, historical and political context, and becoming representative of a phase in the broader process of construction of circus as a new field of cultural production in Italy, a local scene, and a heterogeneous community of practice. However, it lacked an organisational structure strong enough to continue growing. The openness, flexibility and loose structure of the Cecchi Point (managed by a social cooperative appointed by the local government) was what, in the beginning, allowed the SLIP project to be integrated relatively easily, and to operate in synergy with the realities occupying other spaces in the courtyard (pictures below). However, the lack of rigid, precise, explicit rules ended up causing misunderstandings and divergences which resulted in an open conflict between the two realities and in SLIP’s decision to leave the space:

“we found a number of difficulties ... we don’t share the management strategies of the structure that hosts us. There are some bureaucratic needs and we didn’t feel supported...in three years we didn’t see a formal contract, despite having asked for it a number of times, [we obtained] only verbal agreements which are not effective...”

[Fieldnotes, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015, SLIP open assembly]

Picture 4.4– 4.7: Checchi point, spaces



Source: Google maps





Educational work, meeting point for children and youth from the neighbourhood



View from outside SLIP's entrance

Source: pictures taken during the fieldwork, October 2015

Thus, we have to side with Becker (1982) when he wrote that only those changes which find an “organisational base” last. SLIP was successful in “mobilizing enough people to cooperate in regular ways that sustained and furthered their idea” (: 301), but not in gathering enough resources and acknowledgement on the local political scene, losing what, for circus, is probably as essential as organisational apparatus and cooperative networks: an adequate physical space. The lack of clear rules left the last word to more powerful – politically and financially speaking – actors.

The dynamics at play in Turin's circus scene and in the SLIP experience also reflect Bourdieu's description of the “struggle for the dominant principle of hierarchization” (Bourdieu, 1993: 40) in a field which is attempting to build its own definition and autonomy. It is particularly interesting how both ‘easy’ commercial success (as in the case of Sonics and of the circus-fitness centres) and ‘alternative’ circuses which are (or attempt to be) indifferent to the economy (as in the case of the alternative circuses presented in chapter



5, and of SLIP), may be framed as being following an “autonomous principle” in relation to the new field of contemporary, artistic, circus, in which the heteronomous principle of success is discredited as much as lack of rigour and formal organisation, or the exhibition of an excessively communitarian, ‘hippie’ or “anarchic” lifestyle.

This chapter provided further evidence of the conflation between “the formalized and procedural cultivation of creativity” and the “creative cultivation” of bureaucracy and economy - testified by the current “turn to the arts in the search for better organisational models” (Wilf, 2010: 565) and the hailing of artists and cultural workers in general as “model entrepreneurs” (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 3) in contemporary society. Moreover, it showed how these broad principles of organisation have affected the circus scene in Turin.

The following chapter highlights the pivotal role played by notions of creativity and authenticity, as they are constructed and appropriated through the practitioners’ representations and everyday experiences, in underpinning the neoliberal tendency to incorporate “aesthetic, political and economic practices”, as well as the construction of a responsible self through disciplined leisure and passion, into a “single assemblage [...] of which work, politics and art constitute the different facets or viewpoints” (Lazzarato, 2008: 7, quoted in Stephens, 2012: 96), and in which the production of subjectivity aligns with economic and social development.

To do so, it first delineates five main axes as continuums along which different circus actors and organisations place themselves, in the attempt to define the relevant external and internal boundaries at stake and to highlight how practitioners alternatively differentiate among different types of circus or identify with a sole community, how they make sense of their experiences and construct identities as (a specific type of) circus practitioner.



## **Chapter 5: Meaning and boundary making within the community of circus practice**

This chapter outlines the construction of circus as a practice, focusing on the role of leisure and everyday cultural and artistic work within a neoliberal context and on the practitioners' construction and appropriation of knowledge and meanings while making sense of, reproducing and resisting ideologies of creativity and authenticity. Particular attention is placed on the dynamics at play at the intersection between structural changes and the grassroots, communitarian and counter-cultural origins of this bodily practice to identify the main defining axes along which different actors and organisations place themselves, drawing - and blurring - boundaries and branches within the 'community of circus practice'. We will confirm the pivotal role of creativity and authenticity in the neoliberal economy, and highlight their normative contents.

First, however, I will focus on the ways in which the research case under study reflects or distances itself from the core elements of circus practice as depicted in chapter 1. In relation to the codes of the 'timeless circus', and those of 'contemporary' circus, I will attempt a first definition of the core characters of 'contemporary' circus in Italy, and draw the 'authenticity map' through which practitioners orientate themselves in the field, to understand the values of this art world and the hierarchies of the circus field.

More specifically, in line with the abductive strategy of this research and the use of concepts in a sensitizing sense, as theoretical tools to describe and understand social life in terms of the actors' meanings (see chapter 3), the conceptual framework of this chapter counts with three main sides: Becker's (1982) notion of art world will be employed to shed light on the transformations of the circus as a form of art. Wenger (2010) and Paechter (2003) concept of community of practice illustrates how the interplay between practice and identity produces (more or less contested) values, knowledge and learning trajectories. Bourdieu's concept of field highlights the relations between the transformation within the circus and broader structural changes characterising the "mood" (Bourdieu, 1993: 32) of post-Fordism.

Furthermore, notions of risk, flow, character and bodily capital acquire specific meanings in relation to the embodied practical mastery of circus-specific techniques and attitudes, shedding light on the ways in which practitioners make sense of, compensate for, and navigate this complex, physically and emotionally demanding intersection of social, political, and cultural axes.

The five axes identified as main underpinnings of the circus practice highlight the discontinuous and meandering path of learning within the community of circus practice. This process does not draw a straight, clear-cut direction "from peripherality to full membership" (Paechter, 2003: 71), since both departure and arrival points take shape in relation to other bodily practices (such as sports and recreational activities), other forms of art (such as dance and theatre), but also different ways of defining and practicing circus itself (including, for instance, different political and professional choices, or technical and aesthetic preferences).

It is in this sense that this chapter outlines the characterising axes of the circus practice as intersecting and overlapping continuums along which the actors participating in the research (including practitioners, experts, and organisations) position themselves, and move. Rather than fixing boundaries and hierarchies the aim is to sketch a provisional picture of the core and controversial aspects of an unstable field which has recently begun its construction, and of how these changes reverberate across the circus community of practice.

This outline represents the first step to account for the “social and sensual logic” (Wacquant, 2004: 7) that informs contemporary circus practices in relation to the current reconfigurations of art, work, leisure and the body, to then focus on the tensions implied in the redefinition of positions and careers throughout the circus field and draw professional and personal trajectories in relation to the core axes, shaping different conceptualizations of self, art, and labour (chapter 6); and on the intersection between these trajectories, the acquisition of specific body techniques and of a circus (symbolic and material) bodily capital, and the incorporation of feeling rules (chapter 7).

Circus practice is defined by the embodied, practical mastery of specific techniques, which requires strict discipline and total dedication; by the central role of challenging tricks and the normalization of risk and prowess; by a “concrete” relationship to space and objects (in particular, to circus props and apparatus) and to the different types of activities involved, which sometimes position it closer to the domain of the “crafts” than to that of the “arts” (Becker, 1982). Despite the difficulties experienced in managing new forms of risk, such as artistic, entrepreneurial and narcissistic risk, this technical aspect of circus provides a rather stable terrain if compared with the increasing centrality of creativity and authenticity in defining circus artistry, and the shifting conception of mainstream and “alternative” circus (Frasca, 2015).

The latter draws a contested line between more or less commercial, institutionalized or countercultural forms of circus art, which acquires peculiar relevance within the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 2. If its innovative, intrinsically creative character is what allegedly differentiates circus from other forms of art and bodily practices, it is also what turns it into a model example of the mechanisms underpinning the ideology of creativity, diversity, passion and adventurous life which characterize current neoliberalism. This chapter untangles this paradox pointing at how the current institutional changes within the circus field are underpinned by the idealization of a specific form of creativity – structured, disciplined, effective, and safe.

### **5.1 Virtuosity: the “concrete” basis of circus technique**

According to Becker (1982), every art world is characterised by a specific type of virtuosity. The latter is related to certain skills, speed, and surety, the knowledge and following of procedures and form, control and lack of mistakes in performing a certain activity: “The specific object of virtuosity varies from field to field, but always involves an extraordinary control of materials and techniques”, or “mastering a variety of techniques” (: 275). Circus virtuosity is strictly connected to its ‘technical’ component, which, in turn, consists to a

great deal in the ability to achieve and perform “things [which are] impossible to do” [Teo, 40, professional].

Becker’s perspective is useful even though circus is considered here as a practice in a broader sense, rather than strictly as a form of art. We will see that practitioners at all levels cultivate virtuosity. The difference between circus as practiced by amateurs or professional artists resides mainly in the degree of immersion within the community of circus practice, and of the symbolic, affective investment “in the game which produces the game” of circus (Bourdieu, 1984: 86). Professionals dedicate longer time and higher constancy to circus and circus-related activities, and learning, developing skills and performing assume a prominent position in everyday life, meaning making, and identity work.

Circus is known as the “magic of the impossible” [Valeria, 39, professional], the highly challenging and the extraordinary, entailing at the same time physically demanding performances, requiring extreme strength, flexibility, or courage; something distinguished from the “everyday”, “normal” or “natural”, something for which “the body is not predisposed” [Leonardo, 23, professional student]; and the dimension of the magic, “fantastic”, dreamlike [Lucia, 29, amateur], “bizarre” [Marco, 36, professional], escaping everyday life, the “desire to come out of reality, the longing for escape, for freedom” [expert interview 1].

As such, the conception of virtuosity in circus relies on notions of circus-specific body techniques, of prowess and risk, and of extraordinary and adventurous. These three aspects are strictly interconnected and underpin what may be named the ‘technical’ part of circus (paragraphs 5.1 – 5.3), as opposed to the ‘artistic’ (paragraph 5.4) and to what I will name the ‘political’ (5.5) ones.

The paradox of the circus practice is that it teaches how, through training and persevering, the impossible becomes possible, something that can be learnt and achieved; that often the extraordinary, the “challenging”, “upside down”, and “subverting human limits and physical forces”, [various interviews], are actually issues of very ordinary, everyday work and determination: “[circus teaches] commitment...the “I do my best and I’ll make it”” [Carlo, 42, project manager]; “you have to discipline yourself and work to be able to do the things” [Riccardo, 51, circus educator]. In this sense, “superpowers” become a matter of choice and craftwork:

“The circus is a place – not a physical place – but a place where **everyone can choose** to develop a superpower[...]...because the circus is the art of being able to control things which are normally uncontrollable: the body in the air, the clubs in the air, or somebody balancing on something unbelievable. Being able to do something that no one else can do[...], the place in which one does things that nobody else can do, a site where the **strange inventions are built and you build them with the body**”

[Marco, 36, professional]

Circus virtuosity is thus a matter of ‘reflexively’ (Crossley, 2007) learning how to control and master specific techniques in the domain of acrobatics, juggling, or balancing, to name the three main branches mentioned in the extract above. I will analyse this technical aspect

of circus by breaking it down into basic components, alternatively termed “figures” or “tricks”. Although both fieldwork and interviews generally pointed to the overlapping of the meaning of these two terms - which are employed as synonyms in the practitioners’ everyday language - it is worth noting that the word “trick” is particularly significant here, in that it has the twofold meaning of something deceiving, which only *appears* to be – in this case – impossible or magic; and something particularly skilful, performed to entertain (Oxford University Press, 2016).

According to Goudard (2013), “figures” in circus are a means – acquired through repetition – to solve and control situations of disequilibrium. They can be stable, static or dynamic states of the body: for instance, keeping a certain rhythm while juggling three balls for a certain time (or control “the clubs in the air”), standing on a galloping horse (or balance “on something unbelievable”), do a back flip (control “the body in the air”). Figures are thus “technical”, “codified” movements, which may refer to acrobatics in general or to the use of certain apparatus or props:

I: “What do you mean by ‘technical component’?”

“Acrobatics in general, the technique of acrobatics and acrobatics on the apparatus, taken to the apparatus...in terms of codification it is very similar to ballet I reckon...”

I: What do you mean?

“I mean if you want to learn the Chinese pole you have a route to cover, that in the end will be **your technical component**, then this route branches out into movements that you can find, which are free movements, but [you have to] **go through the development of the technique**, with the Chinese pole you have the flags, a way to climb that is codified, and ballet does the same, you go to school as a child and some moves are taught to you because in 10 years you will have to do other things, **it is a codified route**...and such is the circus, **there is a technique at the basis**, a salto is done with a technique, [...] they all go through a technique taught, passed on from generation to generation by the masters, this is what I mean with...**technique and codification of the vocabulary**”.

[Marco, 36, professional]

Figures and tricks represent the basis of the circus vocabulary also because they provide a concrete tool to measure what has been learnt, achieved and taught, like a number of manuals on community and social circus, and guidebooks to circus performance, suggest: “circus can create a sense of celebration as people are pleased for others when they learn a new trick and there’s a sense of wanting other people to succeed” (Trotman, 2012: 28; see also, among others, Dubois, Flora, & Tollet, 2014; Gallasch & Baxter, 2001; Hyttinen, 2011).

The language employed by the interviewees insists on their difficulties and satisfaction in “achieving” [Livia, 48, amateur] or “installing” [Adele, 21, circus educator] a certain figure. As such, figures represent the “‘mindful’ and social aspects” (Crossley, 2006: 105) of circus embodied activity: they require know-how and understanding as well as physical mastery: they cannot be improvised: “I don’t improvise a figure if I’ve never tried it before” [Giacomo, 38, amateur], and it is not enough to get a trick once, “on the spot”, to say you

“have learnt it well”: “one of the rules that they used to say [is]: a trick is good in juggling when you present it for 5 times in a row without mistakes” [Teo, 40, professional].

These “concrete” bases of circus are claimed by many interviewees as an important attractive factor towards the circus practice, particularly when compared to other forms of art (for instance dance and theatre), which are considered more “contestable” [expert interview 1], “vague” and less “solid” [Chiara, 32, professional].

“In some domains of the show business the debatable, the arguable, the questionable were the order of the day, so “I like it”, “I don’t like it”, “I think he’s good...he isn’t...” [...] In the circus there are things which you cannot say that you can or cannot do: a somersault, if you can do it, it etymologically becomes such. So one can’t say “he cannot do something”. So it is obviously a subject about which there cannot be doubts: on the tight rope, you either walk on it or not. One cannot argue: “in my view you cannot walk on it”. If you’re on it, you can, if you’re down, you can’t”.

[expert interview 1]

Tricks provide an immediate sense of satisfaction, and a sense of self-achievement, as opposed for example to the long and slow work on a more general improvement of strength, flexibility or posture:

“For example, because I’m not really a patient person, I’m not really suitable for a type of teaching in which you work a lot on the basis, on the technique, and you do that without having the escape of doing the figure, the fall, the thing. I need to see a result”

[Giacomo, 38, amateur].

Moreover, learning tricks represent a quick opportunity to assess the level of a practitioner or the quality of a performance on somewhat more objectively impressive (“do the trick to have the ‘wow!’” – Emilia, 29, professional) and easily saleable basis than “a work which starts from the inner part” [Stefania, 40, professional]; and even relatively quick opportunities to earn some money – busking at the traffic light or in the street, or being hired for small events such as birthday parties, local fairs, etc. Technique can thus provide a sort of “stability” to circus students (Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011), a way to make sense of the learning process and the indefiniteness of the career within this new art world (see chapter 6).

As such, circus speaks an immediate, “true” [expert interview 1], “primordial” [Paolo, 30, professional] language which is viscerally (Tait, 2005) and “empathically” [expert interview 1] perceived and responded to by the audience. While the members of the circus community are able to ‘see the trick’, and are well aware that learning circus is very much connected to knowledge of biomechanics, the audience is instead attracted by the apparent breaking of taken for granted, physical laws.

This is the “magic” of circus: the spectator is led to feel not only emotion and admiration, but also “a kind of vertigo”, an “unknown apprehension” in front of acts which are perceived as against nature: “it is also this dimension, which we could qualify as metaphysics, that makes the specificity of the circus show” (Moreigne, 2010: 17).

Tricks are important to this respect too, as they represent dramaturgical devices which mark the theatrical rhythm, and the quality, of a performance, and are immediately identifiable by the audience, who “must be able to latch on to that feeling of excitement and then triumph each time a trick ends” (Jacobsen, 2010: 14):

“The moment in which the circus actor performs a trick, [he/she] generates that state of [...] tension in the spectator that leads him to applaud in the moment in which the trick is performed”

[Paolo, 30, professional]

As such, tricks and figures represent the specific language of circus, a means of expression for circus practitioners:

“M. is complaining that the theatre where her and her partner are working asks them to avoid starting from the tricks they can do. She says that technique is the language of those who have studied circus, and as such it is important... “we do not take the figures away [from our performances], because it’s on them that we work””

[fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2015].

In this sense, they are the raw material from which practitioners, following specific rules, produce routines and acts:

“and also the [juggling] encyclopaedia...it stated another rule, in a show never repeat the same trick more than five times, because after it turns into something underestimate, if you do five times the same figure, the sixth you’ve already seen it and it’s in excess”

[Teo, 40, professional]

If the audience is considered able to recognize shapes, it is commonly acknowledged that it does not possess the knowledge to be able to tell the level of difficulty of a trick. From the perspective of the practitioners, on the contrary, being able to recognize the complexity and the work behind figures and moves is an important sign of membership in the community of circus practice. This might also explain why beginners and students willing to assert their position within the community are driven by a hedonistic and collecting desire [Emanuele, 36, professional], by “that addiction to technique, that craving for technique” [Marco, 36, professional]. The ability to perform and recognize complex tricks is thus a pivotal underpinning of the circus’ subcultural capital, as one of the main element on which hierarchies are formed and authenticity status is attributed within the field of circus.

Although circus as it is framed in this research is not just ‘youthful leisure’ but cuts across a variety of practices, aesthetic and political values, age groups, as well as class backgrounds, the subcultural theory provides useful insights. According to Thornton's (1995) definition, “subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder”. It is objectified or embodied “in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. Both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the ‘second nature’ of their



knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard” (: 27).

This is a form of capital because it is convertible into economic resources (through jobs opportunities as, for instance, a DJs, a performer, etc.). Moreover, it is a peculiar form of capital, not only to be accumulated, but also defined and created, given the central role of innovation. Finally, it subverts or at least covers socio-economic status, because “it has long defined itself as extra-curricular, as knowledge one cannot learn in school” (ibid: 29):

“Subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay. Interestingly, the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t” (ibid: 164).

Within subcultures, distinction between subcategories of subcultural capital related to different forms of practice (in the case of circus, artistic, technical, social, alternative, etc.) operates on the basis of being or not ‘being in the know’. While it is difficult for circus practitioners to identify and classify homogenous subgroups within the circus culture, they more easily, like Thornton (1997) highlights, “identify a homogenous crowd to which they don’t belong” (: 208). In this sense, she argues, independently of the fact that the definition of a ‘mainstream’ corresponds to existing social groups or not, it does reflect an imagined other.

Virtuosity in circus represents such a subcultural category to interpret social reality. Circus virtuosity does not merely imply the ability to achieve a certain trick or a certain level of endurance to enchain tricks into routines, but also a specific “quality”, control, care and fluidity of movement, named “cleanliness” by the interviewees. This implies a way of moving which does not show signs of effort or pain, looks “free from gravity”, effortless, is performed “without sweating, staying as fresh as a daisy” [Livia, 48, amateur]; which is organic and aware:

“a clean movement I think is one that wants to be such, a movement is dirty when...when your body is not doing what you are telling it to do, clean does not mean elegant, or classic, to me clean means that you are making the body do what you want it to do, then it can be more or less beautiful to watch, but...”

[Matteo, 31, teacher]

The term “clean” can be employed to convey a normative meaning and aesthetic value of polishness and elegance, of “having beautiful points and beautiful lines” [Lucia, 29, amateur], which is sometimes seen in opposition to other values, such as creativity and authenticity (see paragraph 5.4). However, in general cleanliness is associated with basic skills of control of every single part of the body, including head, legs, arms, and fingertips, as essential to achieve certain tricks:

“We go on practicing the tour on the floor, Alex [teacher] explains to me that I have to start pushing with my leg until it is completely stretched and until I can stiffen the gluteus... “finish” the leg, he says. It actually helps a lot, both me and my base. For the whole class he corrects, basically, the same mistake, to “finish” my leg”

[fieldnotes, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2015].

As such, “cleaning” one’s tricks and moves is generally taken as an important step of learning circus and a basic component of virtuosity. It is the ‘final step of embodiment’ which turns the body techniques implied in circus virtuosity into something ‘natural’ within the circus community of practice. To say it with Bourdieu, embodied clean figures and the ability to recognize them underpins the “practical sense” of circus, the “feel for the game”, and a basis for interaction (meaning both conversation, discussion and bodily interaction, for instance during training) for circus practitioners of all types and levels (including traditional and contemporary forms, amateurs and professionals): “an immanence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action” (Bourdieu, 1990: 66).

Because of the intense, highly demanding character of circus practice, both in terms of physical and personal investment, the “commitment to the game” is sometimes suspended and doubts may easily emerge concerning the actions performed within the field. For instance, spending hours to learn a trick to be performed in a few seconds, and whose difficulty will only be acknowledged within the circus field - especially against an Italian backdrop in which the latter is still restricted, and undergoing redefinition - can undermine the determination of circus practitioners, and question “the meaning of the world and existence which people never ask when they are caught up in the game” (ibid: 67).

To resume, following Goudard (2013), virtuosity in circus entails being able to modify the speed of the execution of a movement, its amplitude and strength, the number of the figures and the way sequences are composed. Virtuosity – in the form of technique, tricks and cleanliness - allows the artists to express themselves and to achieve a level of excellence, thus providing the basis of the circus learning process, body of knowledge, and of value and meaning making. Moreover, this technical aspect of circus provides an important basis to processes of othering of outsiders (Paechter, 2003) within and across communit(ies) of circus practice. While belonging to the community is signalled by the embodied and reflexive knowledge of the circus techniques, these also work as a criterion to separate between circus and non-circus.

## **5.2 Dealing with risk: ordinary functioning and extraordinary character**

Another characterising dimension of the circus practice is its peculiar relation to risk, or, as we shall see in this paragraph, with different types of risk. Firstly, I will focus on what was defined as “real” risk (Goudard, 2013: 23), where the artist’s physical integrity is at stake. This type of risk ranges from the possibility “to fall and twist your ankle...to break you knee, to be paralyzed for the rest of your life, to death” [Leonardo, 23, professional student] and lies at the very heart of the definition of circus, distinguishing it from other types of physical investment (Goudard, 2013; Wallon, 2013a). While part of the technical component of circus, together with the dimensions of virtuosity (paragraph above) and embodied mastery (paragraph below), the centrality of risk in defining a specific language and aesthetics for the circus practice deserves particular attention.

The risky side of circus - which drives the audience to think “Oh my god what’s she doing? Upside down...if she takes a false step she dies!” [Cristina, 20, professional student], to feel “a kind of vertigo” (Goudard, 2013: 17) - was defined as one of the fundamental components of circus by many interviewees, a distinguishing, “congenital” feature [Chiara, 32, professional]. It is attached a fundamental function of circus - the potential to remind the audience, and the very practitioners, of human fragility:

“People still go to see the circus and circus continues to thrill because [the audience] has this unconscious feeling, they hope – in inverted commas - that the acrobat will fall, this is what in years, in centuries has brought people to watch the circus, I mean the fact that this doesn’t happen develops in the audience **this type of tension which is typical of the circus**, so there’s a constant interplay of the acrobat, of the circus actor with fragility, and fragility is a research, **the risk of not achieving a trick, the risk of falling, the risk of getting it wrong...** that is the thing that moves circus forward, **one of the strongest languages that circus has, traditional, contemporary, experimental, circus theatre, circus dance, all the definitions** you want, there is always this thing.

[...]

and this is also the thing that makes you develop a forma mentis...I mean it’s what leads you **to be constantly on the ball**, to be **constantly here, to enjoy the moment** because you know that...you know that you don’t know, you don’t know how long, maybe tomorrow you are warming up and hurt yourself and you have to stop for three months, or you know that that trick won’t work, so at the last moment you have something inside yourself that makes you avoid that trick in your act...it’s a constant challenge, a constant hazard”.

[Paolo, 30, professional]

This quote points at least to two social functions of risk for the circus community of practice: the fascination it exerts on the outsiders through its peculiar, immediate and bodily, form of communication and perception, and a function which reminds of the role of risk for the practitioners of extreme sports. The first one underpins the Romantic view outsiders have of this practice as adventurous and extraordinary and the processes of distinction from the ‘boring other’ (Caforio, 1987; Kreutsch, 2016) fostered by the insiders. As we saw in chapter 1, risk acquires very different meanings in the perception of the audience or in the public imagination, and in the experiences of practitioners, and has, as such, an illusionary character:

“they told me: “...but are you saying that you do those things where you go into the air, you break yourself...but I thought those weren’t real people...but so they are flesh and blood people?” ... so imagine what you can raise in a person...for us it becomes almost normality after a while, but it is a very important thing...”

[Emilia, 29, professional, referring to a conversation with an estate agent and her child]

In particular, many interviewees pointed to the fact that “physical risk”, which entails putting one’s physical integrity into critical conditions, exists mainly in the eyes of the outsiders:

"I mean there is physical risk, but I don't believe it's that high, I mean: very rarely during the training you train without the safety [devices] or you practice things that you don't know how to do without some form of safety, being it a matress or a longe [safety belt] or a safety net[...], then when you take these things to a performance you reduce the risk even more because you put the technical figures about which you are absolutely sure [...]. If you are in a normal training or performing regime risk is low.

I think the risk for the acrobat is more something that the people that don't do circus see, for instance my mum "oooooh my son! Ooooooh be careful that you'll fall! You'll hurt yourself!" but you, as an acrobat, you have the awareness that what you are doing is a safe thing"

[Pietro, 32, professional]

This function of risk in circus signals that, despite revolutionary changes within the circus world, the latter maintains a thread of continuity with the past in attributing central importance to risk and fear control as a sign of character and understanding of the circus culture. Risk is thus a factor of authenticity in circus practice and performances, despite its "staged" character (MacCannell, 1973). Like the 'manufactured adventure' (Holyfield, 1999) in extreme sports, rather than 'real' risk, it is the emotion and sensation felt that counts (Ferrero Camoletto, 2004).

The market of experiential goods in a context of increasing commodification and commercial appropriation of authenticity is thus driven by a sort of 'inauthentic authenticity'. According to Salome (2010), consumers of postmodern sports pursue a "comfortable and predictable sense of authenticity", in which the production of artificial environments "which seem to be more authentic than natural environments" (: 75) perfectly fits. Safety plays a key role in the construction of these blurred, fluid boundaries between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic', and assumes central importance when analysing the case of circus.

The staging of risk differs between traditional and contemporary circus. While it is still a core component of the circus experience, it is not as stressed and highlighted anymore, on the contrary, it is often left to the audience's conceptions and interpretation; the mere display of risk, prowess and hazardous tricks is connected to an old – pointlessly dangerous, physically unsustainable - way of doing circus. As such, it is a sign of 'inauthentic' circus among the community of contemporary circus, although it is still a strong marker of the 'authentic circus' in the collective imagination – like the smell of popcorn and sawdust, the flying trapeze artists, the tamers, the performing animals, drum roll and glitters.

This fits well McLeod's (1999) observation that "authenticity claims are a way of establishing in-group/out-group distinctions", and "to police the scene's boundaries" (: 146). However, it also contradicts his idea that authenticity (in hip hop culture) is associated to the knowledge and acknowledgement of the "old school", since in circus this does not appear as a requirement to 'stabilize the present' (: 144). In the current process of construction of a contemporary circus field, circus as a cultural product and an experiential good assumes different facets: the highbrow appearance of an art form, the political

character of popularity, marginality, social change and resistance, or philanthropy, the polished aspect of fitness gyms.

Hence, focusing on authenticity highlights distinctions between types of circus, but also different ways of experiencing circus, different perspectives such as the audience's or the practitioners'. Like the literature on authenticity in cultural performances and experiential goods highlights (c.f. Ferrero Camoletto, 2004; Grazian, 2003, 2004), the authenticity expected by the audience is different than the authenticity valued by members of the community of practice (professional musicians or sportsmen, for instance).

To satisfy the expectations of the audience, as we saw in chapter 1, circus managers stage the authentic circus experience through the ambiguous, illusionary representation of risk and failure, the manipulation of cultural beliefs about nature and physicality, the use of music and spatial oppositions, the stereotyped visualizations of cultural identities and otherness. However, in the case of circus a further layer complicates the picture, since, at least in Italy, the collective imagination is still deeply entangled with childhood experiences of traditional, family circuses travelling from town to town, which - on the contrary - the contemporary circus community aims to deconstruct and transform, when not disavow.

On the other hand, considering circus as a practice, hazardous experiences represent a way to search for an authentic self, cultivate hidden talents and unexpected resources, develop capacities beyond rationality. As argued in chapter 2, a central role is played by the experience of states of flow, in which there needs to be a balance between the level of challenge and engagement an activity offers, and one's specific competences to undertake that activity, in order to feel comfortable and able enough to enjoy it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Ferrero Camoletto, 2005). Within this framework, risk is what allows to experience a state of flow in which the body, by itself, finds unexpected solutions and activates unexpected resources, increasing self-empowerment.

These insights point to the variable, polysemic and constructed character of the notion of risk within the circus community, where, like the understanding of tricks and 'difficulty', it represents a means of inclusion, cohesion, belonging, but also of exclusiveness, othering and ranking, but it can also acquire different interpretations depending on whether the activities are characterised by the frequency of accidents, the seriousness of the actual or potential accidents, the representations of the public, the characteristics of the activities, the environment in which they take place, or the emotions and perceptions of the practitioners (Garcia, 2011: 117). Moreover, even among the insiders "danger in general means nothing", since, for instance, the risk for a flyer or a porter, on the trapeze, are very different: "for the first one the risk is to fall while flying, for the second, it is the instant of shock with the flyer's body" (Moreigne, 2010: 129).

Circus practitioners do not see their practice as a display of boldness (Garcia, 2011), but as something the right attitudes, competences and habits, and the control of fear, turn safe. Again like in extreme sports, it is the symbolic dimension of risk which acquires a central role as a marker of authenticity. Risk can only function as a convector of pleasure and fun, however, under conditions of control and feelings of safety. In other words, risk needs to be reduced in accordance with awareness about one's bodily and technical subcultural capital (Ferrero Camoletto, 2004): participation in circus activities presumes specific

knowledge and embodied competences, including the reflexive capacity to assess one's possibilities.

Physical risk is considered as something that the 'good' circus practitioner knows how to manage, and this supports "the collective illusion that serious injury does happen, but [...] to others: those who do not train right, [...] who do not have 'the tools it takes'" (Wacquant, 1995: 85-86) or are distracted and not enough prepared or "on the ball". For the practitioners, risk soon becomes a concrete matter of fear control. Fear can be dangerous because it prevents the full control of sensations and emotions (Garcia, 2011).

Learning how to control fear and stress allows to transform the perception of risk, turning tricks and figures into ordinary rather than dangerous, and is thus a central aspect of learning and mastering circus and of membership in the community. Because practical, embodied mastery, rather than theoretical knowledge (Crossley, 2006; Wacquant, 2004), is what is demanded of circus practitioners and what really counts as a basis on which to evaluate the position within the community, fear control is learnt through body techniques teaching the body not to feel the fear "is a matter of work" and "attention" or "care, meant in a global sense, [...] also at the level of your physique", of "habit and discipline".

The quotes above are taken from the example provided by Chiara, a 32 years old professional aerialist. When she was asked to perform her routine on the trapeze at the height of 5 meters ("which I know, for many trapeze artists it's nothing, if you talk to those of the traditional circus they laugh in your face...") with only a one-week time to practice before the show, she followed a precise procedure to get her body used to the height and lose fear, starting from placing "four mattresses" and just sitting on the trapeze to progressively getting rid of the mattresses and performing the whole routine.

Thus, the centrality of the functions that both outsiders and insiders' representations of "real" risk play in providing meanings to the circus practice, turns it into a pivotal part of the "ordinary functioning" of the circus field: "a relatively autonomous space of material and symbolic exchanges aimed at the (re)production of its specific form of capital" (Wacquant, 1995: 85). According to Goudard (2013), risk is always present in the profession of the circus performer, in which, due to the very demanding living conditions (itineracy, collective life, precarious working conditions, uncertainty about the future, income discontinuity, marginality, early interruption of the career), injuries can be physical, but also narcissistic and economic.

In this sense, circus practitioners "relegate [their] whole life to a form of risk" [Chiara, 32, professional] in a multiple sense: besides the "real", physical risk, the participants in the research named three other types of risk, strictly interconnected among themselves: the artistic and the entrepreneurial one, and the one that, following Goudard, we could call 'narcissistic'. These other types of risk seem to matter more for circus practitioners, and in particular for professional artists and students, who find them harder to control than physical risk. I argue that these other types of risk, while contributing to the image of an 'ordinarily adventurous' circus life, are more destabilizing for circus artists, who still do not possess enough tools and knowledge to navigate the recent social and economic transformations of the artistic and cultural sectors, and the undergoing changes within the circus field in particular.

Artistic risk, through which practitioners play freely with the actual artistic codes, is at the basis of innovation (Wallon, 2013a). It is about avoiding “to do things that the others do...choose to do my own things” [Michele, 29, professional]. Artistic risk interacts with physical risk: for instance, when performing, practitioners may deliberately choose to make some mistakes, in order to “play formerly prepared gags” [Mario, 53, amateur] and increase the interest of the audience, or to feel challenged enough and allow the others to appreciate the difficulty of the act performed: “Greg Kennedy, a juggler with Cirque du Soleil, [...] *aims* for one or two drops per show, as a measure of how hard he’s pushing himself: any more means he’s being sloppy, any fewer and he’s playing it safe (Wall 2013: 104).

On the other hand, artistic risk is connected to the narcissistic risk because it implies “getting lost” [Maura, 33, professional] and showing something personal, intimate, “your own thing” to an audience. This can bring success to the artist, or expose her to critique; in any case, it is something that a ‘real’ artist cannot avoid, “congenital” to circus practice: beyond the basics that you learn at school, what you learn repeating what others do, you have to do “your own things” so the risk is in “a way of showing yourself that is like a swing, you can feel a god like a shit, so learning how to relate to the audience, bring new things, it is a form of exposing yourself which in circus is a congenital characteristic” [Chiara, 32, professional]. This type of risk involves making one’s truthful self, including vulnerabilities and flaws, visible and available to the scrutiny and judgement of others. As such, it requires engaging with face, body, and emotion work – as well as authenticity work (see chapters 6 and 7).

However, another side of narcissistic risk is represented by the possibility of “going nuts” due to the extremely demanding nature of the learning practice, and to eventuality of realizing that “you have taken the wrong route, to getting to know things about yourself that you don’t want to know” and to wake up one day, after spending “two years at the circus school with an old guy of 60 jumping on your splits”, to realize “fuck, I threw two years away. Because you can learn a lot [...] and I don’t mean at the technical level but at the human level. But the contrary can happen as well [...] the brain sometimes...goes nuts on you completely...you ask yourself why the fuck am I doing this?” [Leonardo, 23, professional student].

The “entrepreneurial” perspective on risk frames this possibility of doing the wrong investment as an economic risk: “you spend two, three, four, five years [in] the school, spending money, go get training abroad, and in the end your show doesn’t work or you don’t sell it”. It is the same risk as an entrepreneurs’ “with his business [...] to do a thing that you believe is beautiful and then it doesn’t work for the audience, or you invest energies in a company that dissolves” [Pietro, 32, professional].

Thus, considering entrepreneurial risk in circus involves a reflection on the difficult convertibility of circus bodily and embodied capital into economic capital, due to the specificity of the internal mechanisms of validation and authentication. If circus bodies are in line with the aesthetic standards of the fit, strong and flexible body in contemporary Western society, it requires continuous and careful investment, reproduction, maintenance and management, which - more often than not - imply unpaid activities. As

we will see in the following chapters, the final (sellable and consumable) products of circus are performances and knowledge (in the case of circus classes) which - precisely through embodiment, normalization and 'naturalization' of the (sub)cultural capital – shall not reveal the hard work required by their acquisition.

In this sense, like stated above, the artistic, the entrepreneurial/economic and the narcissistic risk look more worrying in the professional artists' eyes because they are seen as less controllable. Physical risk is part of the 'ordinary functioning' of the circus field: it has historically underpinned circus embodied and codified knowledge and learning processes, independently of the ways circus is understood and practiced. The recent changes towards 'contemporary' forms of circus are instead shaping new ways to frame risk from the artistic and economic perspective. This provides less certainty to the practitioners than the relatively much more well-established body of knowledge concerning physical safety outlined in the many manuals and codes produced about circus teaching and in the programs of the professional circus schools (among many others: Cirque du Soleil, 2011; FEDEC, 2010; Heller, 2005).

For instance, even after years of studying to become professional artists, practitioners often do not feel they have the very diverse competences required to enter and gain a position in the labour market. In addition, economic rather than physical risk - the risk "of not being able to make a living, to have to do different things" [Mara, 25, amateur] - is generally named by amateurs as one of the reasons why they decide not to take the professional career. This might be a reason why economic risk plays a pivotal function – even more than the wilful undertaking of physical risks – as an evidence of character and, as such, a core underpinning of value and meaning within the community.

Meaningful risk taking implies being in control of the risk, not at its mercy (chapter 2). If it is relatively easier for circus practitioners to establish when running physical risk is 'out of place', this requires a delicate balancing when entrepreneurial and, especially, artistic risk is at stake. For instance, commercial circus is often contested as the 'easy' solution, something you know you can always rely on, but other than circus as art [expert interview 2]. On the other hand, it is a basic requirement for being a professional artist to be able to live out of your work, so there is no point in investing time and money in a show that "you don't sell" [Pietro, 32, professional]. Thus, "action" as a way to demonstrate "character" (Goffman, 1967b) acquires a different meaning and function for the circus practitioners, in that, rather than reinforcing and reproducing stability and predictability as normality, it fosters a search for normality in high instability and unpredictability of economic conditions and professional success, attributing this to the artist's responsibility of being creative, in line with the assumptions of the theorists of the ideology of creativity and passionate labour.

In all cases, as a practice, a life-style, or a profession, the adventurous dimension of circus contributes to the above mentioned differentiation from 'the boring other', as it is clear in particular from the words of amateur practitioners who stress how, differently from colleagues and friends who had children, a family, a 'normal' life, they are committed to their passion, including at weekends and during the holidays, try to discipline their lives and care for their body shape and health (see chapter 6).



### 5.3 Embodying techniques and attitudes: the centrality of bodily capital

Another central axis in the definition of the ‘technical’ side of circus practice concerns the preeminent role attributed to practical, embodied mastery as opposed to theoretical knowledge: like Wacquant (2004) states about boxing, “theoretical mastery is of little help so long as the move is not inscribed within one’s bodily schema” (: 69). Thus, the embodied experience of circus, the structuring and kinetical remodelling of the body according to the specific demands of the circus field, represents another key site in which “trajectories of practice” and “identity [...] dance” (Wenger, 2010: 7) to build knowledge and shape learning. The circus body as such represents a goal to achieve for amateurs, a tool to work on social skills for social circus instructors and participants, and “at once the site, the instrument and the object of their daily work, the medium and the outcome of their occupational exertion” (Wacquant, 1995: 66) for professional artists.

Given the “comprehension of the body that goes beyond – and comes prior to – full visual and mental cognizance” (Wacquant, 2004: 69), reflexive, “intelligible” knowledge represents only a second step in the learning process:

“I start working on my handstand and on the hand to hand. G. checks on me. [...] She tells me: it was right before! And I reply: “I know but I still haven’t incorporated it fully, I get lost, I think about one thing and miss another one”. She says: “yeah but that’s normal, now the body has done it, it is going through the head, what’s missing is putting the two things together”

[Fieldnotes, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2015]

Verbal explanations and theory are undoubtedly a central part of teaching and learning, as the recently increased importance of institutionalized, ‘intelligible’ knowledge within the circus community – connected to the undergoing process of formalisation of a body of expert knowledge about circus, and demonstrated by the growing number of research projects, publications, conferences, professional trainings, and trainings for trainers (see for instance AltroCirco, 2016a, 2016b; Cirko Vertigo, 2016a; Flic scuola di circo, 2016; Juggling Magazine, 2016; Malerba & Vimercati, 2016) - prove.

However, “discursive mediation or systematization” has no doubt a secondary place within the community of practice when compared with the acquisition of a “specific bodily sensitivity” and “corporeal schemata” (Wacquant, 1995: 72). Too many words are considered a waste of time if a movement, position or trick is not physically achieved “in action”. In this sense, “bodily moves” are placed “at the very edge of that which can be intellectually grasped and communicated” (Wacquant, 2004: 59). Embodied mastery in circus involves the precision of neuromuscular processes, the ability to deliberately break and find balance as one pleases (Goudard, 2013), and can be achieved through «maniacal repetition» [Marco, 36, professional] of preparatory exercises and training with the props or on the apparatus.

On the other hand, differently from boxing in which “reflexive return is by definition excluded by the activity” (Wacquant, 2004: 59), reflexivity plays an important role in the embodiment of circus knowledge. It is true that also in circus ‘hermeneutical mistakes’ can

have serious consequences for the practitioners' physical integrity, for instance when "you get the wrong tempo and don't find the bar [of the trapeze]" [Maura, 33, professional]. However, due to the performative nature of circus (meaning its more or less tacit goal of showing skills to an audience), the assessment of action is not only instantaneous and mastery implies constant reflexive work. For instance, videos are commonly employed to understand what looks good and what does not, or to identify and correct mistakes:

"In that moment I thought my arm was stretched but it was actually bent, ... we use videos a lot because often there's nobody looking from the outside, for instance in the hand-to-hand it's hard [to know] not only what you are getting wrong but who [is making the mistake], so you spend your time: "it's your fault", "no, it's your fault" and the video helps a little, I mean you can say "it was me, stupid me"".

[Leonardo, 23, professional student]

To achieve a practical mastery of "the impossible", practitioners break it down into 'possible', tackling goals which can be achieved in the shorter term and placing an emphasis on the constancy of practice, discipline, body work, and the incorporation of body techniques. In this sense we can talk about a circus capital which includes bodily moves, body techniques and a specific attitude and dispositions towards one's body, which enables to acquire full membership within the community (and, in the case of professional artists and professional amateurs, income), and represents a central value whose understanding is taken for granted but also continuously reasserted.

In the 'strictly bodily' sense, circus develops and specializes depending on the discipline practiced (juggling, aerial or floor acrobatics, hand-to-hand, tightrope dancing, etc.), and on the specific relation to certain props or apparatus. Authenticity of membership in circus practice is associated to choosing and owning one's own props, which acquire high symbolic and affective value. Speaking about one of his clubs, an interviewee commented: "it is almost not like an object anymore, after all those hours there is a part of yourself which, I don't know it is almost maniacal, I mean don't touch it [when somebody asks] can I train...nooo, no, no, I mean you can't touch them, and when you change one of them it is like a funeral I mean before the new club enters the group it takes at least six months I think, you will always feel it's different, it will have a different colour, and you will never use it unless you really need to" [Marco, 36, professional].

Props such as clubs in this case signal membership within the circus culture, and differentiate between, for instance, members who do not care enough for their own and the others' props (asking if they can use them), more and less skilled members (depending on the number of clubs one carries around in one's bag, and on how worn out they are). Moreover, props and apparatuses (as a visible sign, like in the case of juggling tools carried around, or as an 'initial choice' like in the case mentioned below) group practitioners based on their circus disciplines, outlining multiple 'senses of authenticity' underpinned by personal inclinations and the close, unique relationship with one's (personal) object, the life trajectory drawn in interaction with it:

"when we started the school, it was interesting to see how everyone would pick – who knows why, because of particular mental trips – would pick a...a line, a direction, a

discipline [...]. It is like a relationship with a boyfriend, after all you know why you are with someone, but in part you don't, and with the props it is a bit the same. The relationship you establish is love and hate [...], it is a living relationship, it includes satisfaction, joy, pain, frustration"

[Chiara, 32, professional]

While the specificities of these techniques and of the learning process within the circus will be the object of chapter 7, it is important to stress here that, like the boxer's body, also the body of circus practitioners has "inherent structural limitations" (Wacquant, 1995: 67). The first one is age: while in traditional circus "you gave your maximum for a while then broke yourself and at 20-25 don't do anything anymore, [except] selling the pop corns, organising..." today "the attitude has changed, there are people that do this after 40 so you have to look after your body". As such, practitioners must learn to distinguish between the pain level that is right to bear, "because you start doing something you've never done before, the first time you are all broken and you have to manage this type of pain" and the 'wrong' type of pain, "which I have been having for a while and I need to get checked" [Chiara, 32, professional].

While the normalization of pain and the 'never stop training' (despite ageing) solution are not completely dismissed, especially by those who are closer to 'traditional' practitioners or teachers, this attitude towards the body implies a more careful management of the "investment" of "physical assets over time" (Wacquant, 1995: 67) and is perceived as more healthy and rational, because often 'artistic maturity' arrives later, in a practitioner's career, than the peak of physical shape. This management is not always easy to carry on, in that younger practitioners are overwhelmed by an "hedonistic" goal and the "joy of technical flourishing" [Emanuele, 36, professional], and force their bodies to a "psycho-physical massacre" [Stefania, 40, professional] with a much more light-minded attitude than older ones. Only at a later stage, practitioners turn to dance, yoga, or less demanding disciplines (e.g. tightrope instead of trapeze) as 'healing' bodily practices or solutions to continue performing.

A second physiological limitation appears as a "condemnation" in the shorter term: "you have to keep doing it until you stop, because if you stop for a while the muscles, it takes weeks to regain them but to lose them 5 days are enough" [Emanuele, 36, professional]. Depending on the extent to which practitioners value or rely on their bodily capital, every act needs to be calculated as part of a training regime: even "the day you are resting is part of the training" [Leonardo, 23, professional student]. Thus, for some, circus like boxing requires a "monastic devotion" which "permeates every realm" (Wacquant, 1995) of the circus practitioner's private existence, as well as a form of 'inner-wordly ascetism' underpinned by rational calculation and accumulation and investment of bodily capital. If this is especially true for professional artists, a 'circus invasion' of private life happens for many amateurs which are "overwhelmed by the circus wave" [Matteo, 31, teacher] as well:

"I must say that with the increasing engagement in this discipline, in these disciplines, [circus] has become a little of a social element, I mean basically I only hang out with the people that do this type of activity, because, that's clear, dedicating more time to this you

steal time from other things, other companies, then get lost after a while...the social element in this moment is quite strong”

[Mario, 53, amateur]

While it is true that this ‘social element’ does not necessarily imply strict body regimes, it is also important to note that it is essential in producing a reproducing a circus culture of the body which involves amateurs and professionals alike, inviting them to eat more (or less) and to pay more attention to “eat well”, especially for what concerns assuming alcohol, eating out too often, etc. If on the one hand this recent tendency is in line with the overlapping of health, morality and authenticity within the broader spreading of an ideology of wellbeing (Baudrillard, 1998; Cederström, 2011), hailing for a “narcissistic”, emotional, physical and cognitive investment in the body to realise normative selfhood (Sassatelli, 2010), on the other even professional practitioners claim the status of “artists rather than athletes”, leaving space for a highly flexible definition and following of the rules of conduct.

Despite the “sacrifices” circus requires, compensations are highly valued. Pleasure is drawn mainly from “fun” and self-satisfaction, from “passion”, and from feeling “comfortable”, “at ease”, or “free”. Fun and enjoyment rely, as we saw in Chapter 2, on the achievement of states of flow, experienced when engaging with “autotelic” activities. The “holistic sensation” of the “flow state” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) is defined by circus practitioners through notions of passion, comfort, ease and freedom. “Passion” is what allows to maintain the fire “around which we all sit to keep warm” [Sonia, 35, project manager], to work hard and engage the others (for instance in the case of social circus). It is also something unavoidable, which emotionally and physically overwhelms practitioners at all levels, giving them gooseflesh while they speak about circus (for instance in the case of Emilia, 29, professional), turning them into addicted (“you can’t help doing” circus - Marco, 36, professional), or making them happy “like nothing else in life” [Clelia, 19, professional student], allowing them to make sense of a physically and emotionally demanding practice.

As for freedom, ease and comfort, many interviewees used these three terms to indicate the feeling of “finding your world” [Chiara, 32, professional], “feeling self-confident”, safe and precise, but “open” to the world [Maura, 33, professional] and free at the same time: “a feeling of freedom in the use of the body, in the possibility to move in the air feeling completely at ease [...] the sense of feeling good, at ease” [Stefania, 40, professional], unquestionably in line with the definition of flow experiences as merging action and awareness, “self and environment”, stimulus and response”, “past, present, and future” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 36).

“...a feeling of openness, yes? But at the same time of ease, comfort, of being...at ease and empty enough, I mean in that moment I was living the emotions but I wasn’t thinking so this thing has a something like of...of of...absolute, isn’t it? Like when you go to the mountain and listen to the silence, you don’t think about anything else but you are listening to that very thing...something similar”

[Maura, 33, professional]

A second central aspect to acquire circus capital and thus move towards an actual full membership within the circus community concerns the attitude towards the body during the disciplined acquisition of body techniques. For instance, only the novices think that they will achieve important results in a short time: the more expert practitioners understand the lengthiness of the process, and the importance of dedication, “maniacal repetition”, and patience: “I go crazy when someone after only two months tells me he can’t make it. Nobody can after two months, I mean you need a lot of time” [Marco, 36, professional].

What outsiders and beginners see as impossible, becomes merely a matter of hard work and discipline. Rather than signalling an exaggerated self-confidence, this attitude indicates the willingness and disposition to hard work, to refuse to be discouraged by failure or scared by the lengthiness and harshness of the path to come.

“In the last years I’ve thought that maybe there is almost nothing that is impossible. With the trapeze. I mean, that I can’t achieve to do. At what price...[laughs]...but I mean in abstract terms if one trains, and has a method, has a technique, if, if, if,...one has the possibility to train, yes, one can make it, that’s it!

[Maura, 33, professional]

It could thus be argued that, together with the ability to accept and face risk at different levels, action as an evidence of character is not so much associated by the members of the circus community of practice to racy attitudes and the “the quest for sensation” (Le Breton, 2000), but to this patient and perseverant dedication to activities whose only “obligation to continue to pursue”(Goffman, 1967b: 184-185; see paragraph 2.4) lays in notions of passion, fun and freedom, and to the self-confidence needed to accept the hard work and sacrifices required to achieve one’s goals.

““It’s hard” doesn’t work as an excuse...we are practicing *patchieska*. Hélène [a pro] attempts a new way to explain it to me: “shoulders in, but push down and breasts out at the same time!”. Luca [a teacher] tells her: “But if you say this to her she’ll find it hard to keep her shoulders in!”. Hélène replies “Yes, well, you know, life is hard!” (as in: “of course it is difficult but that’s how you do it”). Her and Rafael [her base] are also a living evidence for me to see how much it is wrong to get angry or too much frustrated when things don’t come: “training today’s not going well, but we take it with love...””

[fieldnotes, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

Again, we can see how circus practice is underpinned by a combination of hedonism and ascetism. I have already mentioned this mechanism as it has been highlighted in the literature on lifestyle sports, and consumer culture in general. The microanalytical level of analysis of everyday behaviour and direct interaction might be of help to illuminate the deep changes produced by the contemporary circus movement both in social structures and cultural meanings, shifting values and creating incertitude and instability around the criteria to judge virtuosity and face artistic, entrepreneurial and narcissistic risk. The current “mood of the age” (Bourdieu, 1993: 32) opens gaps and grey zones in the internal logic of functioning of this new cultural and artistic field, still under construction.

The concept of “calculating hedonism” illustrated in paragraph 2.4 effectively addresses the ambivalence faced by contemporary consumers. Featherstone's (2007) defines this concept as “a cost-benefit analysis of pleasure, time and other people” (: XXIII), through which subjects are able to keep together instrumental and expressive, individual and collective needs and demands.

On the one hand, emotions become variables subject to rational calculus; on the other, the instrumental and rational functions of everyday consumer practices are aestheticized. As we saw in these paragraphs, circus roots character in the ability to deal with precariousness and instability, and combines “ascetism and hedonism” (Sassatelli, 2010), drawing on a narrative of the authentic self achieved through personal commitment, strength of character, courage and discipline, but also informality, satisfaction and freedom (Le Breton, 2000; Sassatelli, 2010). As we will see in the following paragraphs, the artistic and political reframing of the circus practice shakes the stability that closure provided to traditional circus (Afonso, 2002; Caforio, 1987) even more, further blurring the boundaries of contemporary circus as a distinguished “art world”, and placing it, as a new field and a community of practice, right at the core of broader social and economic trends.

#### **5.4 Circus as art: the centrality of creativity and innovation**

Circus entails, first and foremost, the display of extraordinary skills. These performative goals persist notwithstanding the shift towards the “participatory ideology” (Wheaton, 2004: 11-12, see chapter 6) and away from competition, virtuosity, and prowess. While the fields of practice (at all levels) and that of (professional) cultural production may be theoretically distinguished, they are deeply entangled in the everyday life of circus practitioners. On the one hand, as we saw above, circus practitioners developed communities and scenes, specific subcultural capital and authentication processes. On the other hand, circus can be seen as an ‘art world’ (Becker, 1982), in which artistic productions are to be consumed by an audience: as we will see in chapter 7, at all levels learning circus includes - as well as the privilege to access the “back regions” (MacCannell, 1973) - skills for being ‘on stage’.

Hierarchies and organising principles are more binding for circus professionals (who make a living out of this practice) and those who occupy more important positions within the circus field, than for amateurs who – as such – may be allowed more playful and less disciplined and constant engagement with circus practice. However, despite these differences in intensity of commitment and investment, there is a continuity between the hierarchies regulating and structuring both ‘stage’ and ‘backstage’ – to refer, like MacCannell (1973) does, to Goffman's (1956) well-known distinction (see paragraph 2.7).

In this sense, it is pivotal to investigate the centrality of creativity and innovation in the authentication process resulting from the interaction between those who make the ‘authenticity work’ – e.g. the “effort to appear authentic” (Peterson, 2005: 1086) – and those who “are able to grant or reject the authenticity claim” (ibid: 1090). In other words, we will consider how authenticity as a social construction and “a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others” (ibid: 1086) builds and blurs symbolic boundaries within and around the community of

circus practice. We saw in the previous paragraphs that practitioners identify and mark their subcultural membership in relation to one's ability to recognize the 'real' complexity and risk of tricks. However, the distinguishing characteristic of a contemporary circus practitioner – in opposition to traditional or classic circus – is that he or she can distinguish between what is really artistically innovative and creative, and what is merely commercial, "easy, as in: if it works with the audience, I keep on doing the same thing" [expert interview 2] and has been already seen before.

Because contemporary circus is, in simple words, the re-classification of circus as art (see chapter 1), the debate around commoditization in contemporary Western society, and between 'art' and 'craft', and 'commercial art' and real art within 'art worlds' in particular, may be illuminating here. Becker's (1982) analysis sheds a different light on the recent "revolution" of the circus "world", showing its ordinary nature:

"So the end point of the sequence in which an art turns into a craft consists of younger, newer, rebellious artists refusing to play the old game and breaking out of its confines. They propose a new game, with different goals, played by different rules, in which the old knowledge and techniques are irrelevant and superfluous, no help at all in doing what is to be done in the new enterprise. They produce or discover new exemplars, new great works that furnish a new standard of beauty and excellence, works which require a different set of skills and a different kind of vision. In short, they make a revolution..."

(Becker, 1982: 297)

If it is true that contemporary circus does not dismiss completely "the old knowledge and techniques" of traditional circus, acknowledging them as common technical underpinnings, it is also attempting to build new aesthetic standards, values and meanings. As we will see in this paragraph, notions of artistry based on creativity and innovation play a central role to this respect. This also requires the examination of how these principles follow or contradict the above mentioned "mood of the age" (Bourdieu, 1993: 32) underpinned by the "ideology of creativity" (Arvidsson et Al. 2010b, Malossi, & Naro, 2010; cf. Florida, 2012). We will see that this perspective questions the very revolutionary nature of this change, supporting the thesis that the case of circus provides a significant case to study neoliberalism.

In particular, within a circus sector currently attempting to reinvent and actualize itself, it becomes relevant to investigate the specificities of "the quest for authenticity" that Salome (2010) attributes to contemporary consumer culture in general. As we saw in chapter 2, commoditization is a central feature of contemporary Western "consumer society" not only because of its expansion to domains previously untouched, but because "the antinomy between intimate or personal relations and the cash nexus" so central to our culture activates processes which translate "the purely commercial value of goods into other forms of value: affection, relationships, symbolism, status, normality, etc." (Sassatelli, 2007: 139). In the case of circus, the ability to establish or acknowledge the value of a performance is connected to the incorporation of authentication criteria based on specific notions of artistry and creativity, that is, to the ability to separate between commercial and artistic value, or value that is created "through the commoditization process" or "as a difference from the commodity form" (ibid: 146).

If a more analytical look highlights a convergence between the values culturally associated to art, such as creativity, innovation, differentiation, uniqueness, and those associated to the market, the subcultural logic of contemporary circus relies on their clear-cut distinction (at least at the discursive level, since meaning making is a process and meanings are never fixed within communities of practice). As observed by Becker (1982), the configuration of “academic” and “commercial art” (: 289), in opposition to notions of ‘real’ art, shape contemporary art worlds.

Commercial art concerns the processes of organisation, constraint and ritualization connected to the artist’s virtuosity’s “subordination to the requirements of audiences and employers” (ibid: 291), which ultimately turn an art into a craft. It represents the outcome of a tendency emerging in academicism, which “consists of an increasing concern [...] with the skill the artist or performer exhibits”. “The originally expressive art works”, instead, are centred on “what is done, the ideas and emotions” they “embody and express” (ibid: 288-289). In other words, while the goals and ideologies of the participants to the ‘commercial and academic sides’ of an art world revolve around virtuosity, control and convention, ‘revolutionary’ art aims to expressiveness and creativity.

Applying the notions of commercial and academic art to the circus, criteria of judgement would be based on the lack of mistakes, the speed and the surety or fluidity of the execution, or what was named above as the ‘technical’ component of circus, in which “there is a right way to do everything” (ibid: 290), and in which effectiveness and beauty are measured on the basis of the difficulty of the tricks performed, the ‘cleanliness’ and ‘polishness’ of the body lines (stretched legs, arms, fingers and pointed feet), the flexibility of the performer (e.g. the extent to which the legs spread or the shoulders “open”).

Circus artistry, instead, rather than measured, is judged on the basis of criteria which rely on the “being in the know” (Thornton, 1997) of the members of the community of practice, and is valued according to rules that – like in postmodern sports (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005: 193) – are variable and continually recreated and assigned value within the community itself, rather than fixed and formalized ‘from on high’. Validation implies notions of authenticity and creativity based on improvisation skills and the expression of a truthful self, rather than – like in traditional circus – on merely technical skills, virtuosity, prowess and risk.

Commercial circus, like commercial art in general, is concerned with the audience’s appreciation, hence with parameters “defined by some world” other than the circus world (Becker, 1982: 296). The participants to the circus world who instead neglect commercial circus search for a delicate balance between what the audience likes (at least if they need to make a living out of their art), the innovative and creative character of their proposals, what they like and want to express and who they really are: it is not “a performative work, done to do the tricks that impress the audience, but a work that starts from the inner part” [Stefania, 40, professional]. Circus artists must be committed to “what still doesn’t exist” [expert interview 2] and to something beyond “the lines, the points, the stretched arm, neck up, shoulders down”, something deeper than “the *classical robots*” who “can maybe even do hard things, but remain the *classical robots*” [Paolo, 30, professional].



Due to the indefiniteness of this going ‘beyond’, or ‘deeper’ than virtuosity, creating a work of art becomes a delicate, always precarious act of balancing. In my small way, I experienced this difficulty during the fieldwork, when working on a trapeze routine. What had moved me to construct the sequence was merely a “creative push to put myself at play, express contradictory feelings of both discomfort, loneliness and enthusiasm, a dark side and a bright one” [fieldnotes, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2015]. Three different types of audience saw the routine. The first one was a contemporary dancer, with little interest in circus technique, who mainly appreciated glimpsing at my ‘authentic self’: what “moved” me and what “I enjoyed”.

Secondly, my trapeze teacher, a professional aerialist with a background in contemporary circus and physical theatre, appreciated the “sweetness” and the care for “the details” (for instance, the slow movement of fingers, the opening of a hand), but insisted that I “cleaned” and drew more attention to the technical tricks, “focusing on rhythm and on following the music, changing speed and intensity”, to reinforce the “technical substance” of the act. Finally, an acrobat and teacher with a traditional circus background accidentally entered SLIP while I was practicing the routine. His comment was: “It is nice but do you want an advice? You never finish the movements with your legs, you need to do more stretching, and feel that the whole leg is working, all the muscles until your toes” [fieldnotes, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2015].

This field experience provides an insightful example of how creation work in circus satisfies shifting aesthetic and artistic criteria and takes into account different perspectives on both technique, beauty and authenticity. However, of particular interest is the second point of view, in which authenticity, creativity and technique require equal balance, as opposed to a focus on authenticity only (first perspective) or on mere technique, and in particularly lines (third perspective).

Given the strict connection between virtuosity and risk in circus (paragraphs 5.1 and 5.2), this opposition between commercial and ‘real’ art directly affects the role of prowess: like Wallon (2013) stresses, contemporary circus practice should not be limited to the latter anymore, or to the merits or pertinence of a certain figure or movement, but needs to be innovative and creative: it requires engaging with “artistic” and “aesthetic” risk as well as physical risk. In this view, notwithstanding the higher physical risks it may imply, the focus on virtuosity corresponds to the ‘easier’ and ‘safer’ way, as it avoids higher artistic and entrepreneurial risks. Moreover, notions of expressiveness and creativity in contemporary circus are connected to narcissistic risk, the risk of “losing yourself” besides that of “losing your life”:

“Being a strong circus professional requires a special dedication, a commitment bordering on faith. Becoming a circus artist isn’t like becoming a dentist or a real-estate agent. It’s not a practical decision. You have to burn to do it [...] without this passion, it is possible to work as a professional: you can make a healthy, exciting, engaging living, with four-star hotels and international travel and, rumor has it, lots of very good sex. But you can’t make art.”

(Wall, 2013: 279 - 280)

Once again, making art requires a commitment to a cause – a passion – beyond the appeal of prowess and technical achievement, a willingness to say something new and unique. However, differently from Wall I argue that becoming an “artist” – a creator of one’s work – rather than merely a “performer” – “who follows the instructions [and tastes] of others” (ibid) is, at least in part, a matter of “practical decision”. It is true that circus practice, particularly at the professional level, is for those who display enough personal virtues of “humility, fortitude, temperance, patience” (Beadle, 2014: 7) to overcome the sacrifices required, and practitioners often frame their choices as the result of passion, love, something beyond their will (“you can’t help it” - Marco, 36, professional).

However, creativity in circus practice is also defined as extensively accessible: as we will see in chapter 7, it is the concrete outcome of learning, dedication, exercises and application of a “method”. Moreover, in social circus the possibility to be creative is claimed as one of the main attractive and effective factors: firstly, creativity provides an opportunity to less technically talented or able participants to be included and feel successful, and secondly learning to be creative is considered as one of the useful life skills to be acquired by the disadvantaged - “at risk” - targets involved [Sonia, 35, project manager].

The four types of risk identified above (entrepreneurial, artistic, narcissistic and physical) are thus employed to construct authenticity in ways which are not always cumulative. For instance, high physical risk can compensate for a scarce entrepreneurial, narcissistic and artistic risk, or a high artistic risk can be dismissed as lack of authentic circus when it is not accompanied by the engagement with physical risk and technical complexity (for a show to be classified as circus, rather than theatre or dance for instance, there must be circus tricks in it). Through this ambivalent working of authenticity constructions, boundaries and hierarchies are continually shaped.

To resume, authenticity in contemporary circus is defined as the appropriate balance of creativity and technique, attitude and hard work. Creativity in particular plays a central role as the essence of the new field of circus art and a glue for the community of circus practice. It works to differentiate contemporary circus from traditional circus’ mere entertainment, opening the doors of the circus to all those who are passionate enough to enter, and elevating the circus practice to something ‘more’ than a mere engagement with activities and prowess, rules and techniques. Following Wenger, we could say that if mastering technique is “a way to honor the history of learning” of the circus community, authenticity and creativity are what enable “to discover the learning edge of the practice, the places where a contribution makes sense and is possible” (Wenger, 2010: 6). The commitment to creativity is what makes practitioners accountable to acknowledge and improve contemporary circus practices, and as such it represents a pivotal underpinning of participation and membership into the community.

## **5.5 A ‘political’ and ‘communitarian’ circus: alternative values and resistance**

Creativity and innovation represent an important axis along which circus practitioners build representations and meanings of circus, or certain types of circus, and position themselves, constantly re-establishing or shifting their values. Another important mechanism to this respect concerns the ‘political’ side of circus, that is, the practice of circus as a choice of life

carrying countercultural beliefs, placing circus practitioners (of a certain kind) at the margins of, or outside, mainstream society.

This axis overlaps, to a certain extent, with the axis concerning creativity and artistry described in the paragraph above, and, in a similar way, sheds light on the pitfalls the contemporary circus movement may encounter in claiming an 'innovative' or, in this case, 'alternative' status. If the disturbing function of citizens' quiet lives, and the attempt to escape the regulated 're-appropriation' of public space, reaching the sites excluded from mainstream cultural circuits, may effectively qualify as claims for resistance to the dominant principles of political and economic power, the same cannot be said about self-representations of a community of life and work based on free choice and personal and emotional investment without monetary compensations (Arvidsson et al., 2010b).

On a first level, creativity is defined as an intrinsic and immutable character of circus: the circus is a space "of creativity, fantasy, imagination and freedom" (Circo El Grito, 2013), a practice which enables a peculiar artistic spirit to emerge, escaping standards and conventions (MagdaClan, 2015), a form of art or entertainment where innovation has always been a core underpinning (Silva, 2009; Viveiros de Castro, 2007; Wall, 2013). On another level, it is framed as a feature of contemporary forms of circus, as opposed to what happened in the past, but also to still existing, but "anachronistic", forms of *traditional* circus, which, while may still deserve respect, merely offer "amazement" [Emanuele, 36, professional]: "Circus today doesn't have this [quantitative] goal anymore [...] the challenge is about creativity, innovation..." [expert interview 1].

Finally, at a third level, creativity is what characterizes 'real' circus arts (alternatively named research circus, alternative circus, experimental circus, circus theatre, circus dance, or, more generally, contemporary circus) as opposed to other coexisting types of circus, namely commercial or academic circus, defined as "repetitive", "commonplace", "expected" and "codified" (Circo Paniko, 2008); "just a game of lights", empty, self-celebrative, "research that the audience does not like" (Frasca, 2015).

Thus, practitioners perceive the shift from quantitative criteria to an interest in intimacy, quality and artistry as a pivotal aspect of contemporary circus arts, as opposed to both circus in the past, still existing traditional circus, and 'commercial' circus. This shift from "gigantism" to intimacy overflows the merely artistic to claim a political value, as a matter not only of taste and aesthetics, but also of ideology and autonomy. Side kunst-cirque, one of the four 'alternative' circuses in Italy<sup>23</sup> states in its dossier:

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<sup>23</sup> Four contemporary circus companies in Italy (SIDE, Circo Paniko, circo El Grito, MagdaClan) have recently started projects of itinerant circus tents. Together, they have organised forums of discussions, like the Italian Forum of Alternative Circuses in 2013-2014, and collective events and shows, like the Grand Galà of alternative circus in February 2016. Alternative circuses, through the exhibition of an out-of-standards, brave and irresponsible way of life (MagdaClan, 2015), claim a disturbing but therapeutic function of "public invasion" of the "alienated", "bored and sedentary life of today's citizen", as opposed to traditional circuses which "now arrive silently, and try to disturb as little as possible in grey industrial areas" (Frasca, 2015). They provide a contact point with "real", "true" life, an inclusive, participatory and cooperative space of encounter, and a means to reconquer public space (Circo Paniko, 2008; Frasca, 2015; MagdaClan, 2015).

“Side is a project of alternative circus. For alternative circus we mean all the forms which unhook themselves from the genre of the so called “circus tradition” to venture on the road of research and experimentation of the circus languages, as it is in the vocation of contemporary circus and, before this, of *nouveau cirque* [...] The choice to create a theatre hall [which has acquired the form of an itinerant circus tent] takes shape in Italy where theatre programs are inaccessible and the cultural establishment is insensitive, aged, unproductive, trader, and totally deaf to the new creative tendencies.

The choice of a moving theatre is underpinned by the original desire to bring art, culture and experiences in the most autonomous way where theatres do not exist [...] the small size of the *chapiteau* is deliberately limited [...] in this way the circus will be able to conquer again the historical centres where it was born and which the traditional-commercial circus, affected by gigantism, had to leave”

(Associazione Culturale SIDE, 2014: 9)

The quote above highlights different levels at which processes of differentiation work, sometimes in contradictory ways, within the circus community. Firstly, “research and experimentation” are taken in opposition to “traditional-commercial” circus. Secondly, nevertheless, the research undertaken from alternative circuses takes into account the popular taste, rather than producing “research that the audience does not like” (Frasca, 2015), like the one promoted by cultural policies and the “establishment”. Thus, popularity and accessibility lose their commercial meaning and become synonymies of revolutionary stakes, on the one hand creating real art as opposed to academic and commercial art, and on the other blurring the very claim of circus as a distinct art world. Being free to go where they want, alternative, autonomous circuses can “conquer again” those territories “where [real] theatres do not exist” (quote above), providing an alternative model of life and generating a “concrete, silent revolution” (MagdaClan, 2015), not merely at the artistic level, like the one envisaged by Becker.

These claims seem at least partially at odds with another common representation of circus as, historically, the most popular form of entertainment. In this view, circus is defined as a mere display of skills, a pure demonstration that, differently from theatre for instance, does not require interpretation (Stoddart, 2016: 15-16) because it is perceived viscerally and empathically (Tait, 2005), independently of the socio-economic background, the level of alphabetization, the usual consumption of culture of the audience. Even when it is ‘just’ virtuosity and technique, circus can communicate with an immediacy which is difficult for other forms of performing practices to achieve. If taken in this sense, ‘popularity’ is either a pivotal underpinning of the identity of commercial-traditional big circuses, or a constraining label, which stops the circus as a form of art from developing (Guy, 2015) and accessing elite theatres and festivals.

The popularity and accessibility claimed by alternative circuses aim instead at fostering a socio-political reflection in the broader audience, in opposition to academic art, which “appeals only to serious audience members, who understand the conventions, rules, and skills” (Becker, 1982: 290), and which generates avant-garde performances that “forget that we are doing circus, and you go too much into the personal trip of theatre and dance, into the message that nobody will every get maybe, forgetting all the technique...” [Leonardo, 23, professional student]; but also to the “Cirque du Soleil-like” commercial

circus of the big events, the “easily saleable”, the “gaudy” and flashy [ibid]. Thus, as in the case of creativity, this ‘political’ side of the circus practice – its vocation to differentiation, to carry alternative social values – is claimed by practitioners both as a property of certain types of circus, and as an intrinsic character of circus in general, differentiating it from other activities, building external and not only internal boundaries.

To give a first example of how circus is perceived as different from other art forms and bodily practices, we could turn to the notion of craft. As opposed to other ‘highbrow’ arts, circus in general is described as “a continuous do-it yourself, a continuous ‘roll up your sleeves’” and get to work (Frasca, 2015), as something you get your hands dirty with. In “Art Worlds”, Becker (1982) states that “members of art worlds often distinguish between art and craft”, despite the “typical sequences of change in which what has been commonly understood and defined [...] as a craft becomes redefined as an art or, conversely, an art becomes redefined as a craft” (: 272).

As we saw in paragraph 5.4 circus practitioners also distinguish between the virtuosity of craft and the uniqueness and expressiveness of art. On the other hand, though, the blurring of this distinction is defined as a central characteristic of the community of circus practice, with the exception of “the really big productions” such as Cirque du Soleil’s: while in other forms of art, like “musical” or “an actor in a prose show” your task is always the same: “dressing room, make up, rehearsals, applause, roses, restaurant, beddy-bye” [Paolo, 30, professional], in circus artists are asked to perform different types of work:

“The dimension of racking your brain for different things, starting from...creating a show that can work, to understand the structure, what kind of loads it must have, who is the engineer that can certify it, and blah blah blah, racking your brain for the costume I have to wear, to understand what permissions I need, how to promote the show, where to promote it, what type of an audience will come, will they like the show and consequently change the production, change the distribution, write another dossier, reply to that call, go do a workshop because I want to change that scene and I need to do that type of work, I could be a craftsman, more than an artist, it is too narrow a definition, or too large for me, more than narrow it is large, I mean I see myself more as a craftsman because what I do is really practical”,

[Paolo, 30, professional]

Interestingly, this seems to be a characteristic of traditional circuses (to which the interviewee above is referring), the alternative circuses, and the more commercial circuses (or at least those who claim the appreciation of the audience as one of the main reasons for their success). In all cases, the artists design and usually also make their own costumes, apparatus, settings; create, write and direct their shows or acts; shape production and distribution strategies, prepare budgets, apply for funding, organise tours and creative residencies. Thus, different types of knowledge, and not merely artistic and technical knowledge, and different learning processes are valued and fostered. Circus as such is challenging in many ways, “it is really a practice that pushes you and improves you” as a person and not only as an artist [Paolo, 30, professional].

A second aspect is connected to this. Circus is framed as a world devoid of hierarchies and competition. While other forms of ‘popular’ performance “such as cabaret theatre [...] arrive directly from TV and as such reflect a purely commercial logic, dynamics of public consensus, of acknowledgement of the famous personality, of the character, etc. [...] Circus is extraordinary because it doesn’t have famous characters, so one doesn’t go to see Marcello Mastroianni, but interpreters about whom in the majority of cases has no idea who they are” [expert interview 1]. There is no circus diva, no star, no *prima ballerina*, no differentiation of roles on stage, while, in the backstage, only very recently and encountering strong resistance the figure of the circus director is emerging.

The research shows how circus practitioners in general assert or are attributed a role of creators as well as interpreters, and often find it hard, or don’t have the opportunity, to put themselves in the hands of an external director. As Garcia (2011) and Salamero & Haschar-Noé (2011) observed about French contemporary circus, this is due to a culture of artistic polyvalence, in which conception, direction, interpretation are not separate, and are all important parts of the circus practice:

“The teachers would tell you: “Find a theme, finalize a routine to express and narrate this theme”. As I said, this part of the dramatization, that is left to us...I don’t feel I can measure up; I already struggle so much with the athletic part, that putting the dramaturgical part in it too is really hard for me”

[Livia, 48, amateur]

Moreover, in order to learn circus skills and to continue growing, it is necessary to constantly ask for advice, discuss, compare oneself to the others:

“I mean if you don’t realize what your level is, and what is interesting about what the others do [...] I mean you stay that way. Do you get it? I mean you remain that yes, you can juggle three balls and you think that’s amazing because for you it’s awesome, and ok it’s good but [...] you don’t relate to the others, don’t get advice, and that changes you, I think if one does circus [...] with humility [...] it’s a good thing, it helps you grow, it’s something that constantly puts you in front of your difficulties isn’t it?”

[Michele, 29, professional]

This “communitarian logic” (Garcia, 2011) has two corollaries. First of all, it fosters a feeling of belonging centred on a shared practice, on the “how cool you also do this!” rather than, again, fixed and clear roles, hierarchies and a sense of competition (which are generally attributed to theatre and dance): in the circus environment even “the people that do circus at the highest level” after the show join you at the bar to ask you “did you enjoy it?” [Chiara, 32, professional]. Secondly, the research showed how learning in circus allegedly happens through collaboration, sharing, and exchange of knowledge, tricks, figures, and techniques. Following this line, innovations spread quickly and easily, fostering – with the enthusiastic support of its members - the generic improvement of the whole community rather than few celebrities:

“...that discourse of the pure sharing which is typical of the juggler, I mean, I see in other artistic domains, I think about tango because it’s the other one I attended a lot, not to talk

about pure dance, be it classical, contemporary, also the theatre is always very...a bit careerist, and always a bit of a strategic discourse, so “I won’t explain this to you because if I explain it to you, you apply it straight afterwards and it’s not my own exclusive right anymore”. The street juggler instead is born, and grows, and becomes good thanks to the completely free sharing with other jugglers, I mean in the conventions you go there and there can be Jay Gilligan, who is the best juggler in the world, that explains to you how to do that thing, I mean you go to Jay and tell him “excuse me Jay can you show me that thing for a second” and he explains it because the spirit of the juggler is that very thing”

[Valeria, 39, professional]

This conception of knowledge fits particularly well Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder's (2002) theory of the community of practice, where know-how does not belong to anybody and any technical innovation tends to circulate freely. Moreover, this communitarian, participatory logic is becoming a dominant principle of the field (see for instance the audience development project Quinta Parete (2015), extensively funded by the Italian government), breaking with representations that depict it as autonomous and countercultural, and rising questions about the actual space left for alternative forms of circus.

## **5.6 External and internal boundaries of contemporary circus as a new field and a community of practice**

In the paragraphs above five axes were identified to illustrate the main underpinnings of the “core” (Wenger, 2010: 4) of circus practice: the embodied, virtuous mastery of demanding techniques and risk-control, and the more problematic ‘going beyond’ this technical aspect through creative commitment to the art and political engagement with alternative social values and change.

Following the idea that “core engagement” exists only in relation to the acknowledgment of the boundaries at stake, and that the two are “complementary aspects of learning” (ibid), in this paragraph I will attempt to draw both external and internal boundaries, as they are represented and imagined by circus practitioners, in order to further explore the “qualities” of the circus practice. As such, “boundaries can be as much a source of learning as the core of a practice” (ibid) not only for the members of a community, but also for the researcher. Moreover, like Bourdieu (1993) suggests, boundaries are important sites to explore because they are both stakes of struggle and extremely permeable within the field of cultural production, in which “hierarchization” is not “unilinear” (: 43). In these senses, accounting for both a contemporary circus field and a community of circus practice in Italy implies an analysis of the boundaries at stake.

These are fluid and involve different principles of hierarchization. If a Bourdieusian perspective entails focusing on the frontier between “the field of cultural production and the field of power” (ibid), the interest for the circus as a practice implies specific attention to “what the individuals recognise themselves as sharing” (Paechter, 2006: 19), that is, to both internal norms and othering processes in relation to “what is not” (ibid) part of the circus practice. As such, both structural conditions dictating dominant principles, labels and

categories, and different “modes of identification” (Wenger, 2010) – operating through engagement in activities, imagination of the world and belonging in it, and alignment with others’ perspectives - are at stake. This results in a particularly intricate crossroad of main streets, back streets, and wall streets<sup>24</sup>, which overlap and articulate into a complex intersection of social, political, cultural and subjective axes.

### 5.6.1 Circus and other practices

Because the boundaries of the new circus in Italy are not “formally fixed” through explicit “markers of membership, joining and leaving rituals”, in order to understand the “internal configuration” of the community of circus practice in Italy I focused on “its relationship with the rest of the world”, and in particular on how ‘other’ practices are defined as such (Paechter, 2003: 73). However, in doing so different perspectives may be taken into account. Boundaries may be imposed from above, as cultural politics categories and labels, and are at various degrees re-appropriated and countered by the practitioners, who, in turn, through their activities and representations, construct the boundaries of *their* circus practice employing, with different recipes, the axes named above.

For this reason, although the core of the circus practice is underpinned by a relatively solid pillar of circus technique, as we move towards the contemporary landscape external and internal boundaries become more and more blurred and intersecting. For instance, a practitioner of contemporary circus might place her own practice closer to contemporary dance than to the “neoclassic” way of doing both circus and dance [Marco, 36, professional].

We mentioned before that “local negotiation of meaning” goes hand in hand with “participation in broader systems” (Wenger, 2010: 4). Within the circus field, this is particularly evident when political acknowledgement is at stake, as two cases taken from the fieldwork show. In the first case, the director of a youth circus contested the resistance of a sport national association in acknowledging circus as a sport, thus denying the youth circus right to claim for insurance coverage and instructors’ formal training:

“They tell me that circus is an art and not a sport. But in their lists in the first places they have ‘martial arts’. Then there’s ‘artistic gymnastics’, then swimming developed its artistic side through synchronized swimming. It is not true that one thing excludes the other. They tell me [circus] is not a sport but how can you say this if we have courses for children and adults, projects with the schools...”

[fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2015]

The fact of circus being both a sport and an art is claimed by many as one of its distinguishing features: “what distinguishes circus from sports is that it is also an art; what distinguishes it from the art is that it is also a sport!” [Carlo, 42, project manager]. This is seen as an advantage and an attractive factor of circus, in that it provides opportunities both to keep fit and work with the body, to avoid competitive environments, and to be

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<sup>24</sup> This image draws on a passage from the book “The mountain shadow”, by Gregory David Roberts: “Back Street, Main Street and Wall Street are the three big streets in every city, and none of them play well together on the shallower edges of tangled banks...” (Chapter 81).



creative, which is “something that in sports doesn’t really exist. Because sport is made of strict rules, art is made of freedom and openness. In circus you invent your apparatus, in sport this doesn’t exist...the soccer player who invents a decagonal ball, this doesn’t exist” [expert interview 1]. From here, the idea that practitioners are allowed more freedom in the search of their own way of practicing circus in relation to more serious and rigid athletes, that they are a little crazier, and can (and must) think out of the box: “Circus has a thousand souls, it depends on how every single person lives it. The juggler lives it as numbers, I want to do 13,12,11, while there’s whom, in juggling, puts in some ballet or hip hop. You can do it!” [Carlo, 42, project manager].

In the second case, the director of a contemporary circus company was applying for a European project:

“Mine is a path of commingling...I would like to have the possibility of participating to the calls as a work of commingling between music, theatre, circus, dance, so if there’s a call in which you put dance but you’d allow me to participate, you don’t exclude me, or a call with theatre, and you’d allow me to participate, while on the contrary this is difficult and this is the reason why it was good to be accepted under the label dance [...]. I thought they would never take me because they think what I do is circus, so they won’t place me under dance, and even less theatre or theatre for young audiences, these were the three classifications, and this is the problem...”

[Elisabetta, 40, director]

This quote highlights the problematic issue of participating in a community which, on the one hand, is still on the path towards a full official and institutional acknowledgement and, on the other, defines itself as a “commingling” of disciplines and arts, and an intersection of genres. This is also why getting to both the core and the boundaries of contemporary forms of circus is not a straightforward task. The images used in the interviews (see chapter 3) were very useful to this respect. They allowed me to explore the boundaries of circus in relations to other practices, in particular aerial yoga, fitness, calisthenics, pole dance, dance, ‘physical’ or ‘athletic dance’ theatre<sup>25</sup>, and parkour (picture 5.1).

The boundary with a yoga and a fitness class was marked by differences in the objects and apparatus employed (small mats, low tissues), by the attention to the detail (legs were not enough stretched, legs not enough spread), and by the body positions and disposition in place, in particular the fact that the teacher shows the same figure to a whole class, that there are many people in the same position, and that each person had her own tissue: “[in circus the disposition] is a little random. I mean you train all together in the space, to do the strengthening, etc. but when you set up the apparatus, there are a few people for each apparatus, not like here everyone with his own” [Filippo, 22, amateur]. Moreover, the circus teachers usually follow students on a more individual basis, and, when they show a move, they do it before the student rather than at the same time like in a fitness class. The

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<sup>25</sup> This current has also been developing in Italy in the last years by companies such as Katakò and Liberidi, based in Milan. Although with a very different style from the ‘teatro fisico’ of Philip Radice in Turin, they name their genre as ‘physical theatre’ or ‘athletic dance theatre’, and draw on different disciplines including Lecocq’s theatre, gymnastics and dance.

setting also played a role, in that the gym was identified as a fitness gym due to its height, polished look, and presence of mirrors.

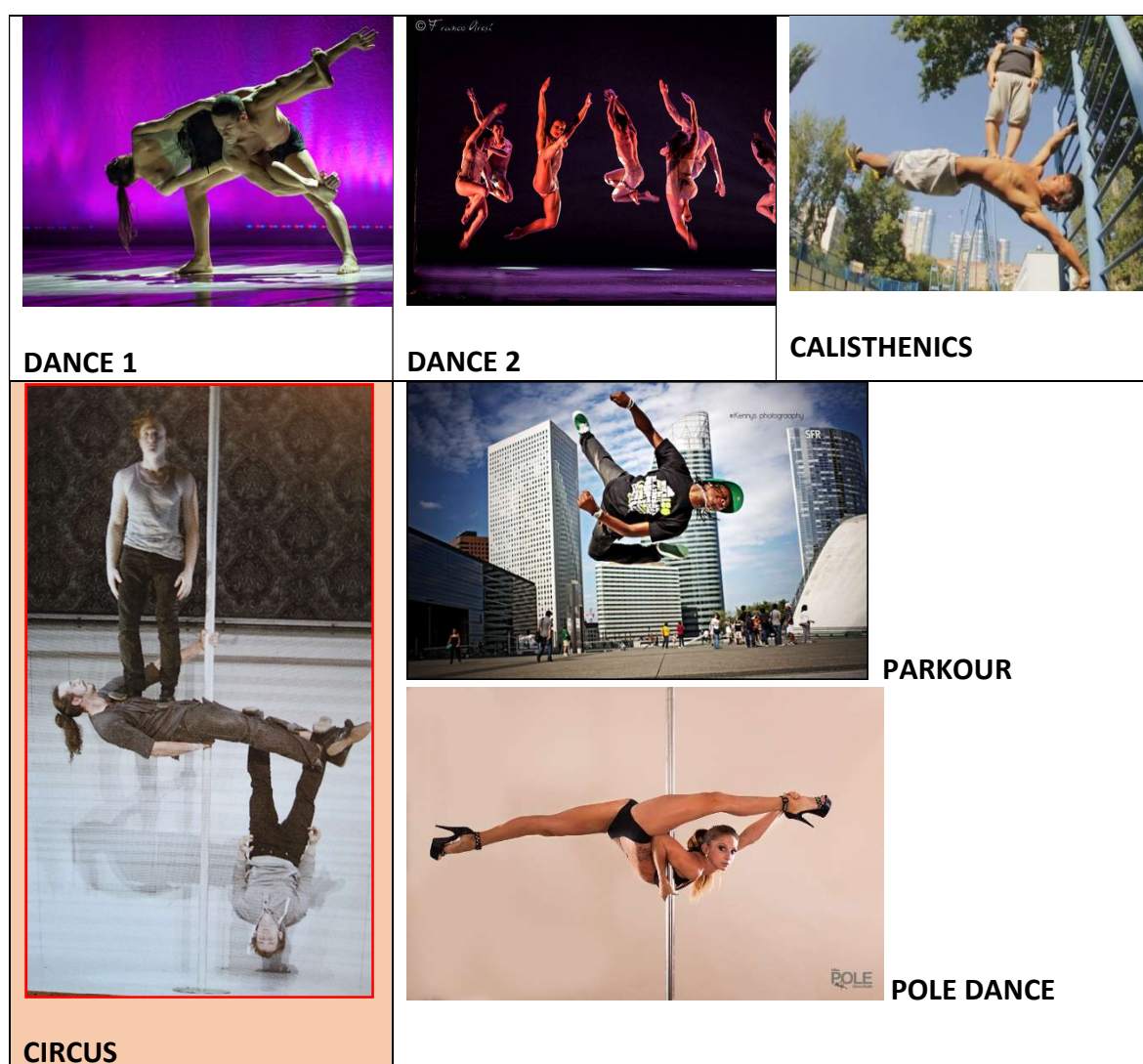
The boundary with calisthenics is mainly based on a notion of artistic research and creativity, and of “circus culture” of a certain circus apparatus, rather than a mere display of strength and skill, of the “Look how strong I am!” [Carlo, 42, project manager]. The setting was determinant: circus can be practiced anywhere, including a park, but it would then be used for training rather than to show off, and if it was a space of performance, there would be costumes. Some identified the type of shoes, as well, as belonging to sports rather than circus. Similarly, setting and style of clothing were central in the identification of parkour or urban dance as ‘other’ than circus. In particular, wearing a cap and a watch do not match the typical circus practitioner: “I think it’s at least 12 years that I don’t see a circus person with a watch” [Marco, 36, professional].

As for dance and the ‘physical theatre’ current, boundaries were set on the lack of recognizable circus tricks and figures, and on the diversity both of position and of types of body, which all look very similar:

“They have all the same lines, the arms in the same position, feet points absolutely stretched...a group of circus people never looks exactly the same, take the girls for instance, there’s a taller one, a shorter one, a chubbier one, a thinner one, while in dance they are generally very similar to each other physically”

[Giovanna, 49, project manager]

**Picture 5.1: circus and other practices**



**Sources:** 101 things to do, 2015; ABC Allenamento, 2013; Circondriacos, 2014; Danzaeffebi, 2014; Deviant Art, 2013; Grey panthers, 2014; Kiss Kiss Bank Bank Technologies, 2016; Maggie's notebook, 2014; Pole Dance Italia, 2012.



Finally, the main difference with pole dance was found in the presence of a too static pose, again “merely” displaying strength and flexibility, and in the type of cloths: “She is violently...I don’t know, this underwear especially, circus girls are very careful [...] to wear something that covers this part [groin]”, rather than aiming at showing their bodies, circus people aim at showing their skills, and for this try to avoid “that I look all around and then my eyes stop exactly there [groin], while this shouldn’t be the case”. Safety, as well as normative requirements differentiates between circus and pole dance: “she could never fall and stop on her belly, she would get burned and the day after she couldn’t do her show because they want her body to be beautiful” [Marco, 36, professional].

### 5.6.2 Traditional/Classic and Contemporary circus

Traditional circus was a “very closed” [Franco, 60, project manager] community of life and work which marked its separateness from the outside both materially (delimiting the space with barriers) and psychologically, remaining always the same, creating safety around this stability as against the continuously changing outside (Caforio, 1987). Contemporary circus is, on the contrary, open to everybody with a vocation to become an artist (Garcia, 2011). However, as an art, contemporary circus defines itself not only in opposition to traditional circuses’ closed way of life, but also to their ‘classic’ aesthetics which is reproduced in neoclassic forms of circus such as Cirque du Soleil’s, which, while contributing to the affirmation of “another possibility to do circus in our country”, is different from “the deconstruction characterizing Avant-gardes” (De Ritis, 2015).

The aesthetic of traditional circus is seen as “paralysed in a reiteration of an identical cliché”, and, as such, very far from the “current, trained circus artist” [expert interview 1] who pursues artistic innovation. In this line, a normative value is attached to the dimension of ‘cleanliness’, in the identification of classic and neoclassic circus (Cirque du Soleil above all), as opposed to contemporary, research circus, in which self-expression and authenticity are prioritized, sometimes at the expenses of polished lines, stretched points and legs, declaredly impressive tricks. These distinctions may be clarified through the comparison of the two images in table 5.1, which allowed to elicit significant insights during the interviews. They effectively convey the meanings attached to classic circus as opposed to ‘more authentic’, contemporary forms of circus.

**Table 5.1: classic and contemporary circus**

|   |   |
|---|---|
|    |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cold, lack of emotions, 'flat' emotions</li> <li>- Distance, detachment from the audience</li> <li>- Old, result of applying conventions and merely 'technical' research</li> <li>- Produces amazement, astonishment</li> <li>- Look at the horizon, infinite, 'functional' look to keep the balance</li> <li>- Static, pose, gesture, clean lines, flexibility, strength</li> <li>- 'What' is done: trick, difficulty, virtuosity</li> <li>- Superhuman skills</li> <li>- Fake / fictitious, appearance</li> <li>- Setting: circus tent or tv</li> <li>- Glittery, tight costume</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Warm, affectivity, sweet and hard at the same time (complex, contradictory emotions: hand like a caress and weigh hard to bear)</li> <li>- Proximity, sharing with the audience</li> <li>- Fresh, new, innovative, result of emotional and dramaturgical research and experimentation</li> <li>- Produces something meaningful, tells a story</li> <li>- Look shows intention, relation</li> <li>- Dynamic, alludes to movement, lack of attention to lines (lines are not researched, legs and feet are not stretched)</li> <li>- 'How' it is done: quality, interpretation, responsibility, having something to say, message</li> <li>- Humanity, affectivity, relationality</li> <li>- True, real life</li> <li>- Setting: theatre</li> <li>- Everyday clothes</li> </ul> |

Pictures' sources: Circondriacos, 2014; Maggie's notebook, 2014

The picture on the left would thus represent the "classical robot" [Paolo, 30, professional] which "puts together a super body, super lines, super clean" [Marco, 36, professional] mentioned in paragraph 5.4, entailing a "formal beauty" [Filippo, 22, amateur] lacking

innovation and authenticity, while the picture on the right is seen as the outcome of a search for a personal quality of movement which signals total ownership of one's body, including the expressive aspects [Paolo, 30, professional].

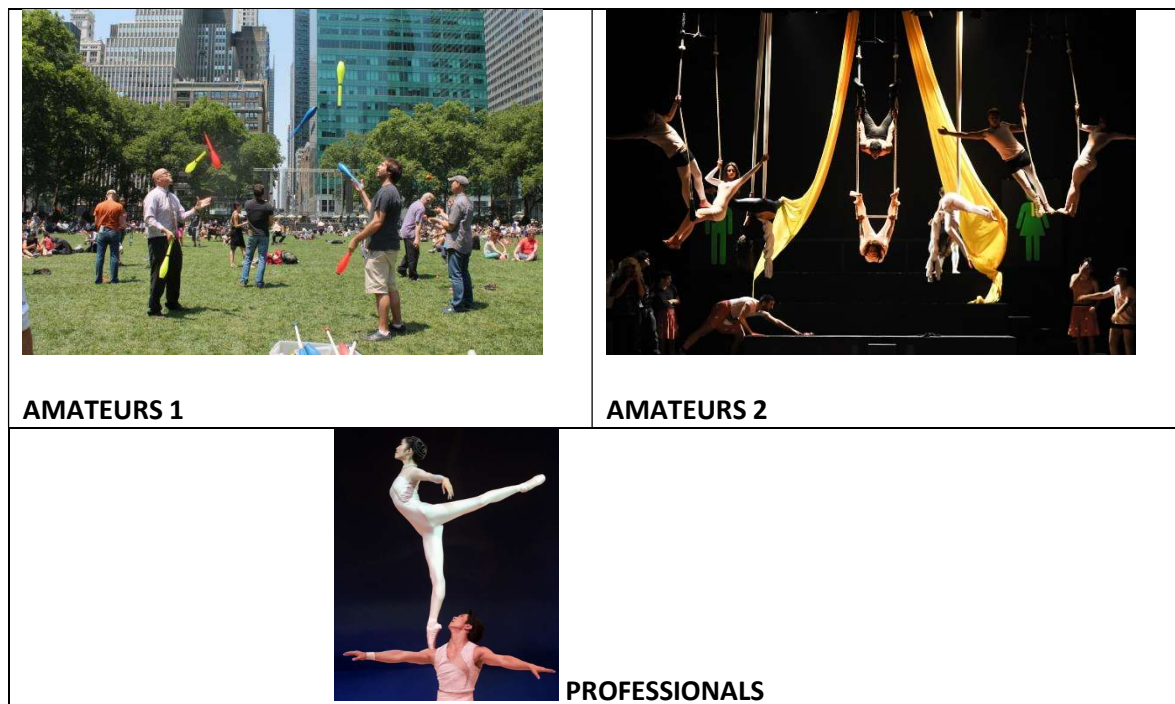
### **5.6.3 Amateur and professional circus**

On the one hand, circus today represents a career option for potentially everybody, the spreading of circus courses and workshops provide open learning opportunities, and an increasing number of amateurs – called “professional amateurs” by Stephens (2012) - occasionally engage in paid circus work. Moreover, the boundary between amateur and professional practice is often crossed: amateur courses have provided important points of contact between amateurs and professionals; social circus educators may advice particularly talented pupils to attend a circus school; professional artists work within social circus projects, in tandem with educators; many professionals started as amateurs and maintained close connections to their previous schools; professionals, students and former students often teach amateur classes within the schools, and sometimes train together, create groups, build close connections:

“After two years that I was doing trapeze [in an amateur course within a professional school] ... there was this group called ... and they asked me, it was a group of mixed people, pro and not-pro, we were a lot like around twenty in rotation, some arrived, some left...and one day during a meeting I met C. and at that time I didn't know her I didn't know what she did and I fell in love with her, and then I found out she was a [professional] trapeze artist”

[Pietro, 32, professional]

**Picture 5.2: Amateur and professional circus**



Sources: Bryant Park, 2013; Circo Corsaro, 2014; Maggie's notebook, 2014

However, the higher physical and emotional investment demanded of those who choose to turn circus into their main profession still builds significant differences between amateur and professional practitioners. Being an amateur or a professional artist generally entails 'external' differences in terms of body shape, look, attitude, age, type of props employed and technical and artistic skills:

"[looking at 'amateurs 2'] To start with, this guy has a point and a leg in 'flex' without realizing it I think, then there i salso...it's a group scene, the classical group scene of the end-of-the-year performance, also the choice of the costume...a little trivial...and a little "Ta-daaa!" the hand like "ta – daaa voilà! Thankyou!". But it's cute, makes you smile!"

[Emilia, 29, professional]

Moreover, it implies a totally different life choice, a different position and role of circus practice in one's own life, a different level of dedication and urgency to study, learn, seize opportunities:

"Living for that [for the passion for circus, for work, for training, for research], for those who want to become artists...it's a different choice, the professional artist is different from the amateur, if you want to be a professional artist you cannot lose a single moment"

[expert interview 2]

This implies that circus professionals do not see, as much as the amateurs, the ludic and fun dimension of training circus, which, rather than the option to be pursued after work,

becomes a matter of necessary engagement, even without, as it often happens, monetary recognition:

Conversation with a pro at the bar outside SLIP, I ask if she's going to train, she replies: "Today I'll do something only if they pay me, I'll do a sit-up only if they pay me". M. comments: "That's great...I mean, if it works!". She again: "...no, it doesn't work".

[fieldnotes, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2015]

Being circus *per se* the art of the extraordinary, even amateur practitioners can be perceived as virtuosos by the general audience, but, as a professional, one's goal should be to "surprise the circus people rather than mum and dad" [fieldnotes, 13<sup>th</sup> March, conversation with a professional specialized in swinging trapeze]. At the opposite end, the emotion felt by amateurs when performing can turn into mere routine for a professional: "in those shows that you have done maybe a hundred times...there is a bit of indifference...you get there, put your make up, warm up, do your thing, and that's it, ...it happens that you lose that aspect that is so central to me...feeling a kind of excitement, but positive, anxiety, willingness to be on stage and show your work, but also a little bit of fear" [Stefania, 40, professional].

A few words shall be spent on social circus practices. While participants to social circus projects may be assimilated to amateur practitioners, in terms of physical and time investment, the professionals involved in social circus - including instructors, educators, project managers, trainers and researchers (often with overlapping roles) – are often demanded high levels of subjective engagement with their work. However, this is often not limited to the training of circus skills, and it includes educational and administrative tasks. As such, social circus professionals' bodily capital is very different from that of professional artists.

However, social circus draws on the same core characters of circus practice in general. Its effectiveness is underpinned by the assumption that circus is "more of a physical and less of a mental experience", and as such it provides a "more concrete" and "healthier form" of therapy, in which "you learn to use your body which went through violent experiences" [Chiara, 32, professional].

Like social art in general, social circus

"occupies a thoroughly ambiguous position in relation to the other two in that it appeals to external functions (like bourgeois art) while at the same time rejecting (like art for art's sake) the dominant principle of hierarchy in the field of power" (Bourdieu, 1993: 16)

Social circus represents the 'other' of professional, artistic circus (Sorzano, 2016), as it addresses disadvantaged audiences and contexts, working on the deconstruction of stigma, to subvert social labels and empower participants. However, like in the case of other lifestyle sports, or popular forms of art, it has undergone multiple "civilizing processes" (Turner, 2013) of institutionalization (Shapiro, 2004), and it has been "infused with pervasive disciplinary discourses serving to produce normative 'healthy' [...] self-responsible and productive neo-liberal citizens" (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011: 127). Social



circus is also developing in institutionalized forms, and undergoing a process of professionalization in which credentials are becoming increasingly important (see paragraph 5.7).

As such, its relation with the field of power is ambivalent, since, in order to survive and develop, social circus must articulate adherence to cultural politics criteria for funding and the hegemonic, normative conceptualizations of sport, art, and social problems, and resistance against these policy agendas and disciplinary discourses, pursuing autonomous views and ways. This ambivalence may be even stronger in Italy than in countries like France and Scotland, in which “a long-standing tradition of social action (...), especially grass-roots education” (Shapiro, 2004: 318), a policy “concerned with cultural democracy” (ibid: 317), and the acknowledgement of policymakers of the potential of sport in promoting “youth engagement, physical health and well-being” (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011: 109) has rehabilitated popular art forms and ‘civilized’ lifestyle sports in the last decades. In our country, this potential of art and sports has gained scarce political attention. Social circus is thus less supported, but it may also be less bound by cultural and health policies.

#### **5.6.4 Alternative, commercial, and institutional circus**

We have seen that the relation with the institutions, and the processes of formalization and specialization constitute a particularly contested terrain within the circus community. On the one hand, the discourse supports the creation of contemporary circus as a more or less institutionalized field of cultural production, artistic research, or social intervention, claiming for more support and recognition from institutions and authorities, and looking hopefully at the recent interest of formal institutions as the well-deserved recognition of the artistic value of circus, and as a possibility for more rentable functioning from both artistic and economic point of view.

Institutional acknowledgement in this sense may (or may not, it is still hard to tell) represent a first step towards a professionalization of a sector constitutes in its greatest part of smaller, local organisations which have to rely on their own resources to develop a network of contacts and thus improve their possibility to work – in a daily mission which is similar to a struggle (Garcia, 2011: 48). For instance, for many artists the fact of having to dedicate long, unpaid hours to administrative and promotion tasks – besides the actual physical and artistic work - is extremely demanding:

“Stress and frustration for me has a lot to do both with the rehearsals and with the management of the show-machine. There is a lot in that part that I would like to...solve

I: What do you mean?

I mean, for example ... finding solutions in the managing which I still don't know, I mean for sure a person that can do all that part of distribution, promotion, it would already be a big slice but, to say it all, to me it's a burden even the fact of having to write the email: “is the gym free for two days, at what price, to rehearse?” That weighs on me a lot too”.

[Maura, 33, professional]

However, even if organisation and division of work may entail a more rentable functioning from both artistic and economic point of view, they also encounter resistance and disagreement about delegating roles and decisional power in a universe of small organisations aroused, for the greatest part, from personal encounters, emotional investment, and relatively restricted social networks, following a tendency observed by Garcia (2011) in France.

On the other hand, the institutionalization and “economization” of circus is seen as a threat and a form of corruption (Beadle, 2014) of the originally countercultural, sharing spirit of circus, which escapes labels, categories, formalization of any kind. In this view, institutions, politics, and the economy contaminate the spirit of circus turning it into a reproducible format and method and into a way of life too close to the mainstream, while alternative circus as a choice of life places itself, in its extreme version, as opposed to institutions and to the bourgeois way of life, resisting formalization and codification and control through which “European budgets” fund “innovation and research that the audience does not like”, and from “commercial circus, just a game of lights” (Frasca, 2015), reclaiming, in a sense, the roots of traditional circus (as a travelling community with a disturbing function of passive ordinary life) but with an emphasis on the dimensions of political choice of life, openness, participation and lack of hierarchies.

This dispute highlights the controversial character of the “economization of culture”: “Practices and institutions sit in a constant tension – practices cannot survive without institutions, but institutions bring with them the pursuit of goods that can always corrupt practices” (Beadle, 2014: 6).

### **5.7 Towards a definition of circus: processes of authentication and institutionalization**

We have seen thus far how the circus field is undergoing formalization and institutionalization, while struggles for authenticity characterize the community of circus practice and the related subcultural groups. This paragraph resumes the analysis of the construction of a new circus field in Italy and of the values and definitions circulating within the community of circus practice to highlight their nexus with processes of institutionalization and constructions of authenticity.

Two main definitions of circus emerge from the analysis: one is asserted by cultural entrepreneurs who, following the French model, claim the status of art for circus, and enhance artistic training and production within the field. A second definition draws on the opportunities provided by circus as an educational and sports activity, and is therefore concerned with participation and access to the circus practice. Each definition is linked to specific conflicts, hierarchies and distinction, since, as a claim and a construction, authenticity is always a form of “subcultural ideology” (Thornton, 1997).

In the first case, contemporary circus emerges in opposition to traditional forms of circus, through an ambivalent relation with institutionalization (in the case of the ‘alternative’ circus), and the conflation of creativity and bureaucracy in circus professional training. In the second one, tensions emerge concerning subcultural membership, aesthetic

preferences, and teaching and learning techniques, but also around very practical issues such as teachers' training, safety, insurance, and the corresponding credentials.

The claim for official acknowledgement which led to the current processes of institutionalization is intertwined with practical needs such as funding, insurance, and credentialization. Moreover, institutionalization is linked to domestication and civilization of practices otherwise marginal and deviant, following cultural policies which foster active citizenship (cf. Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Shapiro, 2004; Turner, 2013).

For what concerns credentialization, Collins (1971) argues that "the increased schooling required for employment in advanced industrial society" reflects the demands for greater skills, but more importantly responds to "the efforts of competing status groups to monopolize or dominate jobs by imposing their cultural standards on the selection process" (: 1002). His conclusions are underpinned by the observation of the variability of occupational demands, established "upon bargaining between the persons who fill the positions and those who attempts to control them" (: 1007).

Through institutionalization, education becomes a mark of membership in a particular group, rather than a mark of technical skills. This is evident in the high symbolic value that attending, or having attended (one or the other) professional circus school acquires within the community of circus practice in Italy, and in the role of these institutions in spreading versions of subcultural knowledge: "the content and occupational significance of [the few existing or emerging] credentials are [...] cultural and exclusionary" at least as much as "technical and efficacious" (Brown, 2001: 20).

Moreover, in line with Brown's arguments, the most powerful organisations in the field offer new possibilities of credentialization, fostering (self-inducing) the demand for officially recognized education. This is evident in the increasing number of trainings for circus trainers in Italy. However, strong cultural, symbolic barriers based on belonging persist, and limit access to occupations and organisations in the field of circus more diffusely than the recently introduced credentials: "credential requirements for jobs are less concerned with concrete work skills than with demanding that recruits hold similar, school-taught cultural dispositions to incumbents of positions [...] occupational monopolies are upheld by popular beliefs that mask cultural domination under ideologies of individual merit and technical competence" (ibid).

In the case of contemporary circus, a system of credentials is currently starting to take shape. Thus, informal training, professional experiences, as well as subcultural and social capital count at least as much as credentials. Formalization and specialization of training is still not strong enough to turn credentials into the sole "cultural entry barriers to position" (ibid), nor into a fully effective "formal claim to competence or trustworthiness" (ibid: 26).

In order for credentials to work technically (as certification of skills), they need the "creation of a powerful alliance of disciplinary and professional organisations, employers, and governmental regulatory authorities" (ibid: 29). Given the fragmentation of the circus field, and the absence of unique regulatory authority, credentials cannot work in such ways yet, or only contextually to specific organisations. It is not by chance that Gilchrist &

Wheaton (2011) define this situation as “accreditation bandwagon” (: 119), to indicate a particularly significant ‘battlefield’ for position taking.

For what concerns domestication, I will draw on Shapiro (2004) to highlight central features in the “multiple, interdependent processes of institutionalization” of the circus field. The case of breakdance analysed by Shapiro outlines dynamics of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the role of support from the public sector, and of the alterations of alliances and competition between members of different social groups (with different values) and generations: “the ongoing controversy involves three definitions of breakdancing: as art, as competition, and as socialization” (ibid: 317), which command three main processes of institutionalization: breakdance as an art form, as competition, and as a tool for social work.

The first derived from government policy concerned with cultural democracy and the will to rehabilitate popular art forms. Like for *nouveau* and contemporary circus, such institutionalization by cultural entrepreneurs has produced a distinctive art form that is more developed in France than in any other country: the hip hop ballet. Framing breakdance as competition entails instead a return to the “real thing” (ibid), as a reaction to the “anesthetization of breakdancing” (ibid: 318). Finally, social workers and educators see both art and sports as possibilities for social improvement, and consider the value of hip hop for education and socialization.

Circus can be defined as art, as a profession, and as a bodily practice (and the community developed around it). These definitions insist on different conceptualizations of authenticity, and different processes of institutionalization: as a professional artistic field, and as social, youth and amateur circus. In all cases, “institutionalization is based not only on shared meanings but also on diverging interpretations of those meanings”, and, as we saw in Turin’s scene, official definitions demand “cooperation and organisation for the perpetuation and legitimation of forms of action” (ibid: 331).

Three different, but strictly interconnected processes emerge from the analysis of the internal and external boundaries of circus, and in particular from these two definitions. A first aspect is related to formalization through professionalization, institutionalization, commercialization. Secondly, I highlighted subjectivity and identity building through a “calculating hedonism” which attributes meaning to personal experiences, linking them to each other in an attempt to rationalize one’s course of life, or career, in relation to one’s ‘real self’; and, at the same time, searches for, tests, and reveals the latter through a certain attitude towards and style of life (cf. paragraph 2.7), the experience of strong emotions, autotelic activities, and participation in collective effervescence. Finally, conceptualizations of artistry and creativity play pivotal roles in the recent attempts to reframe the circus and construct a new circus field of artistic and cultural production.

These diverse dynamics find in the notion of authenticity a common, particularly fertile conceptual terrain. As stated above, authenticity is a construction through which the members of a cultural or subcultural group make sense of their lives and experiences. Constructions of authenticity are appropriated and formulated at the structural levels, by institutions and organisations which operate in the fields of power and in the economic field. In table 5.2 I propose a typology of ‘circus authenticities’, attempting to hold together these micro and macro levels, and the different processes emerging from the analysis.

**Table 5.2: Typology of circus authenticities**

| Field authenticities   | Subjective authenticities  | Formal authenticities  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>The “timeless circus”</p> <p>Contemporary circus: multidisciplinary, creative, innovative, complex.</p> | <p>Circus as autotelic experience: challenging and learning aspects of circus; emotional and bodily experience of practice and performance (collective effervescence). Authenticity of experiencing strong emotions and overcoming physically demanding challenges. Immediate authenticity, emotional rather than rational.</p> <p>Circus in the life course: how circus helps to make sense of one’s (personal and professional) career. Rationalizing, ex-post authenticity.</p> | <p>Circus art for circus art’s sake</p> <p>Commercialized forms, for instance talent and other TV shows, commercial events, etc.</p> <p>Professionalization: relation to system of educational credentials, definition of training paths, etc.</p> <p>Institutionalization: relation to officially funded and structured organisations and projects. Relation to local and national authorities.</p> |

‘Field authenticities’ are defined in relation to the characters which are attributed to different notions of ‘authentic circus’, as a form of art or entertainment. In particular, this typology can be linked to the historical development of ‘circus frames’ (such as traditional/classic, contemporary, and social circus), and to the features of the “timeless circus” presented in chapter 1. Moreover, it is related to the construction of a new field of circus, in which old, out of fashion conceptions are disrupted in favour of notions of circus as creative, artistic and innovative.

‘Subjective authenticities’ are defined in relation to the ways in which circus practice contributed to the construction of self, both as a project (that is, through rationalizations about one’s career and different working and life experiences), and as something revealed through punctual, instantaneous feelings of connection to something bigger and other than the self (for example a community, Nature, Art, Life as a whole) such as autotelic experiences, and participation in moments of collective effervescence, which in turn function to demonstrate one’s character and responsible self.

‘Formal authenticities’ are defined in relation to, for instance, titles, credentials, official visibility – that is, modes of formal acknowledgement of circus practice and expertise. While ‘field authenticities’ refer specifically to the reframing of circus as art, and as such to the centrality of conceptions of artistry and creativity in the neoliberal society, formal authenticities refer to the ways in which the status of authentic circus practitioner may be achieved and testified, the role of credentials and formal certifications on the one hand,

and informal education and professional experiences on the other. To this respect, the processes of professionalization, commercialization and institutionalization of contemporary forms of circus become central to analyse how notions of authenticity are constructed in line with, or in opposition towards, these attempts to fix, spread and restrict knowledge of and access to circus culture and specific capital.

The different types of authenticity are connected among themselves. Subjective authenticity, for instance, may be claimed on the basis of formal credentials, or, on the contrary, in opposition to the conceptualizations of circus fostered by institutions and organisations struggling for a position within the contemporary circus field currently under construction. Careers may be constructed as rationalizations of movements towards and away from the legitimate, authentic ways of practicing and performing circus. Finally, the formalization of the sector can be seen as an effective channelling of the creativity required of contemporary circus practitioners, or else as way to definitely cage it; in the same line, position taking within the circus field occurs ambivalently in relation to formalization.

### **5.8 Concluding remarks: contemporary circus in contemporary capitalism**

The intention driving this chapter was to show the changes within the circus world employing both the concept of community of practice and of circus field, focusing on the interplay between representations and experiences, learning and meaning making, the principles of hierarchization of the field of circus arts, and the broader field of economic and political power to outline some of the ways in which the recent transformations of the modes of practicing and consuming circus are embedded in society at large.

As such, the paragraphs above outlined five main axes – the centrality of technique, risk and embodied knowledge, the importance of creativity, and the framing of (a certain type of) circus values and choice of life as alternative or different – to understand how circus practitioners define and represent circus. These axes underpin the dynamic process of meaning making within the community of circus practice as a social learning system, providing practitioners with opportunities of personal participation in the form of engagement in shared activities, and of reification of their participation through the production of techniques, methods and concepts (Wenger, 2010). Circus practitioners engage in training and performances, embody specific body techniques and produce both a “symbolic” and an “actual body” (Paechter, 2003: 77), which works as a specific form of capital (Wacquant, 1995) employed to gain membership, acknowledgement and income.

The recent “revolution” (Becker, 1982) turned circus from a closed, marginal community in which socialization followed its own logic and was organised around work, families, a nomadic way of life, and a notion of circus art as the responsibility and product of every circus family (Afonso, 2002), to a cultural phenomenon at the centre of the most recent trends in the fields of the arts, sports and leisure. Thus, the redefinition of values, meanings and forms of participation within contemporary circus as both a field, a practice and a community requires specific attention. Virtuosity, as embodied mastery of circus technique and physical risk, represents a relatively stable, “concrete”, underpinning of circus knowledge and values. Despite the different interpretations, definitions, roles and methods

it implies, it can still be inscribed within the “ordinary functioning” (Wacquant, 1995), the relatively coherent logic which has thus far sustained the circus universe.

However, contemporary circus as an emerging new field, distinct from and, to a certain extent, opposed to traditional circus, places circus practitioners on a precarious, unstable and contested terrain, where, through their everyday practices, they are giving shape to a new “regime of competence”, new “criteria and expectations” through which membership may be recognized (Wenger, 2010). While the managing of other types of risk as well as physical risk - namely artistic, entrepreneurial, narcissistic risk – become central, to different degrees, as parameters on which practitioners’ character is to be judged, notions of creativity and authenticity are imposed as structuring principles of the field of contemporary circus, and re-appropriated in meaningful ways by the members of the new circus community. However, this often clashes with the actual living and working conditions of circus artists, and the monetary and material recognition of their work, as the following extract highlights:

“I really want to say this: very often with the excuse of pleasure, that it is our dream, it is our passion, you like doing it [...] then you go to the people that hire you or have to pay you and “ah, but you like it, ah, things...” and then you put down the costs and **often this work is not paid as it should, in Italy**, if you think about the other arts [...] and we are talking about a short-term work, if you take the physical part of it we are not paid like soccer players [but the work is equally demanding] and **they have health insurance and everything we have nothing of that and this thing is never recognized** [...] they rely on this thing, that it is beautiful, that it is a dream, that it is artistic and these things to take things away from you instead I think we should all keep it in mind every time we [work] and realize ourselves, also **those parts you are giving up to do this**»

[Emilia, 29, professional]

The fragmented, precarious development of the circus sector is a prove of how, in order to effectively work as a major factor of economic and development (Florida, 2012), creativity (somewhat paradoxically) requires formal structures and monetary acknowledgement. In other words, the possibility to generate new creativity and employ it in the production of economy and society relies on the quality of life and on the working conditions of the creative workers. If the creative class is symbolically identified by subjective dispositions more than professional or educational background, social and organisational conditions are required to allow creativity to be expressed without alienating effects (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011).

In the introduction to “The rise of the creative class”, Florida (2012) asks: “Take a typical man on the street from the year 1900 and drop him into the 1950s. Then take someone from the 1950s and move him [...] into the present day. Who would experience the greater change?”, to argue that the transformations of norms and values, of the ways in which people live and work, of rhythms and patterns of daily life, matter more than technological change. I argue that in this light the recent reconfiguration of the circus sector looks less surprising or revolutionary once new meanings are understood.

As a matter of fact, neoliberalism and contemporary circus foster values through keywords which are astonishingly similar: creativity, participation, sharing, reconquering public space. Thus, what makes circus different and alternative to other forms of art and practice, also places it at the core of late capitalism dynamics. Circus practice requires to be disciplined, creative, authentic, multi-tasking, committed and “attached to your show, your work” [Paolo, 30, professional], perfectly in line with the demands of affective, immaterial and passionate labour (Arvidsson et al., 2010b; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Stephens, 2012).

Moreover, as we will see more in depth in the next chapter, the reconfiguration of the circus sector in Italy shows that only those forms of creativity which can be subjected to formalization and institutionalization - conflating “notions of self-realization and autonomy” with “an orientation to success in the marketplace” (Wilf, 2010: 569) - are granted social acknowledgement within the current redefinition of dominant and alternative principles of hierarchization (Bourdieu, 1993).

Contradicting the stereotype of artistic careers as freer than the others (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), creativity does not erase social inequalities, rather it shifts them to a more ‘intimate’ terrain, on which subjectivity is at stake as much as productivity. Moreover, through the commercialization of self-discipline, work enters the sphere of leisure and creative and artistic practices, turning the production of disciplined, determined, hard-working, yet emotional, creative and unique selves into a matter of social responsibility and obligation (Sassatelli, 2010). In this sense creativity and authenticity become new ideologies, in that they are hailed as solutions to structural problems and underpin the “universally shared illusion” (Bourdieu, 1995: 34) of a free, adventurous, empowering life and practice.

Data generated through observations and interviews indicate that circus is practiced as a form of resistance and promotion of an ‘alternative’ notion of art, based on creativity, innovation, blurring of boundaries with other forms of art and sport, new forms of organisation and relationships with the audience, democratisation of the practice. However, within the neoliberal context, this tendency acquires an ambivalent character. These apparently contradictory trends – expansion of and resistance against new capitalism – are held together thanks to processes of meaning-making. For instance, we will see in the next chapter how the mere fact of being able of making a living out of one’s art – even if this implies accepting and mediating with commercial art - acquires value as a vehicle of resistance and authenticity. The latter is given by the totalizing investment required, and its monastic, rather than instrumental, value, no matter the type of work or employer.

Moreover, this ambivalence characterises neoliberalism in general, which expands and appropriates spaces of resistance, channelling them towards efficiency and production through commercialisation, institutionalisation and rationalisation.



## Chapter 6: Circus careers

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters outlined the emerging field of contemporary circus in Italy and the values, conflicts and hierarchies involved in the community of circus practice, highlighting strategies, ideologies, and subjective aspects of the dynamics at stake, and introducing insights into the opposition and complementarity of commercial art and art for art's sake (Bourdieu, 1993), the ideology of innovation and creativity as 'invisible' drivers of contemporary capitalism, and the desire and need for professional artists to pursue both symbolic values and material profits, and to negotiate between aesthetic changes and economic constraints, reproduction and distinction.

The interplay between individual experiences and the social aspects and economic principles specific to the circus sector emerges even more clearly and strongly when careers, in Hughes' (1984) sense of nodes in which a person's life is joint "with [historic, social] events, large and small" (: 124), including "the phases and turning points of a man's [sic] whole life [...] of which his [sic] work is but one facet" (: 125), are taken into account. Goffman sees careers both in the sense of the image of self and self-identity, and of an official role, belonging to an institutional system (Murgia, 2006). In this sense, this chapter further develops the conceptual 'missing link' between the structural and the phenomenological perspective at stake in the thesis, exploring the modes in which collective and subjective representations of art, labour, leisure and business shape the lives of circus practitioners, professionals and amateurs alike.

In this chapter I will highlight how the case of the show business in general, and the contemporary circus sector in Italy in particular, is paradigmatic of a neoliberal framework in which the status of 'art' justifies 'precarity'. In paragraph 6.2 I will illustrate the tension between symbolic value and material gains which characterizes this sector, emphasizing how conceptions of vocation enhance the first (paragraph 6.3), while the second ones are maximised through strategies of risk management (paragraph 6.4). In paragraph 6.5 I will analyse and problematise the articulations of these dimensions in the different types of circus identified in the previous chapter, focusing in particular on amateur and professional circus, and among the latter, distinguishing between artists and other types of circus professionals. Finally, in paragraph 6.6 I will draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the ways in which the constant efforts to balance symbolic and material aspects in artists' careers characterize neoliberal ideologies and subjectivities in general.

According to a number of scholars (see for instance Bassetti et al., 2015; Chicchi et al., 2015; Menger, 1999; Sapiro, 2007; Stephens, 2012), contemporary cultural production, and the show-business in particular, represent a paradigmatic case to look at the social role and the symbolic value of artistic professions and practices, and at the new articulations of art as opposed to – or in compliance with – notions of work, labour and leisure. Artistic practices blur symbolic and material needs, aims and gains, reflecting the reconfiguration of the relation between paid labour and vocation work in the post-Fordist context, in which the capability to transfer subjectivity, emotionality, innovation, creativity, originality, and sociability directly through produced goods and services becomes central to the value of

labour. Leisure is the site of imaginary production of immaterial and identity goods typical of the new capitalist configuration of labour, and it is also a salient case to understand how precariousness and self-exploitation can limit freedom as well as representing the only means to escape passive productivity.

Thus, ideals of independence and vocation translate into rigid imperatives of flexibility, self-discipline, complex organisation of diverse tasks and sources of income, free work and the constant need to search for and build opportunities of (self-) employment. In this sense, work becomes boundless and permeates all spheres of life, without necessarily implying higher incomes. This new form of labour exploitation is hidden under a cover of self-actualization and self-expression. In this sense, work becomes “charged with existential aspects” (Chicchi et al., 2015: 10).

The case of the circus is particularly relevant, since, like Stephens (2012) argues, “art, not cooptation [by the economic field], is what is new for circus” (: 164), which until very recently was considered the site of entertainment and virtuosity *par excellence*, and remains mostly so in the collective imagination, at least in Italy. Moreover, circus has entered the sphere of disciplined fun or “rational recreation” (Sassatelli, 2012: 5), since, as we saw above, courses and workshops are opening up diverse training opportunities accessible to passionate amateurs, disadvantaged targets, children and adults in search of fun and fitness. In this sense, circus can be considered as a “market-savvy art form” (Stephens, 2012: 107) which follows the contemporary tendency towards the optimization of difference, the desire for commodification of the marginal, and the increasing symbolic value attributed to cultural diversity, niche marketing, and non-standard consumption:

“I don’t think it is coincidental that circus has recently been granted status as an art form. Looking at the practices of circus performers historically and contemporarily, it appears to me that circus is precisely the kind of art that does well under the constraints and disciplines of the current economic paradigm. Under these conditions art is subject to increased pressure to be financially viable, and there is a growing demand for artists (and all workers) to be entrepreneurs who market and manage their images and careers”

(Stephens, 2012: 106)

Thus, if the term career in the neoliberal context evokes an elusive and problematic domain in general, circus careers interlace in particularly significant ways with salient themes for today’s society, such as the vocation, passion and disinterested attitude underpinning artistic practice, the search for time and spaces of self-expression, the ‘body and soul’ dedication to a physically demanding activity, the market orientation of the field of entertainment, and the engagement – to different degrees – with a diversity of tasks, competences, and (more or less paid) jobs. Both as a professional and as an amateur occupation, circus requires intense commitment, and develops “a rich culture and a strong sense among the members of being different from other people” (Hughes, 1984: 296).

Moreover, the apparent marginality of the circus case fades in a society in which “no profession is safe anymore, so the gall I showed in daring [a circus career] became let’s say the necessary condition for today’s students, who know that as soon as they’ll finish they will have to throw themselves in a jungle and will not have a permanent job” [Emanuele,

36, professional]. Circus artists can say “I live out of what I do”, and do not feel “inferior” to those who have a stable job but “struggle...eight hours a day, three euros per hour” [Michele, 29, professional]. Access to the contemporary circus labour markets in Italy is underpinned by the construction of a professional social network, like in dance and theatre, as well as peculiar ways to form groups and produce performances, such as strong social ties, artistic affinity, and self-direction: “a circus in which you are in a company, you choose your own company” [Marco, 36, professional]. While auditions represent the main tool to access the field and operate on the labour market in dance and theatre (Bassetti, 2009; Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), the circus sector is still not developed enough to organise official auditions itself, although circus artists are employed in dance, theatre, opera productions and TV shows, local traditional circuses hire seasonal performers, and big international companies such as Cirque du Soleil organise auditions in the biggest cities.

On the contrary, the diversification of sources and constant search for funding represents a common point between circus – in which less than a third of the sources to produce circus shows are (local and national) public institutions (Malerba & Vimercati, 2016) - and the other performing genres (Bassetti, 2009; Luciano & Bertolini, 2011). Performing artists operate on a labour market in which short term and project-based contracts prevail, and the public social security provided is minimal. These workers can thus be taken as a paradigmatic example of the importance of individual – rather than systemic - strategies to face career obstacles and seize opportunities. Their familiarity with the model of flexibility, temporariness, and self-entrepreneurship precedes the shrinking, from the 1990s, of the so called ‘family-work’ system (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011: 153), based on a gendered division of labour, on male full-time employment and on dependent, long-term employment, with a strong welfare.

Together with the absence of an officially recognized, single educational path to become a professional artist, the flexible, uncertain mechanisms to access the labour market, the precarious working conditions and the need of a time consuming, constant search for diversified sources of funding, outlines the profile of a ‘doubly invisible’ profession. Following Urfalino (1989), Salamero (2009) speaks about “invisible academies” to indicate a situation of “aesthetic anomy” and “artistic autonomy” in which the only marker of consecration to a profession and certification of certain skills and status is State aid. The term “invisible” indicates the ambiguity and unseizable character of these mechanisms, which enable institutions to provide support without taking responsibilities for artistic choices. In the Italian case, however, public funding supports only a minimal part of the cultural production in the performing arts sector (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), outlining a situation in which not only the criteria, but support itself is almost invisible, as we have seen in paragraph 4.3.

## **6.2 Symbolic and material gains**

If the uncertainty of the working conditions of the circus artist is a source of concern, stress and disadvantage, it is also a defining trait of the artist’s peculiar professional position. Artistic activities in general are characterised by weak regulation and strong personalization (Sapiro, 2007). Positions in the artistic labour market are to be created, rather than pre-fixed, and individual talent, charisma, disinterestedness and symbolic

capital evidently acquire more value than routine, interchangeability, material gains and the certification of skills. The precariousness entailed by the choice to follow the artistic vocation generally acquires secondary importance in the artists' interpretation of their careers, while the myth of the artist as "a charismatic figure who, assuming luck comes his way, is driven exclusively by the inner need to realize himself through self-expression" (Menger, 2014: 104) prevails. The case of circus is no exception: artists and practitioners in general show a highly enthusiastic attitude for the acknowledgement of individuals' uniqueness, the passion, emotions, freedom and creativity involved in circus work. This positivity conceals the precariousness, uncertainty and instability of a demanding, necessarily multi-task occupation generating concern, anxiety, frustration and sometimes rage among professionals, and scepticism and reluctance in those who choose to undertake or maintain a separate career outside the artistic sector.

Besides the need to constantly deal with uncertainty and precariousness while "putting one's nose to the grindstone" [different interviews], another issue remains hidden under the rationalisation through which choice is obscured by 'vocation', success by predestination, effort and discipline by gift:

"while the uncertainty of success contributes to the social prestige of the artistic professions and grants a magical quality to a type of activity that has become the paradigm of unconstrained, nonroutine, and ideally fulfilling labor, it also generates considerable disparities between the conditions of artists who succeed and those of individuals who are relegated to the lower ranks of the celebrity pyramid"

(Menger, 2014: 104).

While the profession of artist entails, in reality, a broad range of socio-economic conditions and symbolic gains, the ideology of creative freedom and high non-monetary advantages and satisfaction offers a justification for the choice of a life of limited material means and high insecurity, "as if artists inverted the values attached to, on the one hand, social integration by means of a regular and paid activity, and, on the other, personal autonomy in the typically painful experience of unemployment" (ibid: 110), leading to the paradoxical situation in which security entails discomfort and dissatisfaction:

"After two years [of a permanent teaching job] I understood that I felt a bit...it was like having a permanent job, although I worked only a few hours per week. The fact of going there three-four times a week, even just for two-three hours, it already felt like having a real job, so I started working again full-time with the company [...] and we started travelling a lot all over the world"

[Stefania, 40, professional]

Following Bourdieu (1993), Menger (2014) argues that this subversion of social values is connected to a more general "defence mechanism against disenchantment" (: 111), in which the meanings attached to failure and success, satisfaction and distress are inverted, the most famous artists can be accused of betraying their artistic mission, while the fulfilment of a creative need indifferent to success can become a dream.

"I would like to slowly go towards something [...] non-commercial, or at least non-canonical, not...not entertaining, I don't know how to define it..."

I: "NOT entertaining?"

"Not entertaining, I mean, entertaining in a broader sense, but not necessarily comical or aimed at collecting money I mean there are many things that when you perform in the street...especially if you are busking freely and not in festivals, you have to take into account who's in front of you don't you? [...] I wonder if doing a show [...] something contemporary in inverted commas, I wonder if an audience that you find spontaneously in the street, if they are ready to see such a show"

[Michele, 29, professional]

In this sense, doing 'real' art entails indifference to heteronomous principles, which in turn becomes an autonomous guarantee of success. A similar process of distinction through the rejection of or resistance against commercialization and institutionalization can be found in alternative sports, in which 'being alternative', rather than 'the best', represents a source of authenticity (Ferrero Camoletto, 2005). However, it is important for this research to remind that, in the Italian context, the cases of success in the field of contemporary circus are even rarer than in other artistic fields, and criteria to identify success and failure vaguer, due to the novelty of the contemporary circus phenomenon in the country. For instance, figures of reference such as directors and companies are still missing or little known, the visibility of contemporary circus is growing but still limited, and often gained through participation in other artistic, sport or commercial sectors and events, such as theatre, dance, music, and television shows, fitness courses, the openings of the Olympic games, etc.

In this specific context, and within a framework of widespread precariousness, producing 'real' circus art is not necessarily a defining condition for being a professional artist. The uncertain, new status of circus as form of art and, in particular, as an accessible career option, contributes to a situation in which surviving out of one's (more or less) artistic work – out of "doing a thing I like" [Michele, 29, professional] - is not only necessary, since "the more you stay alive, the more you are an artist, so you need to be able to eat" [Emanuele, 36, professional], but also, in many cases, a sufficient condition to acquire the title of professional artist.

On the other hand, even those performers with a broadly recognized artistic reputation and professional education do not assume this title light-heartedly, as if it was a sign of presumption. This fact indicates that humility and down-to-earthiness, curiosity and availability for "everything that there is in a show, placing the cables, doing everything" [Marco, 36, professional], is an appreciated character within the artistic community. This moving threshold signals that art is still defined by an aura of mystery and magic, but it also highlights a paradoxical situation in which, despite the claim for more professionalisation, organisation, social protection, and acknowledgement, the ability to survive in a situation of high uncertainty and precariousness is something artists are proud of.

In this sense, precariousness is not always hidden in the representations of artists, on the contrary, it becomes a defining condition not only of everyday life, but of the very identity and subjectivity of circus performers. In other words, the material gains of such professions, which range from “making a living out of it” [Davide, 31, professional] to “being well paid, if one achieves high levels” [Emanuele, 36, professional], are named as privileges, framing the choice of the artistic profession as economically, as well as symbolically (because of the happiness and “love” felt thanks to one’s job – [Davide, 31, professional]) rational. This in turn increases ‘the symbolic value of material gains’ and obscures the countercultural origins of the new circus movement, aligning it with neoliberal logics.

This adds a further option to the possibilities mentioned by Menger (2014): the relegation of art to the private sphere of leisure and amateurism, or to the institutionalised, acknowledged field of artisanal production, or the transformation of art into alienated labour involving artistic individualism. The research shows that artistic labour can be framed as a rational strategy rather than a vocation beyond choice. In this sense, the “economy of charisma” (Weber, 1978, quoted in Menger, 2014) in which the main reward is virtue, only partially explains the dynamics entailed in circus careers. As we will see in the next paragraph, the shift from the denial of to the compliance with social mechanisms is in line with the rationalization of the production of symbolic goods (Sapiro, 2007).

### **6.3 Circus vocations: irresistible attraction, predisposition, determination, and luck**

Due to the recent emergence of circus as a professional and leisure option accessible to all, many interviewees narrate their “discovery” of a world whose existence they completely ignored, had a vague idea about, or knew but did not consider as a feasible professional or leisure activity: “something not for myself, for others” [Clelia, 19, professional student], “too big an ambition, a dream almost out of reach” [Emanuele, 36, professional]. Among the reasons to start a circus career, the predisposition of already existing physical, cognitive and emotional attitudes - the “primary habitus”, to say it with Wacquant (2014) - plays a central role, despite being concealed by the narrative of individual agency and uniqueness: “A series of things made me approach [to the circus practice]: I succeeded as soon as I tried, although I hadn’t moved for basically 10 years” [Livia, 48, amateur].

This relative facility is due to previously existing habits, characters, and interests, thanks to which the dimension of sacrifice shrinks (“I have always climbed, so it was easy to start with the aerial work” [Stefania, 40, professional]; “I have been closed in the gym since I was a small child” [Davide, 31, professional]), or to the addiction to a physical and emotional state (“that mental feeling” - Andrea, 27, amateur) that only the circus activity provides:

“I have always loved movement for its magic...passion for movement means that I was a hyperactive child, undiagnosed, but I had a number of physical compulsions, different tics, and these didn’t diminish with time when I did sports, because there was competition and I wanted to be the best, I was ambitious etc. When I encountered the artistic movement I found a physical goal to my physiological necessity to pour out some energies but these were not aimed at competition but at the creation of ... beauty, harmony, joy, fantasy, creativity, so [...] this gave me a serenity and [...] I felt that it was a liberation wasn’t it?”

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

The quote above leads to the deconstruction of the myth of the 'natural circus person', mirroring the evidence provided by Wacquant (2004) that the seemingly 'natural' relationship between black men and boxing is actually the result of routines, and cultural and social contexts, rather than physical or innate predispositions. Thus, in the case above, something pathological like 'being hyperactive' – which would normally be classified as a deviant behaviour and a factor of marginality – is reframed through a specific socialization process (supported and validated by the family, in the first instance) as a factor of 'diversity without the minus'.

Vocation is thus a construction, a rationalization *a posteriori* of one's choices and occurrences in life. In the case above, this is possible through the myth of the 'undomesticated' child, who cannot stay still, loves to be outside, to climb trees and everything he/she finds, has a "passion for movement". This is a mythization because, like Bourdieu (2000) highlights:

"dispositions do not lead in a determinate way to a determinate action; they are revealed and fulfilled only in appropriate circumstances and in the relationship with a situation. They may therefore always remain in a virtual state (...).

The principle of action is therefore neither a subject confronting the world as an object in a relation of pure knowledge nor a 'milieu' exerting a form of mechanical causality on the agent; it is neither in the material or symbolic end of the action nor in the constraints of the field. It lies in the complicity between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things, or, more precisely, between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms (those of the social space or field) and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus, a complicity which is the basis of a relation of quasi-magical participation between these two realizations of history" (: 149-151).

In the words of Wacquant, "habitus alone never spawns a definite practice: it takes the conjunction of disposition and position, subjective capacity and objective possibility, habitus and social space (or field) to produce a given conduct or expression (Wacquant, 2014: 3).

This "meeting between skilled agent and pregnant world" (ibid), is also at the basis of the continuity between primary and secondary habitus, family and specialized socialization, which, for what concerns contemporary circus artists, is documented by Salamero (2009), who analyses how families participate in the process of construction of a vocation. The family represents the first site of acknowledgement of artistic ambitions. Every socializing experience – through school, sport and circus - constitutes an interpretive filter for the following one. Her analysis includes the family background of circus students, and she states that the will to support children's fulfilment typical of the generations of parents after 1968 pushed the respondents to participate in a variety of sport and artistic activities, to spend a lot of time playing, in line with the pedagogy of play, and with a discourse in which social and material marginality become positive criteria. Primary socialization of future circus artists also insists on the freedom to explore space, including verticality, which determines a certain relation to the body. Finally, accepting circus as a recreational activity and as a professional choice is representative of a certain 'educational style' (ibid: 439).

Also in *Grazing the Sky*, a documentary movie which portraits the lives of modern circus performers in 11 countries, including Canada, Italy and Belgium (IMDb, 2015), a successful circus life is achieved by some of the characters after a number of scholastic failures, difficulties to remain seated for hours or to learn the “academic stuff”. Again, in line with Wacquant's (2014) analysis:

“Sporting habitus is a tertiary formation, grounded in (...) primary habitus and mediated by scholastic habitus – which constitutes both a motivative resource and a built-in hindrance to gaining the practical mastery of a corporeal craft” (: 5).

The closer the distance between the successive layers of the habitus, the easier will be the learning process.

According to Garcia (2011), circus vocations often start with a casual encounter with the art world, such as a show or, in the case of this research, the experience of a circus discipline or the encounter with a circus person:

“I felt an unbelievable call, I had bumped into this...I think it was a flier, which intrigued me a lot and...and I had like a very very clear drive inside myself, “Yes, yes, I have to do this””

[Maura, 33, professional]

This irresistible attraction, curiosity or deep passion for the form of art is followed by the discovery of “the emotion of freedom” [Andrea, 27, amateur], and a natural tendency towards creation and the strong appeal of being on stage, “because you feel inside something, you find your world, [...] 100% ecstasy when you feel a connection with the audience [...] you reach levels of intensity, of energy, [...] you feel there is an open emotional channel” [Chiara, 32, professional].

It is as if circus provided a way out of marginality, a chance for liberation, a possibility to turn a problematic nature or condition (such as the hyperactivity named above, or being a certain type of person, “completely unbalanced in your life [...] completely sick, without a sense, that doesn’t do anything similar every day, never stays in the same place” [Marco, 36, professional]), or “a moment of big change in life [...], of great uncertainty, destabilization”, of search for meaning and self-discovery [Maura, 33, professional] into a creative potential of social and symbolic value. In other words, vocation is considered to be intrinsic to the individual, while access to the career is often explained as chance. The idea of ‘being chosen by the job’ (Garcia, 2011), or “conquered” by the circus practice, facilitates the undertaking of a job with high professional risks, and of a very demanding leisure activity.

Besides serious engagement – both physical, cognitive and emotional – and an ascetic ethos demanding strong determination and ‘sacrifice’, “a passion for work, for training, for research [...] to live for that” [Expert interview 2], artists must need or want to say something, draw on “the willingness to change the world” [Valeria, 39, professional], beyond “the idea that if it works I keep doing it”, towards a conception of circus as different, surprising, astonishing [Expert interview 2].



This creative and political mission is, according to Sapiro (2007), one of the social conditions to create an artistic vocation, as it underpins the collective illusion – an “*illusio*” (: 18), a belief in the game, that enables the total subjective engagement of artists, the sacrifice of material comfort, family life, stability, and the aware undertaking of risks in exchange for symbolic benefits. These individual projects to follow vocation, however, can never be aimed merely at personal or commercial success: “if you are a real artist [...] either you put your soul [in what you do] or you are a mere executor” [Valeria, 39, professional].

Contrarily to the assumption that “artists have a big ego” [Adele, 21, circus educator], being a circus artist entails that “I am not interested in carrying on my ego, I am interested in making my peculiarities available for the final goal, that is the work we are doing together” [Paolo, 30, professional], and “working on the concept of collaboration, integration, also because to create a good company, a good show, not necessarily all those present must be the best in that discipline, absolutely this is not always the case, because then you create a very cold, sterile environment, while someone who doesn’t do anything can have the heart to create the magic of the show” [Valeria, 39, professional].

This aspect of the “soul” or the “heart” differentiates between the forms of circus analysed in this research. In the case of amateur circus, total subjective engagement is limited to the moment of practice, and preserves the areas of family life and material gains through labour. In social circus, “you must be willing to put your artist’s ego aside and get even with people to whom it can take six months to learn how to throw two balls” [Adele, 21, circus educator]. In the case of ‘artistic’ circus, “the concept of standing out in something, defeating someone, pushes away from the artistic sensitivity” [Emanuele, 36, professional].

The choice of circus as a profession is, thus, a matter of both chance and choice, entailing both an extremely strong, beyond will, “unrestrained passion” [Livia, 48, amateur], and the determination to pursue one’s choice even “when it is difficult” [Stefania, 40, professional]: “The luck is to have the courage to make a choice, and choices must come up” [Emanuele, 36, professional]. Chance includes the possibility “to be able to afford” this choice: in some cases, “although it is something that belongs to you, you have to deal with ... the necessities of life” and the circumstances in which the encounter happens, including at what age, with whom (“had I encountered a situation with other people, I mean a company”), and in what phase of one’s career (“the odd thing is that I started all this when I already had a thriving business, and I couldn’t say no I close everything and do something completely different [...] it is normal that you think twice about throwing everything away, isn’t it?” [Giovanna, 49, project manager]).

These narratives show that vocation is constructed, it is the outcome of a process of rationalization aimed at making sense of an often uncertain and fragmented, rather than linear, pathway (Salamero, 2009).

Circus becomes a rational choice also due to the absence of other attractive options, and as a step-by-step process in which the interplay between ‘internal drives’ and external, public or institutional, acknowledgement, is decisive:

“When during the last year of high school it was time to choose what to do the year after, you go see different universities, the conservatory, but all the things I went to see I told

myself: “yes, it’s nice” but nothing made me as happy and curious as circus, so after a while I gathered up some courage because, in any case, a circus life, to dedicate you life to the circus, is beautiful but scary, it is not easy to make a living out of it, so I was quite afraid of saying “I’ll do the audition [for a professional school] and see”, but then thinking about it I said “I want to do what I like, even if it’s a bit of a difficult, insecure life, but if I believe in it and I like it I do this”, then I participated in the auditions, I was quite insecure especially after seeing the others’ acts, and then, nothing, it went well...”

[Francesca, 18, professional student]

This quote is in line with Garcia's (2011) observation that the desires and beliefs which found vocation are reinforced by the institutions, and, in particular, that being chosen by a school significantly contributes to the representation of one's path as a “destiny” (: 33), as an “entitlement” (*titre*) that, like the academic qualification (*titre scolaire*), is valid on all markets and that, as an official definition of official identity, rescues its holders from the symbolic struggle of all against all, by uttering the authorized, universally recognized perspective on all social agents” (Bourdieu, 1985: 732).

Other sociological studies of the circus artists, such as Salamero's (2009) analysis of the French case, depict the participation in the selection process for a professional school as a “rite of consecration” (to use a Bourdieusian expression) and full membership to the artistic community (: 347). The quote above shows that this happens despite the fact that artistic professions are not regulated by specific official registers and no specific educational qualifications are required to access them (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), again highlighting the tension between heteronomous and autonomous logics and mechanisms.

Another important factor to start a circus career is that plurality counts more than precocity for selection (Salamero, 2009), and serious commitment can make up for an older age and allow to “learn things both physically, mentally, and about myself, [...] to continue to evolve” while “my friends at my age usually have their own life, and don’t have much of an evolution” [Giacomo, 38, amateur].

Finally, circus careers (both amateur and professional) are underpinned by an autotelic attitude and a specific notion of having fun: “a *present* fun and a lot of sense of discipline”, different from “doing something light [...] I have fun but I also work hard [...] engage yourself also intellectually [...] the fact that I struggle, I sweat, my muscles hurt afterwards, but it’s beautiful, efforts are paid back” [Livia, 48, amateur]. Fun must be challenging, implies the willingness to overcome “physical, but most of all mental, blocks” and “discover different aspects of oneself” [Stefania, 40, professional]. Another important component of this ‘fun’ is that it should be “natural” [Stefania, 40, professional], both in the sense that it allows to engage profoundly with the practice without living it as a sacrifice, and that it allows to avoid “taking oneself too seriously” and “losing that passion that [...] if it is a continuous game you will always find the resources to carry on” [Elisa, 33, professional/project manager]. This ludic dimension has more to do with “playing a role” [Ibid] and “collecting, learning as much as you can” [Emanuele, 36, professional] rather than “messing around” or not being serious [Elisa, 33, professional/project manager].

Only this disinterested type of commitment can allow things to flow, including through the (casual, rather than searched for) emergence of opportunities to make money out of it:

“I didn’t choose it as a job, I chose it as a need first and foremost, as a nourishment for my self, [...] then once I finished the school I’ve gone through two or three opportunities that made me say “ok, let’s say yes to these opportunities”, until I understood that it was really what I wanted to do also as a job”.

[Maura, 33, professional]

Again, it is easy to see that the meaning attached to a situation of ‘natural flow’ corresponds to the representation of an ‘external’ reality which confirms ‘internal’ feelings (a “strong passion” [Stefania, 40, professional], what you like, and feel attracted by). In this sense, casual encounters and opportunities, but also family socialization play a pivotal role in shaping ideas about jobs and careers which either deny or follow pre-existing ones (Salamero, 2009).

#### **6.4 Strategies of risk management**

“It is clear that circus is not an exception to or outside of contemporary systems of governance; in fact it is in some instances a paradigm of these behaviors. Not only is circus an art that does well in a market system, but it also seems to fit well within contemporary disciplinary discourses.”

(Stephens, 2012: 232)

According to Stephens, circus works well in a market system and, even more, in contemporary capitalism, because actors are well equipped to face the increasing demand of emotional, affective and immaterial labour and work, and the “disciplinary expectation” (ibid: 231) to be creative, engaged, and emotional on the workplace and in any moment in life. This implies a “totalizing” engagement not only in the sense that “life in certain moments is just that [circus]” [Stefania, 40, professional], and that circus is a “lifestyle commitment” (Stephens, 2012: 149), but also that it implies developing different types of competences and performing different types of (paid or unpaid) work: if, on the one hand, links are established, in local communities, between art, culture, leisure, schooling and social work, on the other hand, as we have seen before, culture is becoming a “real economic sector” (Menger, 1999: 543). These tendencies blur the boundaries of the artistic sector, since creative workers are increasingly demanded in industrial sectors, and, conversely, artistic production is taking the features of business.

Hence, artistic production is underpinned not only by a specific professional and social role, but by a “bundle” of more and less prestigious tasks (Hughes, 1984). Some of them are more strictly connected to the circus (as art or business) practice, others are equally necessary but imply completely different skills. Moreover, they can be classified, on another level, on the basis of remuneration. Starting from the type of work that circus activities always demand, we could mention, first and foremost, body work: constant training is a necessary requirement of circus practice, but the opportunities to be paid for it are scarce. For this reason, amateurs and professionals have different attitudes in relation

to the “preparatory part” of circus practice: while it becomes a frustrating aspect for professionals - who rarely achieve monetary recognition for their daily body work, and who are obliged to combine training ‘for free’ with other, less appreciated, activities, such as teaching – it represents amateurs’ main source of satisfaction:

“I don’t particularly enjoy performing; I like the preparatory part more. Maybe also because I don’t do it professionally. I have come up with the idea that professionals, in the moment in which they perform, they work, and maybe earn money. This is not the case when they train [...]. To me it is a bit like the difference between going to school and to work: when you go to school, you study and you know you can dedicate your time to studying, you don’t need to worry about the bills...because you know that you are dedicating those years to studying. [...] When you work, instead, you can have fun, but less, because you have different obligations”.

[Livia, 48, amateur]

Moreover, while circus artists’ emotional labour on stage or in the ring is monetarily recognized as an essential part of the job, and gives, as we saw in the previous paragraph, a sense of freedom, it also entails the risk of “emotional clangers (*svarione*)” [Stefania, 40, professional], or of “presenting things without being sure they will work [...] it is a big risk because a thing in which you put your heart, your soul may not be appreciated, but this is part of the game” [Giovanna, 49, project manager], which is often not considered when fees are established.

As well as dealing with the stress caused by a physically demanding and precarious profession, like other artists circus performers must be versatile and manage multiple roles (teachers, creators, performers, managers and promoters of their own activities, etc.) and a portfolio of resources (Menger, 1999). This reduces the financial risk of creative activity and increases the control over one’s career, but it also increases the number of tasks and the organising work required to ‘juggle’ with these multiple roles – all equally needed - trying not to neglect any of them, and often distancing artists from what should be their main occupation, that of creating art, or amateurs from their supposedly first, ‘regular’ occupation.

In the case analysed by Álvarez et Al. (2005), role versatility goes hand in hand with role consolidation, but if this can be true for a few, famous, big, more powerful cases, for the majority of the artists the multiplicity of tasks can become an obstacle to role consolidation. In line with Salamero (2009), this research found that a contemporary circus artist is required competences in circus, sport, art, but also administration, promotion, diffusion, legislation, communication. These ‘side’ competences are often unwillingly acquired by artists, nevertheless they differentiate someone who needs to make a living out of his/her art, and an amateur. Being multi-skilled is also said to be the soul of circus, and an advice many interviewees would give to someone at the beginning of a circus career: “do something completely different, like learn how to play an instrument” [Michele, 29, professional]; “read, study...invent beautiful and useless objects” [Marco, 36, professional].

Another salient theme is the distinction between commercial art, and art for art's sake (Bourdieu, 1993), and how these notions converge in – or distinguish between – the representations of certain types of jobs (Stephens, 2012):

“on the one hand there is a new type of work, or an artistically interesting job, on the other instead when you are doing let's call it a *marchetta*<sup>26</sup>, or the piece you have done a thousand times for an event”

[Stefania, 40, professional].

Commercial work is what happens when “there could be anybody else [any other acrobat] in my place”, and not “contents”, or “emotions” are brought or moved through one's performance [Pietro, 32, professional]. Commercial art is generally attributed to “events” rather than “shows”, and to big, rather than small, productions: in the first cases performances are “so big and fascinating that you see the ensemble, and you don't see the single acrobat [...] so people are interchangeable”. On the contrary, in the small companies “if you change one of the people the show will be different, even if you do the exact same thing on the technical level, at the level of interpretation is different” [Pietro, 32, professional].

Moreover, real artistic production should have “affective goals” beyond mere entertainment (Stephens, 2012) and the “easy way” which does not require specific cultural capital to be understood, and is not characterised by the aura of mystery art should have:

“going in front of an audience to get the applauses using a hyper-codified language, that people before me...in circus you copy the acts, it is normal, after 2, 3, 4 and even 10 years you see more or less the same act, that is an easy way to do things, which works with the audience that doesn't know but [...] you don't contribute to the research of art in general [...] you copy to have more applauses and more money”

[Marco, 36, professional]

However, being able to perform both commercial and pure art is an appreciated quality, as long as it contributes to one's independence and autonomy. In today's world in which the diversification of activities is essential in order to survive, the division between mass production and limited consensus, between art that mediates with market mechanisms and the field of power, and art for art's sake, is entangled with an idea that success (including economic, material success, which can be making a lot of money, or just enough for a decent life) is a consequence of all type of work experience, appropriate training, determination and character, as much as vocation and talent, highlighting a convergence between commercial and authentic art in artistic careers.

In this framework, circus performers enact strategies of risk management which are close to those of other artists. Economic, occupational risk is managed through diversification of the professions, the sectors and the clients (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), but also, first and foremost, a diversification of skills. Like in the sectors of dance, theatre and music, only the

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<sup>26</sup> I could not find an appropriate translation for this term. It indicates something done just for the money.

very few big and strong organisations (such as professional schools and international festivals) have enough resources for a division of work according to complex competences such as organisational, fundraising, research, innovation, public relations, promotion and production of audio-visual material, and administration, or to specific roles such as artistic and pedagogic director, etc. Thus, the artists themselves need to acquire a diversity of skills and roles, turning into “entrepreneurs of themselves” (ibid: 125).

Economic risk is reduced also through reconversion and double careers, combining circus activities with a part time job in a sector outside the arts, such as “social work” [Chiara, 32, professional], with jobs in another artistic sector, such as dance or theatre (what Luciano and Bertolini call extensive diversification), or undertaking different activities related to circus, such as “teaching, training, directing, managing a circus space, producing shows” [Michele, 29, professional], what Luciano and Bertolini name intensive diversification. Other strategies imply high mobility and the diversification of workplaces (including, for instance, the street, travelling circuses, contemporary productions, as well as corporate events).

Reconversion is a necessity due to the early end of the career, which, despite the shift from a mere aesthetic, to an identity function of bodily practices such as dance and circus, remains a central concern for many practitioners. While the artist is meant to express, at every stage of her career, the artistic dimension of her path, with the physical possibilities of that moment, material precarity and physical weariness lead to the erosion of the initial vocation and to the enactment of strategies of reconversion (Sorignet, 2004), such as acquiring skills to become a director, a coach, a manager, a therapist, and remain within the artistic field.

Precisely due to the centrality of artistic practices in processes of identity building, reconversion acquires extensive symbolic costs, in terms of social and individual identity, connected to the narcissistic risks of circus (see chapter 5), in which “you risk losing completely your...love for yourself [...working] in an environment where nobody understands you” [Elisa, 33, professional/project manager], “being completely drained [by the circus style of life]” [Paolo, 30, professional]. This is true not only for professionals, but for passionate amateurs as well:

“[Since I’ve started practicing circus] my holiday became occasions to go to festivals, help friends that do shows, or do myself some shows. So, I also take two or three days of leave to prepare a show, I don’t care about my holidays ...”

[Roberto, 45, amateur]

Narcissistic risk is strictly connected to the fact that in no case can the outcome of creative activity be certain, as no information and support is sufficient to grant success, not only with the audience at large, but also within the field of cultural production:

“I had decided to carry on with this project despite the lack of resources, spaces, economic and logistical [support] and...also following his [an important director’s] advice where I used all the language and the technique that he transmitted to me, I mean, in my view I really applied all I could, everything I was able to, of the things that had been the basics [of his

teachings] and...of what was contemporary circus, until then, and that I thought I wanted to work with, so a certain type of approach to one's self, one's emotions, in relation to space, rhythm, relation with height, teachings that I put inside [my work], I mean, I had really done everything I could so to hear that [that she should change profession, from the director that taught her the notions she was trying to apply] was really hard for me"

[Maura, 33, professional]

On the other hand, for circus artists, this risk is at least in part compensated by their familiarity with the symbolic and material value of flexibility, adaptability, humility and down-on-earthiness illustrated in the paragraphs above.

Another central strategy of risk management is the continuous investment in social capital. This plays a pivotal role both in terms of economic risk, since networks and reputation play central roles in accessing and remaining on the labour market, shifting from job to job (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011), and narcissistic risk, as it facilitates the subjective incorporation of the social appreciation of a totalizing search for self-actualization, blurring labour and free time. In this sense, the inclusion in a social network functions as a structure validating belief and justifying sacrifices (Sorignet, 2004), and compensates for the limited convertibility and transferability of the circus embodied subcultural capital.

## **6.5 Amateur, professional and social careers through the circus world**

In the broad sense adopted here, the notion of career concerns the circus practice in all the forms outlined in chapter 5, including professional artists, other professional figures such as teachers, educators, managers and directors, and amateur practitioners. Thus, circus does not only acquire value as an artistic product, but as a passion, a hobby, a way to keep fit, as well as a secondary or a primary profession. Hence, circus careers are affected by contemporary configurations of both the labour market and consumer culture. These feed into each other, as for instance the increased importance of fitness culture has generated a higher offer of amateur circus courses, and a proliferation of the organisational settings and professional figures these require.

The level of specialization and differentiation of the Italian circus field is still too low to enable the identification of subgroups and distinct categories of reference. For instance, professional schools are not recognized as social circus institutions, but this does not mean that they do not undertake social circus projects, in collaboration with schools or the civic sector. On the other hand, social circus organisations do not insist as much as professional schools on the technical and artistic proficiency of the participants, since circus is taken as a tool for social intervention. However, this does not exclude discourses mirroring the professional environment, as well as taking professional circus as a reference (for instance, to motivate participants to conclude their education, to open up professional opportunities, to highlight technical or artistic progress, etc.). Moreover, careers started within the amateur or social circus movement may end up in the professional, artistic field.

The distinction of different trajectories in relation to the different types of circus is complicated even at an analytical level, due to the blurred boundaries between personal and professional, art and labour, work and leisure, as well as the fluid and heterogeneous

character of circus practitioners' representations and life paths. Professionalization and formalization are affecting the circus world transversally: specialized training and credentials are acquiring increasing importance both within the artistic and the amateur types of practice, to the extent that all forms of circus organisation, including companies, schools and associations, are required competences in officially regulated matters such as labour relations, safety, health, administration and management.

Considering that amateurs choose to develop circus skills for personal, rather than professional improvement, this process highlights ambivalent social expectations pulling together specialization of professional skills (as at the administrative, formal level different role figures are expected to exist within any circus body, including the smallest associations) and the cultivation of a multiplicity of life and work skills.

The main differences between amateur and professional practice, and, among the latter, between artistic and social conceptualizations of circus, concern the degree of investment in subcultural and bodily capital, the position of circus within a broader life frame, and the involvement with different types of discourses (for instance, social circus engages with values and skills shaped by the discourse on social work).

The strength of the 'collective illuso' is different for practitioners who spend most of their time among other practitioners, than for amateurs who attend circus spaces regularly but in more contained forms, outside work and family life. In the first case the "involvement in the game which produces the game" (Bourdieu, 1984: 86) represents a higher stake, due to higher economic and affective investments.

However, this does not mean that amateurs do not invest circus practice with a foundational value for their identities and subjectivities. On the contrary, as a dream, an expressive and creative opportunity, a personal challenge and proof of character circus sometimes becomes a central component of life, to the detriment of family, work, and friends. In the following extract an amateur interviewee describes the implications of circus practice as social, expressive and physical:

"the growth of my involvement with this discipline, with these disciplines, has become also **a kind of a social element**, I mean at this point I hang out only with people that do this type of activity, or almost, because it's clear, once you dedicate more time to that you have less time for other things, other crowds, and then you lose them, you don't see them anymore. For example, I used to climb, but now I'm too tired on Saturdays and Sundays to go climbing [...].

The social element is quite strong. **Then it represents something creative**, which has never been too present in my life but it has always been desired, let's say, I've always missed some kind of **expressivity**, to express what there is inside, ideas, feelings, etc.

And then there is **a lot of fatigue, commitment, dedication, resistance against pain**. Almost everyday I find myself facing the moment where I say "no, I don't want to do this because I will hurt myself". Or that I'm tired and I have to decide, but almost every time I opt for the "yes", I keep going – not always, because I have my limits"

[Mario, 53, amateur].



These same dimensions, of social, creative and physical commitment, are highlighted by amateurs and professionals alike. Hence, the main differences concern the degree of investment and the higher entrepreneurial and artistic risks faced by professionals, as well as the fact that physical engagement is most likely more logorating at the professional level (amateurs may have physical problems due to circus practice, but the impact on the level of economic risk is less direct and strong).

Turner's (2013) model of the different stages of engagement with sport might be of help here. He identifies a "'foundation' stage" of "basic levels of engagement", which corresponds to occasional circus practice; a "'participation' stage", at which amateurs begin to spend high amounts of time and money in circus spaces, as it is the case in the quote above; a "'performance' stage", at which amateurs, professional amateurs, and precarious performers become experts of training techniques, performing genres, aesthetic standards, etc.; finally, at the "'excellence' stage" we find affirmed professionals and practitioners who dedicate to artistic research, and make most of their living out of performing:

"As the participant progresses from stage to stage, their level of engagement and involvement in the sport increases, thereby moving from casual engagement, through to a mode of participation mirroring Stebbins' concept of 'serious leisure', in which participation could be viewed in the context of a 'leisure career' through to, in the case of the Olympian or elite level performer, the cultivation of an actual career as a sportsperson" (ibid: 1251).

Hence, we can distinguish between an artistic and a leisure career, but also between artistic and other types of professional careers in the circus community. The conceptual categories of 'symbolic and material gains', 'vocation' and 'risk management' outlined in this chapter highlight further analytical insights. First, we could say that amateur practice implies less intense material investments (and, as such, risks and gains), but assigns high symbolic value to the circus practice, while both sides are pivotal in professional careers.

Secondly, vocations are constructed on the same representations of physical and emotional predisposition to undertake physically challenging, fun activities, and attraction towards non-competitive environments. Curiosity and irresistible attraction underpin the first, often casual encounters with circus practice in most cases. However, for amateurs the casual encounter is usually depicted as happening too late in life, so that only the youngest or the most determinate, passionate and courageous amateurs decide to pursue a professional career. This opens up a reflection about the implications of circus practice as a foundational proof of character for professionals and amateurs: while for the first ones it is foundational, as it implies a totalizing choice, and it overwhelms all domains of life and social ties, for amateurs it is restricted to one of the many domains they attend.

Further elements of differentiation are provided by the different elements on which attraction and engagement is based. For social circus professionals, attraction is towards the subversive or the inclusive potential of circus practice, and the 'added value' that circus can contribute to social and educational work in "hooking" the participants [Sonia, 35, project manager]. Artists commit to physicality and the expressive potential of circus, to the powerful feelings felt when on stage, but also to the call of freedom and alternative

way of life, outside routine and boredom. Freedom may be framed as reappropriation of time, in terms of reclaiming control over the passing of time, or a different conception of time, less productive, less dictated by social norms and more “subjective”:

“You know, time passes and so time also in terms of age, [...] and the time dedicated to do something, and not always something useful, [...] it is **a very subjective time** [...] if I think about the things that I do with the circus, I mean some things have slowed down, other things have gone back, for some things you feel younger, I mean inside, I don’t know if you know what I mean...

I: You mean that doing circus makes you feel younger?

Yes I mean...you can feel younger or at least you have things that remain very...I don’t mean childish, but in the positive sense [...] the fact of doing something this intense, which involves your life this much, creates a [sense of] time which is necessarily subjective, or you have moments in which you have to stop, for instance with your body, and time seems to never pass, and on the contrary when you train you create you are doing something new, time goes fast, and...

[...]

Clearly time around you changes, I mean, you see friends of your age and do another type of...have another style of life, exactly because they have a totally different style of work...I don’t know, stability, I don’t know, call it the way you want, so time passes and inevitably **your time is a little subjective, it goes at the same pace with the things you do**”

[Michele, 29, professional]

The ascetic ethos and creative and political missions are less pervasive in amateur practitioners’ lives. Circus practice plays a pivotal role in shaping amateurs’ identities, but it is less demanding in terms of the heart and soul engagement mentioned in paragraph 6.3.

In terms of strategies of risk management, this entails higher narcissistic risks for circus professionals in general and circus artists in particular, to the extent that, for amateurs, circus represents one of the many worlds they inhabit, while for professionals circus life overlaps with work and social life, and often with family life. Thus, the risks implied in failures on and off stage concern all domains of life, the cultivation of private and public presentations of self, while for amateurs they may be limited to the intimate sphere, and to one of many significant aspects of life.

Moreover, the strategies to manage economic risk such as career reconversion, double careers, diversification of skills, products and audiences, and investment in social capital clearly determine professionals’ more than amateurs’ experiences and choices. Extensive and intensive diversification are generally considered better solutions than diversification of workplaces, when this extends to merely commercial events, but the artist’s need to make a living out of circus arts per se justifies occasional engagement with commercial circus.

Furthermore, different conceptions of field and formal authenticity (see table 5.2) orient the lives of professionals in a more salient way for circus professionals than for circus consumers. Authenticity is underpinned by “freedom of action” and implies characteristics such as “acting in one’s own authority, being truthful to one’s self, achieving congruence between feelings and communication, [...] being distinctive and coherent” (Svejenova, 2005: 950-951).

Authenticity is a particularly relevant concept when studying creative careers, in which “individuals are increasingly considered the owners and agents of their trajectories, capable of enacting their professional lives in weak situations that are ambiguous and provide few salient guides for action”, and in which the “career contract is not with an organisation, it is with the self” (Svejenova, 2005: 948). Svejenova considers authenticity as “both a motor and an anchor for careers in boundaryless contexts” (ibid: 969): on the one hand, individuals are expected to draw on their authentic selves to identify their desires, values, and attitudes, and shape their careers. On the other hand, “Authenticity, understood as a truthful expression and presentation of one’s self to various audiences, has the potential of becoming and being [...] an anchor” (ibid: 970).

Authenticity and agency thus represent central elements to adapt to career transitions in art. Authenticity work – “which is manifested in the duality of identity expression and image manufacturing” (ibid: 949) - is seen as the glue between the different stages in a creative career. Agency is tied to authenticity through the emphasis on responsibility about making coherent choices with one’s past and one’s desired future, and about behaving congruently in the private and public domains. In this sense, the authentic person successfully combines loyalty to one’s past, or to tradition, and openness to novelty and change. Moreover, authenticity requires choices which are truthful to one’s sense of self, and congruent behaviours with one’s feelings, values, character and competence.

It is true that sports and artistic practices like circus acquire central value as ways to search, explore and express the self, but at the professional level circus is invested with more intense efforts and value for self-identity. Moreover, performing acquires central value for artists in constructing adequate presentations of self.

On the contrary, amateurs in general appreciate the participatory, playful and relational characters of the practice. To this respect, circus practice may be similar to lifestyle sports, in which “a participatory ideology that promotes fun, hedonism, involvement, self-actualisation, ‘flow,’ [...] living for the moment, ‘adrenalin rushes’ and other intrinsic rewards” (Wheaton, 2004: 11-12) is one of the main features. This implies resistance against “institutionalisation, regulation and commercialisation” and “an ambiguous relationship with forms of traditional competition” (ibid: 12), emphasising, on the contrary, the expressive aspect.

Practicing circus at an amateur level does not exclude serious commitment to learning and immersion within the community of circus practice. Following a tendency which Sassatelli (2012) identifies in commercial culture in general, circus practice combines this ‘hedonistic’ side with an ‘ascetic’ one, enabling practitioners to “demonstrate their command of themselves and their bodies” (: 639).

Goffman's ideas about the presentation of self (see paragraph 2.4) are thus illuminating of how an artistic and sports practice like circus can become "a matter of individual will and proof of personal and social success for all" (ibid), and how this today is pursued both in the spheres of work and leisure, especially in the lives of creative professionals and engaged amateurs, in which "the value-laden opposition between the sphere of consumption and that of work is increasingly being contradicted" (ibid).

However, as stated above, circus practice is much more overwhelming in circus professionals' lives and subjectivities, due to the higher investment, the higher risks faced, the overlapping of the circus sphere with everyday social life. If "careers are retrospective rationalizations of patterns that serve a purpose" (Svejenova, 2005: 955), shaped through authenticity work, they are also a form of distinction, a means to "affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass": "distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*" (Thornton, 1997: 201).

Circus practitioners often base the claim of "their distinctive character" (ibid) on the passion, courage, discipline and – more generally – 'difference' required by their professional or leisure choices, which distinguish them from a mass which follows hegemonic social norms concerning the phases of life, the career, the family, the body. This is true not only for professionals, like in the case of Michele quoted above, who claims a more "subjective" sense of time compared to his peers, but also for amateurs.

Giacomo [38, amateur] highlights for instance how circus provided him with opportunities to continue his "evolution", while friends of his age "have their own life", without "much of an evolution". Livia [48, amateur] loves the aerial silks because "she is surprised by what she is able to do". She does not identify with the women of her age: "I see fat, flabby women; maybe also by maternity – I didn't have children, and this maybe helps, I don't know – disinterested women, while I see that my body responds when I ask".

This tendency is called procrastination of 'social aging' by Thornton (1995): "this is one reason why youth culture is often attractive to people well beyond their youth. It acts as a buffer against social aging – not against the dread of getting older, but of resigning oneself to one's position in a highly stratified society" (: 160).

However, despite these 'serious' implications of leisure for identity and subjectivity, they are not comparable to the courage and character that undertaking circus as a professional choice signify, and, as a result, to the impact in terms of social distinction. Just before I interviewed them on a Saturday morning in an almost deserted Sociology Department at the University of Turin, Clelia [19, professional student] and Francesca [18, professional student] commented: "How stressful!", asserting with conviction how much happy and relieved they were of having chosen an education and a career which would never lead them to work in such a (sad, grey and serious) environment, sitting in an office 8 hours per day.

Their concern for the risks implied in their choices were still limited, possibly affecting other, far away phases of life. For the moment, their choice relieved them of the social obligations their peers decided to engage with. In this sense, as further explored in the next

paragraph, distinction represents a powerful mechanism against disenchantment for professionals, given the high symbolic value of economic, material commitment to the circus arts illustrated in paragraph 6.2.

## **6.6 Concluding remarks: circus careers, social distinction and reproduction**

In principle, circus is, like dance, “quintessentially performance, involving all the senses” (Turner, 2005: 2), and, as such, it resists mechanical reproduction, while keeping its “auratic qualities [...] into secular modernity” (ibid). However, despite the unicity and authenticity of live performances, and the defence mechanisms against disenchantment named in the previous paragraphs, contemporary performing genres are not indifferent to the convergence between “cultic” and “exhibition” values in new conceptualizations of art, in which the “charismatic status of the artist and art is converted slowly but inevitably into celebrity, where branding replaces aura” (ibid: 1).

On the contrary, if the demand of “unicity without the aura” (Lavaert & Gielen, 2009: 75) is spreading from the aesthetic to the political and the economic fields in general, “performance services” (Hurley, 2016) are becoming an important aspect of the circus world. These conjugate immaterial labour and an “efficacy imperative”, operating both in the artistic field and “the service economy by being *performant* (successful) in the business-world sense of performance/performing – meeting productivity goals and expectations”. It is significant in this sense that “theatrical performance like Cirque du Soleil’s in Las Vegas has been taken up as a model of “new economy” production” (Hurley, 2016: 75).

Creativity and innovation, rather than the reproduction of virtuous and technical tricks, is what counts to “sell oneself” in contemporary circus (Garcia, 2011: 44) – that is, as market as well as symbolic value. Moreover, only the relatively few cases of large, well-established companies can afford an actual diversification of roles, while for the majority of contemporary circus artists role-versatility is still the most feasible pathway to success (or survival). Thus, not only gift and chance (ibid), but also marketing, administration, and other side-skills have acquired central importance for circus artists, highlighting a legacy, rather than a rupture, with the entrepreneurial, business character of traditional circus. In this sense, the notion of talent, or gift, in the circus combines the aura of uniqueness and artistry with more regular skills of business and risk management.

While a shared representation still circulates among artists and practitioners that the commercial value of art production is separated from its symbolic value, success for professional artists is inseparable from the material, as well as the symbolic, gains drawn from artistic work, so much that to be part of the artistic professional community, the first requirement is to make a living out of one’s practice, whereas practitioners known to be ‘just’ amateurs rarely achieve success with their creative productions.

It is true that, given the time demanding character of circus practice, and the value of technical virtuosity, only dedicating full time to physical and bodily practice can one achieve significant artistic outcomes. However, the precarious situation of circus artists in Italy forces them to undertake, as we saw in the previous paragraph, multiple careers, which

prevent most of them from investing in creative work and artistic productions as much as they would like to:

“I teach as well, I do a number of things [...] but let’s say that basically what I would like to do the most, and that in some periods of my life I did more, but for example not in this moment, are shows”.

[Chiara, 32, professional]

Contingent employment and “casual labor” (Menger, 1999) still prevails, despite the highly skilled, mobile and diversified character of artistic jobs, in an artistic sector in which professionalization made possible the “triumph of creative individualism” and maximised the role of risk since “those who feel called upon to create are infinitely more numerous than those who can succeed” (ibid: 571).

On the other hand, formal professional artistic (and circus) training, which aims to increase the opportunities of their former students to access the labour market (Wilf, 2010), insist on the importance of creativity, inventiveness, and originality, building and teaching “methods, with its own handouts” [expert interview 2] and “systems” [Emanuele, 36, professional] to acquire the skills to “turn the artist’s technique into something other than the demonstration of technique” [expert interview 2], “bringing physicality and dramaturgy together” [Emanuele, 36, professional] and showing the authenticity and fragility of the artist as a special and unique human being:

“you must follow the path of the writer, your technique must be your vocabulary, your sequences, sentences, your style, language, you must write sentences that, in the end, tell a story in a particular language”.

[Expert interview 2]

The majority of the professional artists interviewed tend to separate between essential and side aspects of their professional choice, and between more and less desired tasks, resigning themselves to the idea that there is an often hidden ‘business side’ to their bodily, creative, and ‘purely artistic’ activity. Emphasis is generally placed on the appreciation of the privilege of having a profession which is also a passion, an opportunity to have fun, meet people, travel, achieve ecstatic states, and gain the admiration of an audience, and of the responsibility to move, share emotions, communicate relevant and innovative contents.

The fact that insecurity and precariousness often obscure this mission, forcing performers to an extensive and intensive diversification of the career, and to a waste of extensive energy and time in these and other strategies of risk management, is either rationally framed as a clever attitude, or assumed as a (frustrating and temporal) part of the game.

This shows how defence mechanisms underpin social reproduction thanks to their invisible – taken for granted – nature: not only the emphasis on creativity and unicity obscures the economic (and precarious) side of the very same coin, but the latter remains an

unrecognized (materially, at least), as much as essential, part of the artists' work, both on the labour market and within official education institutions.

For instance, the professional circus schools support artistic professionalization insisting on the centrality of constant and systematic following of effective methods to improve technique and creativity, but overlook the practical, commercial and administrative knowledge required by the profession, such as knowing how to deal with "a withholding tax" and other things one needs to learn despite "not giving a shit" [Chiara, 32, professional].

On the other hand, we saw in paragraph 6.3 how the material gains acquired through circus activities acquire an intrinsic symbolic value. The reasons why circus as a profession is both very attractive and highly scary is the inextricable intertwinement between the privilege of freedom, of having "no obligations except the ones you create yourself" [Mara, 25, amateur], and the constant risk of 'not making it' and having to recur to intensive and extensive career diversification. The neoliberal emphasis on the individual's responsibility for a self-disciplined search and expression of the authentic self through body, emotion, and 'regular' work and labour points to the convergence between artistic and ordinary jobs under the social imperatives of creativity and (economic) efficacy.

This seems in line with Arvidsson et Al. (2010b) analysis of "passionate work" in the fashion industry, although this research also highlights the neglected role of the symbolic value of economic, as well as artistic, skills, associated with an appropriate, increasingly appreciated, professional attitude. Being able to deal with strategies of marketing, administration and risk management (while attending to one's artistic mission, that is, consciously avoiding to cross a certain acceptable boundary) is valued *per se*, not only for the material advantages provided: professionalization entails 'economization' not only as a necessary side effect, but a desired underpinning, despite the inadequacy of institutional frames, official education and policies in the Italian context.

In the (numerous) cases in which the available resources are not sufficient to distribute or delegate tasks, or no single person wishes "to bear all these problems and give up doing social circus and take care only of bureaucracy" [Adele, 21, circus educator] or "to deal with all the things concerning diffusion and promotion" [Maura, 33, professional], the artists themselves must acquire these diverse skills.

Considering the case of German theatres, Eikhof & Haunschild (2007) argue that:

"Despite all claims of contributing to *l'art pour l'art*, theatre actors are explicitly concerned with sustaining and increasing their employability by strategically investing in cultural, economic and social capital, that is with enacting economic logics of practice. Since assessment criteria for cultural capital and artistic credibility are vague, theatre artists have considerable discretion to justify their doings to themselves and others by invoking *l'art pour l'art*. Bohemian lifestyles support this devotion to theatrical production and help both theatre actors and theatres to protect intrinsic motivation from market logics" (: 535).

Thus, (Bohemian) lifestyle functions as a symbolic protection of autonomous principles from heteronomous logics, concealing how criteria of economic and artistic success

progress hand in hand. This fits Álvarez et al's (2005) use of the notion of “optimal distinctiveness” to indicate the reconciliation of needs of assimilation and differentiation in social identities, through the paradoxical construction of a smaller, personalized “own iron cage” in which roles and partnerships are consolidated, in order to “break away from the iron cage of a field's conventions” (: 14). In other words, in line with Becker's (1982) idea that artistic innovations require a legitimizing system to circulate and survive, artistic fields require both isomorphic pressures, conventions and normative grounds to build a legitimation system, and efforts to sustain the emergence of unique, extraordinary identities in the form of innovators carrying peculiar interests and agency, and going beyond the established conventions (Álvarez et al., 2005).

While the value of authentic artistic productions cannot be merely commercial, a certain level of compliance with ‘heteronomous’ logics does not prevent the achievement and maintenance of the status of artist. The fact that these diverse experiences converge in the lives of individual performers show that rather than being in opposition, commercial and authentic art nurture each other.

Since performers are both artistic products and labourers (Stephens, 2012), the dimension of daily training, perseverance, and disciplined routine is inseparable from the need to effectively sell oneself and one's work. This partly blurs the distinction between commercial and pure art, highlighting how being a professional artist entails a familiarity with being on the edge between business and art, self-expression, innovation and audience's tastes, success and marginality. Together with its ‘traditional’ precariousness, the legacy with the commercial dimension of entertainment places circus careers close to any other contemporary profession.

Both autonomous and heteronomous logics are pivotal in an artistic labour market which is closed and structured by rigid – but informal – rules, in which talent is a negotiable resource within the professional community, and conventions continuously renegotiated; in which there is no unidimensional criterion to connect pay, power and prestige; in which it is mainly the community itself that certifies professionalism, and the self-referential character of these criteria enhances the risk of over-investing in social, rather than specific artistic, capital: “once enough social capital is acquired, only the artists with a strong creative drive will pursue artistic capital, while the others will give up once they achieve a dominant position” (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011: 130). However, heteronomous principles increase the uncertainty of the artistic labour markets since “tastes [...] undergo unpredictable shifts” (Menger, 1999: 548).

Bourdieu (1993) would not probably find the convergence of continuously re-established oppositions surprising, since in his view the two opposed fields of cultural production always coexist and rely on each other, and their unequal “power of distinction” contribute to the same process of social reproduction:

“[art for art's sake's] fixation on technique draws pure art into a covenant with the dominant sections of the bourgeoisie. The latter recognize the intellectual's and the artist's monopoly on the production of the work of art as an instrument of pleasure (and, secondarily, as an instrument for the symbolic legitimation of economic or political power); in return, the artist is expected to avoid serious matters, namely social and political



questions. The opposition between art for art's sake and middle-brow art which, on the ideological plane, becomes transformed into an opposition between the idealism of devotion to art and the cynicism of submission to the market, should not hide the fact that the desire to oppose a specifically cultural legitimacy to the prerogatives of power and money constitutes one more way of recognizing that business is business."

(: 128)



## Chapter 7: Circus bodies: embodiment, circus capital and reflexive body techniques

### 7.1 Introduction

The interviews on which this research is based included the question of whether circus practitioners may be recognized as such outside the circus space - while walking in the street, or drinking coffee in a bar, for instance. The responses pointed to elements of style and attitude (see paragraph 2.7 for the definition of 'style' and 'attitude' employed in the thesis), in particular related to comfort, carelessness and cheapness of clothing ("a comfortable outfit [...] or sloppy" [Lucia, 29, amateur], "tattered" [Maura, 33, professional], "always in a tracksuit" [Clara, 39, professional], "dishevelled hairstyles, or particular hair-cuts [...] or dressed in a caritas-style, I mean, as it comes" [Michele, 29, professional], "hippie style" [Clelia, 19, professional student]).

They also highlighted different "typologies" of circus people, for instance with a more "technical" [Michele, 29, professional], or less "showed off" [Giacomo, 38, amateur] style - related to environment, age, and other subcultural references. Relevant insights to this respect may be found in an episode such as the following, referred to a circus festival:

"We went to buy the tickets and we didn't even need to ask for the discount for circus artists and students. They look at us and hear us talking about Gloria and Mikey [artists], and they take it for granted that we are 'from the circus', and give us half-priced tickets. Later we meet Mario, he's angry because he didn't get the discount, not even when he showed them the membership card [of a circus school]. We think it is maybe a matter of age, physique, and style. When we tell the episode to Michele [artist and teacher] he attributes it to the clothes style: "He's too technical, he's not enough 'Caritas style'""

[fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015]

The expressive, symbolic, and distinctive function of style – in its components of image, argot and demeanour (Brake, 2003) – and attitude – which here indicates more situational behaviours and the ways in which individuals deliver their style in specific contexts, is thus reasserted in the community of circus practice. Style as a 'focal concern' (ibid) helps practitioners to orient themselves and establish subcultural, internal and external boundaries.

However, despite the predominant style of the hippie circus person, circus practice mostly remains a 'secret' that only well-trained eyes can decipher:

"Circus is like superpowers, this is so cool, you cannot tell. A friend of mine, a theatre person, he told me: "because it's like superheroes, you say, could that be a tightrope walker? You don't know...obviously those with the eye, if I see someone I can understand that if he has shoulders like this he's an aerialist [...] but the cool thing is that if you don't have a trained eye, or even if you do, you don't know it...you don't even imagine, if you see one in the underground, that one could be the greatest...in the world"

[Chiara, 32, professional]

Thus, more often and more interestingly for this thesis, the marks left by circus practice were searched by the respondents more in depth than clothing or hairstyle, on the skin (in the form of calluses, bruises, scars), muscle shape and size, or deeper still, in ways of interacting, seeing the world, and feeling, such as a communitarian spirit and “family-like” environment [Arianna, 20, professional student], a “sense of a lot of people” [Matteo, 31, teacher] sharing practice and friends, “laughter and jokes” [Alberto, 22, teacher]; a kind of “craziness” and anarchy which doesn’t exist in competitive sports [Expert interview 2]; a high sensitivity:

“we are all very sensitive, emotional people, very...I mean, people that express a lot, so they shine in their own light, also for this reason because they are used to showing continuously what they feel”

[Emilia, 29, professional]

This final chapter follows two main thematic threads: the embodiment and transmission of a specific knowledge and expertise, which in circus is mainly tacit and bodily, as one of the best way to identify the boundaries of a field and a community (Bassetti, 2009b); and the reflexive construction of an adequate self through body, emotion and authenticity work. Against the backdrops of social structures in general, and late capitalism in particular, studying embodiment becomes of central relevance to grasp processes of socialization and dynamics of interaction, the “cognitive, conative and affective components of habitus” (Wacquant, 2014: 6), the apparent contradiction between hedonism and ascetism in contemporary consumer society (Sassatelli, 2012), and the effects of the imperatives of creativity, authenticity, emotionality on the self. Thus, key underpinnings in this chapter are the concepts of embodied and bodily capital (Wacquant, 1995, 2004), Reflexive Body Techniques (Crossley, 2005, 2007), and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983, 2006).

The concept of embodied capital draws on a “*sensible*, that is, informed by a common sense” view of practices, underpinned by “practical sense, social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatisms” (Bourdieu, 1990: 69), which is acquired merely “by virtue of being part of a given social world”, thanks to the “implicit, automatic and unconscious process of motor simulation [which] enables the observer to use his/her own resources to penetrate the world of the other without the need for theorizing about it” (Lizardo, 2007: 17). An example of the extent to which symbolic and practical knowledge coincide is provided by the central role of metaphors grounded in the bodily experience of the world, such as left and right, higher and lower, in learning circus like in dance (Bassetti, 2009a):

“socialization instils a sense of the equivalences between physical space and social space and between movements (rising, falling, etc.) in the two spaces and thereby roots the most fundamental structures of the group in the primary experiences of the body which, as is clearly seen in emotion, takes metaphors seriously”

(Bourdieu, 1990: 71-71).

This view of socialization ‘by osmosis’ is not at odds with the attribution of a central role to reflexivity. Reflexive body and emotion work is undertaken in a late capitalist society in the

attempt to achieve the ideal body, and the ideal self, which represent abstract, idealised, perfect and unreachable models, and as such imply high costs in terms of health and wellbeing. The body today is the object par excellence of treatment, manipulation and staging, on which a number of social and economic interests converge (Marzano-Parisoli, 2002). In post-industrial societies, the individual must be “a self-possessed self” solving “the paradox of consumption as public benefit and private vice” requiring “a capacity to modulate different attachments, emotions and behaviour” (Sassatelli, 2012: 636) in all aspects of life.

The importance of the reflexive cultivation of the body in affecting both one’s position within the existing social structures, and the ‘inner’ level of the emotions and presentation of self is most evident in the accumulation of bodily capital, in Wacquant’s (1995) sense of secondary forms of habitus, acquired through specific and intentional learning. Bodily capital in this sense represents an available resource for social actors to consciously engage with and manipulate the social world.

Among the many contemporary bodily practices, contemporary circus is particularly interesting because, at least in Italy, it still lacks codification, formalization and fixation of learning paths, specific aesthetic and performative standards and body techniques<sup>27</sup> which characterises sports and ballet, and still relies extensively on the creativity, improvisation, personal skills, views and experiences of the practitioners. This enables a high diversity and variability of notions of what an ‘ideal’ circus body is, and how it is to be achieved, across sectors, institutions, approaches and individual practitioners engaging with contemporary circus practices. Secondly, the body in circus is present in a peculiar way, opposite to the “asepticised” and “abstract” body (Marzano-Parisoli, 2002: 15), shaped by broader social trends.

First of all, circus practice shapes fit and muscular bodies, and appreciates and cultivates certain bodily characteristics in association with specific disciplines:

“well if we want to go into the details, aerialists have big shoulders, jugglers always carry their bag with clubs or balls, and I don’t know, hand balancers have always this part [the forearm] very developed, and also the wrist is like POO! [laughs] BOOM! [makes a gesture as to imitate an explosion of the wrist] So you may even be able to tell the speciality!!!”

[Emilia, 29, professional]

Moreover, like dance, circus relies on notions of more or less “difficult” or “easy” bodies (Bassetti, 2009a), but it leaves space for a diversity of bodies, including the “curvy” ones (which, according to Elisa and Emilia, former dancers, are excluded in dance environments), as well as the differently able or socially excluded bodies, particularly in social circus practices, in which “there is almost nothing bodily”, meaning that “a lot of things are done

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<sup>27</sup> As stated many times in the previous chapters, in Italy contemporary circus is still a recent practice and a field under construction. In other countries, such as France and Canada, the level of formalization and standardization is much higher. For instance, in France the professional circus schools have progressively defined, in a common way but also by way of differentiation, a training path in formalised phases (Salamero, 2009: 485). In Canada, standards concerning flexibility and aesthetics (for instance in terms of body size, “beauty and lines”) are much more severe [Emanuele, 36, professional].

without necessarily using the body [...] at the level: I train, I do muscular strengthening” [Adele, 21, circus educator]: the body is used in a creative way, adapted to the needs and skills of the participants.

The lack of formal and fixed codification also concerns teaching and learning circus techniques. As we saw in chapter 4, conflicts have emerged in the Italian field concerning the fixing of parameters, skills, conditions and methods about teaching circus (both to trainers and learners). It is sometimes assumed that there is “a codified route”, or “a technique at the basis” that is “taught, passed on from generation to generation by the masters, [...] a codification of the vocabulary” [Marco, 36, professional; c.f. paragraph 5.1].

Until now, however, despite the increasing availability of training for circus practitioners and trainers, methods and procedures about teaching and learning paths haven’t been fixed and codified in Italy, and remain at the almost complete discretion of circus schools and their managers and staff. While the European Federation of Circus Schools – FEDEC – of which the two professional schools are members – published the “Basic Circus Arts Instruction Manual” and other specialised manuals in certain disciplines, standards, parameters, compulsory paths are not unified, fixed or made explicit in any Italian official, broadly recognized, document. This is true particularly for amateur, youth and social circus organisations: the absence of “unique and precise actions, technical standards to comply with” is taken on the contrary as a characteristic of circus practice which differentiates it “from traditional sport practice” in the most official document<sup>28</sup> I could trace, in Italian, concerning the teaching of circus at amateur level (UISP, 2015).

During my research, I encountered a great diversity of methods, and even terms, to teach and learn the same circus techniques. The following extract may provide a clarifying example:

“We start with the ‘lift’, but Alex [instructor] calls it pitch 1, so we think about the work done with Michele and Laura [other instructors], where pitch 1 is: base stays still, I step on his hands and balance on one foot, and we do that. And Alex, with some aversion: “What’s this? go up!”. [...] he also reckons (while other instructors consider this an absurdity) that the ‘tempo lift to hand-to-hand’ - or ‘tuck through to handstand’, as the FEDEC manual calls it (FEDEC, 2010) - should be learnt before being able to endure in ‘hand-to-hand’, and before the handstand jumping from the shoulders, which is more difficult to achieve according to him”

[fieldnotes, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

The progression for teaching aerials, too, varies a great deal. Some teachers start with figures, others with routines, some insist on strengthening severely, others on the fun,

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<sup>28</sup> With ‘official’ I mean that it was released by an official Institution of Sport Promotion (Ente di Promozione Sportiva), including a relatively high number of associations and schools. The document was sent to me by email on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, by a responsible of the Circus Arts sector of the institution, as “all the material [they had] concerning the circus arts”. However, I have never come across this document again during my research. Other documents in Italian are: a how-to manual for kids to do circus at home (Madia, 2003), and a number of documents produced by single schools and organisations. The website of the umbrella organisation for youth, social and contemporary circus in Italy does not provide further references to teaching manuals published in Italy.

creative and expressive part of it. Moreover, figures can be installed, and, again, called, in a variety of ways.

Finally, internal variability to the circus community is tied to attending and belonging to a specific environment, such as a training space or institution, and the 'microculture' it generates:

"there are many different circus people. [...] for instance the students of the professional course you notice well enough [who they are] because they band together, like anyone doing school 8 hours per day always with the same people, so you have a way of moving, now it got lost, but a way of talking...it's got lost now, but the first years there was this thing, it was very funny..."

[Matteo, 31, teacher]

Secondly, the circus body is real, substantial, concrete: it smells, sweats, falls, bleeds, lies and rolls on the floor, wherever it must (in a gym, in a park, in the street...), sometimes it is even accepted when it farts, as an accidental consequence of some exercises. It can be ridiculous, untidy, grotesque, crude, even gross and 'pulp'. When asked about the sensory perceptions they associated to their practice, practitioners named: "smell of sweat, a lot" [Filippo, 22, amateur]; "feet, various sweat..." [Francesca, 18, professional student]; "the 'stickiness' or the 'crust' because you are on the floor, you touch a bit of everything" [Mara, 25, amateur]; "consumed air [...] consumed and stale environment, sweat" [Arianna, 20, professional student]; "during the warm up [in a hand-to-hand class], face to the floor, I smell the odour of feet and sweat on the rubber mats which cover the room" [fieldnotes, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2015].

When practicing certain circus disciplines, one has to deal with cuts, burns, bruises. They must be healed and well covered to avoid re-opening, continue training, and to keep the apparatus clean (preventing blood stains):

"Manuela, my teacher, told me that according to her also the second layer of skin came out! It wouldn't heal...then while walking you realize that skin stretches, even if I don't walk many km at all: it is enough to go from my desk to the bathroom, or from the car park to the office..."

[Livia, 48, amateur]

"Pietro wants to try something on the trapeze, at the second attempts his hand opens, a callus explodes and bleeds. [...] Also one of my hands opens, a piece of thick skin comes out. I put bandage and tape borrowed from Pietro. It's ok for now, it hasn't even bled.

[...] I try the back turns and after a little while I feel my back aching again (it did already from the day before) and my biceps hurt too, the skin on the arm is scraping despite the layers of clothes...now I'm all burnt on my arms and have three open calluses on my hands and it is kind of embarrassing: yesterday in the pizzeria they saw the tape and bandage and asked me if I wanted my pizza cut. This is because I hadn't been training seriously for a while"

[fieldnotes, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2015, trapeze workshop]

Although skin gets thicker and harder with practice, the easiness with which one's hands "open" can be a sign for choosing, or not, a circus discipline, and for recognizing expertise and hard training, or lack of familiarity with the apparatus and less 'serious' training:

"Gloria tells me that she had started with the trapeze and her teacher in Madrid would call her butter-hands because as soon as she got on the trapeze her hands would open. This year she tried to start again after 4 years, to create a short act, but the first time her hands opened and she thought: what if I hurt my hands and I cannot do hand-to-hand anymore? And she gave up."

[fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2015]

Not only this kind of body characterises daily practice, but it is visible in contemporary circus performances too, maybe in the attempt to mark the distance from traditional circus, presenting a 'more real' body than the distant, polished, glittering, and smiling body of classic circus. The quotes below provide significant examples:

"One night we went to see a performance by Cie Eaeo<sup>29</sup>, "All the fun". The audience sat in a circle on stools of different heights, leaving a circle of about 5 metres diameter in the centre for the 5 jugglers to perform. Their performance was very physical, you could really feel their bodies, in relation among themselves and with the objects, balanced, thrown, caught. Proximity did not leave anything to the imagination, including physical investment, energy, and sweat. This was (voluntarily, I guess) exacerbated when they all wore water proof jackets and started a very physically demanding act, on the engaging rhythm of a fast music, until rivulets of sweat started running out of the jackets, on their wrists and hands"

[fieldnotes, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2015, back from a circus exchange in Belgium]

"She has a long, red cut on her leg at the end of the performance, I don't know whether she did it or just re-opened it when she hit the floor violently with her leg during an acrobatic move [...] Also the following girl, a rope acrobat, has her toes and feet all taped, maybe because of the wounds and abrasions due to the rope. A girl with very long hair performs an act on the trapeze with her hair loose, she plots them in positions of precarious balance, then loosen it again, she leaves a lot of hair on the trapeze, some fall.

The feeling the performances communicate is physical pain, pulled out hair, bodies that deteriorate and wear out to achieve the acts...I don't know whether this is the meaning, but it is what the audience perceive, also Barbara, the friend who accompanies me, an amateur circus practitioner, shares this impression: "Ouch! This must hurt!" she comments".

[fieldnotes, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015, watching a performance of professional circus students]

The body, embodiment and reflexivity occupy significant places in circus practice, both for their role in identifying, building and deconstructing external and internal boundaries of

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<sup>29</sup> The trailer of the show is available here: <http://www.cieeaeo.com/>



the community, as a sign of membership, and due to the peculiar investment in body and emotion work. In the following paragraphs, I will analyse circus practice in light of the three main concepts presented above – bodily capital, reflexive body techniques, and emotions work – showing how embodiment both happens through a process of osmosis between bodies and social and interactional contexts, and reflexive learning. In circus practice, reflexivity works both “in-action” (Basseti, 2009b) - during improvisations, or to prevent accidents and correct mistakes - and following action, as a device mediated by videos, pictures or others’ feedbacks.

## 7.2 Bodily capital

In this paragraph I will focus on “the diverse ways in which specific [circus] social worlds invest, shape and deploy human bodies” and on “the concrete incorporating practices whereby their social structures are effectively embodied by the agents who partake of them” (Wacquant, 1995: 65). As we saw in chapters 4 and 5, the social settings in which circus practitioners are embedded are diverse, both in terms of biographical backgrounds and references – values, ideals, and methods – of the attended circus environment. However, the importance of the body “as a *form of capital*” (ibid) crosscuts the different circus domains analysed: circus practice is underpinned by the use of the body as both “work of art” and “raw material” (Lobo & Cassoli, 2006: 65); like the fighter’s body, it “is simultaneously his means of production, the raw materials he and his handlers [...] have to work with and on, and, for a good part, the somatised product of his past training and extant mode of living” (Wacquant, 1995: 67).

Visible signs of body work in a circus space may be found in the muscular bodies stretching, strengthening, hanging, climbing, flying, or throwing and catching objects or people; the beating and clanging of aerial apparatuses, the sliding and slamming of mattresses and circus props, the music accompanying an act rehearsal; the smell of sweat and of the thick air exercising bodies breath in and out.

The circus practitioner “is” her body: she “is totally identified with it” (Wacquant, 1995: 66) and in close relation to props and apparatus (which represent a defining, immediately visible and recognizable index of circus practice). Like for the fighter’s, “properly managed, this body is capable of producing more value than was ‘sunk’ in it. But for that it is necessary for the fighter to know its intrinsic limits, to expand its sensorimotor power, and to resocialize its physiology in accordance with the specific requirement and temporality of the game” (: 67).

Circus practitioners, at different levels, try to work on and improve the weak points of their bodies (weak muscles in the arms, stiff joints, etc.) in order to achieve circus tricks and performances, and, as such, full membership within the community of circus practice. They attune with the tempo of other practitioners and of the apparatuses, and with the rhythm and movements regulating space and tools use and interactions. In order to do this, they employ all the senses: touch enables to recognize the texture of a part or another of a certain apparatus, and informs about how and when to grab or let go; hearing, when following the music, or to be aware of what is happening around, at what distance, to distinguish, for instance, between an ordinary landing on a mat and a more alarming noise,

to follow the indications of an instructor while learning a new trick; sight, to watch others, take reference points in the space or on one's body while performing a movement; smell, to recognize a familiar circus environment and situate oneself.

Circus capital is multiple: a number of 'sub capitals' may be identified, for instance the aerialist's, the acrobat's, the balancer's, the juggler's, the flier's and the porter's, as well as more specific sub capitals developed in relation to different tools, props and apparatus: trapeze, tissue, lyra, tight or slack rope, unicycle, stilts, balls, clubs, etc. The relationship with objects such as props and apparatuses is central to learning circus. Being them safety tools to facilitate training (such as mats and harnesses), circus objects by definition (trapeze, globes, unicycles), or ordinary objects used in circus ways (to juggle for instance), embodying circus is about learning how to use specific tools, not only in artistic, but also in technical terms. Experts are expected to be informed about the technical differences between different props (for instance many interviewees highlighted that contemporary circus professionals mainly use white clubs with a particular shape), to know how to rig autonomously and build and look after the structures they employ.

Circus capital can be employed in one's professional or personal career as a resource to make a living, to produce art, or to build and express one's self. On the one hand, the strategies employed to convert or transfer the bodily capital into other forms of capital or other types of artistic work (see chapter 6) show that circus artists are aware of the temporal finitude of their bodies. In terms of body work, practitioners after a certain age start to consider the idea of having to stop one day:

"I don't like the idea of interpreting an old character that would like to be young on stage, [...], but I think that until I can be at the top of my physical possibilities I continue to train, when I'll see that I cannot achieve what I'm interested in anymore, I'll stop"

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

"The future...actually I have already started the re-addressment, it's been a few years now that I've started thinking: "I have to start getting ready for something else, because if I get to 40-45 years old that I have to stop suddenly, I will become terribly depressed!"

[Stefania, 40, professional]

However, this is restricted to the "physical performance" side of circus. Working in the field of the performing arts offers, in the eyes of the respondents, many other work opportunities, from focusing on teaching, direction or technical aspects (lighting and sound), to undertaking less physically demanding practices, such as theatre, clowning, or more sustainable approaches to movement. An example is given again by Stefania:

"it's been a few years now that I have started experimenting also with other artistic forms, more in theatre, dance, to collaborate with other artists, following the creative process in the shows. [...] To be honest, I see myself on stage until...I would really like to be on stage until the end of the life, so let's say that I didn't think this was possible before, but since I've started seeing the show as not only a physical performance, I started thinking that it is possible. So I sincerely see myself continuing to do shows, even if in a completely different way and form, and then working most of all in collaboration with other artists".

Like Menger (2014) states for artistic careers in general, “professional rhetoric” is “intended to equip artists with collective rationalizations” and other “cognitive mechanisms by which artist invent the illusions necessary to provide long-term motivation for their professional commitment” (: 112). In professional circus schools, circus artists project themselves in a future in which they will be able to perform until an old age thanks to methods and body techniques that will preserve their bodily capital (Garcia, 2011). In this sense, “contemporary circus is based in a paradoxical way simultaneously on the ideology of physical prowess [*prouesse*] and on the one of artistic singularity proposed by contemporary dance” (ibid: 34). On the one hand, professional students provide examples of ‘old’ acrobats:

I: “do you think it is possible to do this until the end of one’s life?”

“Yes, we have two examples here at school, our Albanian teachers aged 60, and they still jump as if they were 20, do handstands, handstands with one hand, with the head, climb the Chinese pole, do everything. If there is a good method, you can keep going all through your life, they say “my secret is never to stop, not even for a day””

[Leonardo, 23, professional student]

The idea is thus that, with the right method and “avoiding training in a harmful way for the body, trying to work in a respectful way for the body [...] listening to one’s body, to the signals it sends” (Stefania, 40, professional), it is possible to preserve bodily capital. This reflects a “narcissistic” investment in self-presentation and ‘self-preservation’ through the body: “dealing in growth, development, liberation, reappropriation” and according to “a normative principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability” (Sassatelli, 2010: 26), in this case connected to long-term investment in one’s bodily capital to endure in circus practice, for fun or for work reasons. Referring to Baudrillard (1998), Sassatelli states:

“The French theorist envisages elements of “puritan terrorism” in all this – “except that in this case it is no longer God punishing you, but your own body, a suddenly maleficent repressive agency which takes its revenge if you are not gentle with it ... if you do not make your bodily devotions”” (2010: 26).

The conception of a fit, healthy, and responsibly looked after circus body goes beyond the absence of fat or muscular tone of contemporary consumerism, to embrace the ability to listen to one’s body, know what is good for it, take care of its different parts, prevent injuries and accidents. Moreover, besides the requirement of deep knowledge of one’s body and self, circus practice is a matter of “character demonstration” and “the realisation of normative selfhood” (ibid: 29) through constancy, discipline, determination and hedonism in the pursue of passions, desires, pleasure. This explains why it is not for everybody:

“this is a work that demands commitment every day, it is beautiful, it is my passion, but it demands commitment every day, and every day you must train, the day you are not training it’s because you are resting which is also part of the training, but you cannot rest for three months during the holidays, partying, destroying the work of one year

[...]

The brain sometimes [...] it is too much stress, maybe you are in the wrong place, and you ask yourself why the hell am I doing this? It is a bad moment, I saw two girls crying..."

[Leonardo, 23, professional student]

Generally speaking, as it can be elicited from the tests candidates have to sustain to enter professional training, the physical assets considered essential for circus practice are flexibility, strength, and endurance, and the ability to perform basic acrobatic moves (in the case of Flic school: "front roll and back roll; cartwheel; handstand front roll; roundoff; handspring forward; and free acrobatic movements" - Flic scuola di circo, 2015), dance and theatre skills. Gender also seems to represent an important factor in evaluating bodily assets. Garcia (2011) shows how socialization in circus professional education in France adopts different criteria to orient women and men: the physical characteristics for which women are assessed and advised about the specialization to undertake are fixed ones, such as height and body structure, while for men the most malleable ones (such as strength and power) count.

In the French system of professional schools, training is organised in three main steps: the first one is oriented towards the acquisition or reinforcement of physical dispositions. The second one aims at the incorporation of discipline-specific circus techniques. Finally, the last step aims at a more intensive artistic work to prepare an act or a show, and facilitate the inclusion in the labour market (Salamero, 2009: 485). In Italy, the number of schools is too scarce and the field too young to allow for such a standardised organisation. However, the training programmes of the schools also seem to insist on these three aspects: physical conditioning, specialisation, and artistic research.

"The training of contemporary circus artist is composed by two different fields which are collateral and fundamental: **training physical / technical** and artistic research aimed at new contemporary languages. Their integration is the goal that the school is pursuing during the three years of study, divided into: two years of further training and optional third year of **artistic and individual research** [...]. During the first year there are the basics of the various disciplines, each student has to know whatever circus technique in which he intends to **specialize** [sic]"

(Flic scuola di circo, 2015).

In circus like in boxing "anatomy is not destiny" (Wacquant, 1995: 70): through body work – "a highly intensive and finely regulated manipulation of the organism whose aim is to imprint into the bodily schema of the fighter postural sets, patterns of movement, and subjective emotional-cognitive states" (ibid: 73) - the body "can, within given parameters, be refurbished, retooled, and significantly restructured" (ibid: 70).

In circus, body work aims first of all at the improvement of core, arms, shoulders and legs strength (in particular, the number of pull ups, push ups, and leg lifts one can do), proprioception, and flexibility (being able to bend the back forward into straddle positions and backwards, into a bridge; being able to split the legs both on the frontal and sagittal planes). Thus, "to acquire the specific *bodily sensitivity* that makes one a competent" circus practitioners "is a slow and protracted process; it cannot be effected by an act of will or a conscious transfer of information" (Wacquant, 1995: 72) and it transforms not only "the

physique” but also the “ ‘body-sense’, the consciousness he has of his organism and, through this changed body, of the world about him” (: 73).

Thus, in line with the insights presented in chapter 2, changes in the body affect the perception of physical and social space, the modes of interaction with others and, as such, one’s sense of self. In this sense, symbolic and bodily knowledge coincide and are inseparable from social positions and dispositions. Bourdieu's (1990) perspective about the “feel for the game” is illuminating of why actions and ways of doing are hardly questioned, and motivation is inscribed within practice itself, growing as one develops expertise; but also, of why it is so hard to question habits and relearn to use the body:

“Practical sense is a quasi-bodily involvement in the world which presupposes no representation either of the body or of the world, still less of their relationship. It is an immanence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action. It orients 'choices' which, though not deliberate, are no less systematic, and which, without being ordered and organised in relation to an end, are none the less charged with a kind of retrospective finality. A particularly clear example of practical sense as a proleptic adjustment to the demands of a field is what is called, in the language of sport, a 'feel for the game'. [...] Produced by experience of the game, and therefore of the objective structures within which it is played out, the 'feel for the game' is what gives the game a subjective sense - a meaning and a *raison d'être*, but also a direction, an orientation, an impending outcome, [...]. And it also gives the game an objective sense, because the sense of the probable outcome that is given by practical mastery of the specific regularities that constitute the economy of a field is [...] filled with sense and rationality for every individual who has the feel for the game” (: 66).

The experience of a bodily practice like circus thus contains in itself subjective and objective meanings and motivations to engage in modes which are, at the same time, bodily, cognitive and emotional, immediate and reflexive. Relearning to use the body entails becoming aware about previously taken for granted practical sense, and reconsidering one’s modality of being in the world. In line with what Bassetti (2014) states about dance, the practice of circus affects the everyday habits and daily life of practitioners. Specific (dance or circus) techniques are enacted every day, and resist outside their field as habits:

“in the long term, the bodily remodeling hits the dancer’s modality of being-in-the-world, her or his everyday relationship with the world as a body-subject. The aspiring dancer’s habitus progressively changes [...], until the ways she or he walks, sits, breathes, etc. i.e., manner and attitude – become “that of a dancer”. What one learns with the body and through it is not something one has [...] but something one is, an embodied knowledge to be enacted” (: 95)

For instance, in more than one occasion I noticed the difficulty for circus people to remain seated or still for a long time, listening to a lecture or a presentation. For this reason workshops, seminars and conferences addressed to circus people often include games, dynamics, breaks in which everybody can stand up and move around. Moreover, we saw already in chapter 5 that circus practitioners have a “very bodily way of interacting, listening, being present” [fieldnotes, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2015]. As soon as they can, they stretch, try handstands or other tricks, juggle, balance random objects:

“Balancing on the nose is something that comes with me wherever I go; I saw Manu [circus artist], at the restaurant there’s the guy that brings roses: he takes the rose and places it on his nose and I said: “Look at this guy, so indiscreet”; but since I’ve learnt how to keep things in balance on my nose, I do the same! So, you know, in the supermarket you take a baguette, you are waiting in the line, what do you do? You keep it on your nose! Because it is an instinct, if I see something I could keep on my nose, it is a really uncontrollable instinct”

[Giacomo, 38, amateur].

To conclude, a few “small pleasures” of training (Wacquant, 2004) might be pointed out, which compensate for the demanding building of the circus bodily capital. Wacquant’s “virile friendship” (ibid: 68) can be translated, in the case of circus, in a “playful” [Matteo, 31, teacher], “friendly” [Giacomo, 38, amateur] environment of “freedom”, “sharing and fun”, “with nice people” [Stefania, 40, professional]. “Emotional attachment” (Wacquant, 2004: 69) and the sense of belonging to a separated community, with different, shared values and habits, is also an important element:

“there are also **relational implications**: differently from other disciplines, I don’t feel competition in circus. on the contrary, I feel a continuous, pleasant exchange [...] it is a very different environment from sports and also dance, where even in any amateur course I’ve always felt much more competition. This is not the case in circus. [...] this is why I’ve always become attached to the people I met in circus courses”

[Lucia, 29, amateur]

The “environment”, the sharing of a learning path, the sense of belonging to “this family of the circus” [Matteo, 31, teacher] attracts people to the practice of circus, underpinning what becomes framed, in the words of practitioners, as passion, vocation, search for freedom, a drive too strong to be ignored, or a desire to pursue a certain way of feeling and experiencing the world:

“There is evidently something important that this [circus practice] is giving us [...] it like saying that...it is almost nutrition of...of continuing to overcome limits and say: “I will make it”, and in the end I make it. And...as I was saying, here, look!” [she shows me her arm to say: talking about these things has given her gooseflesh!]

[Emilia, 29, professional]

Finally, there is, in circus like in boxing, “the joy of feeling one’s body blossom, loosen, gradually get “tuned” to the specific discipline” (Wacquant, 2004: 68). This is possible thanks to “the oft-vivid sentiment of corporeal wholeness and ‘flow’” provided by training (ibid): the states of flow thus acquire central importance in processes of embodiment of a circus habitus. Like (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) clearly points out, the challenging character of an activity is as important as expertise for one to enter a state of flow. As the articulation between competence, dispositions, familiarity with the ‘rules of the game’, and, on the other hand, the challenges posed by non-familiar contexts, habits, and activities, flow may be seen as a declination of the notion of habitus in a more personal, psycho-social sense, through which personal engagement and individual experiences acquire meaning and

value. Moreover, “training becomes its own reward when it leads one to master a difficult gesture that offers the sensation of decoupling one’s power, or when it enables one to score a victory over oneself” (: 68): “The self-confidence, the trust in yourself, grows a lot, it helps you to overcome certain fears [...] it pushes you a lot [...] you slowly construct something and see the results” [Mara, 25, amateur].

### 7.3 Reflexive body techniques

Wacquant’s and Bourdieu’s view of practical sense as the articulation between embodied knowledge of the world and specific modes of being in the world cannot obscure the question of reflexivity in learning and mastering a technique. This perspective seems at odds with Wacquant’s (2004) idea that “action and its evaluation are fused and reflexive return is by definition excluded from the activity” (: 59) of boxing, and this is because it broadens the focus from the moment of performing (or fighting) or improvising, to the process of continuous learning and relearning of a practice, correction and improvement.

In the first case, reflexivity may be counterproductive, as self-assessment prevents or interrupts the flow of creation or communication with the audience. In the second case, a continuous, reflexive consideration and re-orientation within the field and the community of contemporary circus is essential, especially in circus in which the emphasis on creativity and artistry turns authenticity and proficiency into blurred and instable notions (differently, from instance, from gymnastics in which either you win or you don’t), and in which there is no fixed constrain as to how and until what extent virtuosity can be pursued.

Reflexivity may be especially important when considering embodiment in circus also due to the peculiar interplay between neoliberal tendencies and resistance against them (see paragraphs 5.5 and 5.8). Circus practice may in this sense be seen as a way to reappropriate the body, which expresses a politics of the body against the mainstream trends of commercialisation and aestheticisation.

Drawing on the phenomenological distinction and interdependence between body and self, between the image of myself and my body and embodied, lived experience, Crossley highlights how “ ‘I’ am ‘my body’ and that body projects are therefore reflexive projects” (Crossley, 2005: 2). In this sense, he speaks about Reflexive Body Techniques (RBTs):

*“RBTs, as I define them, are those body techniques whose primary purpose is to work back upon the body, so as to modify, maintain or thematize it in some way. [...] RBTs are techniques of the body, performed by the body and involving a form of knowledge and understanding that consists entirely in embodied competence, below the threshold of language and consciousness; but they are equally techniques for the body, techniques that modify and maintain the body in particular ways”*

(ibid: 9-10).

Learning RBT is part of the process through which our specific sense of self is developed: they are chosen in accordance with agents’ projects of self-development. As such, “why agents engage in this body work is a key question in sociology” (ibid: 15).

Defining body techniques as 'reflexive', Crossley indicates body techniques 1) involving two agents and the manipulation of someone else's body, or 2) the use of one single part of the body to modify another one, or 3) the "total immersion in a stream of activity", for instance when "I launch my whole body into action, in an effort to increase my fitness, burn off fat, tone up and so on" (Crossley, 2006: 105). In the case of circus, example of these three cases could be: 1) massaging (to warm up, warm down, release contractures), stretching in pairs, aiding others manually when learning a trick; 2) stretching and massaging with one's hands other parts of the body, filming and watching videos of one's practice to correct one's mistakes, getting dressed in specific ways, both during training and while performing: cloths play a pivotal role in the work done for an adequate presentation of self. Entering the training space entails taking one's everyday shoes off, wearing specific 'circus shoes', socks, or work barefoot, take off watches, necklaces, bracelets and belts, which can damage the apparatus, but also avoid showing parts of the body when it is not necessary (as opposed to, for instance, pole dance); 3) what Bassetti (2009b) calls "reflexivity-in-action" (see paragraph 7.3.1), that is, the immersion in states of flow, for purposes of improvisation, creation or performance.

Body techniques are generally assembled into routines: they "are repeated on a daily, weekly, monthly and/or yearly basis [...] to structure time in a more familiar and safe-because-same manner" (Crossley, 2005: 14-15), or function to mark exceptional moments in life (for instance with a tattoo or other bodily modification, or with an extraordinary experience). In Crossley's perspective, the spatio-temporality of body techniques is "central to their meaning" (ibid: 15), in particular because it allows to distinguish between techniques employed for aims of "body maintenance" and "body modification" (ibid).

In the case of circus practice, "extra-daily" techniques become daily, if not ordinary (Bassetti, 2009a). They become central in structuring and organising the spatio-temporal dimension of life, and the reflexive projects of self-development. However, a clear-cut distinction between body modification and body maintenance may be inappropriate to capture the blurring and overlapping of these two purposes in each phase of a practitioner's career: body modification is more of a consequence of training than an explicitly searched for aim, like it could be in body building or fitness activities. Although recently a number of gyms present their aerial courses as fun ways to keep fit, both body maintenance and modification are strategies needed to achieve tricks and progress. While experts generally do not need to train to improve strength and flexibility, but to maintain them, they continue to engage in techniques of body modification, following trends of contamination with other practices, such as dance, or yoga, or attending regularly physiotherapists, kinesiotherapists, osteopaths, etc.

On the other hand, other definitions provided by Crossley are extremely useful in analysing embodiment in circus. First, he identifies "repertoires" of techniques which are specific to certain groups, and as such convey meanings in appropriate ways and enable effective interaction in different contexts. These repertoires "can always be differentiated into: (i) clusters which all members practise, (ii) clusters which the majority or a large minority practise and (iii) clusters which only a small minority practise" (Crossley 2005: 2). The latter are particularly important because they point to significant internal boundaries, highlighting the "social logic of distinct set of practices" (ibid). Secondly, Crossley clusters



body techniques into “ensembles”, that is, “sets of techniques which are practiced for a common purpose” (ibid: 10). For what concerns circus practice, I identified the following clusters of Reflexive Body Techniques (RBTs):

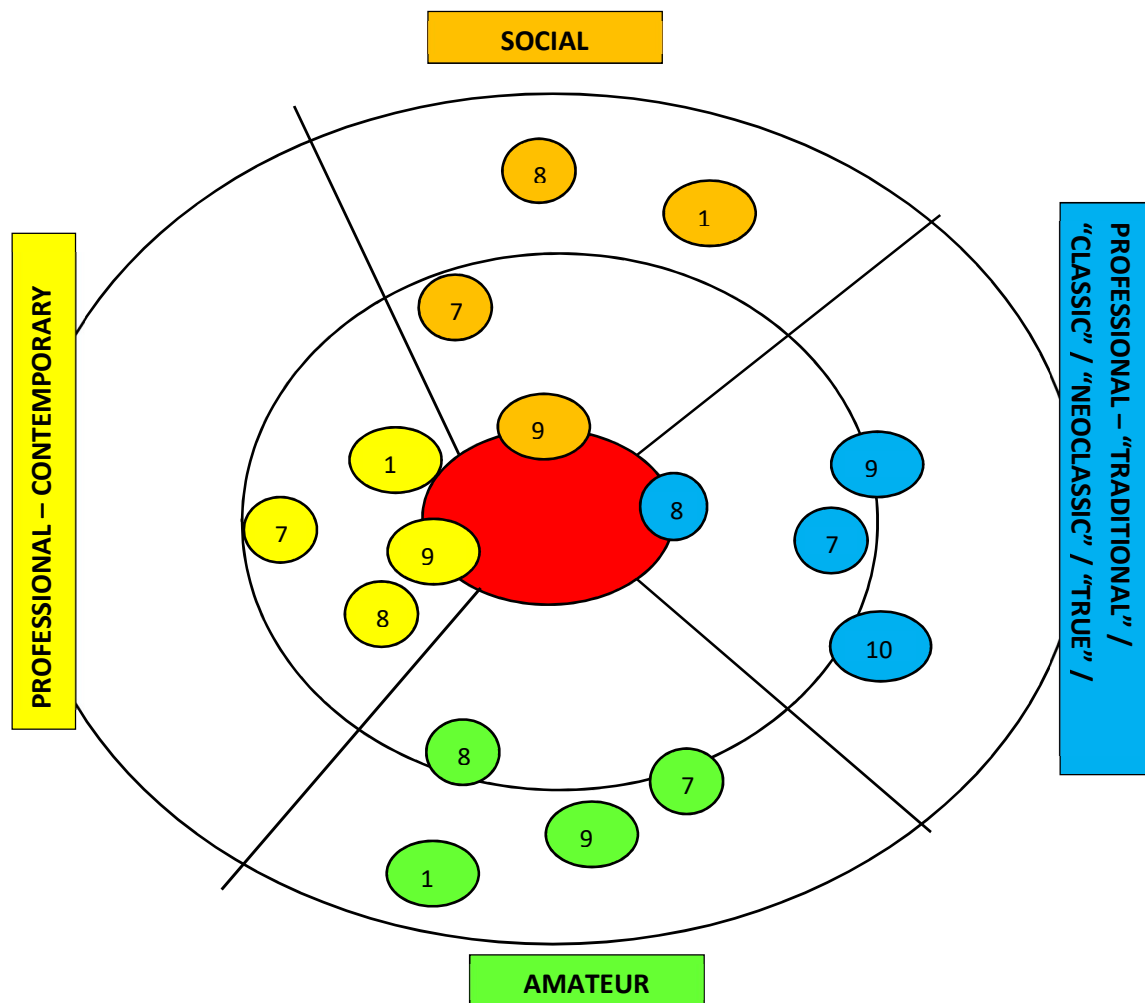
1. Warm-up
2. Physical conditioning
3. Practicing tricks
4. Managing pain and fatigue
5. Managing risk
6. Performing in front of an audience
7. Care for health
8. “Polishing” of gestures and poses
9. Improvisation and creation
10. Acquiring fluidity of movement and scenic presence

The classification of techniques into clusters and ensembles sheds light on the distinction between 1) “a core zone” of RBTs, which includes those techniques that are taken for granted, a matter of culture rather than choice, “too widely practiced to reflect anything distinctive about the self” (Crossley, 2005: 26), and relatively stable or only “historically variable” (: 27); 2) an “intermediate zone” of body techniques, whose appropriation is “less likely to be obvious, taken for granted and expected, and more likely to be a matter of choice” (: 28) and active self-construction, and which are also historically variable, as they rely on fashion and advertising; 3) a “marginal zone” of innovation and experimentation with specific RBTs, which are “not accepted as legitimate choices” and require disengagement from “the broader societal community, whether deliberately or not” (: 30). These techniques follow a different social logic, and may reflect “existential projects and choices” (ibid), as well as particular position-taking in relation to cultural or subcultural values. As we move towards the marginal zone, the significance of RBTs to identify elements of transgression or distinction increases. Thus, while ensembles in the core zone highlight the external boundaries of the circus practice (chapter 5), the intermediate and marginal zones enable internal differences and boundaries between “specific subcultures, fields and movements” (: 31) to emerge.

Picture 7.1 shows a visual map of clusters and ensembles of RBTs, and how these draw a core, intermediate and marginal zone, and boundaries between different ways of practicing circus, or subgroups within the community of circus practice. The distinction between the four types of circus represented in the picture – ‘social’, ‘amateur’, ‘professional’, and, among the latter, ‘contemporary’ and ‘traditional’ (also referred to as ‘classic’, ‘neoclassic’, ‘true’ circus, or ‘nouveau cirque’ - like this polished, glittering, ‘aestheticized’ and commercial genre was called by one interviewee, with Cirque du Soleil in mind as a reference) relies on the partial, working definitions provided in chapter 5. While the last circus type was not the object of this research, and, as such, neither the sample of interviewees nor the research sites are representative of this broad, heterogeneous category, I decided to include it in the mapping of circus RBTs because it is often taken as the opposite of contemporary circus, thus marking its boundaries, especially in terms of body techniques.

The RBTs which occupy the centre of the graph (1 to 6, highlighted in red) represent the underpinning of circus practice in general, despite differences in emphasis and priorities tied to the variety of circus styles, aesthetic ideals, and goals of the practice. For instance, amateur practice is generally less intense and time-demanding than professional training, so the time dedicated to the same body techniques increases at the professional level. Like a professional student at the first year observes “now we don’t do everything in one hour anymore, but in 5, or 7” [Clelia, 19, professional student]. The position of ensembles 8 to 10 is instead less central and more variable, depending on the type of circus practice.

Picture 7.1: Visual map of 'Circus Reflexive Body Techniques'



1. Warm-up
2. Physical conditioning
3. Practicing tricks
4. Manage pain and fatigue
5. Manage risk
6. Perform in front of an audience
7. Care for health (food, alcohol, smoke, drugs use)
8. “Polishing” of gestures and poses
9. Improvisation and creation
10. Acquiring fluidity of movement and scenic presence

The graph mainly aims to facilitate interpretation and clarify the presentation of the outcomes of this research, and it shall not be taken in any ways as an attempt to fix, or define in absolute terms, categories, groups and practices. While it draws on Crossley's (2005) mapping of body techniques, it is not, like in his case, a statistically significant graph, but a photography of the context-specific, situated research insights. As such, it can rather be assimilated to Bassetti's (2009a) classification of dance RBTs, underpinned by a much

smaller sample and qualitative methods. Furthermore, the distances between the RBTs have no statistical or analytical significance, they have been arbitrarily and symbolically set as a step of the interpretative process. While different criteria may have been useful in establishing the distances from the core in more accurate ways (such as the number of hours dedicated to that specific activity, graphical representations employed during the interviews, etc), as explicated in chapter 3 (and particularly in paragraph 3.6.4) the sample considered is not statistically relevant, and the interview questions concerned more general issues. The visual representation of body techniques was not a research goal, it is simply a useful tool, in my view, to present the research outcomes.

In order to interpret the picture above, a premise must be made about the variability of body techniques. What I identified, also on the basis of the discussion in chapter 5, as the core circus RBT, are central to all types of circus, although emphasis is placed on them in different ways, and different methods are followed. For instance, physical conditioning is one thing in social circus, which is less focused on hard training, and more on the playful character of the activity: “I make you do [10 push-ups] while you play, if you can do them” [Adele, 21, circus educator]. And another one in professional environments in which “training is more accurate, ‘Nazi’: “do a hundred sit-ups!!!”” [Mara, 25, amateur], and the playful, inclusive and tolerating dimension of circus is less central: “When I teach amateurs, I don’t have the patience, if you are not coordinated, go do something else. I can’t see the playful in it, I don’t have the patience” [fieldnotes, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015, conversation with professional student].

Besides the circus approach, methods, emphasis and attitudes in the acquisition of the core ensembles, variation unfolds on individual (e.g. based on discipline, role - for instance base or flier, age, gender, ‘season’ of the year, and phase in one’s career) and social bases (depending on the most diffused theories and methods concerning training, conditioning, applied biomechanics and technology, ideas about health, and aesthetic and artistic ideals). An example of the historical variability of circus body techniques can be found in the following extract, in which, during a trapeze workshop, the manager of a circus space comments on the changing uses of an apparatus such as the trapeze:

“I used to do these things on the swinging trapeze, years ago you would never leave the bar in the fixed trapeze, but you did it at high heights. Now you do it lower but it’s all dynamic movements, and with a 40-cm mat underneath and without the safety cable, you leave and retake [the bar]. The first one to do this was an artist from Cirque du Soleil, she did fixed trapeze but with the tricks of the swinging trapeze. Also the rope is done in this way now, in dynamics, leaving the rope and retaking it after a time of flight”

[fieldnotes, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2015].

As for individual variability, first of all men and women are not equally distributed among circus disciplines: according to Garcia (2011), aerial practices are mainly female, bases are mostly men (except for the few cases of two-women duos), and jugglers and clowns are mainly males. This is due to a sexualised socialization which leads boys to undertake disciplines in which strength is required, and girls towards those practices demanding lightness, flexibility, and grace, as if circus disciplines, like most social practices, “had a sex” (Garcia, 2011: 89-90). In the French system she observes, Garcia notes how circus students

at their first year of professional training choose their specialities searching for different characters: males mainly search for “strength and *exploit*”, while women mainly aim at achieving exercises in a proper and clean way (ibid: 93). Moreover, teachers often re-orient, indirectly, the choices of the students based on bodily size and shape and physical skills such as flexibility or agility.

This is connected to normative ideas about more or less “docile bodies” (ibid: 98), or what Bassetti (2009a) calls “easy” or “difficult” bodies (: 364). The notion of docility relies on the physical characteristics of the practitioner, considered as more or less plastic and “workable” (Garcia, 2011: 98) through the action of trainers and directors. Plasticity, associated to certain physical attributes (size, weight, etc.) determines the bodily capital of circus practitioners. However, both plasticity and corporeality are normative notions: in Garcia’s research, dexterity and musculature are considered as “workable”, while size and structure are considered as permanent. This results in the exclusion of girls whose body structure is considered as suitable for ‘feminine disciplines’ from the practice of disciplines considered “neutral or masculine” (ibid: 100). This vision has limiting effects for the career of women, which are oriented towards disciplines with specific requirements in terms of training and performing space: for instance only a few theatres have the height and structural conditions suitable for aerial disciplines to be performed. These gendered dynamics, however, also hold a longer-term variability element:

“Dominique [instructor] tells us that things in the circus world have changed: in the past, girls worked with flexibility, guys with strength, now men are much more flexible, and, thus, girls need to become strong. I ask why men are more flexible today. He says that it is because of the changed methods of working, and teaching”.

[fieldnotes, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2015, handstand workshop]

Another quote from the fieldnotes taken during the same workshop is significant in relation to body plasticity and the shaping of more or less “easy” bodies. Having an “easy” body is a gift of nature, as another moment during the handstand workshop highlights:

“According to Dominique, there are those who are gifted by nature, they have something in their body thanks to which they try once, and immediately achieve a result, while others have to work for years and years and never get there”

Hard work, in some cases, can compensate for the lack of perfect physical features, as it was the case, according to the instructor, of one of the other participants in the workshop: “you can tell he’s been working hard, because he doesn’t have physical qualities of high level” he told us. However, “someone not very gifted who works hard will never achieve the level of a hard-working gifted person”.

The normative character of the notion of docility can again be highlighted looking at the historical variability of mechanisms of compensation. In contemporary circus practice and education, which is generally considered as less rigid, severe and formal when compared to traditional circus, compensation for a “difficult” body can also operate through creative and original ideas:

“According to P., what saves us [in contemporary Western circus] is that the most important thing is the idea. In circus there is no competition like in gymnastics, otherwise the Russians and the Chinese would always be the best because they start at the age of 4. [...] nowadays a figure like a flag does not necessarily need to be straight, you can do it in different, invented ways, what matters is the idea, the creativity”.

[fieldnotes, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2015, handstand workshop]

Finally, it is important to note that the same technique might be used for different purposes, for instance a “five-seven minutes run” (Livia, 48, amateur) can be used to warm up, while a longer run can be used, like swimming, as an alternative to “doing exercises in a gym” [Emilia, 29, professional] (to change routine, or if an adequate space is not available), as physical conditioning to improve endurance and seen as a therapeutic activity for certain body parts.

### **7.3.1 Core zone**

#### **1. Warm-up**

Warming up is an essential part of circus practice. It is meant to get one’s body and mood ready for circus work, and it marks the beginning of every training session, creating a sort of ritual. It generally entails a varying combination of aerobic exercises such as “running and jumping” in different ways [Livia, 48, amateur], joint warm up, exercises to improve proprioception and core stability. No matter the discipline, with very few exceptions the circus classes attended during the research started with running, jumping and walking in different ways (lifting the knees, kicking the buttocks, feet together, feet spread, on tiptoes, on heels, on hands and feet etc.); then entailed a phase, in a circle or in front of the teacher in which - with exercises that vary extensively from teacher to teacher and session to session - articulations were mobilized: rotating, beating or swinging arms, shoulders, wrists, neck, back, fingers, hips, knees, ankles, tiptoes. This phase sometimes includes the use of tools such as elastic bands, sticks, balls, especially when specific physical problems, weak points, or injured body parts are to be faced (Emilia, 29, professional: “I use the elastic band for my shoulders, which are destroyed”). The same is true for isometric core strength and proprioception exercises, which can vary depending on discipline and role, for instance in hand-to-hand the base concentrates on balancing objects such as sticks or weights, while the flyer on isometric exercises.

As an alternative or integration to this ‘classical’ warm up, exercises can be borrowed from yoga:

“The training routine is given by the class structure. You go there, do warm up, strengthening, stretching, then every time more or less we do the same climbs and hold positions on the silks, [...] but before the show I did a little yoga and that helps me a lot, I find that yoga warms up my body much more than a stretching session, it is a very different level of energy and concentration [...] it gives you more awareness, more calm”

[Filippo, 22, amateur]

Moreover, there can be differences in the way warming up is undertaken, depending on the type of circus, on the discipline to be practiced, on whether it is a brief warm up before a performance – in which you need to warm “without getting tired” [Livia, 48, amateur] or a full one, for a training session or class, and on the specific goals of the latter. Professionals’ way of warming up is longer, more disciplined and specific, as opposed to amateurs’ “casual” [Mario, 53, amateur], less personalised and specific, “undisciplined” [Giacomo, 38, amateur], or simply less “autonomous” and aware of one’s body and limits [Livia, 48, amateur] work. In social circus warming up often takes the shape of a game, the sharing of a playful moment, a ritual to enter the environment and leave everyday reality outside, “a subtle warm up, as I call it, in which you don’t realize you are warming up” [Adele, 21, circus educator].

The context “plays a role” too:

“I have kind of like a routine to warm up, then it depends a bit on the environment, then also a little routine on the apparatus to...

I: “What do you mean – “it depends on the environment”?”

I mean that if I’m outdoor I’ll get warm in a certain way, if I’m in a small gym in another one, if I’m in a gym full of people in another one still

I: “Ok so you mean the physical space...”

Yes, how many people, how much I can expand, how much I feel at ease in the place to do the things, clearly...then I don’t really care, but sure enough that also plays a role”

[Matteo, 31, teacher]

Variability also depends on the goals of the training session, whether it is “to prepare a sequence” or rehearse it, or to try out single “elements” [Matteo, 31, teacher], whether the tricks to practice are more or less dynamic, whether the goal is instead to “create the energy” [Chiara, 32, professional] for a work of research, experimentation and creation. For instance in a workshop of “technique on the trapeze” warming up consisted of “some running and skips, jumps, walks, then stretching, then strengthening (sit-ups, push-ups, dorsal exercises), then we warm up on the to the trapeze with some beats” [fieldnotes, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2015]. On the contrary, in a workshop whose main goal was to “provide a technical vocabulary, teach a working method and suggest new paths of artistic creation”, warm up was more focused on the relation with the space and the others:

“we do some running, different types of walks, and joint warm up. Then we start walking in the space, and do some figures to get an idea of what it feels like to welcome someone else’s weight, like the instructors explain. And the fact that it is also possible for someone smaller to carry someone bigger. Then we do an exercise in pairs, one leads another person with his/her eyes closed: this is to build trust and share responsibility, I must lead the other and prevent accidents, make sure he/she doesn’t hurt him/herself”.

[fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015]

## 2. Physical conditioning

Physical conditioning includes stretching and strengthening exercises, performed either on the floor, with generic gym instruments (such as weights, stools, benches, gym ladders, bars, etc.), or on circus specific apparatuses, alone or in pairs. Conditioning is usually a central part of both amateur classes and professional training, although it can receive more or less attention, depending on the goals of the course, class or training session, and on the pedagogical and social goals of the project in social circus (in which care for one's body and perseverance often represent central values). For amateurs, RBTs with the purpose of physical conditioning are often aimed at body modification, especially because without a certain level of strength and flexibility most disciplines will be hard to practice. In acrobatic disciplines this is more evident than in other disciplines, however beyond a certain level of expertise even jugglers realize that they "should do it, at least a little bit, the arms and so [...] otherwise you feel it in your muscles afterwards" [Adele, 21, circus educator].

Emphasis on physical conditioning also depends on personal characteristics and weak points, on whether one has an "easy" or "difficult" body, on the phase of the career. Professionals who dedicated years to body modification, employ conditioning mainly to maintain the strength and flexibility required by their work, adapting these techniques to the specific requirements of their bodies. Flexibility in particular differentiates between contemporary and classical circus: training flexibility is central to contemporary circus practice, but reasons for this are provided mainly in 'functional' rather than aesthetic terms, as it is the case in traditional/classical circus. For instance, the presence of contortionists is much higher, and the aesthetic standards demand more extensive attention to splits and back arches, especially for women:

"Michele (circus professional) tells us that Alex (instructor and performer with a traditional circus background) wanted Laura, his flier, to do a split while standing in his hands, and that he told him: "if she does a split, I'll throw up", clearly showing the disgust he felt for the 'classic' aesthetics"

[Fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015]

To provide another example, after finishing a routine on the trapeze I once received comments both from an artist with a contemporary circus background, and from another one with a traditional circus background, who, by chance, happened to watch me. The first person's advices focused on the rhythm, the music, the intensity and the speed of the routine, while the second one's only advice was to work more on my legs, and do more stretching to improve their length and extension [fieldnotes, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2015]. Finally, as we saw above (paragraph 7.2), admission to professional schools demands a certain level of physical conditioning. Criteria can be more or less strict, more or less demanding: from "having the three splits" [Emanuele, 36, professional], to achieving a certain number of pull-ups or sit-ups.

## 3. Learning/Practicing tricks

Goudard (2013) identifies four steps in learning circus – which he assimilates to "learning risk". The first step is the "function of dynamic or static balancing"; the second one is the



“function of control”, acquired through the repetition of “stable, static or dynamic figures”; the third one is “mastering”, through which the practitioners learn how to break and re-find balance as they wish; finally, the fourth phase is “virtuosity”: the practitioner is able to change the speed of execution, the extension of the movements and the strength employed, the number of the figures and the way they are tied to each other in a sequence. We could rename the second phase ‘learning, and practicing, tricks’ (or, following Goudard, “figures”). In this way the following phase of “mastering” would include managing pain, fatigue and risk, as well as polishing movement; and the final phase of “virtuosity” – as the level at which “reflexivity-in-action” (Bassetti, 2009b) enters the scene - corresponds to one of the necessary premises for improvisation and creation, as well as interpretation, that is, performing in front of an audience.

While these steps do not necessarily follow each other in a linear way in the community of contemporary circus practice in Italy, and occupy different positions in the different sectors depicted in picture 7.1, Goudard’s view supports the argument exposed in chapter 5 that tricks (or figures) are the basis of circus, the raw material for practitioners to express themselves and negotiate their belonging to the community of circus practice: learning tricks enables the reciprocal fuelling between the aware search for disequilibrium and balance and the acquisition of neuromotor skills which, through training, become a language specific to circus artists. In other words, learning tricks is central to the embodiment of circus RBTs.

First, a clarification of the term ‘tricks’ is needed. The term indicates a variety of movements or positions, static or dynamic, usually performed in relation to a circus apparatus or another body. They can be classified according to the level of difficulty and the progression through which they are learnt into tricks of ‘basic’, ‘intermediate’, and ‘advanced’ level. In juggling, for instance, the basis is the ‘cascade’ with three balls:

“The Three Ball Cascade is the most basic juggling pattern, and the first trick any would-be juggler should learn. The Cascade is generally considered to be the easiest pattern, and forms the backbone of many other tricks”

(Library of Juggling, 2015).

While I generally use ‘trick’ and ‘figure’ as synonyms, there is a slight difference between them, related to their static or dynamic character. Figures are static poses achieved through passages, transitions, and “installation” [Livia, 48, amateur], or starting “positions” preceding tricks:

I. [looking at a picture of trapeze practitioners]: “do you think they are experts?”

I’m thinking about what **tricks** you can do from that **position**...but the position itself is beginner level. Either she is practicing forward and backward rolls, then you say ok she’s intermediate, but if she’s trying that position...[she’s a beginner]. And the other one, she’s not well in the position, she’s not on tiptoes...”

[Chiara, 32, professional]

The quote above leads us to another insight: the ability to discern the level of difficulty of a trick is a prerogative of the members of the community of practice, while the audience at large has a distorted perception of what is hardest (and most dangerous). While applause often start in figures which are more spectacular than difficult, tricks that costed a huge amount of effort and time to practitioners are not appreciated as such:

“for instance, this figure [looking at a video of her performance], nobody said anything about it, how is it possible? When I undo it, I unhook myself and I’m holding myself only with one hand. Nothing, nobody noticed and I find it is difficult!”

[Livia, 48, amateur]

“I’m getting tired of circus, so much work to learn tricks that people don’t understand, and my act is only two minutes... it is not the technique that makes a difference for the audience”

[fieldnotes, 13th March 2015, conversation with professional student on swinging trapeze, in a bar]

While subcultural value is attributed within the community of circus practice, visibility and recognition extends beyond the subcultural boundaries to the broader audience. This interplay between lay and internal acknowledgement opens up struggles for authentication and position-taking, and determines the movements of circus practitioners, the construction of careers, as well as identification and construction of subjectivities.

Besides tricks which are broadly recognized as the basis and nucleus of the circus practice (such as the cascade mentioned above), the value attributed to practitioners’ creativity, and the lack of formal codification of tricks, blurs the notion of progression and learning paths. Sometimes “tricks can be invented” [Teo, 40, professional], or “the name of the trick made up” to remember it and write it down [Arianna, 20, professional student]. Moreover, the notion of ‘progression’ is relative also due to the historical variability of tricks, connected to aesthetic values and to the accumulated knowledge and, consequently, increased level of difficulty:

“in the last years in which circus has been taking hold, there has been in juggling, acrobatics, aerial acrobatics a very high escalation of the difficulty in the things which are proposed, and also in the way they are proposed. With three balls you would do certain tricks three years ago, now you still see them but they belong to the past, there is a completely new way of juggling, with balls, and clubs, and diablo also, they have...invented or done or seen new things, the diablo used to be used on the vertical plane, and now on the horizontal, just to make an example”

[Teo, 40, professional].

The “more and more difficult” trend followed by circus practice (and within circus acts, at least in traditional circus) is due to the importance of the component of challenge in defining and learning tricks: the RBTs in this ensemble are aimed at achieving something new, more difficult than what until then accomplished. This can be interpreted in quantitative and qualitative terms: from one ball, to two, then three, four, and so on; from

being able to juggle three balls and to walk on a tightwire, to doing both things at the same time; from climbing a tissue, to learning how to wrap it around one's body and take certain positions, to learning how to unwrap parts of the body to perform drops, to mastering the use of different parts of the body to re-catch the tissue.

Thus, the RBTs employed for this purpose are very diverse, depending on the discipline practiced and on the expertise of the practitioner. However, some 'tricks' are transversal to all circus disciplines: for instance, handstands are practiced, or at least tried out from time to time, by aerialists, fliers, bases, wire walkers and jugglers alike, and "having a good handstand" marks a certain status within the community: "having a good handstand often raises admiration, respect from those belonging to the circus world, and knowing how to distinguish a good handstand from a wrong one. For instance during the [Social Circus Basic] Training a number of people complimented me for my handstand. L. [participant, youth circus instructor] told me: "you must have worked on it a lot, to have it this straight"" [fieldnotes, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015].

This example is not to imply that all circus practitioners are required handstanding skills to be defined as such, but that these skills are more transversal to different disciplines than other 'tricks'. This may be because they can be performed in different circus disciplines and on different apparatuses, and because they represent a good preparatory exercise to achieve other tricks. In this sense, handstands can exemplify some of the central values and body techniques of circus practice: extreme body and posture control, (core) strength, (shoulders') flexibility, hard, long and precise work:

"G. explains to me how to correct my handstand and finally, after years, maybe I understood. My problem is that the ribs often stick out too much. I get that I have to inflate my stomach, although she describes the idea like tying the lower part of the abdomen to the chest, and she tells me: "remember how it feels because everyone has a different perception". And upside down is even more difficult to control everything"

[fieldnotes, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2015].

"I'm trying to work on keeping the alignment while holding a handstand (both stomach and back should be 'flat') and on doing the right work when I close my legs (when the legs are spread, the bum usually sticks out, when I close my legs I have to do a double work, closing the legs and realigning back and stomach and chest, pushing on my shoulders)"

[fieldnotes, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2015].

As the quotes above highlight, it is not enough to achieve a trick once (in the first quote) to "have it", but after the right sensation is felt once, it must be searched for again and again (second quote, a few weeks later), until you finally embody the trick completely, that is, you feel confident and "sure enough that the next time we'll get it again" [Maura, in fieldnotes 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015]; this implies not only "managing to do something the first time I try it [...]": a trick is good if you present it 5 times without mistakes. So it is not easy, because maybe for ten times you get to the fourth, and the fifth it falls..." [Teo, 40, professional]. In this sense, embodiment is not a linear process:


“We try hand to hand. The first time it goes very well, then it starts getting worse and we have to step backwards: do it on the floor, then re-try only the first part of the movement...as usual, when we learn something new, it takes a long time before we actually ‘incorporate’ it [...]. We do a step forward, and half a step backward, and you have to keep practicing, it is normal to get it and then to lose it again. Success is always temporary, there is always the possibility of getting it wrong, or, worse, of “losing” a movement. What remains is only the feeling of what the right movement is, and the impossibility to reproduce what you did just a while before. Until the moment in which things start to come easy, suddenly, and one day you realize you have them”

[fieldnotes, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2015].

Thus, learning tricks implies the practitioners’ awareness that “it is normal” if one day “things are not coming”, and their ability to “take it with love” [fieldnotes, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2015] and “step backwards” [fieldnotes, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015] to a previous, easier step in the learning path. This indicates that the latter “is not merely reiterative, but instead, spiral-shaped; it is recursive, yet also progressive” (Bassetti, 2014: 95). That “each additional step deeply modifies what was previously achieved, and it does so at the level of the lived body” (ibid: 94). However, “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas, 2016) must be reactivated when tricks are no longer ‘coming’, and body techniques for the purpose of achieving specific tricks are to be reflexively re-appropriated.

Table 7.1 below may be helpful to clarify this idea. During fieldwork, the circus trick called ‘pitching’ was taught to me and my base through seven steps. These steps represented not only a learning progression, but also a preparatory progression to be repeated in every training session as a way to warm up and avoid mistakes and injuries. Thus, every time we got one of the steps wrong, we could go back to the previous, simpler (as engaging fewer parts of the body, demanding less strength, power, coordination, and fear control) one. The process, however, was not merely forth and back, as there were also expectations that practicing a more advanced step would help us improve the performance of the previous ones.

**Table 7.1: learning progression of a circus move**

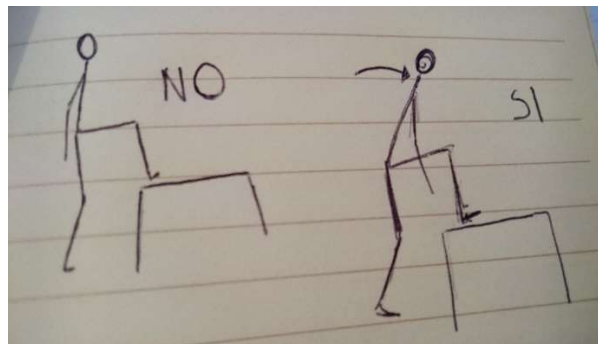
|   |  |
|---|--|
| Step 1: base in pitch stance, flier steps with one foot on his/her hands and stands still   |  |
|    | Step 2: the flyer steps on the base's hands, and straightens the body thus allowing the base to lift her using his legs. Then the flyer steps back on the floor. |
|   | Step 3: same as 2, but base uses both legs and arms to lift the flyer  |
| Step 4: learn how to catch/be caught by the hips: flyer jumps in front of the base, hands on his shoulders, the base lifts her and throws her (she should leave his hands and straighten her body); then base catches flier's hips to soften and help her landing |  |
| Step 5: base holds pitch stance, does not push the plier. Flier steps on his hands and pushes to leave his hands. Base catches her hips.  |  |
| Step 6: base throws the flier using only his legs, then catches her hips and helps her landing  |  |



Source: fieldnotes. Pictures taken from FEDEC (2010): 31

Pitching is a particularly complex trick (at least for my level of expertise) because it demands a high level of control of one's own body, as well as an extreme precision in the attunement with the base's movements and tempo, at the risk of seriously injuring the other person's wrists and back. Thus, I had first to concentrate on my own posture, the position, direction and tempo of each part of my body:

"Alex corrects my posture giving an example with the bench: "If you mount in this way (shoulders back, without a narrower corner between chest and thighs) you cannot go high; in this way (chest forward) you can because you can place the weight better, and you go UP, you can also remain on one leg" - and he shows me, mounts on the bench and turns 360 degrees! This example helps me a lot, although, he says, I'm still leaving my bum behind a little".



[fieldnotes, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

Secondly, I tried to maintain the same feeling "at the level of the lived body" (Bassetti, 2014: 94) – that is, in relation to the different body parts involved, to space, timing, and to my partner's body - and attune to the position and tempo of my partner, stepping, pushing and stretching my leg at the right tempo and in the right direction, as he took my weight and pushed it towards the ceiling. The feeling of a successful pitching and a wrong one are completely different: the first one feels light and easy, the second one heavy and impossible:

"I understand the mechanism only looking at Alex doing it with Momo: despite his 80 kg, Momo finds it easier and lighter to lift him than myself!!! Because he has the right technique: shifts the weight in a gradual but determinate way, starts with the hips and gives the right inclination with the chest, does not leave his hips behind, thinks about going UP and stretches the leg until the end, as if on a trampoline"

[fieldnotes, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2015]

#### 4. Managing pain and fatigue

The level of pain endurance required of circus practitioners varies a great deal: beginners must resist a certain degree of pain when stretching, using body parts in unusual ways, getting the first burns, bruises, and calluses; experts and professionals must keep training despite (minor) injuries and wounds: "when you open your hands...[you put] tape!" and continue training [Pietro, 32, professional]. The assumption that "circus hurts" (or that "a circus person without pain is a dead circus person, because pain is always there" [Leonardo, 23, professional student]), and that a certain level of pain endurance is required to practice circus is central. Pain and bodily wearing become values and signs of membership within the circus community of practice ("maybe if I had the possibility of looking at his hands, to see whether there are calluses, I could be able to tell whether he's a circus person. If you see a girl with a skirt, you can evaluate her bruises" [Lucia, 29, amateur]), and can even be a source of pleasure, in terms of satisfaction for one's hard work, and pride for doing something exceptional. It is "a sign of the vocational habitus" (Turner & Wainwright, 2003: 275) of the circus practitioner.

"A 60 years old person arrives and mounts on your split and starts jumping, it hurts, it really hurts and...now it makes me laugh because it doesn't happen anymore, I still don't have a split but I'm almost there, but in the beginning it was really painful, and sometimes he pushes too much and you get close to a pulled...or an excessively stretched muscle, and that hurts for three days, and for a month I have pain in the hips. The fact of doing physical conditioning every day, [...] also handstands, the shoulders, all the joints, or to jump every day, do somersaults, every day your knees suffer, I wake up in the morning and my knees go "Clack", my shoulder goes "Clack" and...you don't feel it just at school, but walking in the street and sometimes you hear "Clack" somewhere and you feel your hip blocked.

[...]

But it is obvious because we don't do natural things, we don't do things for which the body is predisposed, we don't do things that a normal person does every day, also for this reason it is very beautiful to see and to do."

[Leonardo, 23, professional student]

Moreover, as shown by Bassetti (2009a) for dance, pain is a tool to improve knowledge, performance, and, more in general, of work and art production. Through the presence and absence of pain, dancers and circus people are able to tell how correct is the movement they are performing: pain improves awareness and this is why, also in circus, the "tiring and dulling effect of anti-inflammatories" [Maura, 33, professional, in fieldnotes, shadowing, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2015] is deleterious. However, contemporary circus practitioners reject

excessive pain as a sign of “wrong training”. Methods such as the ones Leonardo refers to in the quote above are being progressively abandoned in favour of ‘softer’ ones, more sustainable in the long term and respectful of individual bodies and recent research on biomechanics and anatomy, more tolerant in relation to less expert bodies, and less demanding and severe for professionals. For example, the first day of a handstand workshop for both amateurs and professionals, beginners and experts, the instructor told us:

“I’d rather you stop than not being able to move tomorrow...everyone knows their own limits [...] I work in a professional school in France, and nowadays students have more power, they discuss the ‘orders’ of the teachers, they ask question. Years ago, if the teacher asked you to do a repetition of ten, you’d do it without a single word, now you ask why and how, say your own opinion, if you don’t want you just do 5 and that’s ok...”

[fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2015].

Finally, circus practitioners are always in search of – or carry with them - special products such as “plasters with essential oils anti-contraction that you can only find in France” [fieldnotes, shadowing, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2015], clothes such as “thick socks which I cut, and helped me a lot to overcome the initial pain” [Lucia, 29, amateur], and attend regularly physiotherapists, osteopaths, etc. not only to fix problems connected to specific injuries, but also as a technique of body maintenance: “C. has the last session with the masseur and physiotherapist, but she wants to continue afterwards because he does such a deep work that is good for her” [fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015].

## 5. Managing risk

As we saw in chapter 5, risk is a defining character of circus, in which “differently from dance, from theatre, you put your body at stake at the physical level, so it is different from learning a text and stage it” [Clara, 39, professional]. Here I am referring precisely to physical risk, and the body techniques employed to reduce or control it. The techniques employed to manage risk aim at developing the awareness and knowledge needed to evaluate the consequences of certain actions:

“this is also the role of the teachers, to make their students understand these things. After a while, it becomes automatic, so you always ask yourself the same question: “What happens if I do something?”. This is the thing, I reckon, the fact of understanding the risks one is taking”

[Alberto, 22, teacher].

If the management of pain follows, or is simultaneous to, the practice of circus, the management of risk has a preventive character, and the body techniques employed for this purpose are enacted before as well as during action. They consist of:

- Making sure the rigging is safe, wearing harnesses and placing (adequate) mats:

I: “What does it mean to be safe while training and performing?”



“To make sure that your structure, in my case [slack rope], holds, that is well placed and tied, be sure that you don’t hurt yourself in case you fall”

I: “and how do you make sure? You check it? You place it yourself?”

“In most cases you place it yourself, you check it a moment earlier, the distances and everything”

I: “and how can you be sure that if you fall you don’t hurt yourself”

“Either you put mattresses...or if you fall you avoid falling on your head”

[Cristina, 20, professional student]

If for certain disciplines such as hand-to-hand, using the harness for tricks performed in height is normal, in aerial practice - with the exception of swinging apparatuses and other particularly dangerous cases – the use of harnesses is ambivalently associated to one or the other type of circus (“classical” of contemporary circus learning and performances). While Garcia (2011) states: “The attitude of contemporary circus aerialists is not different from the attitude of traditional circus trapeze artists, who train often without harnesses” (: 115), one of the interviewee stated:

“what we do is not easy, it is risky, also because we work in the air, also at big heights, we seldom have harnesses, we don’t have the classic...elastic band behind our backs, and this is something which differentiates us from classical circus”

[Davide, 31, professional]

- Self-evaluation or “reflexivity-in-action” (Bassetti, 2009b), as it is the case in the quote of Cristina above, where the interviewee implies that you must be aware enough, during practice, to avoid landing on certain body parts (the head in her case) when falling. These RBTs concern the ability to “be well-aware of when you can do certain things, and when it is better if you don’t do them. This is not only tied to how you feel physically that day, but also emotionally” [Barbara, 34, amateur].
- Spotting and catching others, “having people that spot you close by” [Daniel, 22, amateur], and people who “pay attention to what they do” and “are concentrated while they work” [Giovanna, 49, project manager]. Other people are thus needed in order to learn circus practice. Many times during fieldwork it happened that I wanted to try a new trick, but without someone spotting I would be too scared to do it. Besides the shortage of adequate spaces (see chapter 4), this is another reason why circus practice is shared and collective rather than individual: “Maura thinks that being a lot in SLIP is good, you can always find a space, plus it is the ideal to spot each other” [19<sup>th</sup> march]
- Respect the progression of complexity and risk, for instance, holding on to a support at first with both hands, then with one hand only, and finally with no hands when balancing on a wire, on a trapeze, on someone else’s hands, when learning how to ride a unicycle or walk on stilts: “[you can control risk] being careful not to start with the exercises straight away but do the preparatory exercises” [Daniel, 22, amateur], or “doing something I can’t do at a lower height” [Alberto, 22, teacher]

- Use of specific outfit and materials not to slip or stumble, get burned or stuck, such as tight clothes, leotards, gaiters, belly-bands, tape (to prevent calluses from bursting), or applying powdered or liquid rosin or chalk in order not to slip. Table 7.2 below provides some examples of these ‘risk-management objects’. Respondents were asked to bring “a circus object which they considered important” to the interview (see chapter 3), and many of them brought objects associated to the management of risk and pain, which were attributed central importance in the practice of circus (both for training and performing).

**Table 7.2: risk management objects**



“I brought rosin because it is very useful to train, it helps me not to slide when my hands start sweating and I start getting tired” [Francesca, 18, professional student]

“this is the liquid rosin [...] it is an object which represents a little bit the safety, the determination, the will to hold yourself, to hold on to the trapeze bar [...] determination because when you put it on you don’t go for a coffee, from there you go up so it is a way of feeling ready” [Maura, 33, professional]

“rosin is what gives you the self-confidence you search for before a performance [...] like putting chalk, it is the moment of concentration, in which you talk to your self and give yourself the strength to do things at your best you know? And also to find courage” [Emilia, 29, professional]



“I was burning my belly [with the silks] in a way...I kept getting burned, so my teacher told me: “Get yourself a leotard”!” [Livia, 48, amateur].

“I use a leotard on the silks, because otherwise I get burned a lot” [Filippo, 22, amateur]



“In the beginning I put my belly-band on as soon as I entered the gym, now I use it to keep my top in place, so it doesn’t get stuck or lifts, more than to get used to the pain” [Clelia, 19, professional student]

“sometimes I wear things like belly bands not to hurt myself” [Cristina, 20, professional student]

Source: interviews. Pictures by Ilaria Bessone.

## 6. Performing in front of an audience

This ensemble acquires very different roles depending on the type of circus. For professionals, it is clearly the main stake, the aspect that underpins vocation and passion as well as money-making (see chapter 6). A number of amateurs, too, enjoy performing from time to time “for fun”, “to have the freedom of being how the hell you want to be” [Roberto, 45, amateur], for “satisfaction” [Giacomo, 38, amateur], or the feeling of “complicity with one’s mates” which arises when performing together [Mara, 25, amateur]. Others are interested in circus practice more as a fun way to keep fit, and engage in something totally and passionately: they appreciate more “the preparatory part, where I can experiment and put myself to test and see what I achieve” [Livia, 48, amateur], than performing. Nevertheless, even if just occasionally, showing one’s achievements in a performative way is an essential part of circus practice:

“I think teachers are right when they insist that everyone should take part in the end-of-the-year show, even if it’s just a walk to take the microphone to the presenter, but I think it is the dot on the I needed to conclude a path; being it good, bad, boring, in any way it is a necessary conclusion because it closes a path and it will give you strong emotions...and it is also good to work with other people, coordinate...”

[Lucia, 29, amateur]

In social circus, while the importance of performing is dictated by the project frame, it is generally hold that the opportunity to create a performance together, and to be together on stage in front of an audience, is one of the main transforming factors for the participants and their social environment, in that it provides new images, self-images and identities.

Besides its importance for purposes of self- and social development, performing lies at the very heart of circus practice, which is, in origin, entertainment, and has recently gained the status of artistic genre (chapter 1). If it is true that the imperative of artistry and creativity today permeates all areas of life, doing art still implies making final products available for others. This legacy characterises all levels and sectors of practicing an artistic activity such as circus.

Performing in front of an audience requires “being-in-there”, freeing “consciousness space” for the sake of expression, entering the “mood” of the performance through “an experiential transformation, or footing” (Bassetti, 2014: 104-105) and sustaining the interactional context of the performance collectively, feeling, rather than merely watching, each other: “in order to share meanings [...performers] have to drag the spectator into the experiencing of the meaningful context they are contemporarily creating and inhabiting [...] through experiential footing” (ibid: 110), that is, a bodily and shared change of “ground” or “frame”, in which “the participants’ alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self is somehow at issue”(Goffman, 1981: 128).

This ensemble thus involves techniques of “emotional and corporeal self-management” (ibid: 107), including techniques to both transform and generate emotions (which will be treated more in depth in paragraph 7.5) as well as techniques to mark the change of frame, such as the creation of dedicated spaces and the production of spatio-temporal meanings through specific organisation of space and timing (see paragraph 1.3), the use of lighting and sound. Tools to transform the appearance and atmosphere of the space, such as lighting, sound, and set design, and the performers’ appearance, such as costumes, make-up, hairstyle, also play an important role to this respect: “Yes, this [looking at picture] is a show, that is a stage; there are petals, a set design, lightning done in a certain way” [Carlo, 42, project manager]; “this [picture] looks like a theatre performance of contemporary circus [...] because they are dressed in a way that they look like characters” [Clara, 39, professional].

Certain pieces and styles of clothing also helped respondents to identify circus performances, differentiating them from other practices: “the braces, the costume makes me think of circus [...] rather than dance” [Pietro, 32, professional]; “[in pole dance] there is a bit the excuse of getting undressed ... but saying “I’d doing difficult things” you know? [...] it is too explicit [...]”. In circus showing certain parts of one’s body can happen “by mistake” [Emilia, 29, professional] (see paragraph 5.6.1).

Again, significant differences were highlighted by the respondents between the care dedicated to these aspects in an amateur or a professional context, the first being less “researched” [Matteo, 31, teacher] and more “banal” [Emilia, 29, professional], and between the aesthetics underpinning these choices in contexts of contemporary, as opposed to traditional or classic, circus. In particular, pieces of clothing such as “paillettes, tight leotards” [Paolo, 30, professional] are associated to old-style circus, while “ordinary” [ibid] “less garish” [Michele, 29, professional] clothes and “bare feet” [Pietro, Michele] are associated to contemporary circus performances.

### **7.3.2 Intermediate and marginal zones**

#### **7. Care for health**

Bassetti (2009a) highlights the centrality of techniques to build and preserve the “dancing body” containing a dimension of sacrifice and renounce, such as avoiding dangerous activities, dieting to lose weight, giving up fat food and unhealthy substances. In the visual map of circus RBTs, I placed this ensemble in a position close to the marginal zones in all

sectors, as it did not emerge as an important topic during the research, and it acquired an ambivalent position depending on the circus sector. This is not to say that circus practitioners do not pay attention to what and how they eat, or to avoiding alcohol and drugs before training or performing, which is a matter of common-sense, or “sense of responsibility”:

“the sense of responsibility to go training without having eaten a portion of peppered mussel half an hour before, with the necessary care for one’s body”

[Livia, 48, amateur]

“in the beginning I thought “Ok, after an hour of training I can get myself a beer. But my mate one day told me “yes, or the next time you can do more sit-ups”

[Pietro, 32, professional]

However, the dimension of ‘sacrifice’ seems to be more connected to other aspects of circus practice, such as dealing with insecurity, or having to give up social life outside the circus community. Dieting to lose weight, for instance, is a central technique in building and maintain the dancer’s and the boxer’s body (Bassetti, 2009a; Turner & Wainwright, 2003; Wacquant, 2004). Circus practitioners are concerned about eating well (“I shop and cook, because I try to eat well” – Stefania, 40, professional), but more often about eating enough, and avoiding fat foods does not seem to be among their main concerns. The only reference to the risk of being excluded for not satisfying weight requirements concerned an interviewee who attended a famous school abroad, in which, “similarly to ballet”, the standards of beauty entail that “I reject you also on the basis of not so moral standards, that is, if a girl gets too fat they tell her and the third time she’s warned, she’s out, because it means that she cannot control her weight” [Emanuele, 36, professional].

Moreover, claiming the status of ‘artists’ rather than ‘athletes’, circus practitioners enjoy partying. Occasions of dancing and drinking together are actually central in the process of building the community of circus practice (like the many barbecues, parties, aperitives advertised on the Facebook page of the students, staff and former students of one of the professional schools in Turin demonstrate). SLIP for instance organised, once a month, an opens stage followed by bar opening and, occasionally, dancing parties. The last days of December 2015 I went to a circus show in Bologna and when the performance was over, the circus tent was turned into a bar and a dance floor. Another example is provided in the quote below, referring to a showcase of the performances of the last year students in a circus school in Turin:

“at the end all students and former students remain in the tent, beer cans appear everywhere and they start dismantling the aerials, some of them work, others joke, move objects, chat...”

[fieldnotes, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

While not appreciated, and avoided by most practitioners, it happened a few times during fieldwork to hear comments about the previous night’s partying or drinking (“I had a beer last night and I’m feeling it all this morning” – fieldnotes, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2015).

In social circus, moments of sharing food are appreciated as strategies to improve participation to the activities through the creation of pleasurable moments. Moreover, attention is placed on “health education”:

“We have theoretically, because not always it is easy to implement, the rule that one cannot smoke or use substances while using the circus props, so it often happens that around us, where we work, the youth uses drugs but if they want to climb on the tissue, or use the diablo, then must not smoke”

[Sonia, 35, project manager]

During the social circus activities I took part to as a participant observer, youngsters hanging out in the park were often approaching the circus site, and experimenting circus props, just after having smoked cigarettes or joints, or drunk beer. Nevertheless, they were allowed to participate (of course after dropping the cigarette or leaving the bottle, and to absolute beginner workshops), following the idea that it is a long process to learn how to take care of one’s body, and to pass the message that “no matter where I am, there are rules to follow for my own and the others’ safety [...] especially in an informal setting” [Sonia, 35, project manager].

#### 8. “Polishing” of gestures and poses

The term ‘polishing’ can acquire different meanings, such as attention to details, rhythm, feelings, intention, and so on. Here I employ it strategically, to identify a specific aesthetics in which details such as stretched arms, legs, points acquire central value. This aesthetic of ‘lines’ is attributed mainly to the sector of traditional/classic circus (where “you do like this with your little arm, it is just aesthetics” Expert interview 2), and this is why I placed it in a core position in this sector in picture 7.1.

“for instance in the world of circus sometimes you see that an artist does not look after the line of the body, such as pointed toes, stretched legs, while we research a lot this aspect which in my view, and in the view of our audience, makes a difference, the polishness of the body, the polishness of movement can change the outcomes of a performance a lot”

[Davide, 31, professional]

However, practitioners in contemporary circus settings can also be very attentive to polishing movements: “if I climb the silks, I do it with my toes pointed, I don’t care about doing things just to do them” [Livia, 48, amateur].

This attention sheds an ambivalent light on the relevance of this ensemble in contemporary circus: while contemporary circus practitioners generally insist more on emotions and interpretations rather than aesthetic details, they employ notions of ‘polishness’ when asked to judge the level of other practitioners. For instance, in the following quote the interviewee is looking at a picture of aerial practice, and when asked to judge the level of the practitioners replies: “They are beginners, because of the loose toes, the fact that they try to stretch legs but are not able to, [...] the dearth of flexibility in the hips [...] the arms are half bent” [Emilia, 29, professional].

## 9. Improvisation and creation

Creativity plays a key role in contemporary circus practices: it is at the core of an artistic practice of circus, and provides meaning and legitimation to amateur and social circus practices and performances, in which inventiveness and out-of-the-box solutions can be praised and valued as the sources of excellent artistic and creative outcomes, even when the technical level is low. Traditional circus, on the contrary, is appreciated for the high technical virtuosity of its acts, but charged with copying and reproducing rather than creating innovative performances. As such, creativity seems to be one of the building blocks of the wall between the circus as “one of the performing arts that define culture” and the circus as “an ancestral nomadic way of life that, for many circus families, still consists of eking a living out of the social environment by performing spectacular feats” (Bouissac, 2010: 12).

However, creativity not only builds boundaries between circus sectors, it also separates between disciplines and ways of practicing. Some disciplines, still practiced in contemporary circus, resist the tendency towards theatricalization typical of contemporary circus (chapter 1) reproducing the legacy of ‘mere virtuosity’:

“we try to work artistically with the girls of the swinging trapeze...but there is little to work with I mean you find few spaces to include the part...of free movement, movement creation, because it is an apparatus that leaves such little space to [free, creative movement]”

[Marco, 36, professional]

Moreover, some tricks only enable low “volumes” of expressivity:

“There’s no way of interpreting Shakespeare if you’re doing 7 balls [...] I mean there are volumes, when there’s a high expressivity there cannot be, at the level of physical practice, a very high level ...it’s a matter of regulating volumes, if I’m doing a triple somersault it is difficult for me to be poetic...”

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter (paragraph 7.1), opinions diverge concerning the moment at which improvisation and creativity should enter the stage of circus learning. While broader technical bases provide a more extensive and sophisticated vocabulary to construct improvised, creative phrases and performing material, creation is never excluded from learning contemporary circus forms, not even at a very initial phase. Differently from dance, in which “improvisation demands embodied knowledge and know-how” and “the action of a knowing body” (Bassetti, 2014: 97), in circus one may attempt to express original concepts and get involved in ‘conversations’ before having mastered the grammar and the vocabulary, although, of course, expectations in relation to speaking fluency (which can in this case be defined as a combination of technical virtuosity and innovative ideas) will be very different when ‘listening’ to a social circus participant, an amateur or a professional artist.

Thus, for instance, at a mixed level hand-to-hand class the instructor would alternatively insist on physical conditioning and learning technical, codified movements, and on applying methods of improvisation and creation (for instance, working on 'intentions' and 'emotions'). Moreover, social and youth circus basic training for trainers are centred around both creative, personalised ways of teaching and methods to allow participants to express their own creativity (see by way of example AltroCirco, 2016; Juggling Magazine, 2016).

A variety of motivations can stand for this use of creativity transversally to different levels of expertise. In social and amateur circus, allowing the participants to experiment with circus props, finding 'own' ways of employment, expressing moods and emotions, enlarges the accessibility to and attractiveness of the practice. Furthermore, circus is defined as both a sport and an art, and, as such, at all levels tools to implement both these sides in one's practice shall be taught. Bodies which are subject to intensive learning and relearning of body techniques run the risk of becoming as rigid as "marble blocks" [Paolo, 30, professional] and bridled by embodied conventions about ways of moving and aesthetic standards, which prevent 'real' creativity, underpinned instead by the singularity and authenticity of the artist, from emerging. Only through "actual practice", rather than "a certain vision", can practitioners create "their own thing" [Paolo, 30, professional].

The focus thus seems to be on a practical, bodily learning of creativity, which does not exclude reflexivity, on the contrary, it embodies it: the role of the teacher in guiding and observing creation and improvisations has to be incorporated as much as the "vocabulary" of circus and the ability to play freely and creatively with it. In the case of jazz analysed by Wilf (2010)

"Teachers stress time and again the importance of incorporating the "vocabulary of jazz" into students' playing bodies until they can play it "unconsciously," but they also instruct students to constantly monitor their playing for signs of embodied playing habits that result in improvisation resembling that of other students" (: 564).

While for professional artists the concern for self-reflexive monitoring of creativity and originality represents a higher stake, in circus practice in general the common bases of technique are to be used as a "tool to express something" in a unique way, rather than as an end in itself:

"in circus every movement should express something, even just to lift one's arm or turn one's head have a meaning which is not merely technical but...they must tell me something. Conciliating these two sides, if you can, something very beautiful comes out, but it is hard, especially if you work with people coming exclusively from sport, and for years have been working only in the first way, and not in the second one [...] In gymnastics there is almost a search not to show anything, fatigue nor pleasure, nothing, it is neutral, absolutely neutral, [...] when a gymnast performs a salto you see like a drawing, done many times in the same way, which starts in a way and arrives in another way. If an artist performs a salto, instead, it is a moment in a story, or a moment of happiness or anything else...it is a bit as if for the gymnast the technical gesture is the end, while for the artist it is a tool to express something"

[Giovanna, 49, project manager]



It thus seems that circus technique can only provide a vocabulary that every practitioner can (or, in the case of professional artists, must) re-appropriate and turn into a unique and personal artistic outcome. This perspective assumes that every practitioner should, first and foremost, find his/her own personal characteristics. Chiara reckons for instance that she “will never be the Cirque du Soleil artist who puts her foot on her head”. She hopes her “characteristic ... is expressivity” [Chiara, 32, professional].

This implies a dichotomic view of circus, in which the technical and the expressive are represented as different ‘sides’ of the same practice, to be trained separately, rather than the ingredients of an integrated self:

“The circus artist is one who cultivates and has the body of a gymnast, the head of the actor, and the heart of the poet. [...] the body of the gymnast, you achieve it through discipline and practice of circus and gymnastics, so you mould your body and find yourself ready. The head of the actor, you work it only if you practice a theatrical work which allows you to be both inside and outside of your work, and avoid being swallowed by it. The heart of the poet, is what makes the sensibility of each single artist, and it is absolutely personal”

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

Thus, beyond the search for ‘personal characteristics’ and the “moral obligation of understanding “what you are”” (Wilf, 2010: 570), creativity in circus is the result of reflexive, bodily and emotion work. Several RBTs are taught and learnt for purposes of improvisation and creation, that is, to “turn technique into something other than the demonstration of technique” [Expert interview 2]. Like in jazz, teachers provide students with “the means to disrupt these habits via direct manipulation of the playing body so that new bodily habits can emerge. Such self-conscious manipulation of the body is a way of mitigating the effects of the increased commodification and standardisation of jazz training that have been incorporated into students’ playing bodies” (Wilf, 2010: 564). Reflexivity is thus pivotal to avoid the deleterious effects on creativity of standardized training paths:

“The risk of the circus schools is to give too many indications, to think that circus must be done in a way, they give you directions, but circus is the art of diversity so your way of doing circus, of being you in that thing, is what makes the difference”.

[Chiara, 32, professional]

Wilf (2010) frames this problem as a “specific conception of an embodied practical mastery that is characterized by the dialectic of learned ignorance and learned awareness”, which turns “the constant problematization of embodied practical mastery” into “a condition of possibility for acquiring such mastery” (: 576). The concept of “learned ignorance” is taken from Bourdieu (1995), who defines it as “a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles” (: 19), which gives rise to assumptions and automatic (bodily) responses: the body becomes “the sovereign agent” as it is well expressed

“in the term *muscle memory*, which couples the muscle—the concrete and material tissue that contracts and expands—with the abstract and subjective quality of memory. In this account, it is the body that remembers, not the deliberative human subject. Such a perfection of action that bypasses the deliberative agent is made possible only through a

very intentional, meticulous, and long process of conditioning the body to “remember,” so that, as Bourdieu would argue, the player can “forget”

(Wilf, 2010: 566).

The RBTs for purposes of manipulating the body and enabling new habits to emerge are very diverse and take inspiration from genres which were recognized as ‘artistic’ way before circus. Approaches closer to theatre unfold through cognitive processes, such as: “an almost philosophical work”, done to “raise awareness for the forms that can move emotions, being them short stories, poetry, painting, photography”, and “acknowledge the values of a work of art” [Emanuele, 36, professional]; association of ideas: “for instance one morning, he lives in the countryside, he goes out, he sees a bird flying, the looks at spring coming after winter, then he connects ideas to think about something about the show” [Riccardo, 51, circus educator]; and clarification, through thinking and writing, of “intentions” (“Maura tells me to write down the intentions of the different passages of my trapeze piece. I write down the intention and the emotions I want to communicate and I feel” [23<sup>rd</sup> June]), followed by the marking of switches and pauses through movement and bodily functions:

“then she gives me some advice: first concentrate on the directions and on your breath, as if in a shortness of breath, then she tells me to fix the pauses: I’ll do three of them, and after each pause try to increase intensity. Then, think about the gestures, the movements you make, make few of them but very clear, then join the two things, also attention to the looks to the audience.

[fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015]

Approaches closer to dance start instead “from the body” [Laura, professional, in fieldnotes 24<sup>th</sup> May] as the main tool to create “physical material” [Paolo, 30, professional]. This method entails “spending hours with an object” [Expert interview 2] or someone else’s body. Bassetti (2014) defines this practice “bodystorming”, based on technique and guided by external inputs, and characterized (like brainstorming) by a continuous flow of action:

“movements as well as ideas emerge when one, in a manner of speaking, lets oneself go, and takes a particular stance towards reality – a stance that does not entail the conception of future ... and, more generally, of linear time; a stance where consciousness is completely immersed in the hic et nunc...evaluation is intentionally avoided”

(: 95)

Bodystorming in circus may be associated to body work performed to disrupt bodily habits, “get rid of the bridles” [Emanuele, 36, professional] of technique through external inputs such as music, “metaphoric amputation” (Wilf, 2010: 575), variations of speed and rhythm, self-imposed moods, to foster “motor fantasy” (Emanuele, 36, professional) and the capacity to surprise oneself. This implies taking risks, losing body control:

“the other day at creation class we did an exercise [...] in which you had to fall, really fall, fall “bam!!!” like a table, go down and then try to retrieve control. And it is an impossible thing, you can’t do it because of your sense of self-preservation and it’s really scary”

[Arianna, 20, professional student]

“then I must do everything faster, at least a part of the body must communicate the idea of speed. [...] it’s difficult, I feel that I’m losing control, it seems more dangerous. Maura tells me: “Yes, because there’s a part of you that wants to lose control, while another one would like to keep it”

[fieldnotes, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

Improvisation and creation can be taught and learnt through games and a playful attitude towards body work and objects:

“I develop research playing...we decide to create a show with a chair, then we spend weeks in a room with a chair and we play. We produce material then we select the very cool things that are maybe two in three hours of material. What I do is I try to give them tools to create, I give them inputs and then leave them free”

[Paolo, 30, professional]

Another way to foster bodystorming is to provide constraints, like in the following passage taken from a hand-to-hand workshop:

“we do one minute in which the flyer takes a position and the base manipulates her/him, a minute in which the base takes a position and the flyer searches for supports on his/her body, and a minute in which they both move, but the flier can never touch the floor”.

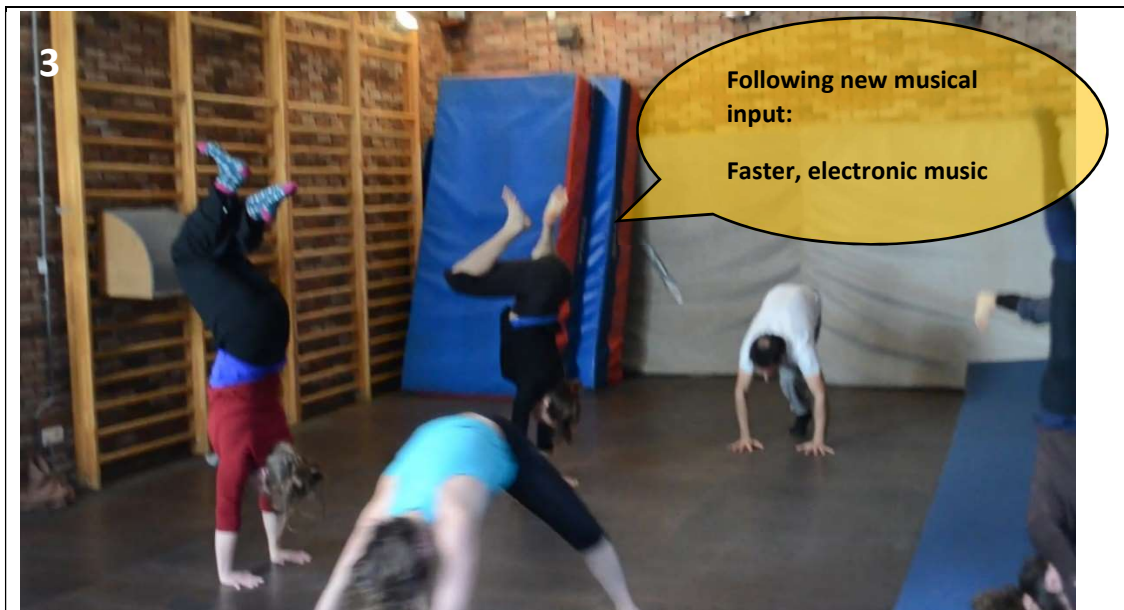
[fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015]

The following table represents, through a storyboard, the improvisation which concluded a 5 days’ handstands workshop I took part in the final part of fieldwork. It may be useful to clarify the practice of improvisation in circus, but it is to be taken as a mere example of a multiplicity and variety of methods and techniques.

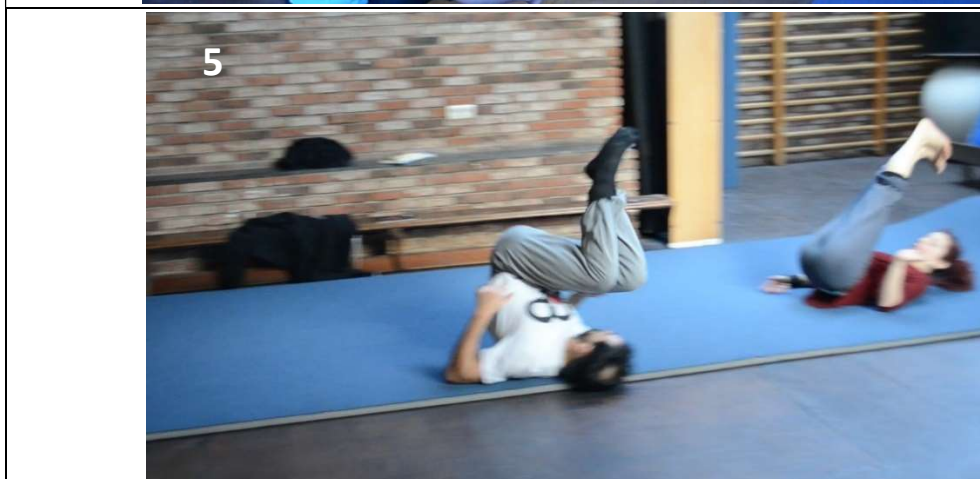
**Picture 7.2: improvisation with handstands storyboard**

Instructions: “try to improvise with all the material we built in these days, all the things you found and liked, and try to follow the music”





Break in which the teacher/observer gives new instructions: “now really feel free, you can enter and exit [the improvisation flow], interact with the others, or let them influence your movement, draw from everything we did in these days, the structures you built two days ago, the work we did in pairs, the different positions, also on the forearms, and really try to explore different qualities of movement, water-like, but also fire, quicker, more lively, feel really free to explore”



Source: video of improvisation at handstand workshop (12<sup>th</sup> February 2016)

The last picture represents one of the many possibilities to “interact with others” and “let them influence your movement”. This introduces another central theme for body techniques acquired for purposes of creation and improvisation, what Wilf (2010) calls “to relate morally to the performing group through sensitive playing” (: 569). “Sensitive” improvisation and creation requires

“learning to work in a group [...] without busing with one’s ideas the ideas of others, how to work with a synergy, which is fundamental, how to understand one’s strong points and put them at the service of the group, forget oneself as a person in relation to the work of the group, so I’m not interested in carrying on my ego, I’m interested in [...] the final goal which is the work we are doing together, so it is never your idea, I say something then someone else adds something...it is a work of synergy”

[Paolo, 30, professional]

Learning “synergy” in circus requires the reflexive and emotion work illustrated in the quote above, but also skills of bodily listening and interaction: “to try and welcome the other body’s proposals, without speaking, without imposing one’s will but listening to the other” [fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015]. This, again, implies the reflexive embodiment of an external eye:

“it is fundamental to learn to work in a group, that is, what are the group dynamics because as long as you are in a group, you have an instructor that follows you...you do what’s told to you, whereas when you have to work on your own, autonomously, without a leader, and external guide, you have to develop the dynamics which are fundamental when you are out of the school to create a show”

[Paolo, 30, professional]

## 10. Acquiring fluidity of movement and scenic presence

This ensemble is central in contemporary professional circus (or “scenic circus” like one of the interviewees, Michele, called it), which, as we saw in chapter 1, has gone through a process of theatralization and contamination with contemporary dance. While acquiring fluidity of movement and scenic presence has a compulsory character for contemporary circus professional artists, it is very much appreciated also among amateurs, and can be employed strategically in social circus, for instance to include and give value to those participants who cannot or are not willing to engage in demanding physical work.

This ensemble aims to learning how to convey both technical and creative circus contents in an expressive (that is, unique and personal) way. It is thus an ensemble of techniques which enable the blending of circus technique and creativity into an organic whole, for the specific purpose of presenting an artistic product to an audience. Despite these strong ties, in my view this represents a separate purpose and, as such, underpins a separate ensemble of RBTs from techniques with the purpose of learning tricks, and of acquiring skills of creation and improvisation, and their embodiment ideally precedes performing for an audience.

RBTs embodied for this purpose also play an ambivalent role, in that they mainly draw from other bodily and artistic practices: rather than being specific to the circus, they are supposed to glue together circus tricks, or to partially substitute circus technique when injuries or age prevent its further development. This aspect of circus socialization reflects the view that doing circus as an art implies “doing something which is not circus, and do circus with something else in mind [...] because otherwise you become a gymnast, I mean do circus with something else inside, I say music because it is something that touches me particularly [...] I mean scenic circus, let’s call it this way, if we want to do a contemporary circus it has to start from another necessity, you cannot do parkour [...], for me circus is art first and foremost, so you need to communicate something and you look for a language to do it. I found the circus” [Michele, 29, professional].

Generally speaking, although skills such as singing and playing instruments are broadly appreciated within the circus community of practice (the quote above gives but one example), the body techniques of this ensemble are mainly drawn from theatre, ballet and contemporary dance, which are also subjects of dedicated courses in the professional circus schools. However, the role of these RBTs is ambivalent because practitioners run the risk of sliding into something other than circus, like in the case of this interviewee who, at an advanced phase of her career, decided to dedicate more time to her own artistic projects and interests, mainly focusing on yoga and butoh dance, rather than continuing to do mainly commercial circus work, thus betraying the expectations of other practitioners:

“[watching a picture chosen to represent her circus practice] I chose this one because this is a work I’m very proud of, and I’m very happy because for the first time I managed to stage a work really done independently of the audience’s expectations [...]. For this, the result was that some people liked it a lot, they were very moved [...], and other were obviously disgusted! I mean, not disgusted but they told me: “Why didn’t you include any technical elements?” [...] I really removed everything that was circus”

[Stefania, 40, professional]

In the same line, these techniques cannot override circus tricks if a performance claims the definition of circus:

“I saw some shows which they call circus, and in the whole show they did one feet-to-hand, that’s it, there were no other circus techniques, the rest was just theatre and dance [...] I said this is a performance of theatre-dance with a feet-to-hand, it is not circus”

[Leonardo, 23, professional student]

In this long paragraph, I have attempted an analysis of the main circus body techniques, in relation to the core axes of circus practice identified in chapter 5. Insights were highlighted in relation to bodily and reflexive knowledge. In the following paragraph I will focus on the latter as emerging specifically from teaching strategies.



## 7.4 Reflexive socialization: learning, teaching, and reflexivity-in-action

Learning circus entails acquiring new ‘feeling’ skills in relation to one’s body. Like for dance, “to feel is, in a certain way and at certain level of expertise, the syncretic union between proprio-ception and proprio-visualization” (Bassetti, 2009a: 318). Dancers acquire a sort of visual memory of their body in movement, and are able to imagine it even when they don’t see it. In circus, too, this is the outcome of a process of embodiment of the circus habitus through reflexive body techniques. Until the moment in which a technique is completely incorporated – that is, when the bodily, kinaesthetic, visual and normative aspects of circus knowledge melt together in an inseparable unity (Bassetti, 2009b), and the ‘external eye’ is embodied by the practitioner - circus practitioners must recur to several different strategies to see and correct themselves. This again reflects the learning process in dance, in which multimodal transmission of knowledge is at play (symbolic as well as physical, visual and emotional as well as conceptual, implying touch, words, gestures, sonification, and exemplar exhibition) (Bassetti, 2014).

The role of reflexivity, both in and after action, was introduced in paragraph 7.3. In this paragraph, I will analyse it in light of the circus teaching and learning process, which

“tends to throw the principle embodied in a body technique into relief. Because the student doesn’t always ‘get it’ the teacher is forced to find ways of making ‘it’ more explicit. They are forced to be more reflexive. And researchers therefore have a greater chance of ‘getting it’ too”

(Crossley, 2007: 88).

Teaching and learning strategies in bodily practices include: verbal indications and guiding, and invoking images with a motile resonances (Crossley, 2007); giving and asking for “feedback from others” (ibid: 89); the personification of body parts and the attribution of intentionality to each different part (Bassetti, 2009b); producing and looking at videos or images to understand and remember the passages of a trick; filming and watching videos to detect mistakes; drawing and other noting systems; visualization and imitation; breakdown of a trick into different parts or steps, in order to embody the bodily feelings and attitudes acquired in the different phases, and put them together in a second moment, or transfer them from one body part to the other; relearning of basic body functions, such as breathing, standing, and walking.

Below I will explain how these different techniques work in relation to the embodiment of circus knowledge. First of all, the interiorization of a “sense of the practice” entails a learning path guided first and foremost by others and by verbal language. Existing former bodily knowledges function as a common basis from which further indications can be given to learn more specific, specialised or complex techniques (Salamero, 2009: 530). Moreover, the centrality of “sensitive feedbacks” (Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011) from peer students, teachers, or artists, which validate, or undermine, the artistic proposals of circus students play a role similar to that of the mirror in dance (Bassetti, 2009a), revealing the “social nature of the corporeal schema” and their “normative aspect” (Crossley, 2007: 89).



In France this centrality of the feedback of privileged spectators is incorporated into the formalised training paths promoted by certain schools (Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011). In Italy, this function may be found in the diffused practice of presenting one's work (in progress) in open rehearsals and, particularly, open stages. Slip for instance organised an open stage each month, and anyone willing to perform (professionals and amateurs alike) was welcome to do so. When others are not available to watch and give feedbacks, videos are extensively used by circus practitioners, providing a new "great instrument of work" [Chiara, 32, professional]. In the following quote, the interviewee comments on a video of his practice:

"Here the attempt was to have her head always at the same height, but it didn't work, we thought it did but from the video we realized it wasn't so"

[Leonardo, 23, professional student]

"the brain makes fun of you, you think you did a great show then you watch yourself in a video and say "No, look at this!!!" and this happens very often, so you must always re-watch yourself because you must be the first spectator of yourself, from within you never have exactly the idea of what is going on for a number of things, you don't have the complete background, you have no idea how big or small you are exactly, so it is only re-seeing yourself that you learn how to manage yourself on stage. At one point I started seeing that I always moved, I couldn't stay still, I always had a certain part moving, and this I only understood it after a long time, I had to watch videos, talk about it, check whether I like what I did because you could also dislike it"

[Marco, 36, professional]

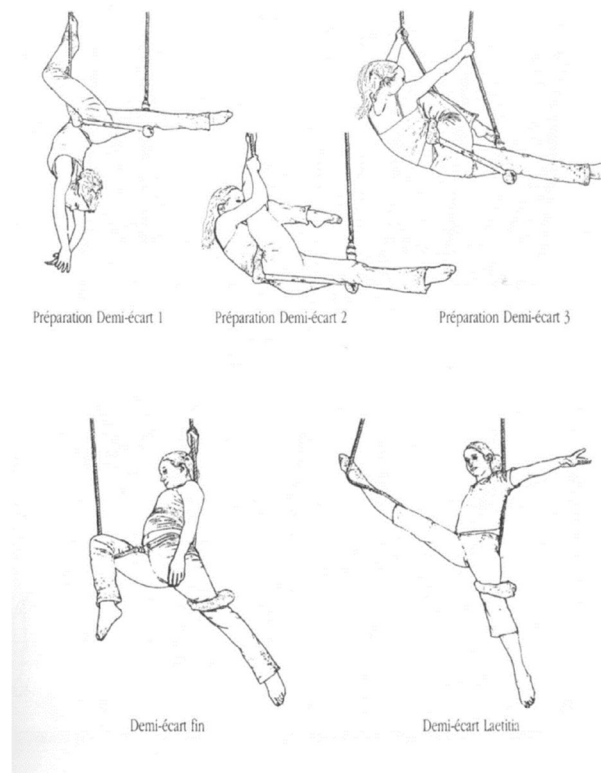
Videos are also increasingly used to learn new tricks. As such, they have "changed the mode of doing circus":

"the fact of having the possibility to film, and thus to break up movements opened new worlds: being able to look at movements in slow motion, you can see a hundred videos on YouTube and try to do what you see, and for professionals it is super important because they can see the things that don't work"

[Chiara, 32, professional]

This breaking up of movements is also employed in manuals (see picture 7.3 below)

**Picture 7.3: Breaking up movements**



Source: Challande (2007)

However, as often the introductions to these video tutorials and manuals state, the role of a prepared instructor can hardly be completely substituted. ‘Direct’ teaching techniques can be very diverse, adapted to the group and context, and to the skills and preferences of the teacher. They include: showing, explaining, doing at the same time; using apparatus and objects (weights, stools, benches, gym ladders, bars, what’s available) for preparatory exercises; manual aid; “singing” the movements while they are performed:

“Alex gave me inputs as I was executing the pitching, correcting mistakes in ‘real time’, for instance: “and UP!”... “legs....and now arms!”. Also Michele tends to sing us the movements in the right tempo”

[fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

Movements can be “sung” and described through exploiting poetics (metaphors, similitudes, personification, metonymy, synecdoche) and through the attribution of intentionality to parts of the body, as if they were different subjects. The following extract from the fieldnotes refer to a hand-to-hand video (Schlunk, 2011) in which the personification and intentionality discovered in unusual parts of the body is exemplified in the flier’s feet’s ability to “talk”, disclosing her feelings despite her will:

“in the video the flier starts talking on the microphone, saying: “and now he wants to talk about my feet, which is not very interesting...”, with an embarrassed tone, as if she’d rather do without his talking about her feet. But he’s bigger and stronger, lifts the

microphone and moves her to the side, and starts talking about her feet: “I can talk with her feet! When she's standing on my hands, just before a trick, there are those tiny, little movements, inside the feet, and they tell me if she's afraid, or if she feels comfortable. I like it, when her feet talk to me”.

[fieldnotes, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

The new roles and functioning acquired by single body parts entails that ordinary actions must be re-learned to do circus: “agents can learn to find parts of their body and mobilize them in new ways” (Crossley, 2007: 89). For instance, back to the handstand example, circus practitioners relearn how to use their hands to stand, rather than to grab, throw, touch, etc.

More specifically, and progressively, this involves a degree of ‘trust’ in one’s hands and arms (which comes together with strengthening and practice, and usually entails an intermediate step in which both feet and hands are used to carry the body’s weight, such as quadruped positions and ways of displacing), an increased awareness of different parts of the hand (fingers, palm, etc.), and the ability to use them, simultaneously, in different ways and with different intentions (the central part of the hand, at the base of the fingers, should hold the weight, the index finger should point straight forward, fingers bend and push when the weight goes too much forward, and relax when it goes too much towards the wrist).

Fragmentation and intentionality are employed in order to transfer the embodied – taken for granted - knowledge of the functioning of a part of the body (in this case, the feet), towards a new part (the hands). This in turn improves the awareness and proprioception of the movement and working of the foot, in line with what observed by Crossley (ibid) about “learning to use the hips to generate powerful kicks in Muay Thai”:

“The average social agent knows, at the level of their corporeal schema, that they have hips and knows how to use them, but getting them to do new things can involve relearning how to localize and mobilize them and indeed learning new uses for them. This learning has an element of transferability to it. One does not have to relearn the use of one’s hips for each martial arts technique in which this principle is deployed. The ability to use the hips to generate powerful kicks is the same as that used to generate powerful elbow strikes, for example, and the same skill can be transferred from one to the other. The effort required to find the hips and re-learn to use them in the first place points to limits of transferability within the corporeal schema however. We learn certain principle of use and these are transferable but acquisition of new principles may involve significant relearning” (ibid).

Moreover, relearning affects not only single body parts, but also fundamental body functions such as breathing and “talking”:

“P. tells us: you must hold your plexus all the time, on the way up be careful with breathing, inspire and then apnoea, then while you hold your handstand start breathing only with your nose, like in yoga”

[Fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2015, handstand workshop]

“and there was an exercise the whole class had to do in the workshop, where some of us had the classical problem of apnoea during the exercises, in particular the very muscular ones, so she [the instructor] asked us to talk, recite, say something, to force us to breathe during the sequence”

[Roberto, 45, amateur]

Thus, learning circus equally engages bodily and cognitive competences, the relation between the body, space and the others, and the way this relation is taught and viewed. It implies being able to perform a trick and to “visualize a routine, do it with the head” [Emilia, 29, professional], but also to understand movements, note and remember them. In this sense, although bodily, practical knowledge acquires more value within the community of practice than theoretical understanding (see chapter 5), mastery does not exclude reflexivity. Although embodied mastery of movements and tricks excludes the need to ‘think’ them while executing them, makes them exist “only in action” (Wacquant, 2004: 60), and relies on the memory of the body, the assessment of a performance is not only “instantaneous”, but “action and its evaluation” often are not “fused” and a “reflexive return” is not only possible but also widespread. In this sense, reflexivity and reflection are rooted in (and not opposed to) the habitus.

## 7.5 Emotion work

In the paragraphs above I outlined some of the main body techniques employed for specific purposes in circus practice. A central position for contemporary circus was occupied by techniques aimed at creation, improvisation, expression of something authentic, personal, unique, which, combined with learning tricks, turn circus into a language for producing art rather than simply “being impressive”:

“There are expectations about what forms performers are supposed to achieve, and what the tricks are supposed to look like, but also an added component about how you are supposed to feel (or make your audience feel) while you are doing this”

(Stephens, 2012: 208).

In this paragraph we will deal specifically with the “added emphasis on demonstrating emotion or narrative while doing tricks at the same time” (ibid) in contemporary circus. Emotional labour is nothing new for circus performers, who have always represented “confidence through smiling and acting bold [...] when the emotional reality may be terror or even boredom with a trick done repetitively”, or “may have played with the audience’s emotions by hesitating before a trick to make it look harder or scarier” (ibid). However, the new circus movement marked a shift towards a higher complexity and variability of the emotions expressed through circus (arts). Tait’s (2005) analysis of aerial performance provides a significant example of how this shift in a sense complicates performers’ tasks, tying the definition of ‘artist’ to the ability to delve into one’s self, doing deeper work than physical training and surface acting (Hochschild, 1983), touching on more complex emotions:

“At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the production of **emotionally varied moods**, either within classical aerial acts or in new circus, expands performance possibilities and deflects the emphasis from (im)possible tricks. In new circus in particular, aerial feats are often secondary to the theatricality and its emotional impact. There is an expectation that aerial acts can also be emotionally evocative like those in films; that is, male and female aerial bodies will be **athletically, artistically and emotionally moving**”

(Tait, 2005: 119).

Emotion work in circus practice includes, but is not restricted to, emotional labour professional artists (and, occasionally, ‘professional amateurs’) engage with. The case of social circus is particularly relevant in that it explicitly provides both “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) and procedures to elaborate and channel the educators’ and the participants’ emotions:

“I mean the important thing, regardless of the emotions you feel (and you experience them all, from frustration of not succeeding, maybe you planned a super beautiful class where you are very enthusiastic and when you arrive the group responds with “this is shit” [...]; or astonishment, when the participants participate [...], there’s no emotion I would exclude; disgust, I mean when everybody take their shoes off, and it’s May and there’s 25 degrees [...]) the important thing, is to find both within the workshop and within the team a channel to express them, even disgust: “Ok guys, now you go wash yourselves because we cannot do activities on the mats because you make us die”. Find a channel and this is the component of the emotional intelligence which we employ a lot”

[Sonia, 35, project manager]

If social circus educators are trained in the subject of emotional intelligence, I argue that, in less explicitly and formally formulated ways, “being able to recognize all the emotions”, “working on emotional awareness, and as such also on the management” of the emotions [Sonia, 35, project manager], is a stake for circus practitioners at all levels and sectors. The feeling rules which regulate circus practice are not only the explicit ones, established as limits “to protect the wellbeing of educators” and participants of social circus, providing guidelines to follow and “spaces to re-elaborate our emotions” [Sonia, 35, project manager]. They exist, implicitly, in professional and amateur circus too.

This view reflects the idea that the emotions are rooted in specific affective cultures (and subcultures), which provide a system of meaning and values to recognize, evaluate, and act in a situation: the emotion felt reflects the meaning given by the individual to the circumstances, it is a social and cultural construction which becomes personal fact through the individual’s style (Le Breton, 2001). Sharing the affective culture of the audience enables actors to elicit and express emotional states through socially recognized expressive signs, and the same is true for social actors on the stage of everyday life. In this sense, the emotions mediate between physical and psychic experience of the world, and cultural meaning, between subject and social structure.

Besides their constructed, rather than universal, character (Caforio, 2007), another important premise to analyse the emotions is the way human practice – including circus practice - is connected to “character demonstration” and “the realisation of normative

selfhood" (Sassatelli, 2010: 29; see paragraph 7.2), in which the "search for authenticity"(Hochschild, 1983) plays a central role. According to Hochschild, "the value placed on authentic or "natural" feeling has increased dramatically with the full emergence of its opposite - the managed heart" (ibid: 190) in late capitalism. This implies that unprecedented value is placed on "spontaneous, "natural" feeling", on the search for the "authentic self" (ibid), in a society in which the capacity to feel is invested with instrumental value and emotion work has become a "public act", "feeling rules" are increasingly "spelled out publicly", and "there is much less room for individual navigation of the emotional waters" (ibid: 118-119).

Featherstone (2007) highlights the ambivalence of this process of internalization of hegemonic feeling rules framing it as a "controlled de-control of the emotions", in which

"forms of behaviour and modes of exploration of the emotions which were formerly forbidden and accompanied by strong interpersonal and psychic sanctions, now become permissible and even mandatory. In what follows, it should be possible to discover in more detail the increasing capacity of the new middle class to display a calculating hedonism, to engage in more varied (and often dangerous) aesthetic and emotional explorations which themselves do not amount to a rejection of controls, but a more carefully circumscribed and interpersonally responsible 'controlled de-control' of the emotions which necessary entails some calculation and mutually expected respect for other persons" (: 58).

Together with the recent emphasis on emotional channelling and expression in circus practice, these premises highlight the importance of analysing the deeper, emotion work, engaging "inches of flesh" (Hochschild, 2006: 98) and "deep acting", as well as face work and "surface acting" (ibid: 101), in projects of adequate presentation of self. Hochschild defines deep acting drawing on Stanislavski's "method acting", in which "the entire world of fantasy, of subconscious and semiconscious memory, is conceived as a precious resource" (Hochschild, 1983: 40) to recall memories about lived emotions in order to experience them again on stage, offering a 'good' performance. She claims that, if within the performing art sector emotion work is acknowledged as a central part of the job, for other emotional labourers (such as flight attendants) it remains hidden and is not economically and culturally valued.

In her view, the higher investment of the inner self in commercial settings implies potentially higher costs for one's sense of self. When emotion work turns into emotional labour, the signal function of the emotions – their role in revealing our viewpoint on the world – moves from "private management" to social engineering, allowing performances to occupy a constitutive part of one's sense of self, and provoking the workers' detachment from their own feelings. Hence, the increasing quest for authenticity in the contemporary context is read by Hochschild (ibid) as a call for the conservation of the already mentioned (see paragraph 2.7) "inner jewel" (: 34), that we try to protect from external intrusion pushing it "further inside" (ibid).

Hochschild (2006) identifies three techniques of emotion work: cognitive, physical, and expressive. The first one implies actively trying to change an emotion by eliciting or transforming images, ideas and thoughts associated to it (for instance, trying to focus only on her flaws and faults when trying to separate from a person); the second one addresses

the somatic and bodily manifestations of an emotion (for instance, trying to breath more slowly, or to stop shaking); finally, the expressive techniques acts on the publicly recognized gestures for the expression of the emotions to modify the internal emotional status: for instance, a smile can be employed to elicit happiness, and tears to feel sadness (which is very different than feigning these feelings through fake smiles and crying).

These techniques often coexist in practice, but their separation for analytical purposes enables relevant insights into circus participants' engagement with emotion work. Besides the strategies employed to this respect, this paragraph will attempt to bring to light the feeling rules shared within the community of contemporary circus practice - that is, the often implicit set of socially shared rules which regulate attempts to feel in certain, socially appropriate, ways (ibid) - and the role of authenticity as a central drive of emotion work.

A general rule for performers is that one should not fake an emotional state, but really feel it, be 'in it', "transmit the emotions as if we lived them" [Expert interview 2]:

"the very important thing is I think that if you have fun, if you really do it with...certainty of what you are doing, you don't mask it, then the feeling gets [to the audience] in a faster way, I mean you see it when someone is pretending and when instead he's laughing for real, to give an example"

[Francesca, 18, professional student]

This type of 'presence' allows to "open up an emotional channel [...] a form of very high connection" with one's self and with the audience [Chiara, 32, professional]. The opening of these "unexpected worlds" is depicted as a "miracle" [ibid] which does not necessarily, always happen, but when it does, "it is a type of connection with other people that naturally you don't get as fast, or in the same way" [ibid]. This may be achieved through previous embodiment of body techniques, following a logic similar to that of improvisation once technique is mastered (paragraph 7.3):

"in a performance, in a show, the movements shall be such that, no matter how complex, you must not think too much about them because [...] you must think about other things, you cannot think about the movement itself but about living that thing you are doing, being present to that thing you are doing, otherwise all the concentration becomes internal while you are on a scene and...**you have to open yourself and live what you are doing with the others** and...this is so complex that if you concentrate too much on what you have to do, it's over. I can tell straight away when a performer is thinking only about the trick, or when it is done as part of a story [...] sometimes in circus the tension [for doing a trick] can be palpable, but there are moments in which the story must flow."

[Marco, 36, professional]

If experience on the one hand can be helpful in reducing the concentration needed to achieve tricks, on the other repeating an act many times can have "indifference" [Stefania, 40, professional] as a consequence, a lack of excitement, and higher difficulty in eliciting emotions. A solution may be found in 'energizing' exercises or rituals: "after the show one of the performers tells me: "To make the audience have fun, we must first of all have fun

among ourselves, that's why we joke and laugh before the performance'" [fieldnotes, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2015].

Other such 'rituals' unfold in relation to circus objects, such as checking the apparatus one last time, or putting rosin or chalk to get "ready" (see paragraph 7.3). The relationship with objects, props, and apparatuses is central also in everyday emotion work, and not only for purposes of performance: it facilitates focus and concentration, and eases access to states of flow. Moreover, the relationship with objects provides practitioners with a sense of confidence so central that they feel disoriented when dealing with the empty space, like one interviewee illustrated referring to the difficulties of a group of performers she was directing to "just move them in space, do a choreography, only with movement, make them run, cross the space": the "feeling of the circus practitioner" is strictly connected to the props and apparatus he/she uses. In her case, on the contrary, she was trying to foster a different "mental condition of listening about what you are doing with your body and for your body" through trainings and "workshops without the use of the apparatus, so [...] completely detaching from the idea of jumping on a wire, or hanging from a rope or from a trapeze" [Elisabetta, 40, director].

Performing circus involves deep acting – eliciting, rather than merely faking and expressing emotions: surface acting corresponds to "disguising what we feel" and "pretending what we do not" (Hochschild, 1983: 33). Deep acting "from one point of view involves deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others. In surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves" (ibid). Deep acting may involve "directly exhorting feeling" or "making indirect use of trained imagination" (which is true Method acting). In any case, "the acting of passions grows out of living in them" (ibid). The latter emerged as a central element in contemporary circus: although no official 'Method' exists, circus practitioners rely on different techniques – both physical, expressive and cognitive – to do deep acting. Expressive techniques imply the use of gestures to act upon the "pre-revolutionary level" of subjectivity to transform it (Crossley, 2004: 54) and elicit an emotion. In the following quote, 'interiorization' seems to precede and follow the gestures at the same time, like a self-powered circuit in which gestures and emotions feed into each other:

"in that piece **I jump, I laugh and run, I throw the balls** not because I have to but because...I'm really having fun [...] during the [rope] piece then I'm a bit concentrated but as soon as I do a break **I smile**. If you do it for real you transmit much more, and at the personal level, it's much more ... fun in the fun scenes, to do it for real rather than make an effort to be funny. Or in the more serious, deeper scenes, **you try to interiorize**, and in any case, do them because you feel it rather than have to"

[Clelia, 19, professional student]

If expressive techniques are played out mainly on stage (although we saw above that 'laughing and joking' can be employed before the performance, to enter the right mood and transmit fun to the audience), physical techniques concern mainly the preparation before a performance. In the following extract, they are attributed the main purpose of getting rid of too much tension, which prevents a 'really good' performance:



"I think that the main problem is tension: where there is tension at the physical and mental level, the emotions, the feelings don't flow freely, there is a block. The block is perceived by the audience. [...] you perceive the tension [of a performer] even if he tries to mask it. The really good performers, instead, are completely relaxed [...]"

There's a world of techniques to this respect, relaxation, and everyone finds their own: there's those who shout and yell for two minutes in a room and plays the mad man, those who have breathing, meditation techniques, those who play with body's perception, or with visualization, there are a number of ways. But it is very important to be able to enter a state of mental presence [...] that you are there in that moment. Then it is a completely different thing, for you and the audience".

[Stefania, 40, professional]

However, physical techniques can also be employed on stage, in the form of "structures" which enable to elicit the right emotions at the right moment during an act:

"emotions are like rhythms, the rhythm of breath, you move in a certain way, so in reality they are reproducible, or, in any case, communicable at very high levels. [...] there is a structure which can sustain you, that if you are able to create it, it can sustain you both in the moment in which you feel 100% inside and when you don't, small things [...] For instance I had a silks act which I felt super intense, doing it every month I felt that it lost this thing, and I didn't understand: "I don't feel the same emotion", but no, because doing it every month I changed all the rhythms".

[Chiara, 32, professional]

Finally, cognitive techniques concern images, ideas, and lived experiences: "not simply the body, or immediately accessible feeling, but the entire world of fantasy, of subconscious and semiconscious memory, is conceived as a precious resource" (Hochschild, 1983: 40) for emotion work during improvisations and performances. In circus practice the positions in relation to these techniques seem to be ambivalent. Drawing on personal experiences and unconscious resources, especially when working on feelings classified as 'negative' or "darker" [Chiara, 32, professional], is seen with suspicion and a certain degree of resistance, as exemplified by the following extract:

"the instructor asks us to play the sequence while trying to experience a feeling that he gives us as an input. One of the inputs is 'forsaking'. One of the girls that has to play the sequence with this feeling asks the instructor: "Are we allowed to draw on personal experiences to try and feel that way?". His answer is that it is better not to, because when too strong reactions, crying and intense emotions can be hard to manage"

[fieldnotes, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2016]

When I later interviewed the instructor, I asked him about emotion management, mentioning the example in the quote above. He referred to the interesting notion of "physical emotions" to explain his position:

"what I should bring into this type of work is the...**physical emotions** that a certain sphere of experiences transmits. I mean every emotion turns into a **physical attitude**, it is

something we read in others, the fact that in this moment you are trying to understand what I'm saying leads you to squint, this is a stupid example, but the emotions turn into physical attitudes.

What I should bring [to improvisations] is never my personal memories, it is better not to open these trunks containing trauma, sometimes it is needed and it happens, but what is best [...] is to **understand what the physical attitudes which strong emotions cause are**, ok, so fear leads me to a certain condition, then I try to reproduce that condition, I try to reproduce those vibrations from a corporeal point of view, rather than from a psychic, unconscious one, because the Pandora's boxes are uncontrollable, then I can't manage them.

So an initial work is to understand all the emotions and what type of...vibrations they generate in my body, then they become like a catalogue, which I can leaf through, and mix, and unite, but it becomes a **physical work, rather than a psycho-mental work** of identification, [...] because once you change your balance you are not able to re-centre yourself, and goodbye"

[Paolo, 30, professional]

Being the circus 'the art of the body', too much introspection and the free circulation of emotions of any kind is to be avoided - "unless you are doing social circus" [Chiara, 32, professional]. This interviewee for instance saw circus as different from theatre because of its working mainly on the body, and being therapeutic "as such", without the need to open up the "darker" spaces of trauma, which can be "super dangerous, because you open up things and you must have the instruments to manage them [...otherwise] you freak out [...]" maybe the fact that there's no such things in the circus, is something I like about the circus" [Chiara, 32, professional]. This is partly a matter of the competences required of circus practitioners, which do not necessarily nor compulsorily concern psychology or therapy in general. On the other hand, this aspect of emotion work is also related to the very nature of circus which

"is more down to earth, hence it has never happened to me in circus improvisations [...in theatre...] you cry, the worst things happen, but in circus ... it has never happened to me to bring that darker part, and I don't know whether it depends on the experiences I had before, but I'd say that it is a characteristic of the circus, for being more of a physical experience and less of a mental one, not to take you there. Usually those doors open when the mind goes, although the connection with memories and mind is given by the physical, but it is a more concrete world and at this [physical] level, it doesn't open these things"

[Chiara, 32, professional]

Even social circus – although it employs techniques from psychodrama and the theatre of the oppressed, and, as we saw above, specific space, time and work is dedicated to the participants' and educators' expression of emotions of all type - does not require specific therapeutic skills to the educators. Good practices concern, more generally, the creation of physical and emotional safety, aimed to safeguard the integrity of the participants and the instructors, but also to mark the separation of the circus "warm, clean", orderly environment from the uncertain, dangerous, "difficult" lives outside [Sonia, 35, project manager]. In this protected environment, the channelling of emotions towards 'positive'

outcomes for the circus activity is the object of social circus educators' careful monitoring and manipulation.

Thus, with the partial exception of social circus, there seems to be a paradox at the basis of circus practitioners' view of the emotions and emotion work. The centrality and unity of the body as 'containing' not only sensory, but also emotional and lived experiences, in reality underpins a hierarchical view of the relations between 'emotional', 'mental' and 'bodily': in order to express everything required by circus practice, bodily manifestations and physical work – the tip of the iceberg underpinned by more complex foundations - is not only sufficient, but also recommended as the only level to touch on, avoiding (and even fearing) to delve into deeper and darker waters. This is due to the lack of resources, in circus practice, to deal with 'opened Pandora's boxes', but also to the performative purpose of circus, which is always thought in relation to an audience. Thus, emotion work in circus mainly relies on physical and expressive techniques. It is about "knowing the emotions" and being able to "create [for instance] sadness [...] knowing to be really sad on command" [Emanuele, 36, professional]. This happens only when one "knows how to cultivate sadness in [his/her] body [...] putting oneself in the condition of living the emotions but without closing, remaining open with one's mask to the audience". This, in turn, requires a certain "detachment", "mastering the emotions to the point that you don't allow them to invade and destroy you", acquired through "training and practice" [Emanuele, 36, professional].

Not only physical and expressive techniques of emotion work are central in learning to perform, but also in everyday circus work. In this case, like in the circuit training session analysed by Crossley (2004), rituals involve for instance "warming up, stretching and counting aloud [...], in the hope and expectation of being taken over" by the "role of the dedicated trainer" practitioners act out (: 54). To larger or smaller extents, depending on the space circus occupies in practitioners' everyday life, at the beginning of a class, or a training session, "they strive to shift their mode of connectedness to the world" (ibid). I agree with Crossley that a certain level of pain and fatigue plays an important role in achieving the state of flow required by useful training and learning: "they make us aware of our body and sensations [...] we become more 'inwardly' focused. Our lifeworld shrinks [...] It is very difficult to focus upon anything else when one's legs or arms are 'burning' and approaching exhaustion" (ibid).

Moreover, a mental effort of focus and concentration is required to 'step out' of the potential judgement of other practitioners, of the fear of "non-acceptance" when "showing a part of yourself" [Emilia, 29, professional]. When working on a trapeze act following the guidance of a coach (Maura), in a training space shared with another practitioner, I wrote: "when I meet her [other practitioner's] eyes I feel awkward, but I keep working, trying to follow Maura's advice. I try not to care about feeling ridiculous, [...] not to break the energy I created" [fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015]. These insights imply that to a great deal, emotion work in circus corresponds to avoid interrupting states of flow, to maintain the concentration and the self-confidence required by the engagement with painful, scary and tiring activities, the exposition of one's self to the other's gaze, the need to trust others.

For instance, fear can be escaped by trying to ignore "the head":

“sometimes fear blocks you because it affects the head and...how to say this, it freezes your head and automatically it freezes also your body, because you are not able to manage the things that you are able to do, when the head doesn't follow you it seems that you are not able anymore to do everything you can do, but you can, your body can, your head can”.

[Andrea, 27, amateur]

In other words, it is a matter of “willpower [...] something that comes from inside and pushes you to overcome your limits” which implies “taking a lot of courage and not caring about what your head is saying” [Alberto, 22, teacher]. In this sense, one needs to force him/herself to trust one's skills, the advice of others, and their readiness to catch and spot you: “at a certain point you have to go against the fear and anxiety that block you [...] even if you feel like leaving the room, you do it anyways, you put yourself at stake [...] otherwise you get stuck in your fears and don't grow up” [Alberto, 22, teacher]. In other words, at one point circus practitioners must force themselves to undertake a “leap of faith”:

“It's a leap of faith isn't it? like when I do a front handspring, I have a moment in which during the flight my hands are not on the floor anymore, nor have my feet landed yet. In that moment gymnastics teaches us that if I look at my hands I keep the wave and arrive sinuously on the floor, but in that leap of faith there is a risk, that needs courage, the belief in not wanting to look where you are going, you can just try, and if you try everything is going to be ok, but the tendency is to look at your feet, then you land on your heels and fall on your ass”

[Emanuele, 36, professional]

Managing emotions implies, first and foremost, the embodied awareness of these feelings. The case of social circus instructors is paradigmatic, as they are expected, due to their role of “educators”, “to know exactly what emotions to show and which ones to keep aside, because there are things which I can and it is right to show to the youth” and others which are not appropriate [Riccardo, 51, circus educator]. Garcia (2011) argues that circus performers fight counter-productive emotions through the familiarity with certain emotional states gained through time and practice: fear for instance is overcome through the habituation to ‘scary’ conditions (of height and emptiness, in the case of the trapeze artist she refers to) and the feelings it arises. Fear is associated to the awareness of risk, thus aerial acrobats are required mental and physical dispositions which allow them to realize dangerous tricks without perceiving them as “too dangerous” (: 119). Performers must learn how to master “new” fears arising when asked to perform in new settings and conditions (for instance, at 30 metres of height).

This research highlights that, to a certain extent, the “habituation of the body” to a condition, and the acquirement of adequate dispositions, in order to overcome fear, is also (like learning circus in general) a matter of step-by-step progression, like Chiara's experience, when asked to do a trapeze act at 5 metres of height with one week notice shows:

“So the first day I put four mattresses and just hung there. Ok. The second day four mattresses and I start to move. The third day I took a mattress away and.....in a week I got

to do all my act, in the beginning I didn't do all the tricks, then slowly I added them, [...] it is a matter of habit and discipline..."

Practitioners must equally be aware of the fact that frustration and rage emerge frequently during the learning process, and that they should be channelled and managed without allowing them to "block" the learning process:

"if you get angry, everything works less, it is something I always teach, do not get angry because it is counter-productive"

I: And how do you do this, how do you stop rage?

Eh...you kick something...everyone has their thing, it is difficult not to get angry because you are really trying hard, but [it is important to] understand that that mistake does not block the rest of your training, or does not make you less good than before"

[Teo, 40, professional]

Learning circus entails finding "pleasure" in the sometimes frustrating learning process. In the words of Chiara, it is a form of "letting go" and stop saying "I'm ugly, I cannot do things": "the capability to have fun and let yourself go and not judge yourself are essential requirements [...] and you must always remember them, always fight them" [Chiara, 32, professional]. These requirements imply skills of emotion management, in particular in relation to the control of frustration, anger and fear. Contrarily to the trend identified by Sennett (2010) in the labour system in late capitalism, in which labour is performed in aseptic environments and without ever touching the raw material, and is, as such, "no longer legible" (: 67) by workers themselves, circus work has a high 'legibility': the outcomes of circus work are inseparable from its concrete basis of direct, bodily engagement with corporeal, textile, metal, rubber materials.

A central asset is the awareness that patience and determination are required to pursue improvements and deal with the frustration and rage which regularly emerge during the long, often slow, and "spiral-shaped" – rather than linear – learning process (see paragraphs 5.3 and 7.3), including "a first phase of frustration because you are not able to do anything, then there's a moment of enthusiasm, and then a moment of downturn" [Mario, 53, amateur]. This is where circus practice becomes important in the construction of a sense of self, both as a "search for confirmations" [Emilia, 29, professional] and character demonstration:

"circus teaches you that there are no shortcuts; that if you want something, you have to remain there, hit your nose, overcome frustration"

[Giacomo, 38, amateur]

Thus, feeling rules seem to concern more the expression of the emotions – "the level of communication" [Michele, 29, professional] than the emotions felt:

"You cannot avoid feeling certain things, but you can pretend you are doing something else (training) and that thing you keep it aside, we know well that in hand to hand, it's the

two of you, you want to say something but maybe you don't say it because you know it could have a negative influence on the training trend"

[Michele, 29, professional].

The strategies of emotion management, thus, are mainly aimed at achieving a good mental condition to train, and pour out "counter-productive" emotions in order to get rid of them:

"if during the hand-to-hand training I get nervous I must control it because it transmits negative energy to the other, then you both get angry and don't work well, when you are nervous you are not able to work well [...] if you want to have a liberating cry let it go, if you need it to calm down"

[Arianna, 20, professional student]

As well as problems to be overcome, the emotions can also become resources: not only, as we saw above, for performative aims, but also during training: "you must find your balance between ... there are times in which you must stop for a while and other times in which you must use that rage to try and get it" [Barbara, 34, amateur]. Other implicit feeling rules concern embarrassment when entering a shared training space: it is easy to perceive beginners' feeling of uneasiness when working autonomously in an open training space, as against the self-confidence and indifference for the look of others displayed by more experienced practitioners.

Moreover, another aspect requiring emotion work in circus practice is the centrality of trust in learning:

"There are environments in which trusting the other is not so fundamental, and if trust lacks, that's ok. So you don't train to have, stimulate, develop trust. In the circus, you must develop it because it is like going to war together. Like all the discourses "we are brothers, you protect me and I protect you"; it is actually so, there is an environment in which you must stimulate trust in each other [...] because the work of one is useful to all, and everyone does her things in an overall work"

[Carlo, 42, project manager].

Trust in others, in a way similarly to self-confidence and character demonstration, entails techniques related to expertise in communicating "safety, confidence, serenity and calm, and awareness transmitted through body and voice language" [Sonia, 35, project manager]. Trust is thus a matter of techniques, expertise and skills:

"if someone is spotting me and I don't know him, maybe the first time I just push to a certain point, I don't give my top, I try to protect myself. In the moment I see that he can do his job, I begin to trust him"

[Matteo, 31, teacher]

However, the feelings of 'deep', "physical" trust required by circus practice can only be achieved with time, practicing and "working together", establishing "an interpersonal

relation" [Franco, 60, project manager]; moreover, the process of building trust often starts with a 'certain' immediate feeling, as a matter of "skin":

"in circus, trust is not only the classic trust, it is a physical trust that comes from physical contact as well as from the point of view of experiences you have with the other person who...didn't make you fall [...] it is a matter of skin, although you can trust someone immediately, instinctively, but then only with time you can build a more solid trust in another person"

[Matteo, 31, teacher]

In this sense, it is both a matter of an immediate "feeling it", feeling whether you are compatible with the other; and of creating and building trust, for instance "in teaching, a student you have had for a long time, it will be easier to make him do new things, or more complicated, because he trusts what you are saying, that you are not going to make him fall" [Matteo, 31, teacher].

To conclude, emotion work relies on specific notions of authenticity. The 'inward' movement prescribed by contemporary circus has, as its destination, the authentic self. Emotion work is work aimed to "cultivate the soul" and "understand what moves you, because if you are moved then you will move the others, if you are indifferent to that thing, we already start with a premise of insincerity which is not emotion" [Emanuele, 36, professional]. It implies a deeper awareness of one's actions than that required by merely executing "the 'trick' at hand": "While the performer may or may not speak the thoughts or words associated with the movement aloud, they must be aware of their inner dialogue and be intentional with its outward manifestation" (Cohen, 2009: 38).

This correspondence between "inner" and "outward" is, however, normatively regulated. The emphasis on the emotions and authenticity responds to a "cultural anxiety about mass production and mechanical reproduction" (Wilf, 2010: 567) with the attempt to express the "unique nature" of each person, "one's inner voice and impulses", and "the rejection of outside structures and prearranged models for action" (ibid: 568-569). Nevertheless, it is also a way to place a high value on 'appropriate' emotions and modes of expression (and, in turn, neglect less valuable ones). The invitation to 'go deeper' than the technical, aesthetic gesture implies knowing how to manage the emotions and where the not-to-be crossed limit of this 'deeper' is.

## **7.6 Concluding remarks: the social relevance of subcultural categories in circus embodiment**

This research highlights the sociological relevance of cultural and subcultural groupings, rather than investigating social differentiation underpinned by axes such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. The sample and settings were selected to capture all types of circus practice, rather than a representation of broader social segments. The previous chapter identified differentiation between the forms of circus practice based on the categories of material and symbolic gains, vocation, and risk taking. Here, I have highlighted the transversal relevance and pervasiveness of body and emotion work, and the depth of

their implications, affecting identity and subjectivity building. Nevertheless, important differences may be identified in terms of embodied competences of risk management, and investment in bodily capital. While for amateurs these strategies acquire symbolic rather than material value, for professionals they imply, as stated at the end of chapter 6, more 'serious', overwhelming commitment.

Engagement with deep, subjective, body and emotion work characterizes circus practice in general, including alternative, commercial and artistic versions, amateur and professional levels, performers and other professionals. While social differentiation was not the object of analysis in this research, it is interesting to note how constructions of subcultural internal and external boundaries are significant of processes of authentication. For instance, contemporary circus assumes that less importance is attributed to the emotions and emotion work in traditional, classic and commercial forms of circus. Social circus emphasizes the centrality of emotional as well as physical safety, as an element of distinction from professional circus. Amateurs engage with body and emotion work, but risk taking has, in this subgroup, less intense consequences than for professionals.

Table 5.2 distinguished between field, subjective and formal authenticities. These have different implications in terms of embodiment and the emotions. Field authenticity distinguishes between a creative, attentive to emotions, affects, and human fragility contemporary circus and superficial and glossy forms of traditional circus. Subjective authenticity characterizes circus as a practice in general, as a means of connection, belonging, search for one's true self. It separates circus from other (competitive) sports and more formal, less popular, and less 'concrete' forms of art. Formal authenticity functions as a marker of membership. As such, the centrality of the cultivation of a specific type of body, and the signs left by circus practice on the body become highly relevant to achieve and testify status.

While this is evident for professional artists, it is true for amateurs who envy and attempt to achieve the physical shape of those occupying more salient subcultural roles, as well as social circus professionals, who do not necessarily look like circus performers, but employ their bodies as forms of capital, as it is clear in the following quote, in which the instructor's body shape is employed to attract participants and pursue the goals of social circus:

"Margherita is a big woman, and in schools she does very well, because she says "If I do it you can try as well" [...] and she does everything [...] and for us this is a way to work on the deconstruction of stereotypes of the circus person, I mean...it is often the person that you expect the least to be able to do circus that does it, and even at very high levels"

[Sonia, 35, project manager].

Circus capital – in its bodily and symbolic manifestations - shapes the more or less fit, muscular and flexible bodies of beginners, occasional practitioners, serious participants, professional artists and other full members within the community of circus practice. It underpins authentication and distinction, but in ambivalent, rather than linear ways, and required as such ethnographic and phenomenological enquiry based on subcultural categories and boundaries, rather than broader axes of social differentiation.



## **8. Conclusions: towards a 'fragmentary' understanding of contemporary circus**

Simmel (2012) sees reality as “persistently fragmentary in character” (: 237), despite our ideal of and longing for “greater intensity and plenitude of powers and experiences, for unconditional perfection of life” and human beings (ibid: 238). This ‘wholeness of life’ can hardly be found in actual existence, which is normally experienced as a fragment, “a residual particle of a kind of supra-real state of perfection and completeness of ourselves” (ibid). However, Simmel argues, this fragmentary nature of human experience also provides a unique perspective, of no less value than the inaccessible, ideal “complete whole” (ibid).

If reality is inseparable from the ways it is experienced and attributed meaning, then the ‘fragments’ themselves are “like summits in which all components of knowledge culminate” (ibid: 239). Single aspects of life, in other words, can be seen as “definite resources of truth”, as they provide insights to study life in its wholeness. In this research, contemporary forms of circus have been investigated to illuminate relevant nexuses between social processes and sociological theories, but also the epistemological mechanisms through which knowledge is built “from a kind of centre that is able to distance itself from the world, to accentuate it, or to see it from different overlapping perspectives of a sensory and mental kind” (ibid: 238).

In turn, as we saw in chapter 3, the circus as an object of study can be seen as a “gemstone” composed by different methodological-substantive facets, each of which reflects knowledge as it stems from a specific line of enquiry, methodological approach and theoretical focus (Mason, 2011). These facets were carved from my own, unique perspective on contemporary circus in Italy: based on the insights gained through personal experiences of the circus practice and (partial) knowledge of the circus field, this research asked the question of whether, and in what ways, there is a relationship between the “work of gymnastic, perceptual, emotional, and mental conversion” (Wacquant, 2004: 7) validated and reproduced within the community of contemporary circus practice, and the ways in which the recent developments of the ‘circus field’ in Italy reflect neoliberal reconfigurations of art, work and leisure. This required in-depth, analytical description of, on the one hand, the new modes in which circus is practiced and consumed in contemporary society, and, on the other, of the processes and meanings involved in the embodiment of circus body techniques.

To conclude this thesis, I will focus on the facets – fragments of the circus fragment of the social world – which catch and reflect the best and clearest light to define the overall object of study. These concern a macro, a micro, and an epistemological perspective, as well as the points and segments where they intersect and articulate. At the macro level, this concluding analysis highlights significant reflections about the ‘revolution’ within the ‘circus world’, and the related processes of distinction. The micro facet is instead moulded by questions about risk, responsible selfhood and embodied knowledge. Finally, the epistemological surface reflects insights into the researcher’s positionality and learning process. As it seems superfluous to say, each facet is inseparable from the others: like Simmel cleverly observed, perspectives vary and overlap, and it is thanks to these shifts that knowledge is built. Thus, while the different facets may be discerned for the sake and

clarity of analysis and exposition, it is where these analytical planes converge, or when it is possible to see the different lights they reflect at once, that the most insightful considerations about contemporary circus as a fragment of the 'wholeness of life' emerge.

Before illustrating the conclusions concerning the macro, micro and epistemological plane and their intersections, two recent events may be mentioned to reassert the sociological relevance of studying the circus in this historical moment.

First, "America's best known and longest running circus" (Beadle, 2017), Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, has recently announced that it will close in May this year, after 146 years of circus trains and three-rings shows. The "Greatest show on earth" has proved to be unable to adapt to the current times: it was forced to take its elephants to a preserve in Florida, it spent too much money responding to charges of animal abuse from animal rights groups, and although it was never convicted of animal cruelty, its managers realized it could not live up to its claim as the 'Greatest Show on Earth' anymore. This event marks the end of another "community of life and work", a system created around 'the show' which includes beliefs and habits specific to the circus way of production (Caforio, 1987). People, as well as animals, will lose their whole way of life and their homes, together with their jobs (Katz, 2017).

This is, if one adopts Becker's (1982) perspective, a signal (among many others) that a 'revolution' is taking place within the 'circus world'. Changes concern the definition of artistic and creative labour in general, and tensions around the commercialization, professionalization and formalization of the circus arts in particular. The latter result in new lines of distinction and strategies of position-taking within the circus field, new cultural and subcultural values within the community of circus practice, and new possibilities of circus career development.

To mention but one further sign of this 'revolution', much closer to the context depicted in this thesis, the first official training for aerial circus disciplines' trainers is being delivered, in these very days, by an important contemporary circus institution in Turin (one of the professional schools), together with a Sport Promotion Body (A.S.C., 2017). This occurrence highlights the relevance of the perspective adopted in this research, providing insights into both the normative and the subcultural aspects involved in the current construction of circus as a field and a community of practice in Italy.

On the one hand, it represents a further step towards the formalization of careers and professional paths and the differentiation of professional roles, an attempt to construct a 'discourse' on circus – in Foucault's sense of mechanism of power, a strategy of position-taking of one of the institutional actors involved in the field, and another example of the functioning of heteronomy in circus - as the bureaucratic relevance and acknowledgement of the course is provided by the collaboration with a representative of the field of sport.

On the other hand, these structural changes affect everyday interactions and the embodiment of body techniques and feeling rules. The definition of certain practices and knowledges as essential and basic for a profession can only derive from a specific frame. For instance, if the sport frame prevails, then an analytical approach to the body and movement will obscure other possibilities, such as an artistic or a social frame, involving

more holistic approaches to human beings, and different assumptions and values (such as more emphasis on group cohesion than individual achievements, artistry than virtuosity, etc.).

This in turn has implications at the structural level. Comparing the social circus trainings I took part in during my circus career, to the training for aerial disciplines instructors, a number of differences concerning the spatial relationships and the bodily and verbal interactions between trainers and trainees emerge at a glance. In the first case, participants are generally asked to introduce themselves and great attention is placed on the management of group dynamics as well as possible individual problems. Moreover, teaching and sharing techniques from the domain of informal and peer-to-peer education are extensively employed: everybody sits in a circle, and the knowledge of each participant is valued through continual invitations to speak and share. In the second case, teachers would instead stand in front of the crowd of students, very composed, serious and 'professional' in their attitudes; they would show how things can be done; and the participants' feelings, emotions and opinions did not represent a central subject of inquiry or discussion.

### **8.1 Distinction at work (and at leisure)**

As it is clear from these examples, macro, micro, and epistemological insights into the contemporary circus field and culture are closely entangled: they emerge from my own (continually developing) perspective, experience and knowledge; and they derive from the consideration of broader social changes as well as the impact on individuals' everyday lives and representations. This entanglement derives from the complexity and multiplicity of reality and of human experience, and resulted in non-linear research outcomes. For instance, in chapter 5 I attempted to identify subcultural boundaries and categories, while simultaneously realizing that they were continually blurred, deconstructed and rebuilt, that they varied and shifted in the representations and lives of circus practitioners, depending on age, position within the field, phase of the career, artistic vision and technical expertise.

In general, processes of distinction emerged through the analysis of internal and external boundaries between professional, artistic, and institutionalized circus on the one hand, and professional, entertaining, and commercial circus on the other; between politically engaged circus, social circus and circus as fitness; and between traditional and contemporary circus. These distinctions are not specific to the Italian case. Salamero (2009) highlights how in the French case, internal polarisations developed within the circus field around commercial art and 'art for art's sake', but also around the "apolitical actors" of traditional circus, and the "politicized actors" of *nouveau cirque* and contemporary circus (: 63). Like the dance field analysed by Faure (2008), the circus universe is tugged by different logics: economical, aesthetic, symbolic. As such, new comers as well as already installed actors in the field must develop new ways to strategically attend to all of them, simultaneously or alternatively, investing in either specialization or internal differentiation, in the attempt to capture the attention of the public and of the institutions.

This research highlighted how 'heteronomous' principles of organisation have prevailed in circus history since its beginning, and how the recognition of contemporary circus practices

as a form of art, formalized leisure, and tool for social and educational work, is a sign of only relative and ambivalent autonomy. For instance, Salamero (2009) defines the legitimization of the circus in France as “partial” and “alienating” (: 60) because, on the one hand, it does not concern traditional forms of circus, which are left to their own devices, and whose destiny is either innovation, reinvention, or death (as in the case of Ringling Brothers mentioned above); on the other, the framing of circus as an artistic subfield was made possible by heteronomous transformations in the economic and political fields, and has imposed the approximation to ‘legitimate’ culture.

Moreover, Salamero (ibid) raises the question of the “porosity” (: 58) of the circus in relation to other forms of art and to the sports field, and of how definition and separation have become a complicated task. As long as it represented a peculiar “way of life”, based on a “kind of hereditary fatalism” and a “much sharper break with ordinary life” than sportsmen, gamblers or actors (Caillois, 2001: 137), the term circus indicated a varying, but much easier to identify universe. Today, the distinction of the circus is still rooted in multiple risk taking, and, specifically, in a more blurred limit between virtuosity, prowess and injury than in any other artistic discipline, which places it closer to the domain of competitive level sports. However, the recent framing of the circus as a form of art and an artistic field insists on its commitment to artistry, creativity, and innovation, assimilating it to other genres such as dance and theatre.

In other words, these distinctions hint at a new basis of interaction between the circus sector and the field of power, economy, sport and legitimate culture, and how these contribute to shape circus forms. For instance, the recent emphasis on the therapeutic and social benefits of sports and the arts facilitated the development of a social circus movement in Italy. The insistence on creativity as the solution to all contemporary evils enabled the increasing precariousness which characterizes creative workers’ lives, parallel to a higher engagement with emotional labour and “passionate work” (Arvidsson et Al., 2010b). The dismissal of prowess and of the celebration of excessive risk-taking, in favour of notions of more sustainable body techniques, circus authenticity and a ‘true self’, promoted new ways of learning, performing and doing artistic research, the conflation of bureaucracy and creativity (Wilf, 2010) in the circus field, and also new schemes and criteria of funding and official support to the circus sector.

To this respect, countering a past in which the relationships between the field of power and traditional circus families enabled the artistic autonomy of commercial, entertaining circus, today’s officially supported contemporary circus is bound by demands of social and artistic significance. Nevertheless, commercial, entertaining circus survives (under renovated, updated forms such as talent shows, animal-free Christmas shows, etc.), and, at least in Italy, still meets more easily the taste of the general audience. As it has often happened in the circus history, a heteronomous principle of organisation enables economic sustainability, while the “temporal gap between supply and demand” (that is, “the interval of time necessary for works to impress on the public” (Bourdieu, 1995: 82) which characterises fields of limited cultural production, where competitors tend to become the only clients) awaits to be filled.

Compliance with the economic field or with the field of power thus seems to come in different phases of circus organisations' lives. However, to complicate the picture, the current situation of the show business sector in Italy seems to favour internal differentiation rather than the specialization of artistic institutions (Luciano & Bertolini, 2011). Funding and support is provided primarily to organisations well-structured and trustworthy enough to display economic viability, success, and public acknowledgement, despite the celebrative rhetoric of artistic uniqueness, originality and authenticity.

Thus, it happens that a single organisation attempts to comply with both the field of power and legitimate culture, and the economic field, despite apparently opposed principles. Curiously, through the compliance with broader cultural tendencies, heteronomy also dictates the individualization of artistic practices, which must reflect the authentic, inner nature of the artist, as it is mirrored in her body, style and attitude. While this ideology of singularity may appear as less binding and more gratifying, leaving more space for individual agency and creativity, it also entails higher (artistic, narcissistic and entrepreneurial) risks, more precariousness and exposition, and less protection.

As such, distinction within contemporary circus concerns not only reconfigurations at the field level, but also important differences at the level of practice and embodied knowledge. To mention one significant example, moving from an amateur circus career to a professional one implies shifting from body and emotion work to the level of bodily capital and emotional labour. This entails that "emotions, feelings, relationships are 'put to work'" (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 15), and that labour is imbued with a foundational role for identity building. Like Hochschild (1983) observes, employing face and emotion work in commercial or labour settings (that is, to make money), turns "one's face and one's feelings" (: 55) into resources.

The alienating effects of emotional labour do not concern, or not primarily, the emotion work required of circus performers, like in general of actors, when on stage. Nor do they involve primarily emotion management or other requirements directly related to the performance setting, that a professional artist necessarily undertakes. Circus has a recognized social and symbolic function as a performing genre and a "secular ritual", in that it follows patterns and conveys meanings "attached to the forms themselves rather than particular individualized contents" (Bouissac, 2012: 23). As such, circus artists' emotion work when on stage (or in the ring) is generally acknowledged both symbolically and financially.

However, this is not the case when the management of feelings overflows from "the purposes of art" (Hochschild, 1983: 55) into the daily necessity to deal with highly precarious circus careers. This demands intense investment in emotion work and bodily capital, and has, at the same time, a foundational role for one's sense of identity. Thus, the costs of emotional labour and its imminent alienating effects – causing detachment from one's feelings and even the loss of the ability to feel and recognize emotions - concern those parts of the job which are not recognized as such, and remain hidden under a cover of passion, fun, and self-actualization, which in turn justifies low pay and absence of rights and certainties.

In this perspective, like the distinction between commercial circus, social and political circus, and the officially supported 'circus art for art's sake', the separation between amateur and professional circus may appear less neat under a closer, more attentive look to real life. As it stems from this research, despite relevant differences in entrepreneurial investment and artistic risk-taking, circus is charged, by professionals and amateurs alike, with a central role in the construction of identity and responsible selfhood. Important differences concern the frequency and the intensity of the occasions in which, through circus performances, alienating effects may come into play. However, emotion work concerns everyday practice and interactions, professional and amateur careers trespass into each other in the Italian context, and circus as a subcultural practice (rather than a profession) is less pervasive, but assigned core importance in amateurs' lives and identities.

In this sense, symbolic, rather than social boundaries, seem to be a more appropriate concept to analyse contemporary circus in Italy. However, the most recent dynamics of position taking also seem to indicate that symbolic boundaries may soon take on "a constraining character and pattern social interaction in important ways" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 168-169), drawing more binding social boundaries. For instance, the example of the first official training for circus aerial disciplines' instructors reported above may be interpreted as the attempt of one of the most powerful contemporary circus institutions in Italy to monopolize legitimate knowledge, and not only dictate definitions, parameters, and boundaries, but also display the ability to cross and deconstruct them.

While the reputation of the professional schools is built mainly in relation to professional, artistic circus, in this case they drew on their position within the field of sports to emphasize both the general and the subcultural acknowledgement of their educational, teaching and training skills. Moreover, despite insisting on the existence of differences and boundaries between contexts of amateur, professional, and social circus, they offer activities in all these domains. As Bourdieu (1995) would put it, they owe the power of vision and division, which, by definition, is never fixing and transparent, but it always corresponds to "a state of the struggle for the imposition of the legitimate definition" (: 224) – in this case, of the circus 'artist', 'teacher', 'director', 'amateur' practitioner, etc.

These first conclusions are thus related to the subtle working of symbolic violence in the construction of a new field of cultural production. Legitimate meanings, values and habits are normalized, "while concealing power relations that are the basis of its force" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 172). In turn, the "inescapable and unconscious classificatory effects that shape social positions" (ibid) may well be exacerbated, in the future, by the incorporation of more neatly distinguished subcultural habitus and cultural, bodily and emotional dispositions.

In the opening of her article "Les structures du champ chorégraphique français", Sylvia Faure (2008) quotes Weber stating that the professionalization of an art results from aesthetic autonomization and the specialization of the activities of an artistic field: theorization, teaching, artistic research. Thus, professionalization creates normative frameworks and apparatuses of "social and ideological control" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 178). In a similar vein, the credentialing system in education becomes "a mechanism through which monopolistic closure is achieved" (ibid). These insights are illustrative of

Thornton's (1997) idea that "in a post-industrial world [...] it is easier to see each cultural difference as a potential distinction, a suggestion of superiority, an assertion of hierarchy, a possible alibi for subordination" (: 209), and of Bourdieu's consideration of distinction as one of the central mechanisms of social reproduction.

## **8.2 A revolution among many others**

We have seen thus far how the revolutionary nature of the recent transformations within the circus sector can be questioned and normalized through the conceptual lenses of the notions of field, symbolic and social boundaries, and emotional labour. Becker's (1982) perspective on the mechanisms involved in art worlds' 'revolutions' may be a source of further clarification.

The circus used to be, first and foremost, a cultural and ethnic community, a community of life and work, separated from and collaborating with society at large through the entertaining function of the show, that is, through productive specialization. It provided, to a certain degree, a protected space, a community "whose members exercise joint responsibility in supporting children and the injured, resources are often shared" (Beadle & Coe, 2008: 12), roles and hierarchies are clear and goals are communal, revolving around the necessity to make the show 'go on' (Caforio, 1987).

While contemporary circus in some cases takes the form of a community of life and work (cf. paragraph 5.5), it is a less binding, less stable, and more elective and fluid, fragmented and dispersed one: in opening its – until then – inviolable fences, passionate and talented apprentices from the 'normal' life entered together with a neoliberal logic and vision of labour, art and leisure. Circus turned into an artistic field, a professional community, and a community of practice, despite the persistence of an imagined separation from everyday life and of the social role of the circus in creating, through the multisensory involvement and the visceral perception of practitioners and audience alike, a temporary illusion and desire of a life free of all kinds of oppression (cf. Bouissac, 2006; Caforio, 1987; Caillois, 2001; Tait, 2005). Moreover, the individual artist is now considered capable of and responsible for producing creative, artistic, original work.

This thesis showed how the notions of creativity, artistry and innovation which have sustained the recent reinvention of circus, also represent building blocks of contemporary labour relations and consumer culture. Contemporary circus practices successfully root their diffusion in a rhetoric of uniqueness and differentiation from other artistic and sport disciplines, or other, older forms of circus, but at the same time they follow (or contribute to) the neoliberal subsuming and expanding tendency, both in depth – towards individuals' emotions and personality – and in scope – towards the "increasingly subcultural, marginal and even deviant worlds" (Sassatelli, 2007: 80). The thesis provides, in other words, insights into the 'adaptive' character of art worlds' revolutions – to new aesthetic standards and "a different kind of vision", which turn "irrelevant and superfluous" the "old knowledge and techniques" (Becker, 1982: 297), and fulfil heteronomous cultural, economic and political agendas.

Thus, for what concerns the macro level of analysis, the central elements in the recent transformations of the circus – such as the opening of the circus community and the extension of the accessibility of the practice of circus, the partial dismissal of risk and prowess, the tensions around commercialization and formalization, the emphasis on creativity and the conflation of the latter with bureaucracy in the contemporary circus field – can be investigated as illustrative of salient aspects of contemporary neoliberal society. On the other hand, the involvement of circus practices in neoliberal trends, such as the celebration of individual creativity, passion, responsibility and disciplined risk taking, both at work and at leisure, has undeniable effects at the micro analytical level of everyday interactions and identity building.

### **8.3 Creativity and risk-taking as abilities and responsibilities**

Risk represents a particularly illuminating concept of the entanglements between macro and micro levels of analysis. Salamero (2009) notes that the contemporary circus field is shaped by the opposition between notions of ‘art’ and of ‘physical exploit’, but also how physical risk never ceased to be a defining character of the circus, as it is signalled by the return of physical prowess as a “condition for circus excellence” (: 54) in the most recent performances. Besides its ‘physical’ implications, the notion of risk has multiple meanings, including ‘artistic’, ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘narcissistic’ connotations. As one of the most important autonomous principles of organisation, it determines styles and aesthetic parameters, and it is central to analyse the circus field and its dynamics of position taking. However, it is also a multi-faceted notion through which actors deal with heteronomous economic and political forces and tendencies in other artistic and sport fields, and as such it shapes the representations, experiences and careers of circus practitioners.

On the one hand, risk in circus is related to personal integrity, to those “behaviors on the edge of catastrophes” that Bouissac (2012: 3) speaks about: the risk of more or less serious injuries, and even of death, tied to the real and staged “uncertainty of the outcome” (ibid), which locates circus practice close to extreme and lifestyle sports. In this respect, the analysis of risk in circus sheds light on the recent process of formalization as emerging from very practical issues, such as insurance coverage and the monopolization of knowledge concerning the teaching of more ‘dangerous’ (aerial) disciplines mentioned earlier.

At the level of everyday interactions, the problem of physical risk in circus is often solved through trust in others’ skills and expertise. The trust in circus practitioners from circus practitioners responds to criteria and values specific of the community of practice, such as mastering certain techniques, being attentive, generous, and strong. Trust is highly valued, but only when placed on the right people, in the right circumstances. At the start of the research I viewed trust in circus in opposed terms to the usual sociological perspective (trust in a system, in a product, and as a mechanism through which symbolic and social boundaries are constructed). Circus practice seemed to provide a peculiar case to analyse the fundamental value of trust, since in circus trust means “being sure [...] that the other will hold you, will not let you fall” [Clara, 39, professional]. Thus, “you must develop trust in the other because it is like going to war together”, while “there are environments in which trusting the other is not so fundamental, and if trust lacks, that’s ok, so you don’t



train to have it, to develop it" [Carlo, 42, circus teacher]. Moreover, trust in circus is physical and bodily, it necessarily implies physical contact:

"you establish a 'new' connection, different from any other type of everyday interaction. A communication through the skin, through touch, weights, and also bones, muscles, fat, and sometimes 'intimate' body parts. It is to put one's body and one's self at play, on display, in an almost violent way, without the fear to grab or step or grasp or climb one someone else's body parts"

[fieldnotes, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2015]

However, as it emerged from the research, besides the sensory and bodily implications of being able to trust another person, trust and mistrust enable the construction of internal and external boundaries also in the circus community. Trusting requires the respect of rituals and of implicit rules. Practitioners learn to recognize who can be trusted, and when. Thus, trust works as a "complexity-reduction device [...] a background condition for action, a routine structure of expectations: it may also be the object of choice, yet as such it is reflexively linked with choice, being at the same time the necessary ground for it" (Sassatelli, 2001: 93). Also in circus practice, trust implies a system or an order, it is a matter of presentation of self and normativity, and it is learned.

On the other hand, all types of risk illustrated in paragraph 5.2 (physical but also artistic, entrepreneurial and narcissistic) are connected to notions of authenticity in circus practice. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2000) and Wacquant's (2014) insights into other artistic and sport fields, and on the existing sociological studies of circus students in France (cf. Garcia, 2011; Salamero, 2009; Salamero & Haschar-Noé, 2011), the thesis deconstructed as a 'mythization' the idea of a circus vocation, showing instead the continuity between primary and secondary socialization on the one hand, and sport and artistic habitus on the other. In this sense, the nexus between dispositions towards physicality and risk taking, and circus vocations, also appears as a social construction. Authenticity as loyalty to a " 'true' inner self – an essential self that emerges and is maintained through subcultural involvement" (Wheaton & Beal, 2003: 159) acquires a similar function, for social stability, to that of 'character'. It is to this respect that the different notions of risk have important implications at the level of individual experiences and subjectivities.

We saw in chapters 5 and 6 how the circus expert's character is related to meaningful, aware and controlled physical risk taking, but also to the ability to deal with high instability and unpredictability of economic and working conditions, through the assumption of the responsibility for being creative. While this is a strategy to adapt to social conditions, economic constraints and political choices, flexibility, adaptability and creativity become, in the eyes of circus practitioners, a sign of authentic – "'real' or genuine membership", "constituted in relation to the 'in-authenticity' and shallowness of others" (ibid), and accumulated as a form of (subcultural) capital.

Focusing on risk also provides significant insights into the 'staged' nature of identity and culture. Both at the individual and group level, authenticity "must always be performed, staged, fabricated, crafted, or otherwise imagined" (Grazian, 2010: 192). Drawing on Goffman (1956; see paragraph 2.7), authentic experiences might be described as those

which access to “backstage” regions, where “we reveal what we imagine to be our more authentic selves to our intimates and confidants” (Grazian, 2003: 11).

This is particularly illuminating of the ambivalent working of authenticity both in circus practices and performances, and within the circus community. If all performing arts engage with ‘staging’ techniques, in the “timeless circus” (Bouissac, 2006) these deal with reality in a peculiar way, since risk and the threat of highly serious, physical consequences in case of failure are real and ever-present, and at the same time they are staged, faked, emphasized or covered by circus managers and performers, to guide and shape the audience’s emotions, illusions, and visceral perceptions.

However, following “emergent aesthetic practices” such as “hybridity, irony, and transgression”, contemporary circus challenges “the performance of authenticity as tradition-bound, pretentious, and essentialist” (Grazian, 2010: 192). In contemporary circus, virtuosity, physical risk and failure remain fundamental categories to identify the ‘circus frame’ (as distinguished, for instance, from dance or theatre frames). However, the recent status of art adds a further interpretive layer when judging contemporary circus practices: the centrality of ‘artistic research’, choreography or dramaturgy, and artistic and narcissistic risk taking.

Contemporary circus performances are required a creative, innovative character, which in turn only emerges through intense commitment to the practice, body and emotion work, and loyalty to one’s nature and authentic self. After seeing a show of extremely high circus technical ability, and in which the attempt was to bring in other disciplines, in particular ‘lindy hop’ dance and clowning, a disappointed circus professional commented: “if you want to dance, or be a clown, then go to a workshop. Otherwise just stick to the tricks” [fieldnotes, 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2015]. This seems at odds with one of the main characteristics of contemporary circus – multidisciplinary and the relevance normally attributed to dance and theatre in contemporary shows and schools’ curricula. However, it is significant of how authenticity underpins cultural and subcultural practices: beyond norms, safety rules and aesthetic conventions, what really counts for a circus practitioner, and even more for an artist, is a responsibility to search for, and be truthful to, one’s authentic self.

The close relationship between creativity, loyalty to one’s nature, and authenticity is illustrative of how the staging of the latter “can prove a risky balancing act” (Grazian, 2010: 195). This circus metaphor seems particularly appropriate if we consider Stephens’ (2012) insights into the nexus between the current reinvention of the circus and the neoliberal economic paradigm, under which artistry and creativity, as well as financial viability, have become not only professional duties, but responsibilities towards the ‘artistic self’. Authenticity is thus ambivalently tied to creativity, as it embeds the notion of unique selfhood in cultural and subcultural, common values and criteria.

Creativity is a matter of artistic authenticity because it goes deeper “than developing a personal style of embellishment” (Wilf, 2010: 571), it requires the reconfiguration and disruption, not only the perfection, of habits, complicating “the cultural notion of embodied practical mastery” (ibid). It requires, in other words, not only to know one’s self, but also the ability to draw on this knowledge to improve and change one’s habits and dispositions. Together with Florida’s (2012) deconstruction of “the idea of the lone

“creative genius”” (: 7), this new centrality of creativity charges all individuals, not to mention creative workers and artists, with a further, heavier responsibility ‘to be successful’. Florida (ibid) views the creative individual as “the new mainstream” (: 7), attributes a creative capacity – to be cultivated through perseverance and education - to “all of us” (: 19), and asserts creativity “as the font from which new technologies, new industries, new wealth, and all other good economic things flow” (ibid: 15) – in other words, as the solution to all crises of our time.

The case of the circus is illuminating of the workings of the “ideology of creativity [...] both as a fundamental element to the overall constitution of creative [passionate] labour, and as an important and valuable product of that labour” (Arvidsson et al., 2010b: 297), as it represents both a basis for identification and construction of contemporary subjectivities, and as a source of value for artistic productions. These dynamics overflowed from the cultural sector, to invest society at large. The normalization of the conflation of creativity and bureaucracy, and of art, labour and leisure in the neoliberal society, implies that “just when production is no longer in any way the specific locus of the formation of identity, *exactly at that point* does it project itself into every aspect of experience, subsuming linguistic competences, ethical propensities, and the nuances of subjectivity” (Virno, 2004: 108).

#### **8.4 The ‘disenchanted’ effects of research**

The most interesting aspects of this research reside, in my view, in my twofold positionality as a participant researcher, and a researching participant, and, particularly, in the evolution of this standpoint. I started my PhD as an insider within the circus community, decisively inclined to shed light on the peculiarities of circus, believing, as the members of a subcultural group generally do, in a certain degree of “inferiority of *others*” (Thornton, 1997: 201). Because of the role circus practice and the experiences related to it had in my life, I considered them worth investigating.

Researching contemporary circus implies different approaches, methodologies, and problems, than those which arose for ethnographers interested in traditional circus. Caforio (1987) laments for instance the difficulty of overcoming the defensive and distrustful attitude that circus people working in Italian traditional circus families in the 1980s maintained against sedentary people; and asserts the importance, from an anthropological point of view, to analyse the circus show as an instrument around which the circus lifestyle was created.

In this ethnography, the main problems concerned ethics and roles management, such as dealing with multiple membership (especially in the community of circus practice and in the academic community), managing adequate presentations of self, responding to different expectations in terms of body and emotion work, and the attempt to establish a distance from the object of study, to report a sociological account rather than personal views. Moreover, if access to the field was facilitated by my full membership in the researched group, in order to capture today’s multiplicity of styles, lifestyles, productive systems, body techniques and formal institutions a single focus (such as the show as the core unit of the circus community of work and life) could not be sufficient. As the research

process unfolded, I had to carve further facets in the gemstone representing the object of study, as well as enlarging or erasing some of the initial ones. It now sheds a light of different quality and intensity.

More specifically, the research and writing process changed my perspective towards a more sociological imagination of the circus. On the one hand, I found significant similarities between circus and other practices. On the other, I understood that, if 'circus is special', it is because of very different factors from those which I initially saw. In particular, it is the difficulty to classify it, the complexity arising from insights into the specificity (and the ordinariness) of contemporary circus practices in the broader, neoliberal context, which enabled interesting traits to emerge. Nevertheless, my position within the researched field was determinant of the research outcomes: as well as facilitating access to the field, it implied a pre-existing knowledge about the circus practice and assumptions about its meanings and functioning.

These concluding reflections represent an attempt to mark a full stop which, by definition, starts a new paragraph. They are theoretical and methodological at the same time, since the dialectic relationship between theory, data collection and data analysis, was one of the epistemological underpinnings of the thesis (see chapter 3). Direct experiences, concepts and research design functioned reciprocally as both nourishment and constraint. Reflecting on my work with as much honesty as I am able to report, I see how, despite the attempts to 'fix' and 'reproduce' research tools (from conceptual insights to interview questions) in order to facilitate comparison and analysis, my focus and the lenses through which I looked at the researched settings and groups changed as I encountered new texts, concepts and people, in both the academic and the circus community. This implied an evolution in the way I asked questions, made decisions in the field, considered details as relevant or trivial, as well as an occasional sensation of impotence in relation to these changes, as if it was impossible to account – at least in sociological terms – for the new directions the ethnography continually took.

On the other hand, readings and concepts employed often responded to attempts to fill these gaps and construct a more coherent account of the research process, defining phenomena or statements emerging from observations, interviews and document analysis. The research process can never be clear and linear, if one considers that the researcher has the dual task of accounting for its complexity, while attempting to reduce it and enable analysis and comprehensible report. I have thus highlighted the main thematic threads, while keeping in mind my positionality as a PhD student and circus practitioner, whose past career – and most likely the future one - crosses these and other domains. I have also attempted to maintain the awareness that "being in the know" (Thornton, 1997) is always limited to specific social positions and cultural backgrounds, conceals different, broader perspectives, and makes it difficult to judge and account for the knowledge derived from pre-existing full membership in the researched community.

Moreover, positions and visions are never fixed and rigid: they are fluid and constantly changing, especially today. As such, these conclusions are in part circumstantial: had I had more time, another state of mind and body, another writing setting, they might have sounded different. As trivial as this may seem, this reflection enables a focus on my own

learning process, as it unfolded thanks to the research. As well as losing a bit of presumption, I have gained awareness about the diffused and 'insidious working' of societal forces, of the extent to which they guide individuals' visions, behaviours, desires, bodies and even emotions, and subsume the 'different', the 'marginal', and the artistic.

On the other hand, people, including circus people, now appear as much more in need of systems of reference to organise their lives, knowledges and beliefs, and to anchor themselves to broader orders and imaginations. In contemporary neoliberal society, this responsibility to make sense of one's life, searching for or even inventing new forms and sites of belonging, and weaving a connective tissue between the different fragments of experience, is increasingly assigned to the individual and her or his skills.

In this sense, knowledge about life and the world can only arise at the intersection of social forces and individual life paths. These intersections create the "fragments of life, fragments of worlds", which in Simmel's (2012) eyes justify a profound and less pessimistic view of the "persistently fragmentary" (: 237) character of life. In my view, these arguments provide an invitation for sociologists to continue to pursue and value research work, maintaining deep awareness about the limitedness of one's perspective and knowledge, while at the same time resisting the tendency to draw its boundaries in advance. This sociological enquiry into the circus world partly 'broke the illusion' and illuminated the 'rules of the game', questioning my total subjective engagement with the circus, but also pushing me to explore new fragments – of life and reality.



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