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**CIRCUS BETWEEN CENTRE AND PERIPHERY:  
THE RECOGNITION OF THE FORM IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY  
BRITAIN AND COLOMBIA**

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Thesis submitted to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Policy and  
Management

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## Abstract

The turn of the 21st century arguably marked the point when circus gained recognition by cultural establishments in Britain and Colombia. Issues of identity and recognition were becoming central questions in the analysis of a practice regarded as marginal or lowbrow. This thesis addresses such questions by comparing circus movements in Britain and Colombia. The aim is to investigate global power structures that operate behind the current process of recognition.

The analysis is conducted within the disciplines of cultural studies and circus studies. It follows mixed methods of research that include multi-sited ethnography, semi-structured interviews, textual analysis, archival research and political economy. Interviews were conducted with over 60 circus artists, arts administrators, and policy-makers; they enquire into the factors behind recognition and the distinctive character of the form. The research finds the internal peripheries of circus and a divided practice which is split into differentiated movements such as 'traditional', 'contemporary' or 'social' circus. While contemporary circus gains recognition as art, traditional circus is regarded as entertainment and social circus as therapy or social work.

The historical review on the other hand, reveals that the 21st century is not the only period in which circus is gaining recognition. The 18th century saw the consolidation of 'modern circus' in Britain, the point when circus is said to emerge as a distinct genre and a performing art. The thesis brings those moments together

as evidence of a cycle in which an itinerant and ambivalent practice encounters formalisation. Both periods coincide with a moment when cultural elites and official establishments embrace circus as a valid endeavour. In the process of recognition, crucial agents are often ignored and become invisible.

The research contributes to understandings of circus beyond the West and the centre - more precisely, capitalism, the bourgeoisie, urban centres, expert knowledge and stakeholders. It highlights the influence that narratives found in 19th century Europe are having on contemporary developments of circus in both Britain and Colombia. It proposes that the understanding of global power forces operating behind circus transformations could help to alleviate internal disputes connected with intrinsic differences within circus. It also contributes towards a definition of cultural policies that embrace diversity and incentivise circus developments beyond central figures and models borrowed from the past.

## Chapter One

### Circus between Centre and Periphery

'Comment la marge résiderait-elle au centre ? La circularité de la piste prête à des mouvements centripètes. Les forces centrifuges n'en continueront pas moins d'y dominer, au risque de l'art'.

'How would the margin reside at the centre? The circus ring lends itself to regular circles. Centrifugal forces will nevertheless continue to dominate them, at the risk of art' (Wallon, 2002, p.254).

This research explores global interconnections in the analysis and making of culture through the lenses of circus arts in Britain and Colombia. The analysis addresses issues of identity and recognition of circus, a peripheral art form that is gaining recognition by cultural establishments in both countries. The initial aim was to enquire about the renewed interest towards the form and the consequential immersion of circus into the formal parameters of contemporary culture. It aimed at identifying the values of circus and distinctive characteristics of the art that could support negotiations between the interests of the practice and those of the cultural establishment.

The area of study is circus arts, and the motivation lies in the contribution of circus and marginal populations in the making of global culture and societies. Questions around the distinctive character of circus and the renewed

interest towards the form are behind the selection of the area of study. Is circus a peripheral form entering the centre? What are the implications of a peripheral form entering the centre? Wallon (2002, p.254) explores the latter enquiry in the case of France and governmental interventions from the 1980s onwards. 'Le cirque au risque de l'art' (circus at the risk of art) was the topic of discussion to analyse the impact that such governmental recognition could have in terms of 'artistic freedom' and the 'rebellious character' of the form (Wallon, 2002, p.235). Using the circus ring and centripetal forces as a metaphor, Wallon suggests that centrifugal forces will operate instead. In spite of recognition and formalisation aiming at legitimising circus, the form will deliberately remain in the margins. Illustrating the metaphor with La Fontaine's 'The Wolf and the Dog' fable, circus artists will ultimately prefer the uncertainties of a nomadic lifestyle than the assurance of a fixed life (ibid., p. 254).

This thesis finds a different conclusion in the analysis of Britain and Colombia, where formalisation has played a more definitive role. The question here extends to how is the centre influencing the periphery and the periphery influencing the centre? Two main centre-periphery dynamics are identified: circus and other more respectable art forms, as well as circus between Colombia and Britain, the later classified at the core of the World System Analysis (e.g Wallerstein, 1974) and the former at the periphery (ibid.). In the process, the research finds the internal peripheries of circus. The thesis takes its title from this observation and the extending parallel of circus regarded as a marginal and undervalued form. The

thesis explores the peripheral condition of invisible figures, circus and Colombia both in its positive and negative connotations, namely periphery as a disempowering situation where participants are kept away from full participation and periphery as a place of power and possibility (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.36). The question is thus related to power forces behind the stratifications of peoples, countries and cultural practices in the making of cultural and social practices between Colombia and Britain.

### **Background Research and Theoretical Approach**

This research is particularly motivated by my previous experience working as cultural attaché at the Embassy of Colombia to the United Kingdom. Working between Britain and Colombia inside cultural markets and the making of international politics raised a series of questions I wanted to address from an academic perspective. These questions are related to global influences in the delimitation of Colombia's policies (e.g. commerce, investment, tourism), cultural processes and identities (e.g. branding campaigns, country's image, artists promoted abroad; dissemination of the creative industries model), the division of the world in categories such as core, semi-peripheral and peripheral nations (e.g. Wallerstein, 1974), and global influences in the making of culture and cultural processes.

In this position, I also had the opportunity to work with different artistic disciplines ranging from fine arts and literature to indigenous dances, circus or street arts. Furthermore, I also engaged with different actors from ministerial and

diplomatic corps to renowned artists as well as individuals excluded by cultural and political establishments. This experience of being at the crossroads of these various worlds guided the wide range of topics and approaches explored in the thesis, namely issues around the stratification of countries, artistic disciplines and socio-economic groups. Such differentiations are addressed here in terms of centre-periphery dynamics.

The study is thus located at the intersection of multiple spheres. It brings together circus practice and academia, circus movements in Colombia and Britain and, ultimately, a diversity of actors operating at different levels in relation to circus practices, from artists to policymakers and cultural administrators ranging from the elites to those marginal to them. The research is conducted within cultural studies and the emerging discipline of circus studies. It contributes to the analysis of an overlooked practice in the analysis of culture broadly, and more precisely within the areas of cultural studies and cultural industries. The situation is changing as we speak with the consolidation of circus as an academic discipline and the increased interest of scholars from different fields and backgrounds (most of them circus practitioners) and studies conducted within the performing arts. This research joins the trend by providing a perspective from the social sciences with emphasis on cultural studies and cultural industries, representing one of the few attempts under this framework.

On a theoretical level, my approach has been particularly guided by the insight of academics working in the interrelated fields of cultural studies and

global studies who have brought forward notions as southern theory (e.g. Connell, 2007) or epistemologies of the south (e.g. Sousa-Santos, 2014), which account for the invisible figures and systems of knowledge marginalised in the construction of modern societies. In general terms, this may include the knowledge and voices of people in the peripheries of global capitalism, or outside of formal academic or scientific knowledge production, or the realm of experts.

With the aim of shifting common or established understandings of circus, it follows global studies and its overall attempt at decentralising knowledge and the construction of history and understanding of social practices from the point of view of Europe and the West (e.g. Garcia-Canclini, 2010; Bhambra, 2014; Sousa-Santos, 2014) and the reconfiguration of the histories of artistic production beyond Western actors (e.g. Van Damme, 2008; Carlson, 2013). These bodies of literature are relevant to my case. More specifically, Sousa-Santos's work resonates with my perspective, as it proposes an alternative epistemology based on the recognition of the existent multiple epistemologies, replacing the 'monoculture of scientific knowledge' by an 'ecology of knowledges' (Sousa-Santos, 2014, p.188). This is particularly relevant in the case of circus, a practice regarded as disposing of its own epistemology and way of life (e.g. Beadle, 2009), recognised for the physical learning process and the resilience of body (e.g. Lavers, 2016), but also, as I aim to evidence, by complex disputes between circus insiders and outsiders, romantic and objective views, and between knowledge produced by circus professionals and circus scholars.

In line with such ideas, a central aim of this research is to unveil invisible voices and marginalised practices and actors. I call for the need to consider epistemologies and analytical tools regarded as marginal and peripheral in front of the dominant global North and northern theories. Following the work of Connell (2007), I refer to the entities of the North and the West not as a bounded category of states and societies but to emphasise 'relations of authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnerships, sponsorships, or appropriation' between theories produced in the metropole and those in the world periphery (ibid., p.ix).

The present study is concerned with the dialectics of centre/peripheries, highlighting the role of the peripheries, and calls for considering alternative epistemologies and their contribution to understanding social practices in global times. Rather than imposing and claiming an epistemology of the South to replace an epistemology of the North, while intrinsically marking a duality and division between two supposed separated entities, this research stands in between: it joins claims demanding global perspectives in the understanding of cultural and social practices (e.g. Garcia-Canclini, 2010; Bhabra, 2014) beyond the west and the modern world.

I follow the ideas of the 'modern world' as an invention coined in the European Enlightenment when history and time were divided into 'Antiquity', 'Middle Ages' and 'Modern Times', and the later understood as that present moment of European thinkers and the 'beginning' of the future (Habermas, 1987, pp.5-7). The moment when Europe, capitalism, urban centres, the bourgeoisie, the

state, and the white heterosexual men were placed at the centre in the making of history (Mignolo, 2011, pp.8-10). The European Renaissance and the Enlightenment were acknowledged as the builders of the Western civilisation (e.g. Bhabra, 2007, Mignolo, 2011); an independent and opposed civilisation to other societies that brought 'progress and development' (Mignolo, 2011, p.177). This civilisation was build upon a linear 'genealogy' starting in Ancient Greece, and continuing in Rome, Christian Europe, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, political democracy, industrial revolution and then the United States and the promotion of 'life, liberty and happiness' (Wolf, 1982, p.5). The worlds' history is presented as a history of a moral success story where finally 'the virtuous wins' (ibid.).

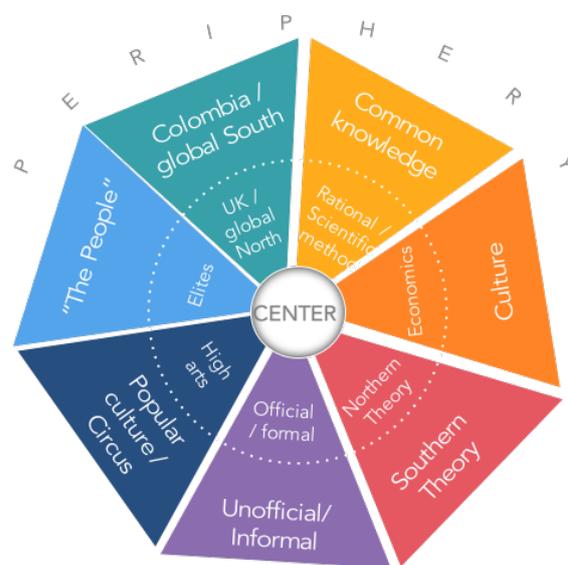


fig. 1.1: Centre and Periphery Dialectics  
Source: Made by the Researcher

Global studies literature supports this analysis in the understandings of circus beyond the entity of the West and its particular system of knowledge. Contributions to these analyses are provided by post-colonial and de-colonial theories, challenging the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical

traditions emanating from Europe (Bhabra, 2014, p.4). These traditions paved the way for the consolidation of a global theory that aims to de-construct modern systems of knowledge, highly informed by individualism, rationalism, dualism and a strong break with the past. This system of understanding is built and sustained by the consolidation of the Western influence assembled by capitalism, slavery, dispossession and appropriation (Mignolo, 2011, p.183). The research instead acknowledges the diverse systems of knowledge and the recognition of a world made up of 'connected histories' (Bhabra, 2014, p.4). The work attempts to join these efforts to deliver upon the call for re-construction raised by post-colonial, de-colonial and global theory as a way to address past and present histories in a more adequate fashion. By doing so, the work joins the effort to reconstruct theoretical categories towards new understandings (ibid.) of circus that can incorporate and transform previous ones.

The analysis supports proposals for breaking the arrangement of knowledge within imaginary building blocks and rigid pyramids called East and West, South and North (Wolf, 1982, p.7); this research claims for the need to bring these together. These categories predominate in academic literature and are used here for explanatory purposes. However, the research must be understood as an attempt to deconstruct such fixed categories by showing the interconnections and similarities across borders. While fully breaking up those categories at a theoretical level is certainly a matter that goes beyond the capacity of this research, it does, however, provide concrete examples of how in the analysis of circus and its history

they become blurred. It also notes how rigid categories have been applied in the analysis and definition of circus.

### **Circus Definitions and Transformations**

This section explores the question 'what is circus?' primarily through historical accounts of transition as found in circus literature. The description serves to introduce the reader to the notion of circus and multiple approaches towards the form. Covering and explaining these approaches exceeds the space and capacity of the thesis but the important point to note is the diverse range of approaches by which circus has been studied, as opposed to the notion of a fixed and limited idea of circus. This is one of the main difficulties found in the analysis of circus and the delimitation of the revision of circus literature. The importance here is to note their existence. This is offered as one of the main debates found in the practice. It also defines and contextualises the terminology used in circus that will help to understand the debates presented in future chapters.

Circus is indistinctly addressed as a spectacle, a performing art, an entertainment form, a venue or an enterprise. It is described as a form of multiple reputations and signifiers (Zaccarini, 2015, p.5). Ideas of circus as a marginal and transgressive form coexist with ideas of circus as a mainstream and massive entertainment business. It is described as a 'gay' form (Frost, 1881, p.316) and itinerant practice 'defying any limits and attempts of definition' (Bailly, 2009, p.64). Circus is approached as a 'way of life' (Beadle, 2009, p.10), a language (e.g.

Bouissac, 1976), an 'aggregate of intentions and emotions' (Jacobs, 2016, p.25), 'an institution' (Beadle, 2014, p.3) or a mix of genres (e.g. Bailly, 2009). The study of circus is highly intertwined with the analysis of fairgrounds, theatre, pantomime and equestrian acts. The world of circus is intimately related to the worlds of the carnival and the marketplace (e.g. Arens, 2006). Its roots and motives are deeply attached to play (e.g. Carmeli, 2001) as well as rituals, magic and shamanism (Jacobs, 2016, p. 27). Together, these complicate circus understandings and the limitation of any study on circus.

These multiple approaches are accompanied by a fixed idea of circus attached to what scholars denominate modern circus, defined as 'an organised sequence of performances within a ring of spectators' (Croft-Cooke and Cotes, 1976, p.7). Modern circus is said to have emerged in England at the end of the 18th century and from there expanded to the rest of the world. Both academics and practitioners have challenged circus approaches in the limited terms of modern circus, claiming for renewed understandings of the practice (Tait and Lavers, 2016, pp.5-6). However, modern circus and that specific time are also recognised as the moment when circus emerged as a distinct genre, a performing art, a spectacle or an institution (e.g. Stoddart, 2000, p.2; Beadle, 2014, p.3), dominating our understanding of the debate around it.

The parallel story of the invention of modern circus and the emergence of circus as a performing art and distinct genre presents a challenge in the analysis of what constitutes 'circus'. Contemporary circus performers are

engaged in a similar struggle to identify their own practice within the general idea of 'circus' (see Chapter 5). For the purposes of this research, it was therefore imperative to revisit the history of circus in order to understand its origins. This is crucial in the analysis of circus and understanding the current process of recognition of circus in Britain and Colombia, the particular focus of this research.

Different terminologies exist today that define the multiple transformations that circus has had across the times. modern circus provides the historical reference to explain the 'origins' of circus in 'the form that we know it today' (Speaight, 1980, p.24; Wall, 2013, p.115; Ward, 2014, p.15). 'Traditional circus' refers to the consolidation of the modern format (Tait, 2005, p.5) over the 19th and 20th centuries that represents the generally shared notion of circus. 'New circus' is associated with a timid break with the traditional format, outside the big top and no longer displaying animals (Purovaara, 2012, pp.17-19). 'Contemporary circus' reports the most recent and striking transformation, where circus totally breaks with the classic aesthetic, format and content (ibid.). This category is further divided into multiple sub-categories such as social circus, community circus, youth circus, eco circus, street circus, and many more.

### **Modern Circus and the Myth of its Origins**

The general account of the emergence of modern circus reads as follows. It was at Halfpenny Hatch, in the Lambeth area of London in 1768 where a former member of the British army, equestrian and successful businessman, Philip Astley, planted the

seeds of what was later called circus (Speaight, 1980). From its foundation, Astley and his contemporaries, Charles Hughes and John Bill Ricketts, took circus to France, Russia and the US at the turn of the 19th century (Wall, 2013; Ward, 2014). From here circus consolidated the format that was exported to the rest of the world (Croft-Cooke and Cotes, 1976).

Philip Astley is recognised as 'the father of modern circus' (Speaight, 1980, p.31). The title is inherited from earlier circus historians who identify him as the first man to bring together in the ring displays of horsemanship, acrobats, musicians and a comic character (ibid.). The format consolidated over the years at his various amphitheatres in London, Paris and Dublin, to become a successful spectacle and popular entertainment in Victorian times (Assael, 2005). Astley's contribution is linked to the invention of the ring and its 42 feet diameter, providing the ideal angle for the equilibrium of a bare-back/acrobatic rider (Bolton, 1987). He was the first to mix riding displays with acts previously performed in European fairgrounds; the first to combine equestrian acts and pantomime (Tait, 2005) and to design a scale of differentiated entrance fees (Mauclair, 2003). In short, Astley is recognised for putting together the first circus show and the elements that characterise what is now called circus, its aesthetics and business model.

Disputes exist around how innovative Astley actually was in the elements that constituted what is considered the first circus show. It is now widely recognised that most, if not all, of the contributions above cannot be ascribed to him. Equestrian acts and traditional popular entertainments of the fairs were

presented by Mr and Mrs Wolton at the Dog and Duck pub, years before Astley (Kwint, 2013). Between 1750 and 1800 there were several recorded performances - paid, in a ring or touring - of what is called 'circus-style entertainments' (Ward, 2014, p.23). The name that identifies the form was given by Charles Hughes, Astley's disciple and first competitor, in association with theatre actor Charles Dibdin (Speaight, 1980, pp.33-35). Together they opened the Royal Circus in 1782 using the word circus for the first time to differentiate their venue and spectacle from Astley's Amphitheatres (Kwint, 2002). Speaight actually comments that Astley 'originated very little himself, although he does seem to have been the first man to combine comedy with horsemanship' (1980, p.31).

Russian circus historian Gregory Fedin goes even further, claiming that Astley 'invited circus into his stable. Circus is what was on the streets – and all it owes to Astley is thanks for letting it into its appointed home – the ring' (cited in Bolton, 1987, p.54). As Bolton (1987) notes, Fedin was probably the only circus historian at the time who disagreed with the common version which places Astley at the centre of the story, providing 'the home', that is 'the ring'.



fig. 1.2: Interior and Exterior views of Astley's Amphitheatre in London, 1777  
Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, London. No. S.2385-2009

The invention is credited today also to Charles Hughes (Ward, 2014) and Antonio Franconi (Jacob, 2016). The latter administered Astley's amphitheatre in Paris, making the circus an admired and recognised enterprise in France. It is to Astley and his contemporaries that we owe the inventors of circus 'in the form we know it today' (Speaight, 1980, p. 24; Wall, 2013, p.115; Ward, 2014, p.15). This is a phrase constantly found in past and present literature, in spite of a lack of clarity about what exactly that form is. The list of 'inventors' then, is reduced to a few European men during the Enlightenment, continuing with 'the great myth of the founding fathers.' (Connell, 2007, p.viii).

The role of their partners and other relevant figures vanishes in the repetition and simplification of the myth. Patty Astley, better known as Mrs Astley or Astley's wife, a circus person and equestrian herself, performed astonishing acts and developed the business with Philip Astley from the beginning (Frost, 1881; Speaight, 1980). With few exceptions, scholars have paid less attention to Patty Astley's contribution and her name and figure is less often referenced. As a simple indication, the index of the *Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Tait and Lavers, 2016, p.612) references Philip Astley in over thirty pages while Mrs Astley is referenced once. The lack of attention towards Patty Astley is even more evident in recent works than in earlier histories. Frost (1881) and Speaight (1980) point towards Philip Astley as the 'inventor' of circus although Patty Astley's achievements are evidenced in their accounts and the 'inventions' are reported in terms of 'Mr and Mrs Astley',

'Mr and Mrs Hughes', 'Mr and Mrs Wolton' and the many other figures involved in the making of modern circus.



fig. 1.3: Mrs Hughes, One of the Many Invisible Characters  
Source: Speaight (1980, p.112)

The internationalism of the artists that made circus a successful entertainment and artistic form are also excluded from the reduced list of inventors and protagonists. Artists coming from the Middle East, India, and Africa, performing in modern circuses are shadowy figures. Circus developments in those regions are reported as a distant past (Jacobs, 2016, p.27), 'the roots' of circus (Speaight, 1980, p.20), or 'circus before circus' (Purovaara, 2012, p.27). Little is reported on their contribution in the making and transformation of circus at the turn of the 19th century, that brought their techniques, styles, experiences and interpretations to the making of circus. Their participation is mainly registered and analysed in terms of its colonial representation rather than as 'makers of history' (e.g. Bhabra, 2007, p.2).

Like Patty Astley, circus artists were not completely invisible in first historical accounts. At the preface of the *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*, Thomas Frost calls the reader's attention towards them: 'But of the circus artistes –the riders,

the clowns, the acrobats, the gymnasts, - what do we know?' (Frost, 1881, p.vii). Those members of a 'strange race' (ibid.) seem to be the subject of the first circus history. Nonetheless, it is the manager Philip Astley, the 'celebrity' (Arrighi, 2016, p. 390) and the urban man (Frost, 1881) who is identified as the inventor of modern circus. In the simplification of the myth and the cursory reference to its 'origins', the multiple makers of circus become invisible. The institution and the manager take the lead.

Astley is above all acknowledged as a businessman (Wall, 2013, p. 114), a man with an obsession who persisted with the business for the longest period of time. No one lasted as Astley did (ibid). He is revealed as a clever, ambitious and entrepreneurial man who managed to attract the attention of influential figures of the time; journalists, magistrates and recognised personalities able to support circus in issues around performance licensing, vagrancy laws and theatre legislation (Kwint, 2002). The first protagonist of the modern circus is the manager, the entrepreneur and the circus proprietor; a protagonist of capitalism. That is the figure highlighted in circus accounts, and the one that gave birth to the first definition of circus.

### **Historical Construction of Modern Circus**

The 19th century marks another crucial moment in the developments of circus. It is when circus became an object of historical study (Arrighi, 2016, p.390). British journalist Thomas Frost wrote *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (1875-1881), the first

history of circus in the British Isles (Kwint, 2013). The 'historicity' of circus, that is, the modern consciousness of history, 'the inclination to be historical and to select, organise, and narrate events of the past', is inaugurated by Frost (Arrighi, 2016, p. 390), 'the first circus historian' (Tait and Lavers, 2016, p.3). This historical account, the order of significance in which Frost presents the developments of circus and the moment of its origins influenced future analysis and historical constructions until the present time. Circus was officially defined and recorded according to Frost's point of view and the sentiments at his time. As cultural historian Marius Kwint notes, '...the sense of history is at the roots of the circus's self-definition as a genre' (2013, p.219). Hence the need to perpetually revisit histories and ideas of the 'origins' in order to construct definitions and an understanding of circus.

The primary accepted understanding of circus is a product of modernity, a modern construction not only in the terms highlighted by Arrighi (2016) of individuality and novelty, but in terms of the Eurocentric construction of the modern world under the hegemony of Western empire and capitalism. Circus combined the informal and formal world of the 18th century Europe and produced a format, a hybrid combining those structures and elements.

### **From Antiquity to Modern Times: 'The Circus is Born'**

After tracing the Roman legacy of the practice, the opening chapter of *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* is presented under the subheadings of 'Beginnings of the circus in England'; 'Middle Ages performers'; 'Philip Astley and the First Circus'. This

first historical construction of circus evidences the presentation of events in accordance to what scholars recognise as the modern invention of time and history (Mignolo, 2011, p.171; Habermas, 1987, pp.5-11). Circus is born in modern times with a distant past placed in Rome. Such presentation of events seems logical as Frost was reporting the history of circus in Britain, tracing its own history and the distinctive element of his own time. The problem arises when that history is translated to the practice as a whole, and understandings of circus become limited to that specific account of events.

Frost's work became an influential source and obligatory reference in future accounts. It brought the attention of contemporary writers towards the form (Tooley-Stott, 1958) and marked the tone in which further circus literature was written (Sotddart 2000; Arrighi, 2016). Connections between circus and Empire were central in circus definitions and understandings. A direct link is established between modern circus and Roman circuses. Both were assumed to derive from the exhibition of exotic animals and chariot-racing in Greece (Croft-Cooke and Cotes, 1976, p.7). A 'vacuum' and the disappearance of circus in between the Roman and the British Empire is reported (ibid.). Circus is initially understood as a fixed building and its central attributes the horse and physical displays. A 'curious parallel' is established between the greatest moments of circus and the highest point of Ancient Rome and Victorian England, making circus the main entertainment of the empires (ibid.).

Speaight (1980) breaks with the direct link between circus and Empire. Parallels between Roman circuses and modern circuses are challenged. The times are not seen as a parallel, but the opposite. The modern circus, an art form is distanced from the vicious Roman circuses. The reasons reported are the venue's shape and the nature of the entertainments. Roman circuses were elliptical and displayed athletic games and chariot races. Roman amphitheatres were closer in shape but 'too large for any intimate display of skills' (Speaight, 1980, p.11). The entertainment was centred around gladiators and animals were presented 'to be slaughtered, not to display their skills' (ibid., p.11). Intimate displays of human and animal skills are contrasted with massive entertainments displaying physical competition and violence. Animals are not slaughtered in the modern circus (ibid.). The comparison already contains some of the crucial aspects that have determined the recognition of circus and differentiations between sport, competition, entertainment and art, with circus located in between.

The similarity between Astley's amphitheatre and the Roman amphitheatre, is challenged. 'The origins of the Circus must be sought elsewhere', concluded Speaight (1980, p.11). Tracing similar buildings and entertainments closer to Astley's time, (also reported by Frost (1881)), Speaight (1980) establishes a more feasible connection between Astley's amphitheatre and the bull-rings and buildings where bear-baiting and other performances were presented in London. The name circus, used for the first time by Charles Hughes, refers rather to the circular track located in Hyde Park where the British cavalry used to train and to the

urban roundabouts, fairly popular at the time (Speaight 1980, pp.33-35), such as St Georges Circus where the Royal Circus was strategically located.



fig. 1.4: Interior of Astley's Amphitheatre  
Source: Speaight (1980, p.12)

The link with Ancient Rome is not entirely broken. 'Minstrels', 'Histriones', 'Saltimbanques' and 'feast of activity', the names given to performers and performing acts of a 'circus-type' since Ancient Rome up to the 18th century Europe, are pointed to as the direct antecedent of circus (Speaight 1980, pp.12-16). Three common characteristics are identified in those artists although they are denominated differently throughout the ages. Women and men performed equally in their shows; a comic character appeared frequently in association with the acrobats; little distinction is reported between acrobats, dancers, mimes and actors (ibid.). Significant also is the diversity of nationalities and racial backgrounds: 'as well as French, and English, the fairs of London and Paris contained Scots, Irish, Italians, Prussians, Saxons, Dutch, Danes, Hungarians, Poles, Portuguese, Spaniards, Negroes, Turks, and Indians [...] We are very close now to the evolution of the Circus as a distinct form of art and entertainment' (Speaight, 1980, p.20)

The historical moment differentiating the modern circus is placed in Britain and France at the turn of 19th centuries, the moment when 'The circus is born ... when the Circus began to assume the form that we know today' (Speaight, 1980, p.24). Neither the artistic form, the performances themselves, nor the close link between circus-type acts through history, are regarded as the definitive essence of circus. It is defined by the specific institutional and historical developments it underwent in modern times. As Wall (2013) explains, circus scholars still debate whether this ancient work constitutes part of the official circus lineage. At the core of the debate is the way in which one defines the form. Some historians take a narrow view 'they consider the circus a composite art, a collection of acts first brought together in the eighteenth century [...] Others are more inclusive; circus is an experience, even a set of qualities – prowess, risk, physicality, ambition' (ibid., p.44).

It is possible to affirm however, that the narrow view is no longer the rule but the exception. In the words of contemporary circus historian Pascal Jacobs: 'it is now obvious that there is not just 'the' circus, with a sealed and codified aesthetic, but rather multiple performance experiences coloured by equestrian arts, acrobatics, games, and dance.' (2016, p.25). The debate lies deeper, in the merging of modern circus and 'circus' as synonymous, as is regularly found in circus literature. When it is maintained that 'before there was the circus proper, there were the 'circus arts' physical disciplines that date back to the roots of human spectacle', Wall (2013, p.43) implies that 'circus proper' is 'circus', the organised form of the 18th century. The same tendency is observed in various accounts with assertions such as 'circus-

type entertainments' (Speaight, 1980, p.12), 'circus itself' (Beadle, 2009) or 'circus before circus' (Purovaara, 2012, p.27), to denominate similar practices before modern times. The differentiation echoes the assertion that circus as a distinct genre and performing art emerged in Europe in modern times. Before that moment, there was not circus but disorganised physical acts, as will be discussed in the following section.

### **Great Circus Moments: Britain, France and the USA**

When focusing on the developments of circus as 'art and entertainment' from the 18th century onwards, Speaight (1980, p.7) clarifies that circus is an international art form: 'to tell its story properly one must write of its history in many countries [...] its developments in one country has followed closely upon its development in other countries' (11). This turns the historian task into an impossible endeavour. To facilitate the task, Speaight (1980) constructs the world's history of circus by concentrating on certain places and certain periods where major circus developments are found up to the 1980s. They are: England as the 'birthplace' of circus in the 18th century; the United States where circus developed in a somewhat different manner from elsewhere in the world, at the turn of the 20th century; and France, because that country represents the peak of European circus in the last quarter of the 19th century (ibid., p.11). The history of circus is now divided into three important moments: the 'invention' of circus in England and the transformation of the form at the end of the 19th century in the United States, with

the addition of the three-ring arena and the massive format with over 1000 performers, animals and technical staff. This last period is divided between the commodification of the form in the US and its consolidation and respectability as art in France.

Stoddart (2000), on the other hand, traces 'the formative structures, contexts and performances' that gradually shaped 'the genre of popular art which, by the early nineteenth century could be recognised as circus' (p.2); she then turns the attention towards Europe, mainly Britain and France, and the United States. Because she is intent on tracing the foundations of circus as an art form no 'attention to further developments in the 20th century (post 1945) and no attention to developments in South Africa, India, North Africa, China and Russia' is paid (ibid.). As the emergence of circus is established as having taken place in England and Europe, and circus is understood as the specific format that emerged in those specific nation-states, further actors and regions became invisible in the construction and analysis of circus.

The history of circus was mainly constructed around those countries. The situation is changing as we speak with the increased amount of circus research conducted in different parts of the world. The rich and diverse history of circus is being complemented by the analysis of the art form around the world, revealing crucial information that can inform past and present developments. This reaffirms the relevance of revisiting and reconstructing the history of circus from a global perspective, as well as revising the fixed idea of its 'origins' and definition. Various

populations and regions contributed to the development of circus, as noted above. Speaight himself highlights the presence of artists of diverse nationalities performing in modern circuses. The long tradition of Chinese acrobatics, very well documented (Qifeng, 1985), is overshadowed as are the advancements of the Soviet Union in the professionalisation of the form, with the establishment of the first professional circus school in 1927. France is acknowledged as the place where circus is respected as art and artistic profession. But before France, the Soviet Union had recognised this professional status. France just followed the trend under different circumstances and a different political system.

The historical account does not differ from the history of theatre and other cultural practices. In an attempt to de-construct the Eurocentric character of the history of theatre, Carlson (2013) notes that this historical account was not only essentially organised by nation-states but 'extremely selective in its choice of which states were considered worthy of study.' After the 'obligatory chapters on ritual drama in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome (conceived as a modern nation-states), the theatre of a vaguely geographically entity designated 'Middle Ages' (largely English) is reported (Carlson, 2013, pp.149-150). This is followed by the theatres 'within modern national boundaries' headed by England, France, Italy, Germany, Spain and the United States; essentially 'the major colonial powers' (ibid.).

This modern construction of circus history and the idea of circus rendered invisible the development of circus in other places and times. Qifeng (1985) analyses and illustrates versions of circus in China in the Tend Dynasty and

other points of time in the rich history of Chinese acrobatics, that resonate with developments in the west. Acrobats, musicians, horse-riding acts and many other circus figures and techniques are found performing together both in public and private places, even in a circle. It was not under the specific format of the 18th century but similar characteristics to the 'organised' presentation of acts is evidenced. In format and components this is similar to 'what we learnt to call circus' (Stoddart, 2000, p,2).



fig. 1.5: "Circus-type" Acts in Non-Western Societies and Pre-modern Times  
 Source: Qifeng (1985, pp.61, 39, 1, 9)

Moving now to pre-Columbian Mexico, objects, paintings and chronicles of Spanish conquerors also reveal the existence of acrobats, high-wire walkers, contortionists, dancers, ball players, comic characters and deformed humans, entertaining at Montezuma's court. They were also found performing both in public and private places. Some of these entertainers were taken to Europe as trophies of the conqueror (Revolledo, 2004, p.112). A crucial area of study is evidenced here in the analysis of these forms. The nonexistence of the word circus

as such in those other societies but alternative meanings such as acrobats the word covering the meanings of circus in pre-modern China (Qifeng, 1985). But also, different values and interpretations of the practice; as Pascal Jacobs himself comments, in Chinese acrobatics risk in circus is not attached to 'danger' as in Western societies but in 'refinement' (Wall, 2013, p.48).



fig. 1.6: "Circus-type" Acts in Pre-Columbian Mexico  
Source: Revollo (2004, p.110)

### **Modern Circus and The Emergence of the Performing Art**

Contemporary literature places less emphasis on Philip Astley and the myth of its origins. Direct links with empire are blurred as well as the stark division between antiquity, middle ages and modern times. Nonetheless, historical accounts follow a similar timeline in constructing the progressive evolution of the form. The beginning of today's circus is still placed in 18th century Europe:

'The circus as an art has a simple, tree-like structure: its roots run deep, at times profoundly so, into the symbolic fertile ground of human history. Deeply buried, at a distance of nearly 5,000 years, lie the ancestral roots of acrobatics stemming from the hunt and other rites imitating the behaviour of prey [...] As time passes, we see the propagation of object manipulation and,

eventually, human complicity with the horse [...] And finally there is laughter [...] These elements, vital for establishing a circus arts vocabulary, fuse at the base of the trunk and mature from 1768 onwards. [...] This is the beginning of the story' (Jacobs, 2016, p.27).

At the end of the 18th century, circus is said to emerge as a distinct genre, a performing art, an entertainment or an institution. This marks the beginning of the contemporary circus and is the key historical reference in the analysis of circus today. Referencing the works of Frost (1881) and Disher (1940), Carmeli (2001, p. 158) notes: 'the circus came into being as various acts and displays were gathered into one program'. By the turn of the 19th century, circus had acquired a generic identity. 'The mix of acts which would go on for a century and a half to make up the entertainment form recognised as circus had been fused together' (Stoddart, 2000, p.17). In this emerging process, circus became a business and a commercial entertainment:

'It was in the Victorian period that the circus emerged as a commercialized entertainment that we would recognize today [...] the moment when the performer and the entrepreneurial manager combined their creative efforts and organized a variety program. Together they engaged in the serious business of making money by presenting to the public their spectacular and gaudy dream' (Assael, 2005, pp.1-2).

From different perspectives; Jacobs from circus history, Carmeli from a more sociological approach, Assael from cultural history and Stoddart from English studies, three elements are recognised as the crucial components in the emergence of the new performing art. The first component is the definition of the vocabulary of circus, in the combination of acrobatics, object manipulation, laughter and the horse. As we have already seen, these elements were already in the fairs and other performances with the work of Saltimbanques. The second component was the organisation and unification of those acts in one venue; again, this was not new. What is new, however, is the performing space; this time the ring and years later the addition of a stage next to the ring in the Royal Circus. The third component was the combined interest of managers and artists in making money. The innovation of modern circus is thus limited to the ring, the private venue and the business model. Aesthetic and artistic innovations are not distinguished as crucial or definitive components of that 'circus invention':

'as Marius Kwint points out, Astley's significance lies not so much in any aesthetic or artistic innovation, but rather in his origination of an institutional form; for the organisation and display of acts which had previously been characterised by their dispersed, itinerant and singular nature. It was his method of marshalling the convergence of audience and performers within a distinctive performance space which, having proved financially rewarding, marked out the following constituent features of what is recognised today as the "circus"' (Stoddart, 2000, p.13).

The new art form is thus defined in terms of its institutional components and business model. It is the contained form performed in a private venue, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution when circus 'came into being' (Carmeli, 2001, p.151). Individual artists and performances are not regarded as circus. It is the manager, the business and the money that are the central figures in the 'origins' of circus as a distinct genre. Beadle (2014, p.3) for instance, distinguishes between 'the practices of the circus arts (acrobatics, juggling, clowning and animal presentation) and circus itself, invented by Astley, as the institution that brought together itinerant artists providing them with money, legitimacy, status and honour'. Purovaara (2012, pp.82-83) complements that perspective, adding that modern circus provided performers with organised working conditions for the first time. During the 19th century 'the performer changed from being an independent artisan to becoming an organized professional.' (ibid.).

Two additional distinctive components are thus added to the emergence of circus. The professionalisation and formalisation of itinerant artists. The institution of modern circus gave itinerant subjects the possibility to become professional. They were paid by a recognised manager and institution rather than via the direct exchange of money with the locals, tourists and business people who frequented the fairgrounds and the marketplace. Itinerant artisans become artists. Circus was no longer a craft (Purovaara, 2012) but an organised, professional and institutionalised form.

This affirmation cannot be entirely confirmed however, with Marius Kwint's accounts of Astley's amphitheatre. Astley is indeed reported as an amazing horse-rider and ambitious and audacious lobbyist who successfully managed to keep the circus enterprise alive. Restrictive legislation on the performing arts, theatre licensing and vagrancy laws complicated the existence of itinerant artists and fairgrounds at the time. Astley managed to keep his amphitheatre outside such legislations. As a householder, vagrancy laws did not apply to his building or to his artists. More importantly, 'Astley successfully pleaded that horsemanship did not constitute an "Entertainment of the Stage"' (Kwint, 2013, p.217) and thus theatre laws did not apply to the new enterprise. This was possible thanks to his talents in getting public personalities to support his novel enterprise. Astley's business and spectacle were packaged as an entity of national pride; an advertisement promoting British values and a homage to the most respected icon of the time, the horse, symbol of 'conquest and civilisation' (Kwint, 2002, p.86). 'Equestrian skills were cultivated by circus managers to promote an image of social usefulness and responsibility' (ibid.).

Artists are not reported as having entirely benefited from the enterprise. Even though a few performers flourished and were elevated to the category of stars, Kwint (2013, p.223) draws attention to the way in which 'the Amphitheatre was adept in suppressing the wages and aspirations of most of its dozens of performers and musicians, writers, scenic artists, carpenters and stable-hands'. 'The circus' did not provide the right performing and employment

conditions, as Beadle (2014) and Purovaara (2012) suggest. It is questionable to what extent artists became money makers and 'professionals'. Kwint's observations point to a different picture, where itinerant artists are portrayed as base vagabonds, creatures who can, however, be governed within the circus and contribute in a productive and efficient way to society.

'Astley's equestrian techniques incorporated much of the ethos of the European Enlightenment [...] The circus made entertainment out of those who might otherwise turn their muscular frames against their masters, people as much as horse. Like the military with which it was originally associated in Britain, the early circus was an organisation that purported to bind those who possessed little more than their bodies into a web of social and national obligation, bestowing on them a sense of continuity and the prospect of useful employment' (Kwint, 2013, p.223).

The distinctive moment of the emergence of modern circus at the turn of the 19th century could be also read as the privatisation of public and market entertainment by entrepreneurial managers, who found an opportunity to combine their talents and passion in a profitable enterprise. But also, in the Foucauldian sense, it contributed to the governmentally of itinerant artists and public entertainments. Modern circus offered the perfect solution to public authorities in the containment and governance of the public space that worried authorities and moralists in 18th century England. Modern circus represents a renovated

performance platform adapted to the political and economic system of the time, marked by the consolidation of capitalism, governmentality and the rise of enclosure (e.g. Neeson, 1993) in 18th century Britain. Respectable businesses and merchants at the time were already located in private buildings. This trend was followed by public entertainments.

This approach however, is highly reductive considering the extensive and complex elements behind circus and its diverse meanings. The approach results from assigning to a single individual, or a specific event and time the emergence of a complex and diverse human practice. In raising Astley and the 18th century as 'the origins of circus', we restrict the possibility of understanding the form beyond those specific elements and time. According to Stoddart (2000), the defining structures of circus such as its architecture, key constituent performances and its economic arrangements, need to be seen in the context of 18th and early 19th century England. The author highlights within the influential forces of that time the role of industrialisation, theatrical legislation, changing attitudes to the role of popular entertainment, questions about the human body and increasing curiosity about and awareness of racial, cultural and zoological diversity, which paralleled imperial expansion (ibid., pp.2-3). Taking forwards that approach, a similar analysis of defining influences on the nature of circus and its history must be also understood outside that specific canon and limited period of time.

Returning attention to the performative innovations of modern circus, the most distinctive component in the definition of circus as a performing art and

distinct genre is the organisation of acts as discussed before. According to Stoddart (2016), it was only in 1782 that circus became an organised form. Up to that year, circus was 'an eclectic and opportunistic assemblage of equestrian display, human and animal tricks and burlesque' (ibid., p.15). In 1782 Charles Dibdin, an unemployed artist from Covent Garden Theatre (Speaight, 1980; Kwint, 2002) and Charles Hughes inaugurated The Royal Circus. This association emerged from an interest in presenting horsemanship in a more 'classical and elegant' manner, combining horse-riding acts with drama by writing plays on themes of chivalry (Speaight, 1980, p.34). According to this account, Dibdin described Astley's shows as 'blackguardism' a term denoting amphitheatre performers as 'rough, uncouth fellows and audiences not much better' (ibid.). The new venue was closer to a theatre, both in its architecture and the entertainment presented. It included a stage next to the equestrian ring where pantomimes were performed (Kwint, 2013).

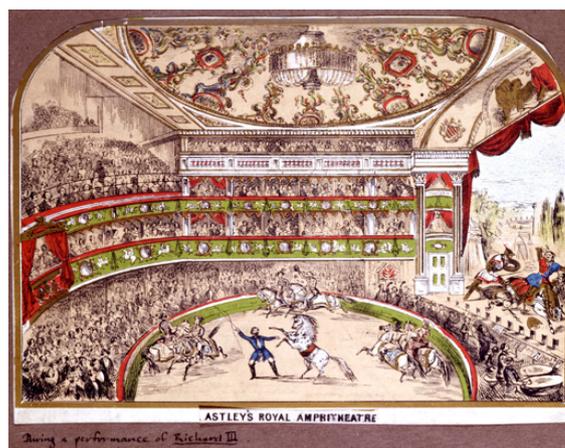


fig. 1.7: Astley's Royal Amphitheatre Mid-19th Century Performance of Richard the VIII. Stage Added to the Equestrian Ring. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, London. No. S.2217-2014

It is not just the presentation of diverse acts in the same venue, but the addition of a dramatic component that is the final element in the constitution of

circus as a performing art and distinct genre. This is the moment when those disorganised entertainments of the street, now performed in Astley's amphitheatre, are fused together with theatre and drama. Circus becomes an organised form and a performing art (Stoddart, 2000). This is the point when circus acquires a closer resemblance and vocabulary to theatre and drama, the entertainment of the bourgeoisie, and conforms more closely with current accepted artistic norms. The idea of modern circus as the emergence of a performing art, ultimately marks a stark division between those performing under the accepted institution and those performing outside that institution. Going back to Purovaara's (2012) comment, the transition from 'artisans' to 'professionals' is also associated with the addition of the dramatic element.

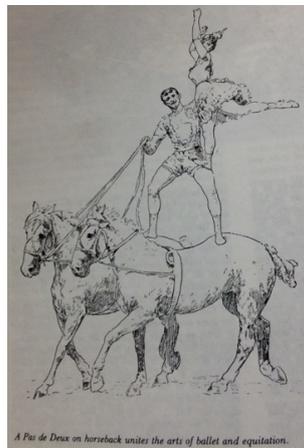


fig. 1.8: modern circus - Horse-riding Acts and Ballet Come Together  
Source: Speaight (1980, p.52)

### **The Decline of Modern Circus**

The modern condition of circus, its ability to incorporate technology and rapid changes of the time, is recognised as one of the major causes of the circus' success in the 19th century (Arrighi, 2016, p. 399). The innovative tone of presenting 'for the

first time on stage' adapted well to the tone of the modern society (ibid.). But more importantly, the glorification of the body and unwritten forms to perceive the world (ibid.).

Circus was also praised by romantic movements rejecting the industrial and utilitarian world; circus represented the familiar, ambivalent, itinerant and revolutionary character that thinkers such as Dickens promoted. But also, the unwritten expression that could liberate the body and the mind from the confines of the rational and intellectual world (Segel, 1998). Pantomime and therefore circus, based on the body, attracted the attention of representative figures such as Nietzsche (2016) and other relevant thinkers and artists that found in circus an inspiration to promote the body over the written formality of expression. Circus values were promoted by the bourgeoisie according to their own understanding of those values and their specific world views (see Carmeli, 1995).

From the second half of the 19th century, the modern format underwent multiple transformations when crossing borders through Western Europe, Russia, the Americas and other regions. The 'intimate' European format was transformed to a massive show (Stoddart, 2000, p.25). Exotic animals brought from the colonies became a central figure while horse-riding acts became unfashionable at the beginning of the new century. The big top was incorporated as wooden fixed circuses were vulnerable to fire. Circuses joined menageries and side-shows and exhibitions of freaks were presented in adjacent tents. All of the innovations above are associated with the influence of North American circuses. This influence is

considered by scholars to signify the return of circus to its fairground roots, with displays taking precedence over drama (Stoddart, 2000, p.79).

Circus became a massive form; three-ring arenas allowed the incorporation of bigger audiences and casts. The railway allowed circus to grow as travelling became easy. The renewed version performed in one-ring or three-rings consolidates over the 20th century in its 'definitive form' (Speaight, 1980, p.8) and sealed format (Purovaara, 2012). Circus becomes the entertainment of the masses; an industry managed by successful managers crossing continents with crews of over 1000 humans, animals and staff. Managers became celebrities and the wealthiest figures of their time (Arrighi, 2016), who in turn turned a selective group of artists and animals into stars that would guarantee the sold-out of the performances (ibid.).

The same modernity that raised the circus is also recognised as its cause of decline in the 20th century (Arrighi, 2016, p.399). Urbanisation and traffic congestion prevented large parades announcing the arrival of the circus, putting great pressure on the installation of tents in the middle of the city sending circus to the peripheries. Circus enters a decline period. It is no longer the central entertainment of the cities. Music halls, sports, cinema and television took its place. Circus became 'commercial', 'massive' and 'easy entertainment' performed by peripheral characters in the peripheries of cities and towns. Animal right campaigns targeted circuses while the consolidation of the individualised modern society and the decline of family values catapulted circus in the second half of the 20th century (Carmeli, 2002).

## **From Modern Circus to Contemporary Circus**

The circus that historians and scholars analysed up to the 1980s found its roots in 1768 England. 'Acts have improved since then, but the formula has not been fundamentally altered' writes George Speaight and hence the detail of his story becomes thinner as he enters the twentieth century (Speaight 1980, p.8). The universal history of circus is written and circus is understood as the specific format found 'all over the world' operated by circus families for more than 200 years with not many variations. A world of clowns, animals and acrobats performed under the big top. Today, that circus version is denominated 'traditional circus' understood as a fixed format with a sealed and codified aesthetic:

'Everyone knows what circus is. Everyone knows that it is a succession of acts mixing the four traditional elements of human skills, horses, clowns and exotic animals; that it takes place in the Big Top with a sawdust ring and loud music; ...Everyone knows that it is for the kids, that it can be tawdry, that it appeals to our most basic emotions, that it's here today, gone tomorrow. And time was when 'everyone' knew when a circus was in town, as colourful posters, a street parade, publicity stunts and the Big Top itself were excellent self-advertisements' (Bolton, 1987, p.6).

By the end of the 1980s, multiple other version and formats are found. The Big Top, exotic animals and the clown were not necessarily the distinctive elements of the form. Family structures fragmented and with them big dynasties of

circus families. Animal rights campaigns and cultural awareness towards animal rights violations forced the exclusion of animal acts from circus shows. Besides the Big Top, circus was found performed in diverse settings, from community associations to streets and private theatres, and from refugee camps to corporate events. The massive show and its distinctive elements are not the only formats found today. The situation was already evident by the end of the 1980s when an additional term was coined to denominate the transformation found at the time outside the traditional format. 'Everyone knows what circus is [...] So – what "is" New Circus?' (Bolton, 1987, p.6).

A different and distinctive circus movement emerged at the end of the 1970s in France, known as the 'new circus' and propelled by the cultural revolution of 1968 (Wall, 2013; Purovaara; 2012). Institutional components were the key identifiers of the renewed circus epoch. Three events are recorded in the literature.

The opening of the first circus school in Paris in 1974 by Alexis Gruss and Annie Fratellini, the new generation of traditional circus families; the transference of circus affairs from the Ministry of Agriculture to the administration of Cultural Affairs in 1979, and the foundation in 1985 of the National Centre for Circus Arts (CNAC) (Wallon, 2002). The 'new circus' is recognised for being located outside the Big Top, for the inclusion of a narrative joining disconnected acts, for the professionalisation of the form with the establishment of circus schools, and for the decisive role of the government in the recognition of circus as art and the subsequent investment of public funds.

Such advancements were not presented in France for the first time. All of them happened decades earlier in Russia in the consolidation of the Soviet Union. In 1919, through ministerial meetings and a deliberated public policy, the Russian government decided to invest in circus and to develop the form, not as a base and distracting entertainment but a respected art. The first ever circus school in the world opened in Moscow in 1927 and was the first large-scale attempt at circus education (Wall, 2013). The curriculum included the teaching of drama, dance, music and more importantly, the incorporation of the rich tradition of ballet; all in the view of the training of holistic circus artists. To encourage innovation, recognised artists such as theatre director Constantin Stanislavski and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky were invited by the state to create experimental circus shows (Wall, 2013). Interdisciplinary approaches and the experimentation of circus with other artistic forms were amongst the main purposes of the state's investment and developments of circus in Russia.

Nonetheless, these advancements and this historical moment are not recognised as constituting the emergence of the 'new circus' in the official history and narrative of circus. This honour goes to France, where the movement emerged; thus, the cultural revolution and political moment of the 1970s in Europe was seen as the motivator. The Russian movement is described as an ideological project in contrast to an artistic movement grounded in creativity and freedom of expression (Purovaara, 2012; Wall, 2013). It is regarded as the product of the revolution and a political tool to consolidate Russia's power at the time. Creativity and innovation are

not the identifiers of the movement but the use of circus as propaganda in the name of ideology and the political agenda of the Soviet state:

'The Soviets reinvented the circus. But there was something artistically insidious at the core of their endeavour. The Soviet performers were paragons of craft but in the service of the state [...] The system was a vast machine, with room for creative license, but only insofar as it complied with the specific state directives. A performer who challenged official doctrine or stayed too far outside the box artistically risked repercussions' (Wall, 2013, p. 34).

The movement of Russia in the 1920s and France in the 1980s differ in their political component and the fact that it was the Russian government promoting the movement, rather than artists. But more importantly creativity and freedom of expression. A question arises to the extent to which the French movement allowed a freedom of expression and what creativity meant to them. This question overcomes the scope of analysis, and detailed research should be conducted to analyse the differences between these movements.

If the role of Russia is recorded as a similar, although opposed movement from the artistic 'new circus' movement in France in the 1970s, less is said on the influence of the Soviet circus in other regions such as Latin America. With the support of the Russian government, the National Circus School of Cuba opened in 1978, one of the first circus schools in the world. Cuba is not just one of

the first circus schools funded in the world, but it inaugurated the professionalisation of circus and the educational project in the Americas, including the North. It also became the reference and the provider of qualified circus instructors to Mexico and the rest of the region (Revolledo, 2004). This model was followed by Colombia's National School Circo Para Todos; two decades later it opened its door with the professional assistance of Cuban instructors involved in the foundation of Cuba's school (Bailly and Lautier, 2007).

The history of circus continued centred in Europe and the global North; the next big moment of circus was the emergence of 'new circus' in France in the 1970s, transforming the modern circus into an art that is now found in the streets, within communities, and political manifestations. A striking distinction is marked. 'New circus' is a 'humanised' version of traditional circus, which still following tradition leaves animals in peace (Bolton, 1987, p.6). It is centred 'around the human endeavours of clowning and physical skills' (ibid.) and the Big Top is no longer the only place to perform circus. A theme or narrative is included to give sense to the presentation of disconnected physical acts. 'Traditional circus' is described as an old-style format frozen in the past where the main concern is the technical skill, giving prevalence to the form, that is, the technique (e.g. Lievens, 2015) and profitability over the content (e.g. Purovaara, 2012, p.106). The attention is now placed on the box office rather than the stage, innovation, creativity and artistic exploration.

'Traditional circus' is now understood as entertainment and a successful business rather than art. In the 1970s, 'circus began to step away from the ritual and tradition it was locked into in order to enter the constantly changing field of modern art' (Purovaara, 2011:115). Circus stagnated and declined, only to be reborn in the second half of the 20th century:

'For the next two centuries the modern circus, in semantic opposition to the circus of Antiquity, developed without really progressing. And then in 1968, exactly 200 years later, the circus abruptly underwent almost daily metamorphosis [...] This in turn gave birth to myriad possibilities, forms, hybrids, and intensities. This arboreal anatomy illustrates the diversity of forms that emerged, developing into other ways of producing circus' (Jacobs, 2016, pp.26-27).

These other ways of producing circus paved the way for Guy Laliberte and Daniel Gauthier to create Cirque du Soleil in 1984, 'a spectacular idea that would quickly resemble a planetary earthquake. In some twenty-five years, this "reinvented circus" would establish itself across the globe' (Jacobs, 2016, p.30). Quebec started to play a crucial role in circus developments and according to Jacobs (2016) this now constitutes the new world of circus. Cirque du Soleil became the main reference of 'new circus' and the instance that 'reinvented' circus without animals as well as renovating the aesthetic elements.

Multiple other formats also emerged with the professionalisation of circus and the new generation of artists, giving birth to the additional category of 'contemporary circus'. Apart from 'new circus', as Zaccarini comments:

'Other monikers have risen to stake a claim on the new "new"- neo-circus, queer circus, contemporary circus as well as the sub-genres of object manipulation, aerial dance or hand-to-hand. Soon no doubt we'll see post-circus, eco-circus, conceptual circus, the circus-without-bodies etc.' Zaccarini (2015, p.5).

Another crucial moment is identified with the emergence of 'contemporary circus' at the end of the 1990s, once again 'in France with the performance *Le cry du Caméléon*, directed by the French choreographer Josef Nadj in 1996' (Purovaara, 2012, p.19). Its foundations are placed in the new circus movement 'cirque nouveau', in France and the US, which was later replicated in Australia, Great Britain and Spain (ibid.).

The distinctive element of the 'contemporary circus' is from the 1990s placed in its 'narrative-driven' form (Leroux, 2016, p.3). Emphasis moved beyond a display of skill towards a creative artistic process in which circus techniques are one of the instruments of expression. It is now an art that employs a theatricality and semantics which are adapted to suit the audience (Purovaara, 2012, p.19). Contemporary circus is now placed at the crossroad of multiple arts; circus techniques are now combined with different artistic expressions such as theatre,

dance and many other forms. The emphasis is placed on the inclusion of a narrative and the search for new methods and venues, as well as the exploration of the old performing tradition 'to a time before modern circus existed' (Purovaara, 2012, p. 112).

'Contemporary circus' is understood as an emerging phenomenon that brings elements of theatre and other artistic disciplines into circus. It is characterised by solo acts or small group of artists telling a personal or a collective but meaningful story, encouraging audiences to reflect on life and transcendental issues beyond mere entertainment and laughter. By transcending the mere entertainment business, 'contemporary circus' finally allows the form to become a recognised art in the same light as the high-arts:

'In many countries, still to this day, circus has been affiliated with a marginal, low-brow culture in comparison to theatre, dance and music. Contemporary or new circus has changed the situation, and it could not have done so alone. Particularly since new circus began, the content and objectives of circus have been increasingly integrated with the art field [...] Moving from a mere display of physical virtuosity to the art field is a process which occurs at a varying speed in different cultures. In countries where the structures and artistic level are more developed, circus has tenaciously and boldly taken its place alongside other art forms' (Purovaara, 2012, pp.17-19).

The new art and distinctive genre of 'contemporary circus' is no longer a shared or unified practice. It varies across countries and styles; it depends on the 'advanced' state of the art world in each country and the multiple styles developed in the individualisation of the form. Further subdivisions and styles such as physical theatre, variété, burlesque, aerial dance, or just an 'artistic performance' are becoming separated categories in dispute. There is no agreement as to whether they classify as circus or not. A redefinition and reinvention are therefore demanded (see Lievens, 2015).

### **Towards Renewed Definitions of Circus**

From the 1980s onwards, scholars have been in search of renewed definitions of circus that can incorporate the dynamic transformation of the practice and the multiple forms it takes today (Tait and Lavers, 2016). Some consider the task of definition an impossible endeavour, as circus is the art of the ephemeral and itinerancy that defies any limit and attempt at a definition (Bailly, 2009; Lavers, 2016). The combination of different art genres in contemporary performances could suggest that strict definitions are no longer valid or even necessary (Purovaara, 2012). There is not such a clear definition for circus as it used to be; the practice is surrounded by ambiguity in its form, in the aesthetics, locations used, and performances displayed.

Nonetheless, various attempts to define the practice are found in the literature, leaving aside specific elements such as the ring, clowns or the Big Top to

concentrate the attention on the human body. Circus is re-defined towards 'the art of body skills displayed to an audience' (Seibel, 1993, p.9), or 'a body-based performance that is artistic and acrobatic and distinguished by specialised apparatus' (Tait, 2005, p.5). 'Circus is a form of performing art in which the instrument of artistic expression is the body's precise movement, which is based on circus technique and is combined with objects or instruments from a circus discipline' (Purovaara, 2012,p.18).

The difficulty of finding a definition of circus today is widely recognised. The introduction to the *Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Tait and Lavers, 2016) dedicates special attention to the task of redefinition. Different perspectives and possibilities of defining circus are provided while evidencing the difficulty of finding an encompassing notion that can accommodate multiple formats and perspectives. Nonetheless, the authors agree on the need to find a reliable definition for the continuation and the public prominence of the art form. These authors propose the following working definition:

'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 [...] 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' (2016, p.6).

These notions look for a definition of circus as a performing art centred on the direct relationship with an audience rather than a contemporary form of bodily practice (Bessone, 2017), leaving aside various interpretations of circus such as a ritual and community practice happening outside the stage, involving audiences as participants and performers beyond mere consumers of their art. They also tend to eliminate crucial figures rejected today such as animals and the comic character. Distinctive elements of circus such as play and display (Carmeli, 2002), ambivalence, laughter and fun are overshadowed in these approaches in an attempt to define an art. The problem, however, is that such definitions are crucial players in present and future understandings of circus as we just evidenced with the analysis of the first official definition of circus. Institutional definitions of circus marked the understanding of a practice for over two centuries. Contemporary scholars have the difficult task and responsibility of finding encompassing notions that would not limit understanding of circus to specific conditions of the present time and the specific interests of recognising circus as a formal art and serious subject of study.

The circus that historians and scholars analysed up to the 1980s found its roots in 1768 England. 'Acts have improved since then, but the formula has not been fundamentally altered', writes George Speaight and hence the detail of his story becomes thinner as he enters the twentieth century (Speaight 1980, p.8). The

universal history of circus is written and circus is understood as the specific format found 'all over the world' operated by circus families for more than 200 years with few variations – a world of clowns, animals and acrobats performed under the Big Top. Today, that circus version is denominated 'traditional circus' and understood as a fixed format with a sealed and codified aesthetic.

### **The Invisible Sides of the Story and the Limitations of Future Analysis**

By refocusing this history away from the institutional and organisational components that characterise modern circus, itinerant and multifaceted artists emerge. Similar to the circus artists of today, they were acrobats, jugglers, animal tamers, magicians, wire walkers and the many figures previously called saltimbanques (Wall, 2013) and circultores (Revolledo, 2014). There were countless figures found performing in the five continents in public and private venues, entertaining people in spite of the socio-economic and cultural background. They could be found in the marketplace and in the streets, either sponsored by the elites or persecuted by vagrancy laws and restrictive licensing permits.

The revision of the historical construction of circus offered above reveals that modern circus, rather than representing the key moment in the emergence of circus as a performing art, represents the privatisation of the public entertainment and the industrialisation of a cultural practice. This ownership of history by capital forces rather than the artist practicing the form is demonstrated through a reframing of the historical narrative. The moment when circus is

commonly said to emerge as a distinct genre and a performing art suggest the appropriation of social practices, time and history by Europe (Mignolo, 2011) and the Northern theory (Connell, 2007).

I refer to the entity of the North in the terms explained by Connell (2007), not as a bounded category of states and societies but to emphasise relations of authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnerships, sponsorships, or appropriation between theories produced in the metropole and those in the world periphery. This periphery includes the same circus artists, their own values and views of their practice; the female partners of the 'founding fathers'; other regions and nations involved in the making of circus and the rural areas where circus has represented a central form of entertainment.

Circus is defined and historicised upon the canons of the modern sciences and the Northern Theory, embedding 'viewpoints, perspectives and problems of metropolitan society, while presenting itself as universal knowledge.' (Connell, 2007, p.vii-viii). Picturing the world as it is seen by men, by capitalist, by educated and the affluent, as seen by the global metropole (ibid.).

These developments and distinctive elements reported at the time of circus' supposed origins are the elements of the commercialisation and industrialisation of the entertainments of the public space. In understanding this level of historical ownership the manager and the business model became the central figures of the discipline. Technological innovations, creativity in adapting performances to taste and rigid laws, and the rapid variation of the format to attract

audiences, enabled the success of the field. This historical moment becomes more representative in the analysis of the emergence of cultural industries rather than the 'invention' of a distinct art form.

This re-composition of the history and understanding of circus reveals an unnoticed case study in the analysis of cultural industries. Film and the media industries are the referential and starting point for the academic discipline. The term cultural industry was first used by the Frankfurt school in their analysis on Hollywood in the 1930s and the commodification of culture (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1945). Circus is not mentioned in these analyses. It was probably not even considered by the academic school for its already 'popular', 'and 'low-brow' category. It is neither included in current accounts where circus is not mentioned neither at the core or peripheral classifications of cultural industries (e.g. Throsby, 2010; Hesmondalgh, 2013).

In the decline of circus as the entertainment of the cities, the infrastructure and circus know-how was adopted and transferred to the new-coming urban forms of entertainment such as the cinema and television. Unemployed circus artists became the central characters of the early cinema and circus staff moved to the new industry (Purovaara, 2012, p.54). The film and media industries borrowed many of the elements already developed by the circus industry (ibid.). For example, the promotion of circus stars that guaranteed the selling of a show was continued by those industries.

Traffic jams obliged the circus to develop a system of poster and flyer to advertise the arrival of the shows (Bentley, 1977). Circus infrastructure and administrative capacity to transport massive groups of artists and animal across borders, was also hired by the US army in the preparation of the First World War (Wall, 2013; Beadle, 2014). This analysis of the creative industries which is overlooked by the discipline, is highlighted in this research. It is argued here that modern circus became the central model and reference in the emergence of cultural industries, and some other less optimistic industries.

By focusing on those itinerant artists as central makers of circus, rather than the nation-state, the venue, the manager or the institutional components, circus history, the understanding of circus and its definition could be greatly enriched and expanded. The artists also provide a clearer picture of the transformation of circus and its complex components. Bringing them back into the picture clarifies the double reputation of circus as marginal and mainstream, as well as factors behind rejection and recognition of the form. It focuses attention on motivation for circus beyond the business model and the opportunism of managers and performers. Circus figures and circus have not always complied with the ideal society and official forms. They have been rejected at different times. It has been the institutionalisation and formalisation of circus that have allowed them to find a place within society and made their art form a viable option and respectable occupation to the eyes of the formal society.

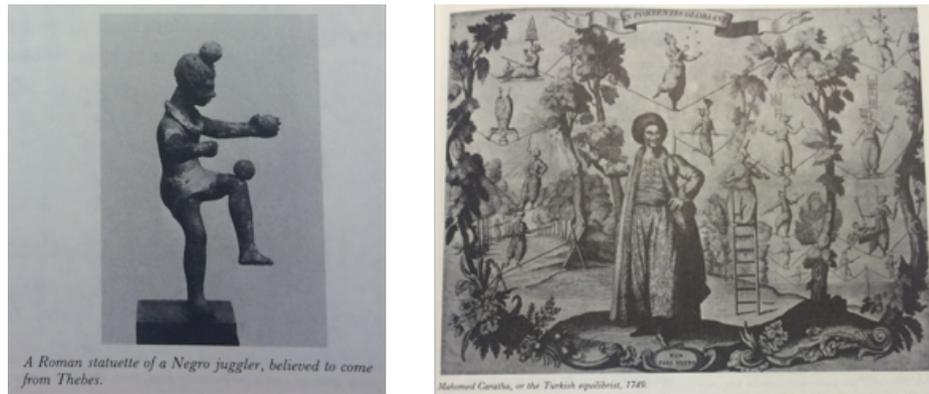


fig. 1.9: Roman Statue of a "Negro Juggler" believed to come from Thebes and Itinerant Artists of the European Fairgrounds ("Saltimbanques") in 1749.  
 Source: Speaight (1980, pp.11, 17)

By recognising the 'vestiges' and 'roots' as circus rather than 'circus-type' arts, Figure 1 identifies within western history the periods of rejection and acceptance of circus since the fall of the Roman Empire up to the 20th century. Following Wall (2013, pp.44-45) and his account of saltimbanques and ancient circus, the rejection and acceptance of circus artists have followed the need to maintain order and the control of society, processes of urbanisation and demographic growth, and the rejection/ascendance of expressions and values that are contrary/compliant to the ideals of society. And more importantly, migratory waves resulting from economic and political forces and the inclusion or exclusion of those migrants and itinerant subjects into the formal economy. This idea of desired society played a central role in the understanding of the role of circus and its value over time. This becomes more evident from the 18th century, with the consolidation of the idea of modernity and changing social mores.

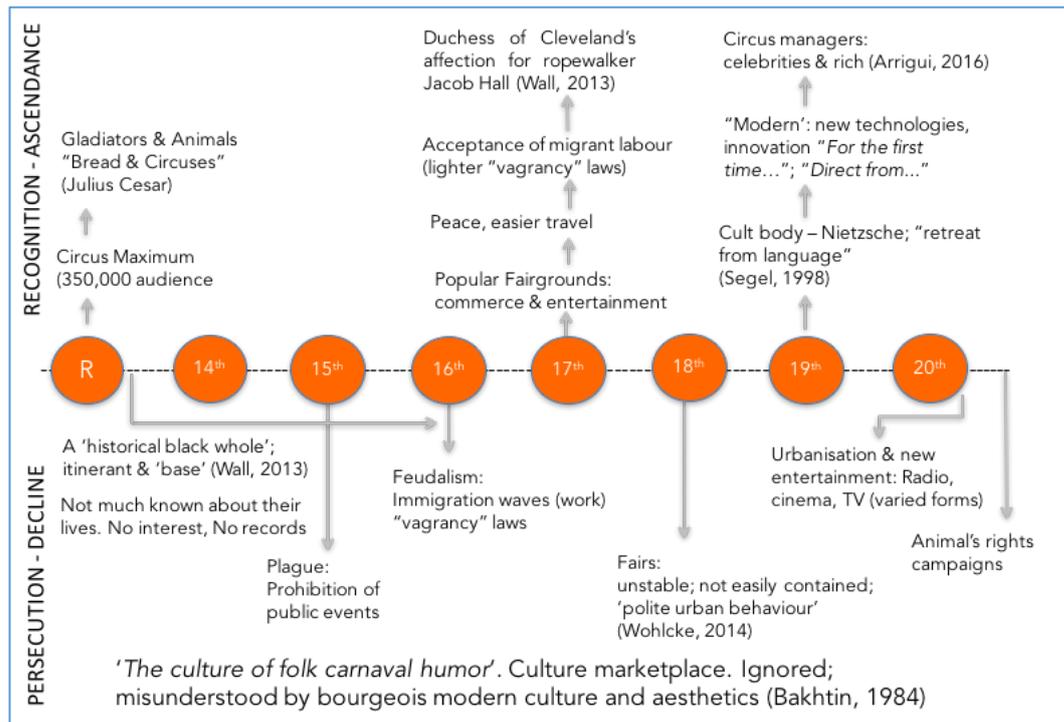


fig. 1.10: Times of Rejection and Recognition of Circus Artist from Roman Times to the 20th Century  
 Source: Made by the Researcher

With the decline of the Roman Empire and the closure of circuses and amphitheatres, waves of migration helped to shape the Middle Ages. Artists mobilised and became multifaceted to increase job opportunities (Wall, 2013, p.44). Not much is known about their lives. Performers were mostly illiterate and kept few records (Bailly, 2009, p.66), while the clergy, the great scribes of the age, considered them base, and so noted little of their doings (Wall, 2013, p.45).

The work of Michael Bakhtin offers an explanation for the lack of interest in these medieval characters which is useful in understanding the state of acceptance/rejection of circus today. Bakhtin (1984) explains how the entertainment of the market, the culture of folk carnival humour to which belonged, among others, clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, was completely ignored or

misinterpreted, despite the central role they occupied in the Middle Ages and the European Renaissance (Bakhtin, 1984, p.4). European medieval carnivals were characterised by the acceptance of ambivalent forms; moods and forms contrary to the serious and official tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal cultures (ibid., p. 3). With the consolidation of states and the stratification of social classes, the coexistence of the serious and the comical experienced in carnival festivities ceased to be accepted. Laughter and humour were displaced and catalogued as marginal; its very character was transformed by the values of the bourgeois middle class (ibid., p.4).

Later events complicated the existence of these artists as Wall (2013) explains. With the black plague, public meetings were banned in order to control the spread of diseases. The transition from feudalism to capitalism provoked migratory waves that alarmed the authorities. Vagrancy laws prohibited the public appearance of figures without accountable stable occupations or the patronage of public figures. The acrobats sought refuge in the higher echelons of society where they were hired for private parties. This new sponsorship scheme allowed them to work and perform. This, combined with the appreciation the Duchess of Cleveland showed towards the ropewalker Jacob Hall, raised the respectability of the form, while rope-walking became the circus speciality of the time (Speaight, 1980). This period is also accompanied by peaceful times and war relief; revolts and massive migration were lessened, allowing easy travels and displacement across borders. Vagrancy laws were reduced and circus artists were able to perform (Wall, 2013).

As fairs consolidated as the centres of commerce, evolving from their medieval religious background, they became the perfect place for artists to perform. Merchants and travellers from all over the world congregated in the fairs in search of objects of all kinds, but also in search of entertainment for which they were willing to pay a good sum (Wohlcke, 2014). In England the London fairs of the 18th century were now the informal venue for commerce. While businesses had already transferred to private buildings, the fairs became places of suspicion where it was difficult to control the values of 'polite urban behaviour' (Wohlcke, 2014, p.3). It is from here that circus emerges as the institution that gave itinerant performers a home, money and honour (Beadle, 2014). They now held a place within the official sphere. These artists were gathered in a single venue and a single show, without being threatened.

This new format unfolded and expanded all over the world, spread by colonisation and empire. London, the centre of politics and business at the time (Wohlcke, 2014), represented the place where artists, merchants and other figures converged in search of business, opportunities and cultural exchange. And through that exchange, innovations emerge. From a process of 'connected histories' (Bhambra, 2014) rather than through the invention of a single European man and a nation-state.

It is important to acknowledge that the emergence of circus as a performing art and a distinct genre transcends the 18th and 19th centuries and the capitalistic structure within which many artists were subsequently to exercise their

practice. Stoddart (2000) mentions many of the co-existent 'circus-type' forms with amphitheatres and circuses such as burlesque, variety and various other forms sharing similar aesthetics elements with 'what we learnt to call circus'. They are not classified as circus, but 'other' forms associated with lower categories of entertainment, for its disorganised components. In the end, as Gregory Fedin suggested, Astley 'invited' circus artists to his ring: 'The acts of physical skill customarily seen at the fairs had been gathered into the commercial enterprise of the circus and the emergence of this original performance institution necessarily implies [...] new cultural products and new models of production that were not operating in the older cultural system.' (Arrighi, 2016, p.394)

As mentioned above, various parallels are observed between those performances in medieval times and the European fairgrounds with those of the Tyang Dynasty or Pre-Columbian Mexico. This is true also of the various forms that circus takes today. Circus artists are found performing in public squares and private venues ranging from circus acts performed at traffic lights in Latin America and tourist marketplaces like Covent Garden in London, permanent big tops in Las Vegas, community circus workshops and performances, and corporate events. With the decline of circus families over the 20th century, circus artists are found touring all over the world as freelance workers with temporary contracts in circus productions or in mid-size established circuses. This evidences the similarity between circus artists in the 21st century and those itinerant and informal performers that gave birth to the modern circus. A relevant question emerges in terms of the real

situation of circus artists under the institutions of the modern circus and 'traditional circus' families in the 19th and 20th centuries. Was circus just represented by big families? Were circus artists formally and permanently employed by circus families? Was the big top their only performing space?

The 'invention' of modern circus is more revealing of the privatisation, institutionalisation and 'artification' (Naukkarinen, 2012) of market entertainment than of the emergence of a distinct genre or a performing art. I use the term 'artification' here to denote the process of turning certain languages and forms into those accepted by the central establishment and its official art world. In the case of circus, the official art world and 'artification' is driven by the accepted languages and forms of theatre and drama in the 19th century, and the 'polite society' (e.g. Wohlcke, 2014). The recognition of circus as a performing art and distinct genre responds to the organisation and presentation of public acts in a form closer to the existent genre of theatre.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodology**

The initial objective was to keep the analysis as manageable as possible by focusing on one country and locating the research within a specific academic field. This was a practical step considering the limitations of a PhD research in terms of time and resources as well as the experience required to conduct a multi-level analysis involving various disciplines, countries, and populations. However, this recommendation was unsuitable for this project, as the motivation was identified precisely at the crossroads of these various worlds. It was not sufficient to concentrate on Colombia or Britain, merely looking at economic and/or cultural forces influencing a specific population group. The area of interest was the interconnections between these elements.

With these limitations in mind, the research started exploring debates on cultural value in light of the literature and theoretical background on the field (e.g. Belfiore, 2016; O'Brien, 2015; Throsby, 2010). The aim was to explore the value of culture through the circus arts when economic and political values seem to occupy a central place in contemporary societies. Initial research questions were based on this theme. However, during the research process, specific debates on cultural value became less compelling in terms of the problematic observed in the fieldwork. Crucial debates became evident such as questions around what circus is, internal disputes found within the circus sector, and the internal peripheries of circus. Framing the research within debates on cultural value led to many challenges until

the very end of the process. To a great extent, the freedom of the research was limited when trying to fit findings and observations within the main debates on cultural value. This limitation supported the selection of an open and flexible research method and the need to engage with literature and methods in a flexible way.

### **Non-Methodical Research**

The final research did not follow a pre-determined methodology. It materialised over the process in a more organic and flexible way. Rather than defining the area of study, research questions, and theoretical background as the first steps of an academic research (Stoke, 2003, p.3), my method worked the other way around. These aspects were defined over the course of the process at a later stage after a wide range of studies in the literature was reviewed and the first round of data analysis was conducted. Nonetheless, this review was combined with failed attempts to narrow down the area of study and research questions that challenged the research. Was circus, culture, cultural value, cultural policy, or creative industries the focus of my analysis? A myriad of possibilities and points of view emerged as the research became unmanageable at certain stages. Instead of narrowing down the analysis, the ideas multiplied.

This challenge however, was at the same time the strength of the research. On one hand, I was able to address cultural debates from different perspectives, without being limited by an area of study. This unstructured process

allowed me to circumvent the 'theoretical background trap' (Silva, 2005, pp.13-14) when a research invalidates itself by following the 'research protocols' (ibid.), taking a priori definitions and precepts to address a phenomena or concept and preventing the researcher from conceptualising the subject from what is observed in the field (ibid.). In this research, for example, it was more relevant to analyse deeper internal conflicts observed in the circus practice over discussions on circus values. These internal disputes became more relevant together with the need to deeply explore circus-related notions and the history of the practice. These elements guided the selection of the theory and the final topics of analysis.

This open and unstructured method however, constitutes a method in itself, which is validated by qualitative research and cultural studies, as will be explained below. It is also supported by the 'triangulation of theory' used in social research where multiple theoretical perspectives are used to plan a study or interpret the data (Neuman, 2011, p.165). The intention is to understand the world from different perspectives. Strict limitations of analysis within a discipline or field of study could sometimes blur the complexity of the analysis while leading to the dismissal of structural debates, as was experienced in this research when focusing the analysis on cultural value.

### **Research Design and Area of Analysis**

This research is a sociocultural study as the purpose is to understand social relations as observed in daily life (Neuman, 2011). It is concerned with 'the study of human

sociocultural life, including beliefs, behaviours, relationships, interactions, institutions, and so forth' (Neuman, 2011, p.8). It follows a multi-disciplinary approach, applying knowledge emanating across the social sciences to the analysis of circus. It borrows methods and theories from sociology, anthropology, political economy, global studies, and other academic disciplines, following the multidisciplinary approach of cultural studies (e.g. Miller, 2001; Pickering, 2011).

This is also a qualitative research, as it concerns more with 'meanings and interpretation' than with measurement of quantities or testing hypothesis (Stokes, 2003, p.3). It is thus grounded on the inductive and explorative principles of qualitative research. Contrary to deductive testing of preconceived theories, 'induction and exploration imply that the researcher set out with a more tentative idea of what is important' (David and Sutton, 2011, p.102). The inductive nature of the qualitative research allows for 'in-depth exploration and provides increased insight into the lives of those being studied' (David and Sutton, 2011, p.96). From literature review to research questions and towards research design, the research did not move in a one-way direction (David and Sutton, 2011, pp.106-8). There were ongoing modifications, with data collection leading to emergent theories which in turn redirected the data collection process (ibid.).

Two main aspects were relevant to the research design and procedure. First, concerning the comparative analysis between Colombia and Britain, the methods and theoretical background would have to allow this analysis and take into account the considerations required to understand the contexts and traditions of

both countries. Second, a multi-level analysis that would combine diverse disciplines, such as economics, culture, and social change, was required. The aim was to understand the interconnections and processes between the two separate entities rather than conducting a mere comparison.

### **Cultural Studies as a Methodology and Theoretical Approach**

The desire to refute rigid methods as well as 'definition' and 'conventional departmental credentials' (see Chapter 4) is at the core of cultural studies (Miller, 2002, p.1). Rather than 'a discipline itself', cultural studies is 'a tendency across disciplines' (ibid.):

'Cultural studies is animated by subjectivity and power - how human subjects are formed and how they experience cultural and social space. It takes its agenda and mode of analysis from economics, politics, media and communication studies, sociology, literature, education, the law, science and technology studies, anthropology, and history, with a particular focus on gender, race, class, and sexuality in everyday life, commingling textual and social theory under the sign of a commitment to progressive social change' (Miller, 2002, p.1).

With the dissociation from established academic disciplines, 'cultural studies has preferred to borrow techniques and methods from established disciplines without subscribing to any disciplinary method itself' (Pickering, 2011, p. 1). Contrary to conventional academic disciplines, cultural studies 'is a knowledge-

producing set of practices or strategies which, rather than search for certainties, produces knowledge and diverse forms of understanding which are constantly open to further questioning' (Prieto-Arranz, et al., 2013, p.2). This flexible and open approach resonates with the flexible approach of this research and constitutes one of the main reasons for locating the analysis within the field of cultural studies.

Another reason is the commitment of the field to understanding culture beyond canonical arts and dominant narratives 'looking at how culture is used and transformed by "ordinary" and "marginal" social groups' (Miller, 2001, p.1). Cultural studies views people not simply as consumers but as potential producers of new social values and cultural languages (ibid.). This academic field deals with politics of culture or the reproduction of relations of power in particular cultural texts or practices (Pickering, 2011, p.1). This same motive has led to the rejection of academic boundaries and prescribed methods, as certain disciplines and methods have been associated with the reproduction of those power structures (ibid.). Cultural studies engages with discourses of power (Stokes, 2003) and emphasises issues of control and conflict (Yudice, 2009).

Cultural studies emerged because of the need to study what many considered 'unworthy of academic investigation' (Stokes, 2003, p.8). It devotes time to the analysis of subcultures and popular culture (Miller, 2001). It focuses on lived experiences of individuals and social groups and invisible voices and stands in between worlds (Pickering, 2011).

This approach resonates well with the analysis of circus and centre–periphery dynamics. Circus practice is affiliated with marginal and lowbrow cultures (Purovaara, 2012, p.17); it is claimed to be a neglected subject of study (Tooley-Stott, 1958, p.15). Until recently, the study of circus was part of the list of undesirable academic enquiries, even within the analysis of popular culture (Carmeli, 1995, p.213). The affiliation of this research within cultural studies contributes to the task of taking circus as a serious area of study and as an integral component of both ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures.

## **Methods**

The same flexible and inductive approach was applied in the selection of methods, data collection, and sample construction. The discipline of cultural studies is distinguishable by the ways in which it engages with theory and seeks to apply it, rather than by its adoption or development of practical methods (Pickering, 2011, p. 1). Thinking of cultural studies as driven by a definite series of methods and techniques is not appropriate (ibid., p.2). However, methods are guidelines for practice and the challenge lies in the researcher’s ability to use them in a creative and appropriate way (ibid., p.5). Rather than rejecting methods, the task is to ‘re-imagine’ them in the interest of one’s own research project (ibid.). This work then, uses methods not in a pre-determined and rigid way but according to the needs of the data and area of analysis. It applies independent and existent methods without following a specific academic discipline or fixed methodology.

Methods are selected according to the area of study (Stokes, 2003, p.4) and are expected to be sensitive to the social context in which the data are produced (Maruster and Gijsenberg, 2013). This research has the scope for flexibility and openness, allowing the inclusion of a global and international dimension, thus acknowledging the acclaimed nature of circus as flexible, international, and non-rigid. The flexibility applied to the theoretical background and research design was also applied to the processes of data collection and analysis.

Triangular or mixed methods of analysis were adopted for the collection and analysis of data. The purpose was to explore circus debates from diverse perspectives. Social research is based on the principle that 'we learn more by observing from multiple perspectives than by looking from only a single perspective' (Neuman, 2011, p.164). Mixed research methods allow this kind of observation as they help corroborate evidence and enable one to understand different aspects of a research (David and Sutton, 2011, p.295). Diverse methods complement each other by providing different dimensions of knowing the research subject (ibid., p.297).

Two main sources were used to collect the evidence: documented or written sources and people (Stoke, 2003). Written documents helped analyse how circus is described in the literature and the media. This information was later contrasted to what circus practitioners say about the form and their own experiences of working in circus. Both sets of evidence were contrasted to understand the historical processes, narratives, and specific contexts that are influencing the practice and analysis of circus. A third category was tangentially

included: circus performances. During the fieldwork, I attended more than 100 circus performances in various countries. The performances provided crucial insights into the artistic and ideological tendencies that are guiding circus today. Those performances stand in between experiences, narratives, markets, and ideologies. They also reveal, to some extent, how circus artists are negotiating or compromising their own idea of circus with sectorial and market demands. The analysis of performances was not considered the primary source of data, but it indirectly confirmed some of the conclusions.

Archival research and multi-sited ethnography were the two broad methods used in the data collection. Archival research was conducted separately in both countries at the main local libraries. Policy documents, media articles and circus literature, more from academic sources than popular literature, were explored. Policy documents were provided by cultural authorities such as the characterisation studies commissioned by the Colombian Ministry of Culture (e.g. Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013), and other documents, pictures, and media articles were provided by circus organisations and professionals. A detailed revision of the circus history and circus representations in the past were carried out not just to contextualise the subject, but as a central aspect of the research. In this way, the research engages with historical analysis as 'both topic and tool' rather than using history as a mere reference (Pickering, 2011, p.13).

E-research was another tool used in the archival research. Media articles and relevant information found on the internet were also reviewed. The internet

contains a myriad of useful information that can enrich the research process. As David and Sutton (2011, p.308) explain, websites used by organisations and businesses to promote their activities are becoming research sites. Information found in the public domain such as organisation websites, blogsites, magazines, newspapers, or Facebook groups provided vital information. They helped identify performances and events from where interviews or participant information could be conducted and also provided evidence such as caricatures, books, or news related to circus. In compliance with e-research ethics (see David and Sutton, 2011, pp. 313-4), personal conversations or any other information affecting the privacy of the circus community or any other actor were not used.

To collect evidence from people, multi-sited ethnography was the most appropriate method for this project. As different research sites and social groups were involved, traditional ethnography was not sufficient to collect the data. Ethnography usually concerns a single site of observation (Marcus, 1995, p.96). Its objective is 'to explore in depth' rather than providing a broad explanation of a social phenomenon (David and Sutton, 2011, p.320). In contrast to in-depth exploration of certain social groups or research sites, the purpose of this work was to stand between groups. Multi-sited ethnography differs from traditional ethnography in the extent that less time is spent with a specific local community. It is a form of ethnographic study emanating from world system analysis and postmodern studies to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffused time-space (Marcus, 1995, p.96). It aims to understand the

relations between the local, the transnational, and the global, looking at an event from different locations, calling for a multidisciplinary focus (Pasura, 2012, p.251).

This method benefits the identification of common factors and interrelations between Britain and Colombia; between artists, policymakers, and arts administrators; between the elites and common people; and between circus movements (e.g. traditional, contemporary, social, street circus). Multi-sited ethnography is about 'being there . . . and there . . . and there' (Hannerz, 2003, p. 202). This method has the advantage of exploring the relationships between 'apparently disparate elements' (Pasura, 2012, p.251) such as Colombia and Britain. It helps to establish connections or note distinctive discourses from site to site, looking at the event from different locations (ibid.). It has the awareness of being within a landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, so the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation (Marcus, 1995). This 'mobile ethnography' (ibid., p.96) challenges grand theories, assumptions, and the tendency of transnational literature to treat communities as homogeneous entities (Pasura, 2012, p.252). The focus is on the characteristics found in both countries and the influences between them. This gain identifying interconnections and situations that are influencing circus globally and cultural practices broadly inside and outside official narratives.

Multi-sited ethnography still complies with the essence of ethnographic work, which involves talking to people, observing and interacting, participating in other activities, informal conversations, and interviews (David and Sutton, 2011, p.

325). The final product is still 'cultural texts' (ibid.). In-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation were some of the main methods used to collect evidence from people. Three actors were crucial to the investigation: circus artists, circus administrators, and policymakers. All of them are referred to as 'circus practitioners' here. The purpose was to enquire about their own circus practices and experiences and their involvement in current policies and circus transformations. How do they understand their practice? What are the interests behind circus transformations and policies? How are those policies affecting their practices? The snowball sample technique, was used to identify circus practitioners and to construct the research sample as will be further explained below. Attention was paid to narratives around what circus is, different circus movements, and how those narratives explain the artists' experiences and contribute to internal conflicts within circus practice.

For the analysis of these data, the methods varied from textual, narrative, and discourse analysis to historical research, oral history, and content analysis. Ethnographic and qualitative research rely heavily on textual analysis (Pickering, 2011). The word text is understood as policy documents, videos, testimonies, press releases, articles, and objects (David and Sutton, 2011). Personal stories, testimonies, and opinions are thus included and analysed as texts for mapping meaning, processes, and contexts. Stories are central to the ways in which people make sense of their experience and interpret the social world (Pickering, 2011). 'Observation, in-depth individual interviews, biographical methods such as life

histories and narratives; analysis of documents and texts' (Maruster and Gijsenberg, 2013) are part of the procedure followed in this research.

Even though the nature of the research was mainly qualitative, some quantification was included in the use of content analysis to organise and interpret a set of data. To some extent, 'quantities are measures of qualities and qualities are classified or accounted for' (David and Sutton, 2011, p.90). This quantification was always accompanied by qualitative analysis, where it is not the number per se, but the meaning behind numbers and social phenomena that was relevant. This was the case in the analysis of the distinctive characteristics that circus practitioners identify in their practice as will be further explained in Chapter 5.

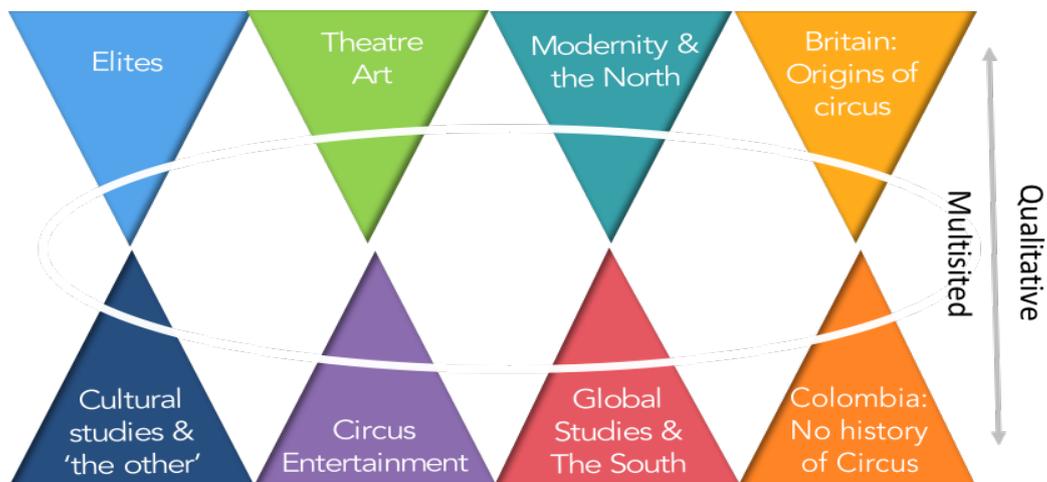


fig. 2.1: Research Map. Theory and Methods  
Source: Made by the Researcher

## Fieldwork

The fieldwork was conducted over 2 years from February 2015 to January 2017. In the first year, archival research and multi-sited ethnography were carried out with interviews and participant observation. The second year was dedicated to the analysis and presentation of the data at public conferences, revision of the literature,

and conducting additional interviews. A considerable part of the ethnographic work continued over 2016 and by January 2017, both the sample and the evidence collected seemed to be sufficient. At this point, further information became informative or useful to re-confirm the results. As David and Sutton (2011, p.112) explain, 'a sample would be sufficient when the current fund of theory building provides sufficient insight such that subsequent sample members' identities and responses or behaviours are predictable'.

In Colombia, interviews were conducted from 1st March to 6th April 2015 in a specific fieldwork visit to the country. In Britain, interviews were conducted over the 2 years, starting with the first interview in February 2015 over the pilot project and finishing with the last interview in January 2017. The majority of the interviews however, were conducted between April and June 2015. Before conducting the main interviews, two stages were crucial to the preparation for fieldwork: my previous engagement with circus and the pilot project. Both processes helped identify the key research participants and the main questions to address during fieldwork. Both processes are explained below.

### **Previous Engagement with Circus**

My previous experience working in circus was fundamental to gaining access to the circus community. This experience brought me closer to the circus's world and other representatives of the performing arts in both countries. This helped guarantee the success of the fieldwork, as the quality of ethnographic work relies on the kind of

access the researcher has to the field (David and Sutton, 2011, p.320). My work with Circo Para Todos and Circolombia outlined the general context and circus background in both countries. In Colombia, I was involved with conversations with the Ministry of Culture, the mayor of Cali, NGOs, and other funding bodies. I took part in administrative processes; establishment of partnership with relevant institutions; attended classes and formative processes within schools; and listened to the needs of students, graduates, directors, and administrative staff. I also attended sectorial meetings such as the First Ibero-American Circus Summit organised by the Ministry of Culture in 2011 and early discussions in the creation of the project named Estacion Viva La Sabana. I had the opportunity to meet actors related to the circus sector, but had little contact with other circus organisations in Colombia. My experiences were particularly based in Circo Para Todos.

In Britain, I gained access to the circus network in the country mainly through the work of Circolombia. I had the opportunity to attend various events where the circus company was performing in places such as the Luton Carnival Festival (2008), Butlins (2012), Roundhouse London (2010, 2011), Glastonbury Festival (2011), and Edinburgh Fringe Festival (2011). I was also involved in the production of Circolombia's performances at the London's Major Thames Festival (2012), Piccadilly Circus Circus (2012) – the opening celebration of the London Paralympic Games, Colombianamente (2008, 2009, 2010), and many more. I helped coordinate Circolombia's workshops in partnership with The Roundhouse as part of their 'street circus' programme. I also travelled with the company to various

destinations for events such as Cirque en Chantier Paris (2012), Le Carré Amsterdam (2012), and The Victory Theatre in New York (2012) and prepared fundraising proposals and other logistics for their participation at the International Circus Festival of Rio de Janeiro (2012) and Fringe Adelaide (2012). I engaged in creative processes that gave birth to the productions URBAN and ACELERE and shared experiences with artists and technical and administrative staff. I was able to watch other circus companies performing in the same scenarios as the Colombian artists.

This involvement could be considered preliminary ethnographic work. However, the evidence and information collected over that period was not directly included as primary data for analysis. During that time, I observed the circus practice as an external and internal member. I shared the artists' lives and performing spaces and witnessed the audience's reactions, while observing perceptions at different levels: the Embassy members, their guests, and circus artists. I was able to talk to the audiences and journalists covering the events. I observed the public that attended circus performances in contrast to other artforms such as theatre, dance, music, or literature. To some extent, these perceptions informed the work. However, only the data collected during the fieldwork were included as primary evidence.

The peripheral role of this data is related to a deliberate decision. First, the intention was to conduct the analysis as objectively as possible, approaching circus from a wider perspective rather than through the particular experiences of Circo Para Todos and Circolombia. Second, the intention was never to conduct

auto-ethnographic work but to focus on the participants' opinions, understand their lived experiences, and understand the contexts behind the narratives and meanings emerging from those experiences. The personal detachment could be considered a difficult or even impossible process. However, circus as the area of study was chosen at a later stage (see Chapter 4). The aim was to understand cultural debates broadly rather than conducting the research as a continuation of my work with circus. The research was not designed as a personal exploration of my own circus' experience. My role as a researcher was mainly that of an instrument (Maruster and Gijsenberg, 2013), bringing together different worlds to identify and analyse the main problems surrounding circus practices. I acted more as an external observer of circus.

### **Pilot: From London to Blackpool - The Fieldwork Starts**

The pilot took place in early February. Following Circolombia's performances in Britain, the first interviews were conducted in London and Blackpool. The aim was to identify the key people involved in circus in Britain and to check the accuracy and pertinence of the initial set of questions. The pilot revealed crucial information and research topics. More than an experimental and trial step of the fieldwork, the pilot played a central role in the analysis. Most of the ethnographic work and evidence collected in the pilot (mainly interviews and participant observation), was also included in the data analysis and research sample. This pilot trial became the perfect place to stand between Colombia and Britain as well as between London

and what could be called 'the rest' of the UK, between traditional and contemporary circus, and, more so, between circus and cultural policy.

### London

The first interview was conducted with a former member of Circolombia's managerial staff who was no longer working with the company but actively involved in performing arts in Britain. This participant directed me to other circus representatives, becoming the first representative of the snowball sample. The interview was conducted more as an informal chat and covered two main areas: first, the state of affairs of contemporary circus in Britain (e.g. size and characteristics of those involved in contemporary circus, main representatives, cultural policies and governmental strategies, the relevance of circus within arts, etc.); second, information about Circolombia in Britain (e.g. the place it occupies in the British circus network, reasons behind the success of the company in the UK, how Colombian artists and the company are perceived in Britain, are they considered a British or Colombian circus).

Two main conclusions were revealed in this interview. On one hand, contemporary circus in Britain is a relatively recent phenomena that became organised in the last 10 to 15 years. Second, according to this participant, Circolombia's success in Britain is the result of the technical skills of the artists but more importantly of their young age and diverse ethnic backgrounds. This interviewee described British circus in general as 'white middle class', coinciding

with some descriptions found in the literature (e.g. Carmeli, 2002, p.83; Stoddart, 2016, p.27), and Circolombia was offering something different to both the audiences and promoters.

The second interview was conducted with a Colombian artist who graduated from Circo Para Todos and was working in London. The two-hour-long interview covered various aspects of his/her experiences in Britain and Colombia (e.g. differences in circus practices between both countries, the circus school, the kind of jobs s/he does in Britain, creative processes, funding their practice, circus policies in Britain and Colombia, and the experience with 'social circus'). This interview revealed crucial aspects in the artistic practice such as the differences when working for a circus production and one's own artistic creation, the type of jobs available for circus artists and the differences between them (e.g. circus workshops, corporate events, and circus productions). According to this participant, most of the work available in the UK was related to corporate events. Colombia gave him/her a circus career and technical expertise, which in many cases was superior to that of his/her colleagues in Britain. Britain, on the other hand, helped him/her find his/her own artistic identity; explore possibilities; and find his/her preferred style, movements, and music. He/she was able to build his/her own artistic character and identity outside institutions and particular formats. This interview was also vital to addressing issues in 'social circus' and artistic experiences within this circus movement.

## Blackpool

The second round of interviews was held from the 15th to the 17th of February 2015 at the Showzam! Festival in Blackpool. Circolombia was presenting their second production Acelere. Seven recorded interviews and more than ten informal conversations were held with Colombian and British artists, technicians, administrative staff, and festival organisers. I also recorded the opinions of more than 15 random members of the audience who saw Acelere on 16th February at the Blackpool Tower.

Showzam! Festival is one of Blackpool's major events organised by VisitBlackpool since 2007. VisitBlackpool is the tourism arm of Blackpool Council, and its task is to promote the UK's most popular holiday destination among leisure and business visitors, both domestic and international (VisitBlackpool, 2017). The 2014, 2015, and 2016 versions were organised by LeftCoast, 'a programme of arts, culture and creative activity happening across Blackpool and Wyre on the Fylde Coast' (LeftCoast, 2014). The aim of LeftCoast is 'to provide opportunities to experience high quality arts and culture that is accessible to all' (ibid.).

As one participant interviewed in Blackpool explained, LeftCoast is part of a national programme funded by the Arts Council that aims to increase engagement in culture and decentralise art's funding outside London (UK admin 2). One of their priorities is to offer a renovated cultural agenda in Blackpool, which is mainly dominated by commercial entertainment (ibid.). Circolombia's performance was part of this strategy as evidenced in the responses given by this and other

participants. The reasons given to programme Circolombia at Showsam! 2015 were: (i) bringing the best international circus offer, (ii) attracting new and younger audiences, (iii) offering a perfect combination of entertainment and art, and (iv) promoting cultural diversity and cultural exchange (UK admin 2; UK admin 3). An interesting exercise, as mentioned by one of the participants, would be to compare London and Blackpool's reception of Circolombia's shows (UK admin 2). London is 'more open' to diverse options and Blackpool is more attached to 'traditional circus and commercial forms of entertainment' (ibid.).

### Blackpool and Traditional Circus

Blackpool and its Circus Tower are emblematic places in the British and European circus scene (La Bonche, 2013). 'The most "circusey" town in the UK' (LeftCoast, 2016) has never missed a circus season since the Tower opened in 1894 (Blackpool Tower, 2016). Local traditional circus artists were also interviewed as part of the pilot project and it was found that the renewed scenario was not necessarily positive. There was a feeling that Circolombia and Showzam! were threats to their practice (see Chapter 5).

The experience in Blackpool evidenced some crucial aspects. First, there was a conflictual relationship between traditional and contemporary circus, where the latter seems to occupy platforms where traditional circuses used to operate. This, accompanied by claims to renovate the circus offer and its implication over audiences and artists. Second, it highlighted the inclusion of circus in cultural

policies in Britain and the role of Colombia within these policies. Third, there was a series of dichotomies in terms of bringing London's diversity to the peripheries of the country. Is the Arts Council diversifying the cultural offerings or replacing the local offerings with London's 'diversity'? Is contemporary circus displacing traditional circus?

This pilot helped improve the focus of the questions and groups to be interviewed. Several observations can be drawn. Similar to the situation observed in Colombia, there is also a renewed interest towards circus in Britain. Both the Colombian Ministry of Culture and the Arts Council England are including circus in their strategic cultural policies. In addition, Colombian circus is being included as part of that strategy. In Britain, there is a conflict between contemporary and traditional circus and the evidence even suggests the eventual displacement of traditional circus by the contemporary movement. Is this the reality? Is the same happening in Colombia?

Three broad areas of analysis were defined after the pilot: (i) Disputes between traditional and contemporary circus and the extent to which one movement is displacing the other; (ii) the renewed interest in circus and its inclusion in cultural policies; and (iii) the similarities, differences, and interconnections between circus transformations in Britain and Colombia. Is Colombia influencing Britain or Britain influencing Colombia? How are circus transformations related between two countries? How is the renewed interest transforming the circus practice? Is circus an alternative and marginal form of entertainment, or is it coming

to the centre? What does circus mean to circus artists and the distinctive characteristics of this form?

### **Research Topics and Questions**

Three areas of enquiry were addressed: circus definitions and its distinctive characteristics, circus movements in Colombia and Britain, and policy-making and renewed interest towards the form. Annex 1 presents the set of questions behind each area of analysis and data collection process. Is there a defined cultural policy towards circus in Colombia and Britain? Is there any specific strategy to promote circus arts? How does it work? What are the underlying interests? How did those policies emerge, when, and why? What is the role of the state in those policies? Testimonies provided by policymakers, circus administrators, and artists, were explored to determine how these processes are taking place and how are they perceived by different actors.

### **Snowball Sampling**

The snowball sampling technique is frequently used in qualitative research when 'the population is hidden and not much is known about who is and who is not a member' (David and Sutton, 2011, p.21). When the population is easily identifiable from a census, household surveys, or other systematised source, a probabilistic or random sample is preferred (Neuman, 2011), giving 'equal chance' to individuals or subjects of an analysis to appear in the sample (David and Sutton, 2011, p.20).

However, this is not always possible when data sources are not available. In such cases, non-probabilistic and non-random methods such as the snowball sampling technique are preferred. Circus, in particular, is one of these cases. The marginal and itinerant nature of the form explains the difficulty in identifying practitioners. Both in Colombia and Britain, there is no circus census or any other systematised data set (Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Micklem, 2008, respectively). Circus groups are highly mobile and difficult to trace (ibid.). Divisions between traditional and contemporary movements complicate the situation. Both groups perform and operate in different scenarios. In Colombia, for example, traditional circuses are mainly found in peripheral areas (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.39) while the contemporary movement is an urban phenomenon (ibid., p.16). Following a marketing strategy, traditional circuses constantly change their names, complicating the attempts to trace these populations (ibid., p.10).

Snowball sampling, also called 'network, chain referral, repetitional, and respondent-driven sampling' (Neuman, 2011, p.269), is an explorative and inductive method that uses the analogy of a 'snowball': it begins as a small ball of snow that grows, bringing with it additional snow (Neuman, 2011, p.269). This technique starts with the initial one or few people, followed by the references provided by these initial participants, and the cycle is repeated (ibid.). No sampling frame exists (David and Sutton, 2011, p.21). Researchers may also use the first respondent's personal networks as a means for gaining access to other members of the population (ibid.).

This technique was the most appropriate to construct the research sample. My previous experience in circus was crucial to identifying key representatives in both countries, thus saving time in the identification process and ensuring accuracy in the data collection process. It also helped build trusting relationships with the interviewees and information sources, which are vital elements for the quality of ethnographic work (David and Sutton, 2011, p.320). An initial group was identified in each country, using information from the previous contacts established at the Embassy in London and the work with Circolombia and Circo Para Todos. Members of these two circus organisations were the first contacts in the sample.

In Colombia, the snowball technique started with Circo Para Todos, Teatro Colón, and representatives from the Ministry of Culture. These members were contacted through my personal and professional networks. A significant section of the interviewees was suggested by representatives from the institutions above. Some of them the traditional clown known as 'Memo', the circus-theatre organisation Muro de Espumas, and Bogotá's District Institute of Arts (IDARTES). They contacted me with further references, such as performers at the traffic lights.

In Britain, I started with members from Circolombia and Roundhouse London. I also attended circus performances and other events such as the Showzam! Festival (Blackpool) and Canvas circus market 2015 (London), where I met other figures such as members of Sea Change Arts and traditional circus members based in Blackpool. These participants directed me to other individuals and

organisations such as the National Centre for Circus Arts, Jackson's Lane, and the Arts Council England as well as the current and the first person in charge of circus at the Arts Council in the early 2000s. The collaboration between these participants was crucial for generating the final sample.

A disadvantage of the snowball sample is the heavy reliance on particular networks and the possibility of ending up with a biased sample (David and Sutton, 2011, p.232). Despite the implications in terms of external validity, this may be the only way to generate a sample in explorative research (ibid., 21). To avoid issues of validity, other organisations were contacted from external networks. This was done by online research, by contacting representatives of key institutions that were not referenced by previous participants, and by attending circus festivals and conferences and approaching relevant individuals personally.

In-depth interview or participant observation enable the researcher to identify where to look next or who to talk to next (David and Sutton, 2011, p.112). In this analysis, the interviews and the resulted snowball sample directed me to invisible and non-mentioned actors. At some point, the sample was heavily weighted towards contemporary circus as very few representatives from the traditional circus were included. In Britain, for example, only a couple of traditional circus artists found in Blackpool were included. Circus festivals and conferences were mainly, if not only, directed to contemporary circus. An effort was thus made to find traditional circuses performing around London from online resources. One out

of the five circuses contacted responded to my email. Through the UK research network, other representatives were identified and interviewed.

In Colombia, random encounters outside the fieldwork period led me to sources that were not found in the snowball construction. For example, I found a small traditional circus on the road while travelling from Bogotá to Medellín for personal purposes. Another example is that of 'Montercermundo', the missing link in the contemporary scene that was not directly referenced in interviews and later found in Bogotá in May 2018. These participants were also interviewed and included in the research sample.

These interviews conducted outside the snowball sample revealed crucial issues. The snowball references led me to a section that could be called 'the accepted or visible circus'. They were actors involved in the process of recognition rather than a representative section of the practice. Invisible and rejected areas, such traditional circus in Britain, were less mentioned or represented in the sample. The situation revealed one of the main research findings and a clue to information sources: the invisible figures and internal margins of circus. The thesis gets its name from this observation combined with the recognition of circus between the margins and visible actors of the practice and the extending parallel of circus regarded as marginal and undervalued, when the form presents its internal margins itself. In this particular case, the snowball technique and its reliance on networks was an advantage in the analysis. This inductive analysis could counterbalance the disadvantage of the technique in terms of the heavy reliance on networks.

The list of organisations and individuals included in the research is presented in Annex 2. The final list and number responded to the observation mentioned above in terms of sufficient evidence collected. As David and Sutton (2011, pp.20-21) discuss, sample size is less significant than good selection methods providing enough respondents to fulfil the purpose required. Sample extension and additional interviews were stopped when repetitive information was being collected and additional information, besides specific data attached to particular cases, was no longer available. Some testimonies and episodes were crucial, but the research aimed to focus on the entire circus sector rather than particular cases or particular stories. Some stories were represented by the story of the network. This explains why crucial institutions such as Crying Out Loud in Britain or Circo Ciudad in Colombia were not included in the in-depth interviews. To some extent, their stories were represented by the story of the network. These organisations were included through archival research, participant observation, or informal conversations held with their members. In addition, some representatives interviewed were involved with those organisations, and to some extent, their testimonies revealed perspectives from those other institutions.

### **Interviews: People as Evidence**

Interviews were mainly conducted in the cities of Bogotá and London. Other locations such as Blackpool, St Albans or Great Yarmouth in Britain; and Cali, Medellín, and Cocorná in Colombia, were included with less representation. The

situation observed in the capital cities and other locations evidenced different realities. Not much was said on itinerant small circuses in rural areas; underground movements; or the thousands of circus artists performing in hospitals, refugee camps, or conflict zones. Invisible and rejected areas of circus were less represented. As mentioned above, an effort was made to include some of the representatives such as small traditional travelling circuses in the peripheries of London and Bogotá as well as artists performing at the traffic lights in Bogotá, which although highly visible, are rejected and overlooked by circus practitioners and circus policies.

Three main groups were considered for the interviews: circus artists, circus administrators, and policymakers. Other actors such as circus instructors and circus students were also approached. Further opinions and actors not necessarily involved directly with circus were also included such as journalists covering circus arts, circus audiences, and representatives of other artistic disciplines. This information was used in additional or supportive argument rather than in the central group of data. The core data were obtained from artists, administrators, and policymakers in Colombia and Britain.

The purpose of the interviews was to listen to artists: How they understand and exercise the circus practice, the distinctive or attractive elements of circus, and their main needs and challenges in the circus sector. Questions on why one should invest in circus and the renewed interest towards the form were asked.

These opinions were contrasted with the interest of cultural administrators and policymakers.

The interviews started with a brief description of their background and how they got involved in circus. Four questions mainly aimed to determine the factors that practitioners identify as distinctive and valuable in circus: 'why circus?', 'what has circus brought to your life?', 'what do you enjoy the most in working with circus?', and 'how does circus differ from other disciplines?'. In some cases, while responding to other questions, the participants used expressions like 'the interesting thing in circus is...', 'what I like the most in circus is...', or 'the reason why I really like working with circus artists is'; these were also included in the analysis.

In all, 63 interviews were conducted: 35 in Colombia and 27 in Britain. The participants were individuals connected to the sector in some way: they are actively working in circus, they used to work in circus but are not longer involved in the sector, or they are working in theatre or other related disciplines. From this group, 44 interviews, (22 per country) were selected for in-depth analysis. This selection reflected a relevant section of the circus sector and responded to the main set of questions. The same number of interviews was selected for each country to keep the balance between artists, policymakers, and arts administrators. These interviewees are referred to in the main document with a country code and number assigned to each one within their specific group. The first member of each group is referred to as COL/UK artist 1, COL/UK admin 1, and COL policymaker 1. Other

categories such as COL/UK artist-admin 1 were used when participants had multiple job roles (e.g. administrative & artistic; instructor & artistic). COL/UK other is also used to reference participants involved in circus that are not necessarily identified as artists, administrators or policy makers.

Owing to particular characteristics in the functioning of cultural sectors in both countries, a larger number of policymakers was interviewed in Colombia than in Britain. While in Colombia the Minister for Culture is directly involved in decision-making regarding circus policies, in Britain, the governmental role is almost limited to one functionary within the Arts Council England. Two policymakers in Britain were interviewed; one is currently working at the Arts Council and the other used to work in the institution. The latter was the first functionary in charge of circus policy within the Arts Council in the early 2000s. In order to keep the anonymity of interviewees, these participants were included within the group of British arts administrators. The classification reflects the functioning of the sector, as arts administrators in Britain are at the core of policymaking, as will be discussed in future chapters. The situation is different in Colombia, where civil servants within the Ministry of Culture or local cultural authorities are the ones in charge of the delimitation of policies.

More than 50 brief interviews were conducted with circus audiences, journalists, and representatives of various performing arts. These were more spontaneous and brief interviews asking for specific information where all the pre-designed questions were not asked. Other interviews with key figures such as Latin American circus administrators and Cirque du Monde representatives were

conducted for specific analyses, such as the origin of social circus, presented in Chapter 6.

### **Circus Conferences**

An important part of the research was attendance to circus conferences and the presentation of the initial results. This step led to the possibility of attending circus festivals in other parts of the world, providing insights into not only the main academic debates but also those on the industry and creative tendencies. It was the perfect opportunity to talk to audiences, circus companies, organisers, and other relevant figures around the globe. These contrasted experiences complemented my understanding of the place that Britain and Colombia occupy in the discourse on circus. Conferences also helped test the validity of my results while becoming part of the multi-sited ethnography.

These conferences informed and placed my work in the wider picture of circus studies; they also revealed different tendencies and similitudes across countries and interconnections between them. The extreme and middle points were found. Circus was immersed into academic and creative research, with emphasis on circus aesthetics, the form, and content in scenarios such as CARD 2 in Sweden and emphasis on social circus at the First African Circus Arts Festival (e.g. Fekat 2015). The distance between traditional and contemporary circus in Canada, which could be extended to other regions, involving the Montreal research group and traditional circus owners, was observed.

For example, while attending the Circus and its Others Conference and the Montreal Complémentaire Cirque Festival, days later in Toronto I met Al Stencell, a circus proprietor, who ran a traditional circus in Canada from the 1970s to the 1990s. I interviewed him and spent over four hours with him, looking at his collection of over 50 miniature pieces of circus scenes and circus characters that he made himself (McCormack, 2003), and over five rooms filled with circus books, posters, photographs, pictures of audiences, and more. This conversation took me closer to the life of a traditional circus proprietor that was not possible in Britain or Colombia. The long chat gave me a different perspective on claims linked to traditional circuses such as 'the only way to perform is in a circus big-top' (COL policy maker 3) or 'you need to be born in the circus to be a circus artist' (COL admin-artist 1). These points were expressed by practitioners when referring to traditional circuses. However, their meaning goes beyond the fixed idea of meeting certain canons of traditional circuses. They relate to what does it mean to be a circus artist, which not necessarily means to be born in a circus family, but to be able to take part in every single stage of the circus production. This is a controversial point as will be further discussed in Chapter 5. Nonetheless, the point raised by this representative is about the polyvalent and integral nature attached to circus (see Chapter 5). In addition, this participant highly questioned the veracity of studying circus from the social sciences point of view. To what extent do gender, race, and class categories as defined by social sciences apply to the understanding of circus in the periphery? Are

we judging certain circus forms under the lenses of our own views and notions?  
These questions remained over the process.

## **Ethics**

The research complies with City, University of London's guidelines on human research ethics. The fieldwork proposal and procedure for data collection were approved by the Department of Sociology, as they were in line with the criteria and stipulations. The research was conducted in a safe environment, none of the interview locations posed any risk of harm. There was no dependent relationship between the researcher and any of the participants. My professional relationship with *Ciro Para Todos* and *Circolombia* had come to an end at the beginning of the research and more than two years before the fieldwork of the research was conducted. The research analysed the circus sector as a whole and did not concentrate on these two organisations. Nonetheless, my previous relationship and familiarity with these circus organisations facilitated the data collection and identification of relevant figures. Interviews were conducted with members from a wide range of circus organisations and from different circus styles. An effort was made to include contemporary, traditional, and social circus organisations, without focusing on a specific style. The purpose of the research was to gain a broader perspective beyond specific organisations.

Participants were initially contacted by email or written communication and informed about the scope and details of the research. Information was provided

regarding their involvement and interview questions. Some were contacted in person at the end of a circus performance or circus meeting and were provided with an explanation of the project. A consent form was given to each participant; they had agreed on participating in the interview and being recorded. Participation was completely voluntary. Semi-structured personal interviews were conducted. The place, day, and time were agreed on by both parts. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes to 2 hours. Anonymity was guaranteed and no names were used in the presentation of the data, with the exception of public figures referenced in public sources. The information is stored safely at City University and not shared with a third party.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Circus Literature**

This section describes the main literature reviewed in the thesis and a broad description of debates found therein. The review helps understand the perspectives from which circus arts have been approached and analysed. The review pays special attention to the literature written in and about Britain and Colombia, extended to Europe and Latin America. The review includes studies from the emerging discipline of circus studies and the growing literature found today. The section concludes with the contribution of this study to circus literature and study of the form.

An important aspect found is the imbalance in the literature written in and about Britain and Colombia. Most of the circus literature covers Europe, Australia, and North America, with less resources available in the cases of Colombia and Latin America. As discussed in Chapter 1, historical accounts are heavily weighted towards Britain, France, and the US. Key historical texts are mainly written by European scholars and concentrate on the analysis of circus in the region and how the form was exported to the rest of the world (e.g. Speaight, 1980; Jacobs, 2016). This imbalance, however, provides various hints in terms of where, how, and when circus history is constructed and the relevance of such historical construction to the understanding and development of the practice (see Chapter 1). It also evidences existent gaps in the analysis of circus from a global perspective, a gap this study aims to address. The situation is changing as we speak, with an increased volume of circus literature coming from Canada, Australia, Scandinavia, and all over

the world, which are being consolidated in the emergent academic discipline of circus studies (Arrighi, 2015).

### **Literature in Britain and its Central Role in the Analysis of Circus**

Britain occupies a central place in the study of circus. It is recognised as the birthplace of modern circus, the time when 'the Circus began to assume the form that we know today' (Speaight, 1980, p.24). From England, the circus extended to the rest of the world (ibid.). The Chartist journalist Thomas Frost is acknowledged as the first circus historian (Tait and Lavers, 2016) and his work *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (1875), is the first historical account of circus written in the British Isles (Kwint, 2013). The work played an important role in the development of further literature, bringing the attention of contemporary writers to the form (Tooley-Stott, 1958, p.14) and marking the tone in which further circus literature was written (Arrighi, 2016). Tracing the Roman legacy of circus, the opening chapter of *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* is presented under the subheadings 'Beginnings of the circus in England', 'Middle Ages performers', and 'Philip Astley and the First Circus'. Philip Astley is considered the 'father of the circus' (Speaight, 1980, p.31) and Britain, the birthplace of the form (ibid.). Frost's historical construction became a reference and starting point for further historical constructions and circus analyses (Arrighi, 2016). The order of significance in which Frost presents the development of circus and the moment of its 'origin' influenced the analysis and historical and present constructions of circus, as discussed in Chapter 1.

In addition to Frost's work and the references supporting his study, *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography* by Raymond Toole-Stott (1958–1991) is another important reference (Tait and Lavers, 2016; Wilmeth, 2016). The five-volume work is limited to records found mainly in Europe and the US from the 1500s onwards. Nonetheless, as clarified by the author in the introductory note to Volume 1 (see also Tait and Lavers, 2016, p.1), his work aimed at widening the understanding of circus and boundaries within diverse worlds. Going beyond literature containing the word circus, an effort was made to include different subjects containing references of vital interest to the circus historians (Tooley-Stott, 1958, p.18). An extensive list of topics from equitation, clowns and pantomime, fairs, menageries, animal psychology to miming and circus fiction was included. Tooley-Stott (1958) portrays circus literature as mainly 'fiction', reading more as 'novelettes' with a few exceptions found in France and Germany (Tooley-Stott, 1958, p.14). English writers are accused of 'romanticising' circus, Americans of 'sensationalising' it, while the French and a few German works are praised for their 'commitment on the technique', treating circus 'as an art quite as important in contemporary life as, for example, the ballet' (ibid.). This work evidences some of the main conflicts found in circus literature and circus debates, such as delimitation of the definition of circus and the scope of study, differences between the literature produced by insiders and outsiders, the romantic and fantastic tones surrounding circus literature, and distinctions between non-serious studies on circus and those treating circus as a respectable art (Tooley-Stott, 1958, p.14).

At the turn of the 1980s, circus literature written in Britain saw a renewal. According to Speaight (1980, p.7), no history of the circus appeared in England for over a hundred years after Frost's work. Some of these accounts are *A History of The Circus* by George Speaight (1980) and *Circus: A World History* by Rupert Croft-Cooke and Peter Cotes (1976). Both works are key references in circus literature across times and place (e.g. Seibel, 1993; Revollo, 2004; Tait, 2005; Purovaara, 2012; Tait and Lavers, 2016). Croft-Cooke and Cotes (1976, p.7) define circus as 'an organised sequence of performances within a ring of spectators' and establish a direct link between the popularity of circus and the rise of Western empires. Philip Astley's circus is associated with similar shows and performances seen at Circus Maximum in Ancient Rome and chariot-racing in Egypt and Greece:

'...another curious parallel between exhibitions in the civilisations of the Ancient World and those of Victorian England (and now of Soviet Russia and the United States of America). At particular stages of their history, these empires were at their height. The adoption of circus as a form of popular entertainment seems to have been stimulated in the heart of a thriving empire, and it may be noted that all circuses provide acts involving foreign animals, in addition to the more usual shows of horsemanship, acrobatics, wire-walking and the rest' (1976, p.7).

Speaight breaks the direct links between Roman circus and modern circus looking for its origins elsewhere (1980:11). These are found in the 'histriones'

or itinerant acrobats that can be found extending from the Roman Empire to the European Fairgrounds of the 17th and 18th centuries (ibid., p.12). Acrobats were known at different points of time as 'minstrels' (Speaight, 1980, p.12), 'feats of activity' (ibid.), 'saltimbanques' (Wall, 2013, p.44), or 'circulatores' (Revolledo, 2004, p.48). Three common characteristics can be identified in these performers: Women and men performed equally in their shows; a comic character appeared frequently along with the acrobats; and there was little distinction between acrobats, dancers, mimes, and actors. 'They were all *histriones*' (Speaight, 1980, p.12).

The works of Yoram Carmeli, Marius Kwint, Brenda Assael, and Helen Stoddart mark another epoch in the academic analysis of circus in Britain. The works of Cunningham (1980; 1982) and Vanessa Toulmin that focused on early popular entertainment in the Victorian era can be added to this group. From an anthropological and sociological perspective, Yoram Carmeli's work focuses in the analysis of traditional travelling circuses in the second half of the 20th century and the transformations that circus in Britain suffered in the 1980s. His work is also crucial in the analysis of popular circus literature, circus and modernity, and the bourgeois construction of circus representations. Cultural historian Marius Kwint wrote his PhD thesis at Oxford University on Astley's Amphitheatre. His work influenced subsequent works, such as those of Stoddart (2000), and is perhaps the most complete and detailed investigation of Astley's time. Further publications include *The Legitimization of Circus in Georgian Times* (Kwint, 2002), circus history as part of a compilation of theatre history (Kwint, 2013), and the recent *The*

*Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Kwint, 2016). Helen Stoddart's *Rings of Desire, Circus History and Representation* (2000) was a study conducted within English studies. It concentrates on the characteristics that gave birth to the popular entertainment we learnt to call circus. Brenda Assael's *The Circus and Victorian Society* (2005) offers a detailed review of Victorian circuses, performers, and socio-cultural conditions that both challenged and promoted circus at the time.

Other relevant titles are Reg Bolton's *New Circus* (1987) that analysed the emergence and development of circus in Britain and other industrialised countries in the 1980s. His *Circus in a Suitcase* (1988) is recognised as pioneering work in community and social circus (Wall, 2013) together with his doctoral thesis on the social value of circus (2004). From the management point of view, Ron Beadle's work is also illustrative in terms of managerial structures within traditional circuses and the internal and external values attached to the circus practice (2009; 2014). Recently, studies emerging from performing studies and various cultural programmes could be included in the emerging subject of circus studies.

Finally, the materials in the vats found at the British Library, the Victorian and Albert Museum, the British Museum, and public and private archives such as the Circus Friends Association of Great Britain (CFA) and the National Fairground and Circus Archive at the University of Sheffield were explored. Tootle-Stott (1958, p.291) describes the British Museum's collection (today shared with the British Library) as 'by far the greatest collection of circus books, prints and

pamphlets in the world ... an extremely rich material [...] scattered throughout the library and no list of it has ever been compiled'.

A major portion of Britain and British literature is thus centred around Victorian times, and the vast material stored at the Victorian and Albert Museum, public and private archives such as the Circus and Fairgrounds archives in Sheffield (1994), and especially the British Museum's collection, today at the British Library. They are relevant to the global study of circus, especially those concerned with circus in Georgian and Victorian times, the moment when circus is said to emerge as a performing art and in the form as we know it today.

### **Literature in Colombia**

Colombia is located on the opposite side of the spectrum, where a systematised analysis of circus and documented history is non-existent (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p. 65). The information needed to be extracted from existent materials, such as newspapers, circus bills, oral narratives, videos, photo-albums, popular literature, and personal memoirs and archives possessed by circus families and practitioners (ibid.). Individual efforts can be found in private collections, chronicles, photo-albums, and other written material provided by circus practitioners, such as personal references to their performances, organisations, institutional reports, and memoirs of circus festivals and encounters. The only published work on these accounts is *Memoria de un Viejo Payaso* (Forero, 2014) (*Memoirs of an Old Clown*) written by Guillermo Alfonso Forero, a member of a traditional circus family. The chronicle was

awarded the *Premio de Critica National (National Critique Award)* by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and Los Andes University in 2012.

Two academic works analysed circus and Colombia. The works of French sociologist Brigitte Bailly (2007) and British clown and performing arts scholar Barnaby King (2013; 2017). Both paid attention to the social engagement of the circus arts and the transformative powers of the form. Bailly (2007) analysed the case of the national school Circo Para Todos (Circus for All) in Cali, classified as 'social circus', and the work of this organisation with youth living in difficult situations. It evidences the transformative power of circus where a professional circus career was offered to these populations. The work of Barnaby King focuses on the 'carnavalesque economies' of the clown, a central figure in the development of circus in Colombia. This work provides an analysis of clowning practices in the country, and its relationship with political, economic, and social developments. It is particularly informed by the case of Circo Ciudad, another representative of 'social circus' in Bogotá. Both studies are crucial references in the analysis of circus in Colombia, and the relevance of the country to circus and social engagement.

In Colombia, circus literature can be found mainly from archival research and policy documents. The most relevant are the two diagnostic studies commissioned by the Colombian Ministry of Culture in 2011 and 2013 with the aim to inform the formulation of a circus policy in the country (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p. 6; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.7). The two reports contain valuable information about socio-demographic characteristics of circus practitioners, an estimate of the number

of circus families and circus companies in the country, and parallels between traditional and contemporary circus. Both studies are supported by interviews and ethnographic work conducted across Colombia.

Pinzon and Villa (2011, pp.11-12) recognised the emergence of modern circus in 18th century as a spectacle with a high equestrian component. Philip Astley is acknowledged as the 'founding father of present time's circus' for his invention of the display stage with a diameter of 13 metres for equestrian exhibitions (ibid.). Like in Europe, the golden age of classical circus started from the end of the 18th century to the first half of the 20th century. However in Colombia, the 'golden times' lasted at least until the 1970s (Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.20).

A similar account of events is found in the work of Ruiz and Ramírez (2013), who attempted to identify the origins of circus in Colombia by tracing the first circus families since the Republican times (Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013). These analyses credit Spanish and Europeans travellers for having 'brought the seeds of the circus arts' in the colonial period (ibid.). Under this approach, circus is understood as a European artform introduced in the country with the conquest of the Americas and its aftermath. Circus is define as 'the artistic spectacle presented in a big top of diverse dimensions where clowns, acrobats, magicians, equilibrists, jugglers, contortionists, aerialists, singers, dancers, mimes, motorcycle, "garotas", among other performers, come together entertaining the public with their physical abilities, humour and prowess' (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, pp. 11-12).

These histories are in line with the historical constructions in Mexico (Revolledo, 2004) and Argentina (Seibel, 1993), tracing the existence and heritage of circus families back to their countries. Both accounts describe the presence of circus-type acts before the conquest of the 'new world', claiming the presence of circus acts before the arrival of the Spanish. In Mexico, the most representative example is Los Voladores de Papantla, (Papantla flyers) recognised by Revolledo (2004, pp.110) as the Amerindian antecedent of acrobatics. The 'flyers' were part of a pre-Colombian ritual practiced in Mexico where performers recreated the flight of the birds while paying tribute to the land that provided them with food and shelter (ibid.). Another reference is the existence of acrobats, high-wire walkers, contortionists, dancers, ball players, comic characters and deformed humans, entertaining Montezuma's court, as evidenced in the chronicles of the Spanish conquerors (Revolledo, 2004). Some of them were taken to Europe as trophies of the conquest (ibid., p.112). A one-way influence is reported from Europe to Latin America in the making of circus. The fact that 'circus-type' artists entertaining Montezuma's court were later taken to Europe as trophies of the conquest is overlooked in the making of circus. Previous manifestations are reported as the 'vestiges' of the form found in Latin America.

Forero (2014), while offering the same account of events, explores other sides of the story, offering an alternative perspective on contemporary clowns and circus artists and tracing their roots to pre-Colombian characters. His analysis is supported by the ritual 'el correr la tierra' (the shifting of the earth), one of the most

representative celebrations of the Muisca community at the time of the European invasions (ibid.). Similar to the ritual practiced by *Los Voladores de Papantla*, the ceremony pays tributes to the land; it is preceded and concluded by dancers wearing masks resembling joy and sadness. The author associates the circus track – the circular central space where the circus performance takes place – with the Muisca ‘cerco’ or circular figure drawn by ‘taitas’ and shamans where their rites were practiced. At the centre of the ‘cerco’ or circle, with a small fire, ‘taita Gata’ – the father of energy – is honoured and the deity of joy ‘Fo’ is evoked. Per the point of view of the Muisca peoples, Forero (2014), a traditional clown, identifies himself with the joyful mask holders accompanying the celebration of life. A troupe of itinerant figures wearing masks of joy and sadness would state the following: ‘We should proclaim ourselves as ‘Foguagua’, the sons of Fo-Fu’, the deity of joy and the protector of artists and weavers. A parallel is made between circus artists today and Muisca characters such as the Fogiagua or the ‘Fomagata’, an ugly zoomorphic creature with one eye, four ears, and one tail (ibid.).

Little is known about the place that Colombian circus occupies in the international context. Few references are found in the literature. Revolledo (2004) spoke about circus practitioners that travelled all over Latin America, referring to some Colombian artists and describing Colombia’s Circus Egred as one of the best circuses in the region. Infantino (2013) mentions the work of Circo Para Todos with Colombian youth and social circus and an active member of the Ibero-American Circus Federation (FIC). Wall (2013) also mentioned Circo Para Todos and the visit

his group paid to Ecole National du Cirque in Paris: 'The Colombian students had come to France to take a workshop, to bring even more of the modern circus spirit back home' (p.272).

Revolledo (2004, p.23) attributes the reduced circus literature found in Latin America to the lack of interest towards the form and the fact that circus is not a respected artform in the region, contrary to the case of Europe and the US. The observation is not quite accurate. In the case of Britain, the birthplace of the so-called modern circus, it can be said that circus has never been accepted as art with the exception of the 'Golden Age' between the 1820s and 1850s (Stoddart, 2000). This is confirmed in various works pointing out the lack of recognition given to circus, a form of art generally considered a lowbrow or undervalued cultural practice (Purovaara, 2012). In the case of the US, circus developed as an industry rather than an art form (Kwint, 2013). Further explanation is thus required such as the relevance of research and funding allocated to such endeavour in different countries.

### **Circus as a Marginal Subject of Study**

The marginal condition of circus is also attributed to the fact that it is a neglected subject of study. This assertion is accompanied by a series of debates on the dual form in which circus literature is found: serious vs. non-serious texts, fiction vs. real accounts, texts written by insiders vs. outsiders, romantic vs. technical approaches.

Up to the 1980s, circus literature was mainly dominated by popular literature, classified as 'romantic' and 'non-serious' accounts written by 'circus

fans' (Willson Disher preface in Toole-Stott, 1958). The lack of 'serious' and reliable accounts is often reported in past and contemporary circus literature in Britain and other countries (e.g. Stoddart, 2000; Purovaara, 2012). While circus is praised for the coexistence of dualities such as life and death, the comic and the dramatic, the serious and the non-serious (e.g. Wallon, 2002; Tait and Lavers, 2016), the literature is discredited for the presence of dualities. Such debates are found in the works of Frost, Toole-Stott, and Speaight as well as recent accounts.

In the preface for *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (1875), Thomas Frost recognised the challenges he faced when writing about circus in England. Among them was the scarcity of available material, with only a couple of memoirs of circus artists and Astley's bills found at the British Library. 'The circus has hitherto been without any exponent whatever', admitted Frost, a phrase later challenged by Toole-Stott (1958) and other scholars. Assael (2005), however, described her situation as the opposite, referring to the rich variety of material found in the *Circus and Victorian Society*. Both Toole-Stott and Assael pointed out references overlooked by Frost. 'If Frost's observation was not quite accurate', Toole-Stott comments, 'it was certainly true that apart from the mentioned references, this form of entertainment had been entirely neglected' (1958, p.13). This time, it was not the lack of material, but the fact that the majority of early books written by 'professionals', which were considered 'ephemeral', had long been forgotten (ibid.). Circus literature is thus reported as being abundant but its quality is questioned: 'A

circus bibliography is a formidable reading but, unfortunately, quantity has tended to obscure quality' (ibid.).

As mentioned above, low quality of the literature was attributed to differences between fiction and technical works, works written by insiders and outsiders, and abundance of fiction instead of technical and respectable works. According to Toole-Stott (1958), differences in the literature written inside and outside the circus field and the 'romantic' and non-serious tone characterise a significant part of circus material, reading more as 'novelettes' than as thoughtful appraisals of its techniques and idiosyncrasies (Ibid., p.17). A significant portion of the circus literature is discredited. Nonetheless, such literature represents in itself a source of knowledge, containing valuable records that can provide deeper understandings of circus and the metaphors and feelings revealed by each place and epoch. This literature is part of circus and its complexities. As Carmeli (1995, p. 214) notes, the circus literature is itself part of the performance of circus:

'This "low-quality," "non-comprehensive" writing takes on itself not only a representation of the real but also its reification. In this respect the dismissal of circus literature as unimportant and unserious as well as the meagreness of 'serious' academic writing about circus, reveal that scholars, too, are being played by this literature's play.' (ibid, pp.219-220).

An example of this debate is found in Frost challenging Dickens' appreciations of circus in *Hard Times* through the imaginary characters of Sleary's

circus. Another difficulty noted by Frost in the preface to the book was the hesitancy of circus proprietors, especially those with higher levels of education, in imparting information on its history and mysteries to those outside their circle: 'They are not, as a rule, so garrulous as poor Sleary', commented Frost, indicating the tension between non-circus and circus people and between socio-economic backgrounds, while marking the distinction between circus reality and circus fiction, as portrayed by Charles Dickens through Sleary's circus in *Hard Times* (1854).

The family life that characterised circus across the spans of time is questioned in 'the first circus history'. Circus values such as communal life, family, and women performing as equals with men, are to some extent questioned by Frost. In the last chapter of the book, Frost provides a contrast between circus life according to Dickens' characters and the 'real' circus he observed in his circus ethnography. The circus vernacular, domestic life, and even the level of tricks reported in Dickens' work did not correspond to what Frost observed in real circuses. In opposition to Sleary's idea of extended families lodging in one house, the circus family house was usually 'an obscure inn in an obscure part of the outskirts of the town' (Frost, 1881, p.312), with circus men, even if married, usually occupying private apartments or public houses. He specified that 'all the mothers' performing in Dicken's circus were not necessarily found on stage, recalling a circus where seven of the eight men performing were married and none of their wives had ever appeared in the ring (Frost, 1881, p.311).

Two additional points are raised in terms of the reliability of circus literature: Differences between circus literature treated as 'novelettes' and circus literature treated as 'art'. The first one is supported by fantasy and tales, the second one, by technique and inside knowledge. But also, differences between England, the US and France, with the latest portrayed as the place where circus is indeed respected as art. Circus 'novelettes' (Toole-Stott, 1958, p.17) are mainly associated with literature written in England, 'the birthplace of the modern circus [where] only a very few of the many hundreds of books written on the circus, reveal a genuine understanding of its technique or of the milieu around which the life of the artiste revolves' (ibid., pp.13-14).

Distinctions between the 'proper history' of circus and fiction are later found in the literature. Making a striking distinction from previous circus titles, Speaight's book is presented as a study of 'the *development* of the Circus as an art and entertainment form' rather than a chronicle of performers and proprietors (1980, p.7). His world's history is focused on England, the US, and France as these countries played a major role in the development of circus as art and entertainment (ibid.). England was the birthplace of circus with a two-way influence on circus in the US, 'where the circus developed in a manner somewhat differing from that of the Circus elsewhere in the world' (Speaight, 1980, p.7). Finally, France reflects 'the peak of art and appreciation that the European Circus achieved in that country in the last quarter of the nineteenth century' (ibid.).

He also emphasised the difficulty in writing the history of the circus, as circus archives are so sparse and scattered (an observation made also by Toole-Stott) and those bills and advertisements that survived are 'so packed with exaggeration and lies, that an authoritative history of the early Circus is an impossibility' (ibid.).

The critique is later found in the literature at the turn of the 21st century. In the introduction of *Rings of Desires*, Helen Stoddart refers to Marcelo Truzzi's comment on how the true nature of circus 'has been heavily obscured by host of romanticised fictions and histories, especially by those circus fans who have sought to perpetuate knowledge of it' (cited in Stoddart, 2000, p.1). 'This seems to be almost endemic in circus', continues Stoddart while stating that circus is famous of deceits, not only within some of the acts but also in its descriptions and knowledge sharing. 'All of this makes the circus at once one of the most entertaining and the most frustrating of arts upon which to attempt research' (Stoddart, 2000, p.1). This is attributed to the self-interest of the circus itself in trying to capture its audience: 'A recognition that the charm of such tales lies in their capturing of something essential about the circus which is that an audience may always prefer either an enchanting or an alarming fiction (well presented) over a bare-faced fact' (Stoddart, 2000, p.2).

Stoddart introduced her work as an academic study rather than an entertainer, where 'the facts and figures included have at least been verified by a number of other sources' (ibid., p.2). The claim now is raised between scientific

knowledge grounded on facts versus circus literature based on fantasy and fiction. Concerning Stoddart's comment, Purovaara (2012, p.81) emphasises the frustration the situation imposes on academic researchers: 'The possibilities of exaggeration and even deceit have often been a millstone around the neck of circus research. A large part of the reality of the circus is obscured by romantic tales and circus fanatics' yearning of nostalgia'.

Another difficulty lies in the differences between accounts written by insiders and outsiders and the mixed values that each account portrays. If Frost is looking for a representative exponent outside the circus that can provide an objective account of its history and reality, Toole-Stott, a circus ex-proprietor, questions the capacity of circus outsiders to portray a real understanding of the circus. 'No one could write a good book on the circus unless he was intimately acquainted with its subtleties and idiosyncrasies' (p.17), raising questions on the amount of knowledge one could acquire when travelling for few days with a tenting circus as many authors have attempted to do (ibid.). The critique is expanded by M. Willson Disher in the foreword to the same work, with the term 'circus fans' to denominate 'the ever-increasing company of writers, painters, collectors, broadcasters, autograph hunters and plain enthusiasts who regard the circus as among the world's lasting pictures ... [noting] a little healthy self-interest in their zeal' (Toole-Stott, 1958).

### **Circus According to Whom?**

The rejection of the study of circus from an academic point of view is attributed to the accusations that circus literature and material are characterised by a romantic and spectacular tone (Carmeli 1995). Therefore, it is considered a non-serious or unworthy subject of study. Analysing some of the 'non-serious' works written in Britain immediately before and after World War II, Carmeli points to the bourgeois invention of romantic portrayals of circus, demonstrating how those books used the ideas of a nation, of Britishness, of the Englishman (e.g. 'Astley and Englishman' and 'Ducrow and Englishman'), at the time of the decline of the British Empire:

'This no-tie, no-order, rootless circus is, of course, an ideological construct. A flaunted escape of the categories renders the bourgeois-made circus a vehicle in authors' crystallisation and reification of those very categories [...] It is by a bourgeois notion of some objective real, reified in these books – as well as in circus live show and lore – that the study of circus literature and circus in general is dismissed. It is indeed only through turning the real and seriousness themselves into object of study that the significance of circus and circus literature can be critically assessed' (Carmeli, 1995, pp.216-220).

As discussed above, little written evidence is found in archives before Frost's accounts with the exception of a few autobiographies (Frost, 1881). Scholars have noted how circus artists across the times have not kept records of their endeavours. Circus, 'the art of the ephemeral and no words', did not clearly enclose its memory in the archives (Bailly, 2009, p.66). The performers were mostly illiterate

and kept few records, while the clergy and the great scribes of that age considered them base and noted little of their doings (Wall, 2013, p.45).

*Circus and Allied Arts* (Frost, 1881) was written at another crucial time when the circus in its consolidated version, of today's 'traditional' or 'classical' circus, was already transformed by the commercial format in the US, Russia, and East Europe and criticised in England or, at least, certain regions in England. Nevertheless, circus is neglected by whom and in what terms? As Carmeli (1995) suggests, to properly understand circus, both romantic and 'serious' versions must be analysed as subjects of study.

### **Circus Representations in Search of Recognition**

While Dickens portrayed circus life as a different world from the modern and utilitarian life, relaying the mere 'facts', industrialisation, and individualism, a clear attempt was made by Frost to describe circus people as 'modern' and respectable subjects as well as 'weird and spectacular creatures'. Both accounts could be also read as using modern sentiments to elevate circus and circus figures when the form was in decline after the culmination of its glorious 'Golden Age' in England. From different perspectives, Dickens and Frost were attracting the attention of the society, the bourgeoisie, and the urban centres.

The romantic and fantastic tone or the positive language of circus could respond to the need for backing the form against public attacks, mainly coming from theatre that had monopoly over the forms of entertainment in the

midst of the industrial revolution (Kwint, 2013). Several attempts to reclaim the fame of the circus can be found in future literature, such as the benefits of circus (Bolton, 2004) and historical significance of the circus in Britain (Carmeli, 1995). As Cunningham (1982) commented, 'The different components of this culture were further drawn together by the political necessity of defending it... by elaborating at any opportunity on the claim that their culture promoted patriotism and class harmony and prevented effeminacy' (p.66).

The question then is to what extent are circus scholars defending their attempts to seriously study circus and find a place within the academic study of the performing arts to portray circus as 'art' rather than 'popular entertainment', using facts, rather than fiction to understand circus (e.g. Stoddart, 2000). In this regard, French sociologist Brigitte Bailly clarifies that in opposition to the episteme of the Renaissance, crossing the history of circus and the history of thought, her historical account is offered in a way that could appear inconsistent with the academic tradition but congruent with the spirit of the circus (Bailly, 2009, p.63). This is an example of the challenges that circus scholars face when analysing the circus from an academic point of view. Which values prevail – those recognised in circus or those of the academic and scientific world?

### **Circus Classified as Popular Entertainment and Popular Culture**

Two issues contributed to these perceptions. After Frost's (1881) journalistic history, it was just a century later when the next history of circus was written in Britain. The

most representative of these attempts was the international history of circus by George Speaight (1980). His work was part of a series of studies sponsored by the Society for Theatre Research with a special focus on the organisational, scenographic, and architectural substance of the theatre world (Kwint, 2013). This is the context under which Speaight's history is written, focused on institutions rather than the dramatic canon. Circuses were analysed upon such criteria and associated with popular theatre and other 'illegitimate' forms (ibid.).

This influential account reinforces ideas of circus in Britain as an institution and a business rather than a performing art. Scholars at the time paid less attention to the study of aesthetic and performative innovations of circus. Both aspects contributed to the portrayal of circus as a popular culture and a lower category within the theatre and arts. The image was reinforced by direct links between the modern circus and Roman circuses, and Julius Cesar's famous phrase 'bread and circuses' that catapulted circus as a distractive tool to entertain the masses. The association was used by circus detractors to reinforce ideas of circus as 'cheap' entertainment and a lower art form (Kwint, 2013).

Circuses in Britain have developed in the shadow of theatre. The modern circus, the British construction, is a mix between Astley's equestrian and public entertainment acts linked to the theatre. This hybrid is the product of the Hughes-Dibdin association. Horse-rider Charles Hughes joined Charles Dibdin, a sacked theatre artist from Covent Garden, to develop a new spectacle to present 'a horsemanship display in a more "classical and elegant" manner' (Speaight, 1980). A

stage was added to the equestrian ring to present pantomime. The renewed format and venue was very similar to the conventional theatre, a situation that alerted patented theatres, triggering a campaign of criticism against circuses. The monopoly of the entertainment business and cultural respectability that the theatre enjoyed at the time was threatened by the new entertainment (Kwint, 2013). Circus was immersed in the world of the theatre, and was covered by the restrictive theatre licensing system that Astley successfully resisted to guarantee its existence and rights to perform. The history of circus was constructed under the umbrella of the history of theatre in Britain (Kwint, 2013). Such construction and understandings of circus in the 19th century, were transferred to other geographical regions and periods of time through the 'myth' of its origins and its portrayal as a popular culture.

The popular character of circus is still a debatable topic. Recent evidence suggests that both the working classes and the elite enjoyed the entertainment of the fairgrounds and the marketplace during the 18th century (Wohlcke, 2014); circus scholars in Britain debate the subject. Historical references demonstrate the same as Astley, when he managed to convince personalities to support his endeavour through the 'Britishness' of circus and the promotion of the national identity of characters (Kwint, 2013). Through this process, circus became the main entertainment of the Victorian times. Evidence suggests that a discrediting campaign was launched by patented theatres in London with the ascendance of circus as an entertainment form (Kwint, 2002, 2013). The 'popular character' and

base 'entertainment' was used by the theatre to criticise circuses and force them to close. On the other hand, one of the main contributions of circus to cultural practice in the country was its ability to break with the monopoly of theatre during the 19th century (Kwint, 2002; 2013), an aspect barely mentioned in the literature and ignored in policy reports.

### **Animal Rights Campaigns and the Decline of Circus in Britain**

The 'Golden Era' of the British circus was between the 1820s and the 1840s (Disher, 1942; Stoddart, 2000, p.17) with figures such as Lord George Sanger and Andrew Ducrow who continued Astley's enterprise after his death. In the second half of the 19th century, the French circus took the lead, while American circuses conquered the British market (Mauclair, 2003). As discussed in Chapter 1, various factors are involved in the ascendance of circus at the time: the internationalisation of the form and the respectability that circus and Philip Astley gained in Paris, with the support and admiration of Marie Antoinette and other relevant figures (Kwint, 2013). The addition of the stage to the equestrian ring, where pantomimes were performed, and key personalities visiting circus admired the form. According to Stoddart (2000, pp.19-20), this admiration responded to the inclusion of opera, theatre, and other languages into circus, which were accepted by the Victorian elite. The golden era is thus informed according to the respectability gained by the middle and aristocratic classes, and the similarity of circus to their respected art forms. The ascendance of

circus is reported as long as it is accepted and recognised by the cultural and political establishments.

After the Victorian era, circus was never seen again as a respectable or artistic endeavour in Britain (Ward, 2014). The times around the First World War are recognised as the decline of circus with the closure of permanent circuses and the escalation of Music Halls, sports, and cinema in the entertainment scene. Circus venues that remained open were soon converted into theatres such as the Holborn Amphitheatre and the Hippodrome in London, while tenting circuses remained popular in the country districts (Speaight, 1980). George Sanders continued Astley's enterprise in the peripheries and touring version of circuses, dying as a wealthy man with a fortune of £5,000 (Ward, 2014). The 'glorious' years of circus in Britain were said to come to an end when entering a 'dark gloomy period' (Ward, 2014, p.99).

More needs to be said on the accepted unpopularity of circus in Britain during the 20th century. A detailed revision of events suggests an alternative perspective. If peripheral populations are considered, the cultural relevance of circus in Britain could be seen as the opposite. The decline of circus was announced during the 1870s (Stoddart, 2000) and were completely buried at the turn of the new century. However, crucial moments and developments are determined over the century. The Blackpool circus tower has never missed a season since its opening in the 1890s. Blackpool is recognised in circus literature as the main holiday destination for the British working class (Mauclair, 2003). However, the tower was opened on the elegant north side of the pier, which, at the time, was still a touring

destination for the elite (Wallton, 2000). In contrast to Arrighi's (2016) appreciation regarding the ascendance/decline of circus and modernity, the tower has served as a resistance to modernity by preserving traditional forms of entertainment, the carnivalesque, and culture (Webb, 2005).

The time in between the wars is recognised for the presentation of the best circus seasons in Britain, with the presence of three major circuses playing in London, a situation not observed since the 1880s (Ward, 2014). Bertram Mill's touring and fixed circuses performed sold-out seasons from the 1920s to the 1960s. Their shows were praised as one of the greatest circuses of the time presenting the best acts from all over the world (Ward, 2014). When bringing the best artists was no longer possible due to financial restrictions, circus was said to permanently close instead of reducing the quality of the shows (Ward, 2014). Chipperfield's circus was also widely remembered in the 1950s and 1960s as a significant time for circus. The 1960s then, are marked as the decline of traditional circuses (Selwood et al., 1995). The reasons claimed are the increased popularity of television as an entertainment form and critical positions towards animal displays (ibid.).

The second half of the century became a difficult time for circuses to perform due to the implementation of animal rights campaigns, persecuting circuses for the exploitation and bad treatment of animals. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) became the main enemy of circuses (Birkett, 1999). A report published in *The Guardian* on 6th February 1999 revealed a detailed analysis on how circuses were criticised at the time without enough

evidence that suggested the bad condition of animals. According to the report, the criticism was only directed towards circuses, while other activities displaying animals, such as horse-races were not persecuted in despite of animal violation acts. During an interview with representatives from the RSPCA, the same article adds the following comment: 'Well, you know, our policy is that we don't like circus. Its head office that's the problem'.

In the analysis of popular culture in the early 18th century, a similar situation is evidenced in the persecution of cock fighting and other popular entertainments, while hunting, the entertainment of the elite, was allowed and did not suffer persecution by animal rights campaigners (Cunningham, 1982). A question is raised in terms of the entity and the real cause of the criticism, which appears to be more on circuses than a general campaign over entertainment activities displaying animals.

While traditional circuses were criticised, further transformations were evident, including both traditional and 'new' circuses. Circus returned to private venues rather than itinerant big tops that became highly expensive to maintain (Selwood et al., 1995). The Roundhouse in London opened in 1964 as a cutting edge performing arts venue in which circus occupied a central position in the cultural agenda. Traditional circuses such as Robert Brothers performed in the 1960s as well as more theatrical versions with the French Le Grand Magic Circus performances in the 1970s and Australian Circus Oz in the 1980s (Holland, 2015). The 1970s is also the decade of Glastonbury's first contemporary arts festival, in

which circus arts were always given a place within the programme and a circus-dedicated field since 1989 (ibid.). Traditional circuses continued on the road under precarious conditions but still attracting a significant number of audiences as revealed in the detailed study of Yoram Carmeli (1995), evidencing the other side of the story and general claims on the decline of circus in the 20th century.

### **Circus Studies**

In the 1990s, Carmeli (1995) noted the popularity of circus in various genres of popular literature in contrast to the reduced interest from academic disciplines towards the form. The situation is changing with the consolidation of circus studies as an emergent discipline in the last decade. The opposite situation can be observed since then. Many independent studies have been conducted in a variety of academic disciplines, ranging from population studies and performing arts to kinetics, brain functioning, medicine, and veterinary studies.

The developing academic field of circus studies is bringing some of those works together while being enriched by an increased number of new publications conducted around the globe (Arrighi, 2015). This is revealed in the recent publications of the *Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Tait and Lavers, 2016) and *Cirque Global* (Leroux and Batson, 2016). They include the work of over 50 contemporary scholars from different academic fields and backgrounds. This last group of emerging works are mainly conducted within the performing arts and more precisely within theatre, drama and dance departments. A significant section is

found under English, French, American or British literature/studies departments (e.g. Stoddart, 2000); or within the area of semiotics and linguistics (e.g. Paul Bouissac). Relevant contributions from cultural historians (e.g. Marius Kwint, Brenda Assael) and popular culture (e.g. Hugh Cunningham, Yoram Carmeli, Vanessa Toulmin) are also found.

To a lesser extent, works can be found in other areas of study such as sociology and anthropology (e.g. Yoram Carmeli, Brigitte Bailly, Julieta Infantino, Ilaria Bessone), physical education and sports (e.g. Magali Sizorn), medicine (e.g. Philippe Goudard), and management (e.g. Ron Beadle). Recently, works have been emerging from media, communications, and cultural industries (e.g. Burt, 2016). An increased number of scholars have been circus artists themselves or involved in the management of circus organisations, productions, or events (CAIOC, 2018).

This body of literature brings scholars from different parts of the world and diverse backgrounds together (Tait and Lavers, 2016; Leroux and Batson, 2016). This helps provide a completely different perspective on circus and its histories. However, most of these attempts rely on the idea of circus emerging as a performing art in Europe at the turn of the 19th century. Circus literature used to be highly concentrated around Europe and the West, with the histories and transformations placed at the core of the practice. Efforts are being made to look beyond top-down narratives and one-way influences in the making of circus. Some examples are found in the work of Leroux (2016), who identifies local movements in the rise of the Quebecois circus besides a direct influence coming solely from the

US circuses. Zhang (2016) analysed the influence of Chinese artists in the development of Quebecois circus.

### **Contribution of this Research to Circus Literature**

This study contributes to the consolidation of circus studies as an academic discipline. The circus literature is diversified (Arrighi, 2015; Tait and Lavers, 2016) and this study contributes to the task of consolidation. It expands the analysis of circus from the perspective of the social sciences and cultural studies. As mentioned above, contemporary analyses on circus come mainly from the performing arts and theatre studies with less representation in the social sciences (e.g. Leroux and Baston, 2016). This approach is influencing the current understandings of circus in terms of its performative character, aesthetics, content, and form. The definitions of circus are thus highly centred around the human body and its expressive potential (e.g. Tait and Lavers). More needs to be said about community and social engagement in the definition of the practice (Bessone, 2017). Cultural studies and social sciences can contribute to this endeavour. This study highlights the community and social component of circus as deeply embedded in the performative and professional side of the form, highlighting the roots of the conflict when circus attempts to gain recognition as art.

This project combined the analyses of circus from a global perspective (e.g. Leroux and Baston, 2016) providing evidence from Colombia and Britain and connections in between. This was done by using multi-sited ethnography to look at

how narratives, meanings, and histories transcend borders shaping circus practices and understandings. It particularly notes the role that Britain has played in outlining the definition, history, and approaches to studying circus. Even though circus is recognised as an international artform, studies involving multi-sited analysis are scarce in circus literature. This is the only study to compare circus in these two locations and the only one analysing circus as a whole in Colombia, taking into account Bailly's (2007) analysis of Colombia's circus school Circo Para Todos and King's (2017) analysis of the carnivalesque economies of clowning in Colombia.

This work contributes to the discussion on circus and modernity (e.g. Carmeli, 1995; Infantino 2015; Arrighi, 2016). Circus is extensively analysed in the academic literature both as an alternative to modern life (Dickens, 1989; Infantino, 2015; Beadle, 2009) and a product and reproducer of modern values (Carmeli, 1995; Stoddart, 2000; Arrighi, 2016). More needs to be said, however, on the modern canons upon which circus definitions, circus history, and circus transformations are reported. The gap in the knowledge is also evident in terms of the origin of circus in Europe at the turn of the 19th century, transformations of the practice across the times, and the claim that circus is a neglected subject (Tooley-Stott, 1958). Existing literature defines circus from the point of view of the central and modern actors such as capitalism, the manager, the bourgeoisie, urban centres, the serious world, the academy, modern aesthetics, and the West. The rejection of circus, for example, comes mainly from official structures such as the academy and

the legitimised art world; more needs to be said about a generalised definition considering the society as a whole.

The analysis of circus in light of history and literature with the support of global studies and the work of scholars such as Bhambra (2007; 2014), Connell (2007), Mignolo (2011), Garcia-Canclini (2010), or Sousa-Santos (2014) is the main contribution of this research. To the best of my knowledge, no study has analysed circus under the lens of this body of literature. No references to these works are found in *The Routledge Circus Reader or Cirque Global*. This combination may help to de-centre circus understandings and 'origins' as a performing art in modern times. This analysis supports the need for understanding circus as international and diverse. The histories and existing definitions are not very diverse.

Extending on Carmeli's (1995) work, circus literature is presented here as an area of analysis in itself and an important element in the understanding of circus. I concur with the author that both 'romantic' and 'serious' works offer valid and constitutive explanations. As he demonstrates, 'romantic' appraisals portray the sentiments of a specific time and place, containing relevant information about circus and societies. Far from discrediting fiction and 'romantic' accounts, I suggest considering them as serious and valid as any other 'fact' or 'objective' approach. I argue that such rejection responds to modern and scientific systems of knowledge where the 'non-serious' and the subjective worlds are discredited (Sousa-Santos, 2014). Disdain towards 'romantic' sentiments could be understood in terms of Max Weber's 'disenchantment' of the world. A tendency is observed in certain sections

of the contemporary analysis of circus to discrediting romantic views (e.g. Stoddart, 2000; Purovaara, 2012) and yearning for 'nostalgia' attached to the traditional circus (e.g. Carmeli and Berg, 1993, p.11). I later discuss how these romantic sentiments are part of circus and the driving force for artists, administrators, policymakers, and audiences alike, within traditional, contemporary, street, and social circus.

Following past and present historical accounts (Frost, 1881; Speaight, 1980; Kwint, 2002; 2013; Wall, 2013; Jacobs, 2016) and extending on Bailly's (2009) and Arrighi's (2016) work, this analysis challenges the historical construction of circus. It particularly argues about the accuracy of historical accounts that replicate Eurocentric and modern approaches to analysing circus (e.g. Jacobs, 2016), accounts that are used as references in contemporary circus analyses. I offer an alternative avenue to circus scholars and practitioners to understand their form outside rigid canons, in line with their demand for the same.

The analysis makes a valuable contribution to the blurry place of 'social circus' within contemporary circus. It supports previous efforts to historicise the form (e.g. Bolton 2004; Lavers, 2016) and addresses the need to document, problematise, and understand the recent history of this circus sub-genre (Arrighi, 2015, p.65). The present analysis contributes to this project by exploring the conflictual relationship between social circus and professional circus, providing ethnographic evidence from Britain and Colombia, thus unveiling an alternative history. It offers an account of the history and meaning of social circus that differs from the accounts in official narratives. By doing so, it reveals the central place that

South America and Colombia have played in the transformation of circus that has influenced the practice all over the world.

This thesis is the first to analyse Colombian circus broadly paying attention to the current transformations in the practice. It makes an innovative initial attempt to bring together some of the historical material and new research insights that could inform future analyses and constructs in Colombia. This research brings the three existent studies on Colombia together, evidencing a connecting point in 'social circus' and the social engagement of circus in Colombia. This could represent the beginning of the development of circus studies in the country. This is a unique attempt that aims to determine the place that Colombian circus occupies in the global context and the only one contrasting circus in Colombia and Britain.

As part of this contribution, the following and final section of this chapter presents evidence found in the archival research conducted at the Luis Angel Arango's library in Bogotá. This section gathers information that could be used in future attempts to construct the history of circus in Colombia and further analysis of the practice. The section includes testimonies provided by my interviewees.

### **Circus Forms in Colombia in the 19th Century**

Various circus forms and styles are found in the 19th century in Bogotá. Performances referenced at the *Reminicencias de SantaFe de Bogotá* (Cordovez-Moure, 1893) include separated acts performed both in public squares and private

venues such as the Coliseum where theatre performances were held. References date back to the 1833 with the American horse-riding company of Mr. Johnson as the first company of this genre that visited the country (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p. 75). Interestingly enough, the first drama company that visited the city is reported in 1835, few years after Johnson's horse-riding company performed in Bogotá. The drama company was brought by Francisco Villalba presenting Spanish and French dramas and comedies. Parallel to these European performances, 'artisans' performed local dramas in 'la gallera vieja' (the old cock-fighting ring), the tragedy of Policarpa Salabarrieta, Colombia's independence heroine.

'Saltimbanques' or 'maromeros' are reported performing in Bogotá's main square, Plaza de Bolivar (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p.67). These 'maromeros' performed astonishing acts representing a 'great bird' in the flying swing (ibid.). In 1847, the 'famous' Dr. Florentino Izasiga, 'a strong and ugly man' is found performing with the 'Mexican Indio Chichiliano' and other 'saltimbanques', the 'greatest funambulist acts ever seen' (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p.68). Two years after, the second horse-riding company, this time from Britain, visited the country in 1849. The same year Dr. Florentino died and Mr Johnsons' company offered a circus performance at the Coliseum in memory of late Dr. Florentino. Further acts performed in public squares are reported: the English tightrope walker and conjurer, Mr Phillips, and the French female conjurer performing with 'a dog, playing cards and local caramel sweets' (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p.76). Finally, Mr. Keller's 'mimoplastica' Polish company in 1863 (ibid., p.80).

Different appreciations towards local and foreign companies are notable. Dr. Florentino and 'Chichiliano', renown Mexican acrobat or 'maromero', are described as 'barbarians' with their act performed in Plaza de Bolivar (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p.69). In the meantime, the English tightrope walker and conjurer, Mr Phillips, is described by the 'publico sensato' (sensible audiences) as executing 'marvellous things' ('maravillas que ejecutaba'). While 'the people' (el vulgo) regarded Mr Phillips as having a pact with the devil (ibid.).

Various conclusion can be drawn from the list of performances above. Saltimbanques, horse-riding and 'mimoplasties' companies, from different parts of the world are found performing in public and private venues in Bogotá in the second half of the 19th century. At this time saltimbanques or 'maromeros' were not recognised as 'artists yet' (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p.67). This suggests that by the end of the century, when the *Reminicencias* were written, Saltimbanques were recognised as artists. The 'bird acts' suggest the performance of pre-columbian acrobatics such as the 'Voladores de Papantla' described before, at public squares in Bogotá. The word 'circus' is not found yet, not even attached to the horse-riding companies coming from Britain and the US. However, different appreciations are evidenced between elites and other groups; some preferring European performers and others the local and public spectacles. This coincides with the division of the two republics that will be explained in the following chapter.

The word circus appears in the revision of the 'theatre plays, opera and other shows' collection held at the Luis Angel Arango Library (see BLAA, 2015). The

collection starts at the end of the 1850s and evidences further connections between theatre and circus. The agenda is dominated by the presentation of operas, lyrical theatre, and zarzuelas performed by Italian companies, including Oreste Sindici, who, decades later, composed the Colombian national anthem in 1887. This fact, and the association of posters with the 'Teatro Colon' suggest a direct link between this cultural agenda and the entertainment of the elite. At the time, Teatro Colon is described as a 'pompous theatre where only the privileged go to spend their fortune' (Cordovez-Moure, 1893, p.52). Among these performances are pantomime plays performed by the Italian theatre company Bronner Cardella, accompanied by a live orchestra playing Italian symphonies and 'Sicilianas' (see Fig. 3.1). Various performances by the same company were announced in 1863 and 1864 presented as 'mimo-coreografica' or 'coreografica-dramatica', offering a fusion of drama, pantomime, and mime acts.

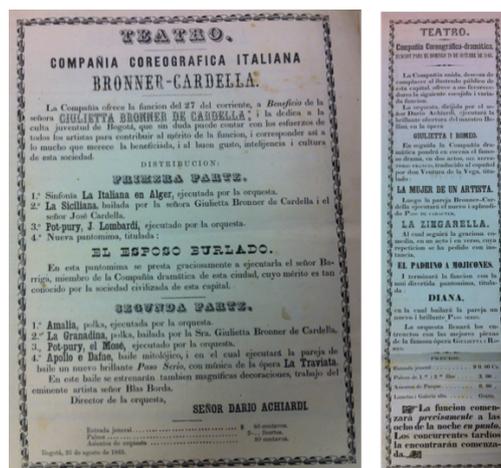


Fig. 3.1: Theatre Company Bronner Cardella Performing in Bogotá in 1863-1864 (Pantomime and Mime)  
Source: archival research at Luis Angel Arango's Library in Bogotá, March, 2015

In 1863 the word circus appears with the company Circo Bernabó, performing equestrian acts, mime, and pantomimes (see Fig. 3.2). They are

announced as ‘grande, variada i extraordinaria función ecuestre, gimnastica i mímica’ (great, diverse, and extraordinary equestrian act, gymnastics, and mime) finishing with a pantomime. Equestrian acts are at the centre of the show. A live orchestra accompanies the performances this time playing ‘Bambuco’ music, the first ‘national’ or ‘Colombian’ music that emerged in the Andean region from the fusion of European, African, and Indigenous rhythms (e.g. Ruiz, 1978; Ochoa, 1997). There is no information on the year’s performances or the provenance of the company. Half of the performers are members of the Bernabó family joined by local artists, such as Ramón González from Caracas and horse-riders from Bogotá, the only characters announced by their nationalities.



Fig. 3.2: Circo Bernabó Performance in Bogotá in the 19th Century. Source: archival research at Luis Angel Arango’s Library in Bogotá, March, 2015

The date of the performance is not available; however, a closer reference, is found in the ‘El Federalista’ newspaper of Venezuela, announcing the Bernabó circus performing in Caracas on the 10th of May 1865 (see Fig. 3.3). The year coincides with performances in Bogotá by the Italian company Bronner Cardella in 1863 and 1864 mentioned above. Another reference found is the Italian ‘equestrian-athletic-mimic’ company founded by Giovanni Bernabò in the early 19th

century (Giarola, 2010). Little information is available on the company whose existence was recently uncovered by Italian circus historians (Giarola, 2010). The Compagnia Bernabò performed in Europe and entertained political commemoration, such as the 'Proclamation de la Constitution de la Grece' in 1843 (ibid.). There is no evidence to associate this company with the Bernabó family found in Colombia.



Fig. 3.3: Circo Bernabò in Caracas – El Federalista Newspaper 4  
 Source: El Federalista, Año II Mes X, Caracas, Miercoles 10 de Mayo 1865, No. 528

Further research must be conducted on the relationship between these events, their commonalities and disparities, which will certainly reveal crucial aspects in the development of circus in Colombia, the hybridisation of formats, and its closer relationship with events happening in Europe. In the meantime, a simple comparison between the performances of Bronner Cardella and Circus Bernabó reveal crucial aspects in the analysis. Both include pantomime, mime, and comic elements. The main differences are the equestrian acts and the 'payaso' or clown, which are not found in Bronner Cabrella's spectacle. This reveals a similar transition from the commercial theatre in Europe to circus in its 'dramatic form' inaugurated

by Hughes and Dibdin in 1782 in London and consolidated years later by Astley's hypo-dramas (see Chapter 1). It also reveals the coexistence of saltimbanques, equestrian companies, mimoplasticas and 'circus', and the possibility of similar artists performing in one or another format.

The main difference between the two performances is the differentiated character of the spectacle and the advertisement of the show. Bronner Cabrella's dramatic composition emphasises its Italian origins and is directed to the 'culta juventud Bogotana' (cultivated young audiences of Bogotá), a public that would certainly appreciate an artistic endeavour that contributed to good taste ('buen gusto'), intelligence, and the culture of Colombian's society: '[L]a dedica a la culta juventud de Bogotá, que sin duda puede contar con los esfuerzos de todos los artistas para contribuir al mérito de la función, i corresponder así a lo mucho que merece la beneficiada, i al buen gusto, inteligencia i cultura de esta sociedad' (See Fig. 3.1).

Circo Bernabó offers a 'mestizo' or 'popular' character (see Chapter 4), including local artists and local music. Rather than highlighting European figures, those who are announced 'for the first time' are the local horse-riders from Bogotá (see Fig. 3.2). In place of 'Sicilianas' and Italian symphonies, circus performs 'Bambuco' music, the genre that dominated the folk music scene in the second half of the 19th century and the 20th century in Colombia (e.g. Ochoa, 1997). The spectacle took place at Plaza de la Concepción (The Conception Square) inaugurated by business merchant and constructor Juan Manuel Arrubla in 1864 in

Bogotá (see Fig. 3.4). The new project represents the final materialisation of previous attempts to move the 'traditional Friday's market' from Bogotá's main square (Plaza Mayor or Plaza de Bolívar) to a private and 'covered' venue, as part of public health campaigns and the 'tidiness' of the capital city (Bitácoras Bogotá, 2006). The building in which Circo Bernabó performed, in the second half of the 19th century, is perhaps the first fixed venue purposely built to accommodate circus performances in Colombia.



> Plaza central de mercado, glorieta central.  
*El Tiempo*, 1953-10-29, p. 6

Fig. 3.4: Former Plaza de la Concepción during its Demolition, 1953  
Source: La Carrera de la Modernidad

Born in Antioquia, Arrubla was a successful business man who acquired and renovated various buildings in the centre of Bogotá to develop his own businesses since 1848 (BanRep, 2016). Among them, a cockpit ('Gallera Nueva' or 'Gallera de Arrubla'), or 'wooden circus' inaugurated in the late 1850s to present 'popular spectacles' (Bitácoras Bogotá, 2006); the most memorable was a fight between a bull and a tiger that ended up in a local disaster after the tiger escaped the scene (ibid.). Like Astley's amphitheatres, the earlier fixed circuses in Colombia

were directly associated with popular entertainment and animal fights run by business men. This time, Arrubla was directly involved with urbanisation programmes, the privatisation of commerce, and the management of entertainment. The renovated marketplace was, at the same time, used by Arrubla to present public spectacles (BanRep, 2016). This suggests that commerce and popular entertainment took place in the same location.

A hundred years after the inauguration of the first circus ring in England, a similar spectacle was performed in Bogotá under similar circumstances to those reported in London. Similar entertainment was performed in distinct venues. Traditional theatre was directed to the elite, performing themes of 'chivalry' (Speaight, 1980), or 'European' in the case of Colombia, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, the *Harlequin*, or *La Triavata* opera (see Fig. 3.1). This moment also witnessed the emergence of new venues accommodating popular entertainment and the new hybrid of horse-riding acts and pantomime.

The comparison between Bronner Cabrella and circus Bernabó presentations reflected the division of Colombia's culture that resulted in the colonisation period. As Mena and Herrera (1994, p.114) explain, the institutionalisation of Colombia's culture developed in between two scenarios; on the one hand, the exaltation of high culture and the esteem for cultural manifestations of the elite, white, educated, sophisticated, of the 'salon', of European standards; and the disdain and denial towards multiple manifestations of a 'popular culture' that emerged in the encounter of Spain, Europe, Africa, and the

Americas. Since colonial times, this popular culture operated in a relegated position at the margin of dominant culture, with the last one dominating the attention of governors and policies. No further information is found about circus appreciation and the reception of the entertainment by different populations and official authorities at the time. By the first half of the 19th century, circus did not seem to be relegated or marginalised. It happened in the renovated building of the capital and the new centre of commerce. It was performed in popular venues as well as classical theatres. What is certainly identified, is that the popular character happened in the marketplace and was directed towards the majority of the population who were in search of local music and local artists.

The analysis above reveals crucial moments deserving further attention in the construction of circus history in Colombia. It adds valuable information to the analysis of popular culture and the performing arts, in which circus played an unexplored fundamental role until the present time. A crucial question emerges around the Italian origins of the mentioned companies, and the possibility of the same group of artists using different names to perform differentiated spectacles according to the demands of the market, either for the elite or popular entertainment. Artists performed both in theatres and circuses, following advertisement strategies that characterised circus, such as a permanent change of the name of the same company (Hall, 2002; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013) and the use of international names or the translation of the word 'circo', 'cirque', 'circus' depending on the local language (Hall, 2002; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, Leroux, 2016).

Circus Bernabó was not the only format in which circus was found in the country in the 19th century. In the 1890s and early 1900s, acrobats, tightrope walkers, magicians and clowns, playing music as 'eccentric musicals', were found performing in public squares and courtyards of the most distinguished houses of cities and towns (Forero, 2014). These artists travelled accompanied by other artists performing 'Bambuco' music (ibid.). According to Forero (2012), they were the precursors of the first circus families such as the Dominguez, the Cacerolos, the Salpicones, the Farolitos, the Suarez, and the Forero (Chipilos), among others. This version coincides with the testimony provided by a member of the Dominguez family, who also reported the presence of acrobats ('maromeros') and 'artists troupes, as they were previously known', travelling across the country by 'mule train', performing in cities and towns in exchange for coins (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.22). These families were reported as coming from diverse backgrounds, particularly from Mexico. Some of them were described by Revollo (2004) who reported the activities of Mexican travellers that settled down in various countries across the Americas, dominating the circus business in the region.

### **The Consolidation of Traditional Circus in the 20th Century in Colombia**

The 20th century is understood as a moment of consolidation of circus families and the presentation of the traditional circus format of clowns, animals, and the big top (Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013). According to interviewees for this research, Colombian circuses were mainly comprised of human acrobatics and

domesticated animals (COL admin-artist 1). The introduction of exotic animals and the 'American' model came with Mexican circuses that soon dominated the urban market, displacing local circuses to the peripheries (COL admin-artist 1). An exception is the Colombian Circus Egred, one of the main circuses in South America (Revolledo, 2004, p.62), which operated between 1948 and 1977. Once again, the travelling circus of the big top is not the only format found. By the 1950s, bull-fighting rings were still called 'circuses' and were places where circus acts were also performed (COL instructor-artist 1).

The golden era of circus in Colombia is reported between the 1950s and 1970s and the closure of the circus Egred was definitive evidence of the decline of circus in the country (Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013). As in the case of Britain, assumptions on the decline and ascendance of circus should be further explored to understand the point of view from which they are constructed. In the meantime, crucial evidence is found around the rejection and persecution of circuses by the elite in the 1970s which suggests the 'decline' of circuses in response to official threats.

The VI Pan-American games were held in Cali in 1972 and the local authorities prepared the city to host the international event of the greatest magnitude. The city's mayor announced in the local newspaper, *El Pais*, the prohibition of 'street vendors, discotheques, fried food stalls, circuses, and spectacles, such as iron cities, monster castles, phantom museums, or mirror palaces'. The reason provided was that over the games, the city must look like a



Fig. 3.5: Prohibition of Circus at the Pan-American Games in Cali, 1972

'modern city' rather than a 'funfair'. The 'real city' should be seen by the international public (González-Mártinez, 2014).

By the end of the 1970s, circuses and clowns were 'enclosed' on the television screen rather than in private venues. Circus shows were recorded and broadcasted and included as part of the programme of entertainment TV shows (COL instructor-artist 1). Clowns, the most representative figure of circus in Colombia (King, 2017), became educators and main characters of pedagogic programmes directed to children and youth (COL instructor-artist 1). Programmes such as 'El Club de los Bulliciosos' (The club of the noisy), and 'Animalandia' (Animal land) tutored the children of the 1970s and 1980s in Colombia. With the economic liberation of the 1990s, national TV channels were privatised. A traditional clown comments:

'Telenovelas started to dominate showtimes and educational programmes were reduced and relegated to national TV channels that were now competing with the big capitals of private companies. With them, the figure of the clown disappeared from the TV' (COL instructor-artist 1).

The popularity of the clown allowed them to find new job opportunities as entertainers at children's parties and also as advertisers for local businesses to attract consumers (COL instructor-artist 1). This testimony coincides with the description of the 'carnavalesque economy' offered in the work of Barnaby King (2017), and the various forms that clowns have found to perform in Bogotá; both as a tool of capitalism as well as social protest and community transformation. Some examples are described in this thesis with Forero's work with the Muisca communities (see Chapter 5) and the protests of 1996 and 2009 demanding the attention of the government towards their social needs. The last one resulting in the recognition of circus as art by the Colombian government (see Chapter 5).

In the 1980s and 1990s, traditional circuses continued to adapt to circumstances demanded by the market and society. National and international TV stars were incorporated as part of the show. Rambos's, Robocops, and the characters of the Mexican Roberto Gomez Bolaños were some of the protagonists of circus at the time (COL instructor 2). In the meantime, theatre-circus companies emerged in the shadow of the theatre such as Muro de Espumas (COL admin-artist 1). Circo Para Todos is founded in 1995 to become later the only professional circus school in the country (e.g Pizon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013) and a main reference of social circus (see Chapter 6). The seeds of the contemporary movement are found complemented by a group of few outsiders that found juggling and circus in the public space (see Chapter 5).

## Chapter Four

### Circus in Colombia and Britain as Cases of Study

#### Why Circus?

I found circus through the work of Circolombia and Circo Para Todos (Circus for All) back in 2008 while working at the embassy of Colombia in London. Both organisations work in Colombia and Britain, combining artistic, educational, political and social agendas. Circo Para Todos (CPT) offers professional circus training to young people living in difficult circumstances (CPT, 2017). It was founded in 1995 in Cali by a Colombian and a British circus artist who were exploring alternative scenarios to exercise their art form. Circolombia was founded in 2006 in London by Circo Para Todos' British co-founder. The organisation consolidated years later as an artistic production company whose initial role was to support the integration of Colombian artists into the international circus market (CPT, 2017).

Their combined model of working with unprivileged populations, offering professional training and high-quality circus performances, while giving the opportunity to low-income youth to transform their lives, attracted my attention. Before acting as a foreign diplomat, and holding a degree in Economics, my early career evolved as a policymaker in social development with an emphasis on education and culture. I took part in the delimitation of education and cultural policies across regions, allocating public funding for the social sectors according to indicators of efficiency and incentives that could improve access to and the quality

of education and culture in Colombia. I was involved in the design of such indicators as well as policies and programs that could give the Colombian population complete access to education and culture. The work of Circo Para Todos did not only well-integrate the areas of my interest (i.e. culture, social welfare, political economy, education, and cultural exchange) but evidenced a real case, coming from the civil society that was tackling some of the most pressuring demands in Colombia. Their work had an extra component in the specific population group involved. Closer to the Pacific littoral, the youth attending the circus schools come from one of the most deprived areas in Colombia, inhabited by African descendants that came to the country through the African slave trade coordinated by Europeans in the Americas (Dennis, 2012). This specific colonial past combined with the current poor conditions in which inhabitants from the region live make this group one of the most affected by socioeconomic inequality in Colombia.

Circolombia was one of the cultural expressions that attracted the attention of the British press and British audiences the most. However, circus appeared to be secondary in front of other artistic disciplines. This was later confirmed in circus literature where the form is often affiliated with 'a marginal, low-brow culture in comparison to theatre, dance and music' (Purovaara, 2012, p.17). This peripheral condition—evidenced in my own experience working with circus and other art forms—turned circus into the perfect case study to address broader questions around centre-periphery dynamics.

A peripheral form like circus and peripheral groups (such as low-income youth and Afro-Colombian circus artists) were not only transforming realities but also the living standards of unprivileged groups (Garner, 2010) as well as circus audiences in Britain (Roundhouse, 2012), and circus models. Circo Para Todos' model was used as a reference by the Roundhouse to engage with vulnerable populations in some deprived areas in North London. This case suggested an inverse relationship of a 'peripheral' and 'developing' country influencing an industrialised 'core' nation, an inverse relationship to the traditional North-South influence. Peripheral populations were performing as any other professional artists in the main arts venues all over the world, sharing performing spaces with main circus companies such as Cirque du Soleil.

While Colombian circus artists were having their work recognised abroad, performing with great success in Britain (Tomalyn, 2017) and various other countries (Jaworowsky, 2012; TheaterOnline, 2012; APA, 2013), circus arts, Circo Para Todos and Circolombia were practically unknown in Colombia, at least, outside the circus circuit as I was evidencing while working at the Embassy and years later when I joined the administrative team of both organisations. In this latter role, I was in charge of supporting their institutional development, leading fundraising strategies and disseminating their work in Colombia and Britain. This experience brought me closer to circus. It also placed me on the other side of the table, no longer as a policymaker and funding body, but as cultural administrator convincing public and private authorities to invest in circus. At the same time, circus was just

increasingly gaining attention by the Ministry of Culture and other cultural authorities. In 2012, the first Ibero-American circus summit was organised by the Ministry of Culture in Bogotá in partnership with IBERESCENA (Mincultura, 2012). In 2011, the ministerial team also sponsored the first Laboratorio de Circo taking place at Circo Para Todos in Cali (Universia, 2011). The year after, the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs chose Circolombia as a special project in the cultural agenda to promote Colombia abroad (MRE, 2012).

This combined experience of working as a policymaker and cultural administrator both inside and outside public and private organisations added questions to the broader geopolitical enquiries formulated above. Is Colombia influencing British circus? How is this relationship observed? Why the renewed interest of public authorities towards circus? To what extent will the renewed interest benefit circus and organisations such as Circo Para Todos? Is circus becoming central? What are the repercussions in terms of its supposed 'marginal' character? What are the positive and negative consequences of bringing a 'peripheral' form to the centre?

The thesis started exploring these questions from a broader perspective, namely having circus as a possible case study without focusing the analysis on circus. Even though this particular case involved interesting aspects of analysis, I was deliberately evading the tendency to affiliate the research within a specific academic discipline and a specialised area of study such as 'economics', 'sociology', 'Colombian/Latin American studies' or 'circus studies'. I started

reviewing a wide range of literature without following any specific discipline or theoretical background.

Circus was not chosen as an area of study from the beginning of the process. My interest was the analysis of cultural process and relationships between Colombia and Britain in a broader sense. The aim was to address and to clarify structural geopolitical debates and the position of Colombia and Britain in the global context, namely their relationship and how those circumstances influence the making of culture, identity formation and socio-cultural empowerment in Colombia. In search of those debates, circus became the perfect case to address issues on cultural production, identity and peripheral populations from the point of view of an art form traditionally ignored in the analysis of culture and societies. Circus ratified itself as an interesting area of study. Rather than choosing this form from the beginning, following my previous involvement with the field, or fulfilling a personal interest towards the form, circus offers a myriad of interesting possibilities in the analysis of broader debates.

### **Why Colombia and Britain?**

As explained above, the first motivation to analyse circus in Britain and Colombia was my previous experience working with Circo Para Todos and Circolombia, as well as working in culture and international politics in both countries. The aim was to investigate the combined work of those organisations in between Britain and Colombia, as well as the success of Colombian artists in Britain and their influence

on British audiences and cultural scenarios. This case suggested an inverse relationship of a peripheral country and a peripheral art form influencing an industrialised nation in opposition to the traditional North-South influence. But also, there is no study covering Colombia and Britain together, making the interconnection an unexplored area of analysis.

The purpose then was to investigate this relationship, that is, how both countries are influencing one another and lessons that can be learned from this collaboration. Is the centre influencing the periphery or the periphery influencing the centre? This was the broader question. During this process, not only did Britain and Colombia become of my particular interest, but of the circus community as a whole. Both countries play an important role in circus transformations, as this thesis demonstrates. They also offer a perfect case to explain centre-periphery dynamics in circus and the global society broadly. At first sight, they are not necessarily representative cases of study in the contemporary practice of circus.

In the global North and industrialised countries, Britain is described as a 'follower' rather than a leading actor in contemporary developments (Selwood et al., 1995, p.50). Countries such as France, Canada, Australia and Sweden, for example, have played a more central place offering 'the most innovative new-circus work' (ibid.). France is well known for its contribution in the emergence of 'new' and contemporary circus, and more importantly for the respectability as art and aesthetic innovations (Tooley-Stott, 1958; Speaight, 1980; Wallon, 2002). Circus Oz and other Australian companies are acknowledged as one of the pioneers of the new circus in

the 1970s and 1980s, and were highly influential in Britain (Bolton, 1987, 2004; Selwood, et al., 1995). Cirque du Soleil and Quebecois circus are placed at the centre of the 'reinvention' of circus (Jacobs, 2016, p.28). In Colombia and Latin America, Cirque du Soleil is the main reference in the emergence of 'new or contemporary' circus (e.g. Revolledo, 2004; Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Infantino, 2013; Forero, 2014). Montreal circus school and its research centre are also key references in circus training. The Dance and Circus School at the Stockholm University (DOHA) is taking artistic circus creation at a postgraduate level with their master and PhD research programs. Finally, Australia and Canada are taking the lead in circus studies and the consolidation of international research networks (e.g. CAIOC, 2018). This is evidenced in the recent publications that are bringing together scholars from all over the world (Tait and Lavers, 2016; Leroux and Bason, 2016; Fricker and Malouin, 2018).

In the global South and in Latin America specifically, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Cuba are more representative. Argentina's street circus movement 'circo callejero' is a well-known phenomenon that has extended all over the region and beyond (Infantino, 2013, p.279). This movement has a strong influence on contemporary circus developments in Latin America and this research finds a crucial influence in Colombia (Chapter 5). Mexico has a long and vast trajectory in the developments of traditional circus. American circus Hernandez was one of the first circuses that performed in Britain in the second half of the 19th century when the US took the lead in circus transformations (Mauclair, 2003). Mexican artists moved

around Latin America and settled down, giving birth to the first circus dynasties in the region (Revolledo, 2004). As in the case of Colombia where the first circus families were mainly Mexican descendants (Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013). The Mexican Gasca Brothers circus (Circo de los Hermanos Gasca) is the main representative of traditional circus in Colombia and the most established one, identified as the only one that really manages to face the bureaucracies required to stand a circus big top in main urban centres (COL admin-artist 2). The national circus school of Rio de Janeiro is one of the first in Latin America after the national circus school of Cuba, founded in 1978 (Revolledo, 2004). It has a strong circus tradition, recognised as one of the first places where European circuses were established in the 19th century (ibid.) and the place where circus movements from North and South met in the emergence of social circus (Rivard et al., 2010).

The comparison of circus in Colombia and Britain offers an interesting example in the study of circus. While Britain is regarded as the birthplace of circus and British history became an obliged reference for circus globally, Colombia is on the other side of the story. No circus history has been compiled while less is said about the place it occupies in the circus world. This parallel reflects the reality of many countries where authoritative histories and analyses of the practice are coming up. With Britain at the centre of circus developments and Colombia at the periphery, the comparison could support the making of unwritten circus histories. This thesis reveals invisible actors in the making of circus and a hidden side of Colombia's contribution to circus in official accounts.

On the other hand, the central role of Britain in circus histories and circus developments is limited to a brief period of less than 100 years. As commented above, the 'inventor' of circus (Speaight, 1980) is described today as a 'follower' (Selwood, et al., 1995) and a periphery in contemporary circus. What role has Britain played in circus development since then? More notable, how Britain at the centre of circus became a periphery today? What are the reasons behind that central role and why has the central place not lasted for long? The following two chapters explore these questions as part of the broader question that investigates the place of Britain in today's global circus.

On the other side is Colombia without a circus history. Chapter 6 unveils the role that Colombia has played in circus transformations at the turn of the 21st century and the emergence of the 'social circus'. This movement is highly influencing the circus practice all over the world and is referenced as raising the profile of circus currently (Pickles, 2015). This movement is attributed to Canadian Cirque du Monde, the human arm of Cirque du Soleil. The thesis reveals how social circus today is an appropriation of an alternative movement that emerged in South America in the early 1990s and translated into modern canons and the language of the North (see Chapter 6). Colombia is a central and invisible actor in official recounts of the social circus. This is an attempt to raise awareness of the influence of Colombia in contemporary circus and social-engagement circus as developed in the works of Bailly (2007) and King (2017). Finally, Colombia is playing a central role in

circus developments in Britain. It is not just inspiring models but increasingly included in cultural policies involving circus.

The problematic and enquiries above are addressed in the following chapters under four main research questions: What is the place that Britain and Colombia occupy in circus today? Is Colombia influencing circus developments in Britain or vice versa? How is the recognition of circus happening in both countries? Is the circus history influencing the contemporary practice in both countries? Before addressing these questions, the following section provides some context for the analysis of Colombia and the broader relationship with Britain.

### **Colombian Context: Diverse Populations Divided into Two Nations**

Colombia is a diverse country of multiple climates, topographies, and populations (Hudson, 2010). It is located North-West of South America, sharing borders with the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, and Panamá. The Andes mountains cross the country from South to North resulting in a complex topography that has complicated communication and mobility across the nation (Melo, 2017). It is a country described as a 'contradiction' for the coexistence of violence, corruption and deep inequality with modern urban infrastructure and a strong financial system (Farnsworth-Alvear et al., 2017, p.5). From the Spanish invasion of the 16th century, the history of Colombia could be resumed as a story of exclusion, massacres, and displacement. This has instigated violence and the

perpetuation of social inequalities that have characterised the country. Less evidence is found of a conflictive past in pre-Columbian societies (Melo, 2017).

When Spanish conquerors invaded the territory in the 1500s, they found a population ranging from one and a half to three million people gathered in several indigenous groups speaking over 180 languages (Ruiz, 1978). These groups came down from Central America following the migratory movement coming from Siberia between 14,600 and 17,500 years ago (Young, 2018). These communities relied on collective and communal ownership of land and institutions (Yashar, 2015). This was one of the main disputes and they faced struggles after the imposition of European systems (Melo, 2017) and the resulted hybrid economic model between feudal Spain and capitalism coming from Britain and the Netherlands through the commerce in the Caribbean (Tirado-Mejia, 2000).

Diverse populations already coexisted before the arrival of European conquerors and the 'mestizaje', the term used to explain the mix of native Americans, Europeans, and African populations. Peoples from at least four continents co-existed in the 1500s in the territory called Colombia today. Such diverse populations make Colombia one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the Western Hemisphere, with 85 different ethnic groups (Hudson, 2010, p.86).

The mestizaje gave birth to mixed groups divided in zambo (African and Native Americans), Mulato (African and White), Criollo (Spanish born in Colombia), Mestizo (Spanish and Native Americans), and white (Spanish). The notion of the mestizaje is highly debatable for its repercussions in the construction of a

national identity and the 'whitening', or social climbing practices within the population (Hudson, 2010, p.87). It relates to the assimilation of socio-cultural and racial practices of European conquerors by local populations inhabiting Colombia (Vila de Pineda, 2002, p.251). According to Peter Wade (1993), Mestizaje 'refers to the master narrative used by the country's lettered elite to promote a homogenous culture and a sense of shared identity among the diverse inhabitants of the emerging nation' (cited in Dennis, 2012, p.5).

Such diversity inhabits a territory that has been divided in two nations since colonial times. The split between the Spanish republic and 'la republica de los indios' or the republic of the Amerindian groups (Melo, 2017) is the first division of this kind. The Spanish colonisation was mainly urban and feudal. Conquerors founded and inhabited cities following their European urban living arrangements located in the Andean region (Melo, 2017). Indigenous populations were obliged to live in towns similar to the Spanish clusters, and close to the harvesting lands or 'resguardos' (Melo, 2017, p.71). From 1593 onwards, indigenous populations became the workforce of Spanish invaders providing a path to a new social order of permanent work exploitation (Melo, 2017, p.50). 'Civilisation' opposed la barbarie del campo, that is the Indian republic, (the 'barbarism' of the countryside), and campesino (peasant) and 'montañoero' (highlander) became terms of disdain (ibid.).

The result was a hierarchical society with the Spanish at the top of the pyramid, followed by criollos and mestizos, with similar socio-political rights, although excluded from public administration. Amerindians were at the bottom,

harvesting the land and working the mines under the 'encomienda', the system of tributes paid in labour and in goods from those Indians cultivating the lands (Melo, 2017). African slaves were not considered civilians and were thus excluded from the pyramid or any other social scale (ibid.). Such inequalities animated the independence project, with criollos aiming at occupying political jobs like the other Spanish, and the peasants and indigenous struggling with increased taxes.

The imposition of European culture and the marginalisation of indigenous and African traditions resulted in the alienation of pre-existing structures. This colonial period was characterised by the introduction of Spanish cultural values through missionary activity and the establishment of monastic schools where natives were taught to read and write (Ruiz, 1978). The secondary school Colegio de Nuestra Señora del Rosario founded in 1563 taught the liberal arts: logic, rhetoric, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, following the European tradition. Higher education was mainly focused on teaching theology, canon and civil law, philosophy, and the arts (ibid.). Indigenous practices and world views such as Shamanism were persecuted during the conquest and almost eradicated in the 19th century with rubber exploitations in the Amazon (Páramo, 2004; Taussig, 1987).

As Mena and Herrera (1994) explain, the institutionalisation of Colombia's culture developed in between two scenarios; on the one hand, the exaltation of high culture and the esteem for cultural manifestations of the elite, white, educated, sophisticated, of the 'salon', of European standards; and the

disdain and denial towards multiple manifestations of a 'popular culture' that emerged in the encounter of Spain, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Since colonial times, this popular culture operated in a relegated position at the margin of the dominant culture, with the last one dominating the attention of governors and policies.

This is evident in the first cultural policy document written in 1978 in which cultural expressions coming from Europe are placed at the centre of the analysis. Local or popular culture is reported almost as inexistent and occupies a lower category. In this document Ruiz (1978). In the case of music, liturgical, and religious music was composed by choir-masters, clerics, and friars. Parallel with this 'cultivated' music in the European tradition, popular forms of music continued to be played at traditional festivals and family gatherings. Spanish, indigenous, and black African strains combined to give birth to popular Colombian airs such as bambuco, cumbia, joropo, and pasillo.

The second division is found in the independence movement and its aftermath with divisions between federalists and centralists, who could not come to an agreement on the political system that would sustain the new nation. The former was led by Santander, the Vice-president of the new republic, aiming for a decentralised system following the model of the US; centralists were based on European systems of a central power run from Bogotá, at the head of the liberator and first president of the republic, Simon Bolivar. In the agitated 19th century, Colombia's population was divided into two groups: the first 8% to 10%, who hold

the monopoly of public administration, education, and wealth and the rest, or 'la gran masa' (the masses) who cultivate the land, work in the mines, and 'survive with the hard work of their hands' (Ruiz, 1978, p.24). To be part of the first group, one just needed a certain level of income and 'culture' or civilisation (ibid.). The latter group, on the other hand, is described as illiterate, lacking moral resources and opposed to the progress of the nation (ibid.). The premonition at the time was the utopia of 'the minority holding wealth and power' and being able to counteract 'the evils' of such 'complete and general ignorance' (ibid.).

With the creation of the official political parties at the end of the 19th century, the 20th century was marked by the division of the Liberal and Conservative republics that resulted in La Violencia (the Great Violence) of the 1940s. In the 21st century these traditional parties are almost diluted, giving rise to a new form of Latin American politics in which elections follow individual candidates rather than a party (Velasquez-Rivera, 2000).

Social inequalities continued in the consolidation of the new republic and perdured until the present time, despite the abolition of slaves and future attempts for the recognition of a pluriethnic and multicultural nation in the political constitution of 1991. Afro-Colombian communities are dispersed all over the region, especially on the coasts, and are separated from one another by topographical barriers, different experiences of racial discrimination, integration, and socio-political, cultural, and economic development (Dennis, 2012). This situation has played against a consolidation of an Afro-Colombian identity that could bring those

communities together in the claim for their rights (ibid.). There is also a tendency to assimilate the dominant culture, as an attempt to separate themselves from the slave tradition, the humiliation associated with it, and the stigma of being black in a racist society (ibid., p.4). 'In the case of Colombia, it has commonly been argued that only a very vague black identity has existed based on ambiguous notions of blackness, a common history, and shared experiences of racial discrimination' (Dennis, 2012, p.4)

After the independence wars, periods of relative calm were followed by civil wars (Melo 2017). Disputes between the Conservative and Liberal parties for the state were accompanied by disputes to control the land that the Spanish regime started to distribute in the 1750s as a response to popular revolts (Velasquez-Rivera, 2000). During the 19th century, formal and informal distributions of the land continued. Only processes happening in the centre of the country, such as the renowned 'Colonisation Antioqueña' were supported by the state (ibid.).

In the rest of the country, the process was a spontaneous occupation of the land by people moving around the territory finding a place to settle and cultivate land. While in the former process, the Colombian state intervened and provided guarantees to the parties involved, the later process was uncontrolled causing conflict and disputes over land. The first group was supported by conservative ideals and the second one by liberal ones (Velasquez-Rivera 2000). The process encouraged the division of people and territory between conservatives and liberals giving rise to La Violencia and the creation of guerrilla groups, initially

composed by peasants defending the land and counter-fighting the process of displacement. The murder of liberal candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948, known as 'El Bogotazo', marks the rising point of La Violencia. To put an end to the conflict, liberals and conservatives agreed to alternate power every four years. The agreement known as the 'Frente Nacional', was rather a 'bipartisan dictatorship' and far from putting an end to the conflict resulting in further violence against left movements and any other governmental alternatives (Velasquez-Rivera, 2000, p.6). Ideological divisions between both parties diminished, while dominant politics became highly influenced by conservative and right-wing ideologies, following the discourse of dominant capitalist economies (ibid.). Development programs followed the interest of the Colombian and transnational bourgeoisies giving privilege to clientelism and violence as ways to exert politics (ibid.). The consequence is corruption, impunity, diversification of violence (validated as governmental processes) or what Velasquez-Rivera (2000, p.6) resumes as 'the privatisation of politics'.

The rise of the drug cartels and disputes for political and economic power triggered another violent period during which paramilitary groups or private armies defended land owners and capital holders from the guerrilla groups and found the production of cocaine and drug trafficking an income source to fund these armies (Duncan, 2006). Paramilitary groups were dismantled in the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez (2002–2010), who came to power when the FARC guerrilla groups were at its height. Backed by the 9/11 and terrorism as the main

global conflict, Uribe gained power (Criscione and Vignolo, 2014, pp.475-476) to later change the constitution and thus were re-elected for another governmental period (Semana, 2016). Despite great opposition conducted by Uribe (Lafuente, 2016), a peace agreement was signed with the following government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) to put an end to a conflict of over 70 years.

The country began another time of division between 'Uribistas' and 'Petristas' (right-wing and left-wing) and renewed illegal groups (Uribe 2018). After the signature of the peace agreement with the guerrilla FARC in 2016, the number of deaths has fallen from 2,713 in 2002 to 210 in 2016. However, cocaine crops are growing, and, recently, more than 250 community leaders have been killed (Reuters, 2017).

In between guerrilla, paramilitaries, and the Colombia state, a long tradition of social movements constitute a fourth actor in Colombia's history. They are members of the civil society organised in a myriad of groups claiming for the recognition of their rights and structural transformations. 2017 marked the 40th anniversary of a representative group. The 1977 general strike (Paro Cívico Nacional) called by workers and was joined by peasants, indigenous, and urban movements, such as community associations, students, and young people, housewives, unemployed, and street vendors (Garcia-Velandia, 2017, pp.19-21). Their claims were resumed in wages, rights of protest and the right to unionise, investment in public education, reduction of prices of basic commodities' and public services (ibid.). After the negotiation with the government at the time, Turbay

Ayala launched the 'Estatuto de Seguridad' in 1978 where guerrilla groups, left movements, social movements and any kind of social protest were treated as equal, punishing any attempt of protest (ibid.). The 2016 peace accord, in a broad regional and national participatory process, agreed on the Statutory Law of Citizen Participation and Guarantees to the Right to Protest (Garcia-Velandia, 2017, p.21). The implementation of the agreement is still pending and in the hands of the peace agreement detractors.

After recovering from the economic crises of the 1990s, the period 2002–2011 is reported as an important achievement in terms of access to education, health and jobs (Angulo et al., 2013, p.2). Poverty was reduced from 50% to 34% and the middle class increased from 16% to 27% (ibid., p.5). Vulnerable groups (households in between the middle class and the poor) increased from 32% to 37% and the high class (households with income levels higher than 50 US dollars per day) from 1.5% to 2.4%. Despite the efforts, the percentage of middle class households is still very low compared to other Latin American countries, where in Mexico reaches the 40% and in Chile the 50% (ibid., p.3). In addition, the middle class in Colombia still present problems in terms of 'labour informality' and 'deficient human capital' (ibid., p.3).

Colombia is still the second most unequal country in Latin America with a Gini coefficient of 50.8 (World Bank, 2018). The main socio-economic 'deprivation' of Colombia's population lies in the lack of work and educational opportunities, on which 66% of the middle class relies on informal jobs (Angulo et

al., 2013, p.15). In 2011, 16% of the Colombian youth was inactive (i.e. not studying or working nor in search of a job), an indicator that remained fairly similar to 17% in 2002 (ibid., p.17). Economic differences still persist, where 43% of 'poor' and 'vulnerable' youth between the age of 18 and 24, were outside the educational system, unemployed, or not looking for work (ibid., p.18), compared to 6% in the middle class and 2% in the high income groups. In addition to employment and education, the main concerns for these groups are in terms of shelter and public services.

### **Shamanism: A Pre-Colombian Heritage Marginalised in the Construction of Modern Societies**

A final section to conclude the Colombian context, is offered here in an attempt to describe Shamanism, the world view existent in pre-Columbian times before the arrival of the Spanish and the construction of the 'modern world'. The topic is relevant to the thesis for various reasons. First, as a cosmology and world view, which was valid in pre-Columbian times, and still present today. Second, as a cosmovision and philosophy marginalised in the construction of the modern world; and thus an alternative world view to modern and western knowledge. Third, for its relation to art, culture, and more specifically with circus, with a direct link found between circus and Shamanism, both in literature and in practice, as will be discussed below.

Shamanism is an essential part of the pre-Columbian indigenous cosmologies. It is a philosophy of life and a way to approach the world from a holistic point of view (Páramo, 2004). The world and its different dimensions (cosmos, nature, and humans) are interconnected, each one affecting the others. Shamanism is considered a series of ritual, magic, and sacred practices that human beings have practiced long before the Palaeolithic period (James, 2004). It has also been related to the origin of human image-making and the foundation of all later religious forms (Lewis-Williams, 2002).

The word derives from the Tungus language of central Asia and several and disputed definitions coexist (Lewis-Williams, 2002). The most common, found in western literature, is the one developed by Mircea Eliade from the study of Siberian and Central Asia hunting societies. Such definition is seen as a formalist and reductionist approach, in which the shaman is believed to cure and make miracles (Pinzon, et.al., 2004); it is seen as a doctor and moreover, a deity that may be also a priest, a mystic, and a poet. In contrast to this perception, the shamans of Vaupes-Colombia, for example, are seen as ecologists rather than priests (ibid.). Their power derives mainly from entheogens (psychoactive substance) such as yajé or ayahuasca, rapé and coca leaves, and their vast knowledge of the ecosystems surrounding their communities (ibid.).

The constant element in the different approaches to shamanism found in the diverse groups that inhabited the Colombian territory before the arrival of the Spanish, is the representation of the cosmos (Páramo, 2004) composed by three

overlapped dimensions: the world of the sky and deities, the world of human beings, domestic animals, and plants, and the world of death. People can cross those worlds with the support of the shaman who is a mediator between the spheres (ibid.). Shamanism broadly, is the human capacity to establish coherent relations as a whole with the sacred, divine, and marvellous spheres of the world; the vision of another reality that is also part of us; shamanism is art, shamanism is the human ability to be creative (Páramo, 2004). Shamanism is an ecstatic experience of a profound transformation of the ordinary mental codification; it permitted the change from a mammal brain to a human/social brain, opening an ocean of possibilities beyond the purely biological and impulsive (James, 2004).

Shamanism is a philosophy of life grounded in solid criteria that relates one's identity with itself, with its social environment, and with the physical world (Jiménez, 2004). It is a practice still present in Colombia these days; in the case of the Paeces community in the Cauca region, one of the most affected by political and armed conflict, the re-construction of indigenous cosmology and the re-legitimation of shamans are considered as essential steps to construct an autonomous and peaceful coexistence in the region (Rappaport, 2008).

Almost destroyed in the modernity process and the disenchantment of the world, it provides an alternative way to approximate life that can challenge modern beliefs, such as lineal approximations of life, specialisation, and segmentation of spheres. Shamanism has also been related to the origin of human image-making as well as being the origin of all later religious forms (Lewis-Williams,

2002). James (2004) argues that posterior religions are ideological deformations of the initial shamanism; among the deformation there is the prohibition of individual contact with the sacred, imposing mediators and priests, which were in charge of hiding ways to access God. In Ancient Greece, shamanic consumption of hallucinogen plants became a mysterious cult. Abrahamic religions eliminated these types of practices, being persecuted and accused of being related to the devil in the Middle Ages.

It is a philosophy of life that could explain current idiosyncrasies in Colombia and contribute to the appreciation provided by Fals-Borda (1981) regarding the lack of recognition of our own technological and scientific knowledge; national projects are sustained mainly on models developed abroad instead of enquiring about existent ones in the nation. As an example, Páramo (2002) sustains that the Shamans, more than anything, are ecologists, experts on the environment and its natural functioning.

Shamanism is also related to artistic and cultural production in Colombia. In pre-Columbian societies, goldsmithing was the most representative artistic practice of indigenous populations before the arrival of the Spanish. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1988) evidences direct links with shamanism. The artists transformed a raw material into a material and symbolic element. Artists and shamans could be seen as those mediums and transformers. Life and culture are seen to be in constant transformation in pre-Columbian societies.

Shamanism is about healing and transformation, the main concepts attached to this human philosophy. Distinct to modern and western philosophy, humans and nature are seen as one, rather than as separate in which the first one controls and dominates the second; nature is present to serve human purposes in a one-way avenue.

A direct connection between circus and shamanism is found in literature. On the historical side, the origins of circuses are attached to rituals and religious ceremonies (e.g. Qifeng, 1985; Seibel, 1993; Revollo, 2004; Wall, 2013). In the case of acrobatics, the first practices were associated with shamanism and 'sympathetic magic', when shamans imitate animals in trance states, walking on their hands, or simply dancing around the fire (Wall, 2013, p.41). On the performing side, Hill (2001, pp.xiii–xiv) establishes various links such as 'the journey to the upper realms on the trapeze' or 'the nether worlds marked by fire'; the primary connection is in 'the transformation, resulting in various supernatural powers such as the ability to fly through the airs with the greatest of ease' (ibid.), and 'the ability of a clown to take on a different persona or personae, while in an altered state of consciousness, [...] the trickster extends the boundaries of the permissible and interjects a much needed spirit of disorder' (ibid.).

The same work refers to testimonies provided by circus artists, who associate their practice with shamanism or have found inspiration in shamanic practice:

'I don't feel separation from society. I feel like I'm trying to provide my piece

of the pie [...] the work of the shaman is to keep people aware of other worlds and other possibilities [...] (I'm not saying I'm a shaman – that would be pretentious). But I'm all about trying to break down barriers between people' Hill (200, p.xiv).

### **Colombian and British Relationship**

In the midst of 'Brexit' and the 'peace' referendums during which Britons said NO to remaining in the European Union, and Colombians said NO to the peace process with the guerrilla FARC, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and British Prime Minister Theresa May met over the first Colombian state visits to the UK: 'This first State Visit by a Colombian President to the United Kingdom confirms the strength of bilateral relations based on shared values of democracy, prosperity, and respect for human rights.' (GOV.UK, 2016). In her opening speech, May declared that 'Colombia is one of Britain's most important partners in Latin America, and this visit provides an opportunity to strengthen the ties that have existed between our countries for more than 200 years' (ibid.). The declaration recognises decades of growth that have led Colombia to become the fourth largest economy in Latin America and the home of the continent's leading businesses. An economic success, Britain invested £1 billion in 2015 becoming the third largest foreign investor in Colombia over the past decade (ibid.).

Formal diplomatic relations between Britain and the Republic of Colombia were first established in November 1825, when Manuel Jose Hurtado, Colombia's envoy in London, was presented to King George IV (McFarlane 2011, p. 10). However the relationship dates back to the 16th century and the new commercial routes opened in the conquest of the Americas. Britain was one of the main benefactors of such commercial links, as one of the main traders of American and European goods in the Caribbean (ibid.).

The neutral role of Britain in the independence of Colombia indirectly influenced the revolution through commerce, culture, and foreign debt (McFarlane, 2011). True to Spanish and European interests, British official position was to not support the American nations but to remain loyal to Spain (ibid.). However, British merchants supported local independence movements through the commerce from Jamaica to Cartagena and other Colombian towns on the Caribbean coast (Bell, 2011).

This role constituted an important threat to the Spanish in the middle of the wars and internal revolts footing the oppression of the new imposed system. British sailors and pirates navigated the coast of the territories 'discovered' by the Spanish, in search of gold and commodities extracted by the Spaniards in the new territories. Francis Drake, and later Captain Morgan, arrived in Cartagena, and on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, supporting the local struggle for independence (Bell, 2011). McFarlane notes:

'Great Britain provided more than just military backing, commercial

opportunities, and financial support to Spanish American leaders: it also offered a powerful, practical, living model for the construction of their post-independence nationhood' (Racine, 2010, p.425 cited in McFarlane 2011, p. 20).

There are three stages (periods of time) widely recognised as areas of British influence in Colombia: i) The conquest of the new world, through commerce and the role of Britain as a neutral, or indirect sponsor of independence, threatening the Spanish dominance over its American territories, and the trafficking of commodities and slaves from the Americas; ii) Pre-revolution times: influence of liberal ideas that inspired 'criollos' in their revolutionary notions, promoted in the independence campaigns (McFarlane 2011); and iii) Cultural influence through educational reforms throughout the centuries (Mena and Herrera, 1994) and the consumption of British commodities (Otero-Cleves, 2009).

Otero-Cleves (2009, p.40) argues that contrary to some common theories of cross-cultural consumption, such as 'creolization', the consumption of English commodities in Colombia reflects a different process. The appropriation of English goods was the product of a conscious search of the upper class to intensify cross-cultural contact with Europe and, consequently, a mechanism to transform local identity rather than protect it, as well as an 'effective means to generate social distinction' (ibid.). An illustrative example is when Jaime Garzon, a well-known humourist casting Colombia's socio cultural and political realities, commented: 'In

Colombia, the rich want to be British, the middle class American, the intellectual believe they're French and the poor want to be Mexicans' (Cosoy, 2016).

However, on the other hand, as Brown (2015) explains, the history of Latin America has been placed in the periphery of global history. The role of the region within global problems is barely analysed, at least within the discipline of history. Tales have followed the imperialistic construction of history, in which Latin America is portrayed as a victim and a passive and oppressed subject. Less is said on the influence of the region on other regions and global phenomenon. It has been from the sociologic and cultural study perspectives that inverse relationships have been analysed. Brown suggests the importance of re-interpreting and re-writing history by including those discoveries and further evidence. Some of them include the sense of 'state'; how cultural goods exported from Colombia and Latin America have transformed other cultures, for example the coffee and chocolate drinking culture (ibid.). This is a history to be fully constructed, by the hand of cultural studies, sociologists, anthropologists, and other areas of analysis, that have brought Latin America to the core in the works of Walter Mignolo, Garcia-Candlini, Arturo Escobar and Raul Prebisch, to mention just a few.

## Chapter Five

### Circus Recognition and its Contemporary Peripheries

#### **“Colombia: A Circus Power”**

In 2011, the Colombian Ministry of Culture commissioned the first diagnostic study to identify the size and characteristics of the circus community in the country (Pinzon and Villa, 2011). This effort was part of a series of initiatives and concrete actions taken by the government authorities to strengthen the sector and 'the visibility of circus' (COL policymaker 4). Two years earlier, traditional circus artists marched in protest from Santander in the north of the country to Bogotá, arriving at the Ministry of Culture, demanding their benefits and rights in terms of pension and social security (COL policymaker 2). The event evidenced the existence of a forgotten and invisible practice, as ministerial representatives stated: 'The evidence showed us that the presence of circuses in Colombia goes back almost 200 years. An invisible history unveiled by the 2009 protest' (COL policymaker 2).

In the same year, the Subdivision of Theatre within the Arts Department at the Ministry of Culture changed its name to the 'Subdivision of Theatre and Circus' (COL policymaker 1; COL policymaker 2). After this recognition, other authorities, for example, Bogotá's Institute of the Arts, included circus within their public agendas (COL policymaker 3). This moment marked a turning point in the recent history of circus. Government authorities acknowledge circus as an existent form that must be supported within cultural policies and funding. Circus is

recognised by the public establishment. It was reported in the media that Colombia was a 'powerhouse of circus artists' with the presence of around 500 traditional circuses (El Tiempo, 2012a). The report presented the main results of the Ministry's diagnostic study, describing the itinerant and precarious work of traditional circuses and the competition of Ecuadorian and Mexican circuses as one of their main challenges. 'The other reality' is revealed in the 'contemporary circus', a worldwide phenomenon following Cirque du Soleil's style, presenting circus outside the big top (ibid.). The situation of contemporary artists was reported in striking contrast to the traditional movement. Regarding the professional training of the former: '75 per cent have taken workshops, 20 per cent have a professional degree – short-term courses and circus schools abroad; and 5 per cent have undertaken vocational training' (El Tiempo, 2012a). Finally, 'social circus' was also highlighted, as a movement with certain 'infrastructure and teachers' offering circus training to young people on low incomes. The report highlighted Circo para Todos (Circus for All) in Cali, which by 2012 had trained 86 young artists, 'some of them working in international circuses' (El Tiempo, 2012a).

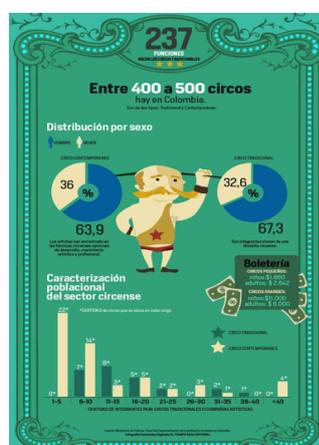


Fig. 5.1: Left: El Tiempo (2012a). Published 7th February 2012. Right: El Tiempo (2012b). Published 9th February 2012.

A few days later, caricaturist Beto Barreto reacted to the piece. 'Circus Power' was the title of the caricature depicting a dialogue between two circus performers at the traffic lights:

- 'Dicen que Colombia es potencia en cirqueros' (They say Colombia is a circus power).
- 'Es que hay mucho semáforo para entrenar' (That's because there are plenty of traffic lights to train on).

A 'circus boom' (COL admin-artist 2) was mentioned by a practitioner interviewed in Bogotá, the capital city. The first decade of the 21st century is recognised as the 'boom' for the increased number of circus artists and the renewed attention from government authorities. According to this practitioner, the reason for the 'boom' is that circus is a familiar place:

'Circus is accessible and closer to the people. The boom responds to the accessibility of the practice. You start doing one thing, and then one more, and more, and then you are hooked! You discover you've got talents that you can cultivate. It's such a cool place. It is a place of freedom' (COL admin-artist 2).

This closeness of the form was accompanied by the rise of the internet. 'Back in the 1990s, we were two people doing this. Now with the internet, people have access to circus on YouTube and other channels' (COL admin-artist 2).

The 2009 protest was described by functionaries at the Ministry of Culture as the main event that triggered the renewed interest from the government authorities. 'Los Caminantes' or "the walkers as they were known" (COL policymaker 2) evidenced an invisible practice overlooked by the cultural establishment and their problem in terms of itinerancy and the difficulty in accessing health care, education, and social security (COL policymaker 1; COL policymaker 2). However, this was not the first time that circus artists raised their voice in front of government authorities in Colombia. In 1996, a group of 50 clowns protested outside the National Congress (El Tiempo, 1996). The group were members of the circus union – Sindicato Nacional de Artistas de Circo y Variedades (Circus and Variety Artists Union – Sinacircol) and were demanding the formalisation of their working and professional conditions (El Tiempo, 1996). The article highlighted the curious weapons they used while demanding something serious: 'makeup, red nose and colourful outfit' (El Tiempo, 1996).

Something different happened in 2012. The 2009 protest coincided with the presence at the Ministry of Culture of two representatives with a particular interest in circus. Both declared that they had been circus enthusiasts and circus lovers from an early age. However, they also had a previous involvement in circus through the work of Circo para Todos in Cali back in the 1990s (COL policymaker 4) and Bogotá's International Theatre Festival showcasing international circus companies (COL policymaker 1). Two additional events were mentioned by these participants: Circolombia's success abroad (COL policymaker 1) and circus policies

implemented in other countries in Latin America, particularly Argentina (COL policymaker 1).

The final interest from cultural authorities reported is the recognition of a valuable and invisible practice. 'Circus artists exist' (COL policymaker 2) and constitute a 'relevant section of the performing arts; this sole reason is sufficient for us to invest in circus as we do in any other performing art' (COL policymaker 3). While the recognition and ministerial effort was perceived favourably within the government authorities, some resistance was found within the circus sector, and most importantly, in the theatre sector (COL policymaker 1). As part of the internal resistance, policymakers noted that traditional circuses consider themselves 'impresarios' and a business activity rather than 'culture or art' (COL admin-artist 3). However, they are making some 'ancient claims that are impossible for us to meet' (COL admin-artist 1). Without further information on those 'ancient claims', representatives from traditional circuses manifested their demands in terms of licences and spaces available to install their circus tents, public services, taxation, access to social security, and various other limitations they face in the functioning of fixed and itinerant circuses (COL instructor-artist 2). Rather than 'artistic' or 'cultural' needs, their demands relate to the conditions available for them to perform. This situation was confirmed in the diagnostic reports (Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013).

The resistance by the theatre sector was highlighted as the main opposition the Ministry of Culture faced in the recognition of circus. It was a very

'complex situation', as theatre perceives circus as a completely different form (COL policymaker 1). To be placed within the 'theatre and circus' box disturbed the theatre community (ibid.). As this ministerial representative commented: 'I guess the dispute is over now, although I never understood their reasons. They were unable to explain them. In my opinion, it was a parochial and very short-sighted view. If you dislike something, you cannot look down your nose on or underestimate a practice which is as valuable as any other' (COL policymaker 1).

This testimony suggests an attitude of rejection and disdain from theatre towards circus, and the reasons were not clearly identified. On the other hand, it is theatre that has been coming closer to circus, as a significant number of artists in the new and/or contemporary circus come from theatre backgrounds. They have found in circus a new way to practise their art form (COL admin-artist 1; COL admin-artist 3). But also, it was through theatre that circus artists used to gain recognition and access to public funds (COL admin-artist 7). Some organisations were called 'theatre' such as 'teatro ecologico' rather than 'circo ecologico' as there was not a circus category within public agendas (COL instructor-artist 1). This was the way for the new circus to have access to public funds. Finally, an effort was made by policymakers to bring circus closer to theatre as a way to gain recognition. In Bogotá, the 2013 local theatre festival deliberately included a circus production to make the theatre sector accept circus (COL policymaker 3). In Bogotá, the director of Teatro Colon, the first colonial theatre founded in Latin America in the 1700s by the Spanish, declared: 'We are planning to increase the circus offer as a

strategy to raise the 'category' of circus. I guess this could be a way that circus gains recognition from audiences too' (COL policymaker 1).

In the meantime, policymakers and the contemporary movement in Colombia find a reference in dramaturgy and the development of circus in Europe, as that element that is missing in Colombian circus: 'Our intention is that circus transcends the mere sum of acts but has to have dramaturgy. We have seen circuses in Italy, Sweden and Switzerland and they have dramaturgy. We feel that it is missing here' (COL policymaker 3):

'...telling a story; that's the beautiful part that I feel circus is missing here. I don't know how it is in other Latin American countries; but I know in Europe they also tell stories and all that [...] telling you a story and inspiring you not just with images and the spectacle but that you can also see something, understand a story and be reflective; I think that's important as well' (ibid.).

### **Contemporary Circus in Colombia: A 'Literate Power'**

The majority of the circus sector in Colombia is described as a population with low education levels, working in informal conditions and having very low living standards (Col policymaker 3). Circus in Bogotá is described as mainly composed of 'artists working in the streets' with 'informal jobs like performing at the traffic lights' (COL policymaker 3). There are also traditional circuses whose living conditions 'are not the best' as their itinerant condition complicates things (ibid.).

They do not have access to education, health care or social security (COL policymaker 1). 'But also', there is the contemporary circus, which comprises 'formal and established companies that have received public grants' (ibid.). Further descriptions of those mentioned above were highlighted: 'they have web pages, they know how to sell their performances, they have a portfolio of services, and so on' (COL policymaker 3). This reduced group is described as 'gestores' or arts administrators (COL policymaker 2). In the literature this group is characterised as one with higher levels of education (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.34; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.56).

In Bogotá, this 'contemporary' movement is limited to two companies: La Gata Cirko and La Ventana Producciones. These two organisations are specifically referred to as the 'other section' of circus. They are described as the 'very few established companies that have already gained a place within the circus sector' (COL policymaker 3). Those that are able to fit the canons of the official system and to fill in funding applications can sell out their shows. At a national level, only Incubation in Bucaramanga is added to the limited list (COL policymaker 2). It is described as working more closely to the production dynamics of the scenic arts in general: 'it performs in theatres, artists are professionals, they are to some extent formalised. In short, they have become visible' (COL policymaker 2).

The term contemporary circus aims to cover the current circus practice. However, the meaning, characteristics and description of this movement only applies to a very limited section of circus. Contemporary circus is mainly an

urban phenomenon while traditional circus is a rural phenomenon (Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.56). Distinctions between new and contemporary circus are not clearly established in Colombia yet, with the exception of the selected group mentioned above and their level of education. Participants interviewed do not really know what to call their style or how to describe contemporary circus. To avoid the difficulty, they refer to 'new or contemporary' circus. An interviewee referred to the 'contemporary' group, the one that is clearly differentiated, 'los chinos de Los Andes' or 'The Andes guys' (COL admin-artist 1), that is, the performers who are from the main private universities in Bogotá such as Los Andes. When describing the movement, this participant clearly stated: 'The contemporary circus ... well ... I don't really know what to call them, please just translate what I try to say' (COL admin-artist 1).

Coming closer to the 'contemporary' movement, interesting elements were found. On one side, their main aim is 'to bring narrative and theatre elements into circus' (COL admin-artist 3). Their purpose is clearly described in terms of combining circus, theatre and other art forms (COL admin-artist 7). This group are mainly following the narrative found in Europe and international clusters, bringing circus towards the 'performing' side rather than the 'commercial' one (COL admin-artist 8). Different from the narrative in Britain and Europe, this group do not complain about the family-oriented character of circus. They still perform and include families and children as important audiences.

At the core of their practice, there is an attempt to dignify the circus profession (COL admin-artist 3), transform prejudices around circus (COL artist 2), be recognised like any other art form (COL admin-artist 7), be able to train and perform in schools and cultural venues (COL artist 3), and combine elements of theatre and other disciplines (COL admin-artist 3). They fund their enterprises through corporate events, commercial performances, circus workshops, and short-term circus training courses directed at other circus artists (COL admin-artist 2). The purpose is mainly to raise money to cover the cost of their productions. Their main goal is to be able to fund their circus productions, which are harder to fund (COL admin-artist 7). Corporate events are their main income source (COL admin-artist 8).

On the other side of the story is how they came across circus, how they started doing circus, and their socio-economic background. They found circus by accident in the streets like many other practitioners. A considerable number also come from unprivileged backgrounds and low-income groups. Some of them started doing 'social circus' (e.g. COL admin-artist 2; COL artist 7) or any other social-engagement activity with circus, such as hospital clowning (e.g. COL admin-artist 3). They met their circus partners in the streets. They learnt circus from peer-to-peer training in public squares and parks, and those who went to university practised during the breaks (e.g. COL admin-artist 2). Most of them are in middle- or low-income groups while high-class performers are rarely found in Colombia (e.g. Pinzon and Villa, 2011). The initial engagement with social work opened the doors for artists from vulnerable groups to perform within the reduced contemporary

section (COL admin-artist 2). These performers are at the same time opening doors to other friends from their 'barrios' (COL artist 3). Some of them attended university and studied other professions, mainly within humanities and social sciences (e.g. COL admin-artist 7; COL admin-artist 8; COL admin-artist 2; COL admin-artist 3). The advantage recognised by policy makers as well as artists themselves, is the ability they have to formulate projects and to apply for funding.

### **Colombian Circus Peripheries in Search of Renewed Narratives**

A circus practitioner in Bogotá who is a representative of the 'new circus' comments that one of the main challenges in the development of circus in Colombia is that people still believe that circus is a fixed structure:

'This tradition inherited from Europe is highly prevalent in Colombia and Latin America; an Aristotelian structure where everything is pre-established [...] Philip is a former Sergeant. This gentleman found a niche that allowed him to bring together a lot of weirdos [...] When we go to Europe, they look at us as weirdos. These 'indios', these weird creatures came together and there is a circus! [...] and in Colombia we still think that is circus' (COL admin-artist 1).

This participant states that the purpose of his/her artistic collective, is to find their own circus identity and aesthetics. This aim is at the core of their practice. According to this participant, the 'origins' of circus in Colombia is found in

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and clarifies: 'this is not a cliché, no. This is a serious investigation we are doing to understand our own reality; our own circus. The play will be called 'The imaginary circus of Macondo' (COL admin-artist 1). Both in a metaphorical and literary way, this participant is researching Colombia's reality and circus history through Garcia Marquez writings. This artistic collective is established as a cooperative rather than a private company.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Forero (2012), a traditional clown, is also developing his practice by looking at local references. Even though his work reports the origins of modern circus in Britain, his own practice could be described as a mix of traditions. Interviewed for this research, Forero commented how 'el correr la tierra' ritual was unveiled while giving a clown workshop to contemporary Amerindian Muisca communities in 2012. The workshop was organised by the local authorities as part of cultural engagement activities, in which the communities were familiarised with theatre and other cultural expression. The workshop, initially conceived as an engagement with what Forero understood as 'western culture', was rather used as a tool to identify their own cultural and ancestral manifestations. The result was the discovery, through the use of clowning techniques, of ancient rituals and customs. During the process, Forero identified a possible antecedent of his own practice and circus arts in Colombia; a double-way exchange and exploration of their common roots. Forero's research continues now as a member of the Muisca community. This testimony evidences an unexplored area of analysis, a valuable

perspective in the construction of past and present circus history in Colombia, and the various meanings and forms the practice takes around the globe.

'Montercermundo', an invisible pioneer in the emergence of the contemporary movement in Colombia, is another example of that local search. His character was created under the slogan 'in search of new narratives' (COL artist 7). This participant highlighted the need to find new narratives for future generations. His artistic practice was developed in what he calls 'third-world comedy' inspired on national TV series popular in the 1980s, known as 'comedia criolla' (criollo's comedy) such as 'Don Chinche'. These local series were replaced by American television shows with the opening of the economy in the 1990s. This participant studied law at The Andes University in Bogotá, where he also taught national constitution and law. His academic and performing backgrounds are combined in his artistic career:

'My circus performance is just the same as the teaching performance. They complement each other well. We don't know what is to be Colombian. Talking about politics is very difficult here. But a clown can make it. Through satire and humour, the clown is able to speak about Colombia's political and economic reality. That is my social function, to tell the truth' (COL artist 7).

This is not the only inspiration this participant finds in local popular culture. Also in an epistemological way, when rejecting the understanding of his own nature in rigid bipolarities and categories, but a 'holistic' being. When researching 'Montercermundo', he found that his character was not a single

character but the 'convergence' of various archetypes: 'All of them inhabiting my world. The challenge was to let them exist. I then created *Frailejon*: a convergence of a Friar and Amerindian characters' (COL artist 7).



Fig. 5.2: Montercermundo's personal archives. Left, street performance in France (2014). Middle. Travel map from Argentina to Bogotá (1990s). Right, performance in Bogotá (2017)

### Circus at the Traffic Lights in Bogotá

The reduced section of 'contemporary circus' in Colombia does not only include the circus group who have academic degrees. Despite their diverse contexts and life situations, performers at the traffic lights offered similar testimonies to other circus artists. As they perform circus acts while the light is red, this movement is now identified as a fourth circus category in Colombia called 'circus at the traffic lights' This trend is found in the main cities of Colombia and other Latin American countries (e.g. Infantino, 2015).



Fig. 5.3: Circus at the Traffic Lights. Research Fieldwork, Bogotá, April 2015

Ruiz and Ramírez (2013, pp.44-45) describe this movement as a reinterpretation of circus outside the big top. According to them, circus at the traffic lights is a renewed scenario in contemporary art following similar trends in other modalities such as street dance, graffiti or street theatre. 'The street becomes an opportunity to sell and to perform a variety of mini spectacles, bringing art to drivers and pedestrians' (Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, pp.44-45). Performers are looking for extra and temporary income (ibid.). There is no evidence of the street used as an aesthetic proposal. Further research is needed to investigate the motives behind performances at the traffic lights (Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.88).

As stated above, more than 60 per cent of the population in Colombia rely on the informal economy (Angulo, et.al, 2013). This group are part of this majority, finding public places to perform in exchange for money. The traffic lights, with their tradition as a market economy in urban cities in Colombia (Rincon-Baez and Soler-Hurtado, 2015), offer the perfect place for them to perform. According to testimonies provided by individuals performing at the traffic lights, they are seen as

'beggars', 'unemployed' and 'drug addicts', and their practice is seen as a 'marginal and insignificant endeavour' (COL artist 1; COL artist 5). Other testimonies found outside the movement described them as 'unemployed youth with a lack of opportunities' who are finding in circus and the traffic lights an opportunity to overcome poverty (COL admin-artist 2). Other circus sections reject the growing phenomenon, as the artists perform 'rough tricks', damaging the identity and the circus market due to the low skill level they display and the devaluation of wages (COL instructor 2). As they perform for little money, the entire circus sector is affected as wages drop (COL instructor-artist 2).

On the other hand, street performers consider themselves artists who have found inspiration in the environment in which they work (COL artist 1). For them, the street is a source of knowledge and opportunity (COL artist 1; COL artist 5). They learnt circus skills on the streets, travelling from town to town across South America and finding peers who are willing to share their knowledge. Their skills are refined today via YouTube or other internet channels (COL artist 1). Their goal is to improve and to achieve higher standards through formal training and performances in theatres and other venues (COL artist 1; COL artist 5). The traffic lights are used in three ways: as a training space, a performing stage (which involves interaction with an audience while bringing art to the street and daily lives), and an income source.

Circus at the traffic lights is an itinerant movement where artists learn circus skills while travelling. Juggling and travelling is their initial purpose. They are

professionals with a degree in graphic design (COL artist 1) or psychology (COL artist 5) similar to those in the reduced contemporary circus section. These individuals have experienced internal displacement triggered by the conflict in Colombia, which led to their itinerancy (COL artist 1), or they have simply found a better income source at the traffic lights than in any other formal job (COL artist 5). In addition to a wage, circus and the traffic lights give them independence and more time to enjoy with their families than if they had a full-time job (COL artist 5). They have learnt circus through peer-to-peer training in public squares, parks, at the traffic lights or in community gatherings. They find in circus an integral form where they can combine diverse arts with their original skills. Circus is a personal and artistic challenge. It is a life purpose and fulfilment (COL artist 1; COL artist 4; COL artist 5). Circus gave them an opportunity to travel (COL artist 1; COL artist 4) as well as acknowledgement and appreciation (COL artist 1).



Fig. 5.4: Performers at the Traffic Lights 1. Research Fieldwork. Bogotá, March 2015

For these artists, the traffic lights are 'the meeting point' (COL artist 1). 'They bring you together; they are the connector' (ibid.), 'the place to learn and to train in circus' (COL artist 5). 'A work opportunity and good profit; it is better than

being employed in a company' (COL artist 5). It gives you the opportunity to teach others who are interested in circus' (COL artist 1). 'It is also exhausting – matadorsísimo – the smog, the sun, the rain. Dealing with people's (bad) mood in the streets' (COL artist 5). 'Dealing with "los Callejeros" who control the best traffic lights' (COL artist 1). These are the 'bad guys' called the 'faristas', who monopolise the best spots in the city, threatening other performers. Above all and in spite of the hazards experienced, the traffic lights are like a 'communal house' where people from all over the world meet and share their knowledge. 'El Faro' – the traffic lights – are like a 'trip' and a cultural exchange where you see others practising their skills while improving your technique (COL artist 1).

Displaced by the political internal conflict, a mature woman and professional accountant who lost her job in her local town and is now living in Bogotá without a paid job encouraged her son to set up a foundation to formalise their practice.

'It was hard for me to see my son performing at the traffic lights. We have never been beggars. We always had a job and a decent life. I used to see my son like people look at him now, as a 'beggar'. But now I'm closer to what they do and I see a decent job like any other, and I understand the valuable work they do now' (COL admin 1).

The street circus collective has come together under the Fundación Recuperarte (Recoverart Foundation) to demand formal training and the vindication of street performers through their performances while spreading a message to the

society and also through the 'social work' they do with vulnerable communities, such as young people on low incomes.

Their artistic perspectives in the future are reported as: 'Going back to my home town with my own artistic project that can help to transform the culture of displacement, violence and enclosure' (COL artist 1). 'I want to combine psychology and circus to do social work. To transform the realities we see in the streets, working with the displaced families we find in the streets, providing them with artistic elements that can enrich their lives while becoming an income source' (COL artist 5). Their 'social work' consists of giving free Christmas functions, workshops and other activities to local communities. 'We do it for free. We do it from the heart and with joy. There are other ways for us to make money' (COL artist 5).

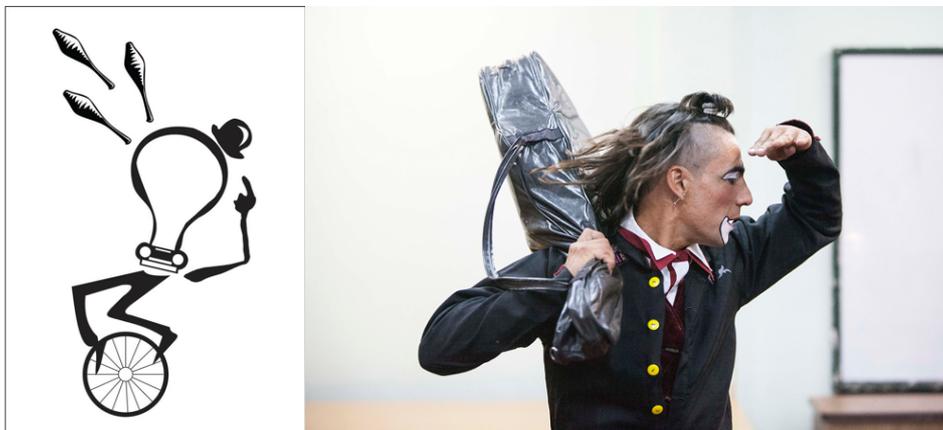


Fig. 5.5: Left: 'Fundacion Recuperarte' Logo. Right: Performer at the Traffic Lights 2. Research fieldwork. Bogotá, March 2015

### **Social Circus and the Streets: A Meeting Point in Colombia's Circus Practice**

The street is the meeting point where a significant number of artists have found circus. Contrary to Ruiz and Ramírez's (2013, p.44) description above, circus has not left the theatre or private venues to go out into the streets. It is the other way

around. The street and public spaces are the starting point in circus. Circus that is randomly found in the streets later enters the private venues, either a theatre, the big top or any outdoor festival. A significant number of practitioners, more precisely contemporary performers, have become circus artists in the streets. They found circus in the public space. They have learnt circus skills in parks, squares or any public corner regardless of their income level, academic background, social class or any other socio-cultural stratification.

'Montercermundo', the invisible pioneer of contemporary circus in Colombia (see Chapter 2), one of 'The Andes guys' (COL admin-artist 1), and the 'friend who arrived from Europe' and taught how to juggle to the visible section of the contemporary circus (e.g. COL admin-artist 2), also found circus in the streets. His first engagement with circus was during a trip to the US where he saw buskers performers. 'I just did the same; I started playing with a juggling ball in exchange for coins at Central Park' (COL artist 7). In New York's Central Park, this character found 'the other side of society: the street and the buskers. Not just doing circus, but different artistic disciplines that meet in the streets' (COL artist 7).

'The Andes guy' engaged with circus and started a long career researching the art form, living in Argentina and travelling all over the world with his hybrid characters. As part of his research, he found that the contemporary European style came to Colombia through Argentinian street performers. According to him, circus is 'a language that integrates different artistic modalities offering a magic environment to spectators. Circus integrates different realities. It is about both art

and craft. What I want to do is to travel and to do my performances' (COL artist 7). Why circus? 'Because of the freedom it offered me. It became my life and I dedicated my life to developing my own idea of circus' (COL artist 7).

Montercermundo, like his visible friend who represents the reduced 'contemporary circus' in Colombia, started their circus careers in what they call 'social circus'; that is, working with vulnerable populations, giving circus workshops with the aim to transform societies. Like the street performers above, social circus was an important component of their circus practice. The difficulty to fund these social initiatives is the main reason they stop doing social circus. Like the co-founders of Circo para Todos, who also met in Brazil while doing circus on a beach (UK-admin artist 1), they all developed their circus careers following an attempt to transform circus and to transform societies. The street is the place, the society is the motivation.

### **The Turn of the 21st Century and the Recognition of Circus in Britain**

In 2002, the Arts Council restates its commitment to circus and commissions a strategic report that could inform the situation of circus at the time, providing guidance for actions to be taken. The report sustains that in spite of the fact that circus was invented in Britain, it has never been seen as occupying the same place in the hierarchy of art as other art forms, by either audiences or the cultural establishment; historically, 'circus has been seen as entertainment rather than art in England' (Hall, 2002, p.5). Five reasons were identified at the time: the perceived

class-based nature of circus; animal rights issues; cultural distrust of nomadic lifestyles; lack of artistic quality and integrity; and the emphasis on commercial income (ibid.). As in Chapters 1 and 3, a historical explanation is found in the conflicting relationship with theatre since the inception of modern circus. Discredit campaigns raised by the patented theatres in the 18th and 19th centuries and the construction of circus at the shadow of theatre (Kwint, 2013), explain in great extent the popular and low-brow perception attached to circus in Britain. Animal right campaigns are behind the decline of circus in the second half of the 20th century. However, as Carmeli (1995) notes circus appreciations have not been always negative and at certain points of time, the official society has also elevated circus for its nomadic condition, the physicality or non-verbal expression as is found for example, in the work of Nietzsche (2016). The rest of this section dedicates attention to analyse the current situation of circus to find that all of the debates above are still present. The difference is that such appreciations are now associated with traditional circus, while the positive aspects are attached to the contemporary circus as it will be further discussed in the rest of the chapter.

### The 1980s and the Resurgence of Circus

The decades before recognition are characterised for an exponentially growth of circus in underground movements in the 1980s (UK admin 8). Training programmes emerged with the so-called community circus with Reg Bolton's work in council states (e.g. Bolton, 2004), but also with Circus Space and Circomedia offering

training programmes to young artists looking for alternative artistic expression (Selwood, et.al. 1995). Zippo's circus – following the traditional format – founded a school programme that provided training to a significant section of British circus artists (UK artist-admin 4). Reg Bolton and circus owner Gerry Cottle proposed the creation of a Youth circus organisation similar to the National Youth Theatre and the National Youth Orchestra (Bolton, 1987). A diverse range of alternatives were offered to different populations, from youths in council buildings in Edinburgh, to the schooling population with the youth circus and young children wanting to explore their artistic potential. The 1980s is recognised as the revival of circus and the emergence of the 'new circus' in Britain, mainly inspired by developments in France and Australia (Bolton, 1987; Selwood et al., 1995). The trend was supported by the RSPCA, which offered grants to the creation of circuses without animals (Bolton, 1987).

Circus practitioners were actively developing their art form in the 1980s. In the meantime, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. The emerging and promising 'new circus' movement in Britain 'struggled to grow and survive given very little access to funding during these years' (Holland, 2015). The same year that the conservative government took power in Britain, the French government recognised circus as an art by transferring the responsibility of circus from the Ministry of Agriculture to the administration of Cultural Affairs. This allowed the future creation of the National Centre for Circus Arts (CNAC) in 1985 (Wallon, 2002). At the same time, Cirque du Soleil emerged, and, with the support of

Quebec's public authorities, the company – initially a street-circus collective, started growing to become the successful multinational we recognise today (see Jacobs, 2018; Leroux, 2016).

France and Canada are the flagships of circus development. France is recognised as the maximum exponent of circus as an art in Europe (UK admin 4; UK admin-artist 1; UK artist 1). Circus in Britain is internally compared to France and the reported need to 'catch-up' with developments in the country (UK admin 7). Funding and the support provided by the government have been vital in those developments (UK admin 4). In the meantime, by the end of the 1990s, the Arts Council started to invest in circus (UK admin 7; UK admin 9). This event coincided with the Labour party coming into power (UK admin 7).

'Community circus' initiatives were recognised as the initial motivation by the Arts Council to invest in the development of new circus in the 1990s (Selwood et al., 1995). Several years later, the Arts Council recognised circus as art and invested public funding to the development of its form. The community circus emerged with the support of the cultural establishment, with funding to operate and develop circus initiatives.

With the recognition of circus as art in 2002, further developments have taken place. A specific position within the Arts Council was now responsible for circus sector (UK admin 8). This allowed the consolidation of strategies towards the form and the recognition of circus within the Arts Council (UK admin 8; UK admin 9). With the arrival of the conservative government in 2010 and funding cuts to the

arts, this position was eliminated (UK admin 8). However, by the time that circus lost this specific position, the form had already a place within the institution; functionaries now considered circus as any other category within the arts, regardless of having a specific representative (UK admin 8). In 2014, Circus Space became the National Centre for Circus Arts (NCCA), following the trend of other artistic practices which are represented by National Centre that could represent their interests (UK admin 5). There was the consolidation of annual circus festivals in London such as the Roundhouse Circus Fest (UK admin 4; UK admin 5) and the annual circus showcase CANVAS (UK admin-artist 2). From an academic point of view, the conformation of the Research Circus Network of Britain and Ireland in 2014 and circus scholars taking part in academic conferences across the globe were also a key developmental stage. What is still missing, according to circus administrators and producers, is circus critiques and a 'circus section' in the media, as there is the case for theatre or dance (UK admin 4). Except from the Research Network and a few other examples, none of the developments above, include traditional circus.

Nonetheless, circus is now recognised and has a place within the Arts Council somewhere in between theatre and combined arts:

'Circus officially is theatre. But is a kind of a funny [...] some organisations are in combined arts because they do lots of art forms, sometimes is a bit more historical the reason that they are in combined arts; but usually is because they don't completely fit very strictly into one of those art forms and they do very different things. And carnival which just entirely doesn't fit anything, so

they come to combined arts [...] is an unnecessary divide [...] if you're a circus artist, if you apply it'll be leased as theatre' (UK admin 7).

### **Circus 250: Britain Celebrates the Invention of Circus in London**

In 2018, Britain commemorates the 250th anniversary of 'the world's very first circus' (Circus250, 2016). The celebration aims to raise awareness about what circus is and the historical legacy of the form (ibid.). The event represents an opportunity to gain general recognition and gather the multiple efforts of the sector in the last two decades. As evidenced in the media quotes below, Astley's myth is likely to be revived and with him, the historical legacy of modern circus:

BBC - 2016

LP: *"British circus? We think it sort came to us from Italy or Germany and Eastern Europe, is there a specific British tradition you can point to?"*  
VT: *"Circus was invented in Britain"*  
LP: *"Really?"*  
VT: *"Yes. We are the birth home for circus"*  
LP: *"Before the Italians?"*  
VT: *"Before everyone, we invented it, 1768. 'Circus 250', in two years, would be the opportunity to demonstrate..." (Midweek BBC, 2016:33)*

Circus 250 - 2016

*"250 years ago showman, entrepreneur and equestrian rider Philip Astley gathered together a series of astounding physical acts - jugglers, acrobats, clowns, strong men, bareback riders - and, on an abandoned patch of land near London's Waterloo, drew out the very first circus ring. It was 1768, a time of revolutions, and poet William Blake was one of Astley's first customers to this extraordinary show. But the real revolution Astley created was a whole new art form. This was the world's very first circus. Every circus, anywhere, began at this moment in 1768." (Circus250, 2016)*

These two media references contextualise the situation of circus in Britain today. On one hand there is a lack of general awareness on the rich tradition of circus history and its association within the country. On the other hand, a decisive effort is made by circus practitioners to raise awareness on 'what circus really is' and

its history and values (Circus250, 2016). As Professor Toulmin suggests above, 2018 'will be a good opportunity to demonstrate this'. Circus250 is a non-profit organisation created to celebrate the 250th anniversary of circus, promoted as an occasion when 'traditional and contemporary circuses will work together for the first time, in recognition of their shared heritage' (Circus250, 2016). The event is already receiving support and partnership of The Arts Council, Totally Thames Festival, the Roundhouse, the National Centre for Circus Arts, National Fairground, and Circus Archive, among others (Circus250, 2016).

There is no record of a similar scale celebration to commemorate previous circus' anniversaries in Britain, such as the centenary or bicentenary of modern circus (UK other 2). This suggests a different attitude and disposition towards the celebration or appreciation of circus arts than decades ago. Circus250 is advertised as an apparent coordinated circus sector engaging the cultural establishment to celebrate the existence of a disregarded art form. The interest is to raise awareness of circus' British historical roots, and is an effort to bring together traditional and contemporary movements in recognition of the form (UK other 2).

Contrary to this appreciation, interviewees for this research describe traditional and contemporary circus as completely separate and independent movements. Structural differences and conflictual relationships are acknowledged. When asked about their relationship with other circus movements and the main challenges they face, a representative from a traditional circus says:

'Is such a struggle, and just everything is so expensive; but we do keep

going; you have a very good week and then you might have a terrible week, you never quite know what to expect. We have no funding what so ever; is only relying on bombs on seats every week [...] the contemporary movement is getting all these grants [...] We are not related at all.' (UK artist-admin 3).

On the other side, a contemporary representative describes the difficult relationship with traditional circus:

'Yeah! is always complex. The Arts Council won't fund the classical circus at all. They're very kind of bitter about that. The Arts Council kind of correctly says this is been a commercial model of a 100 years and doesn't need support; is an art form which isn't moving forward or is kind of static. I agree with that kind of diagnostic in that sense; I think they're really suffering and they're not moving with the times.' (UK admin 4).

Other organisations remain neutral in terms of movement's disputes. Nonetheless, a distinction is made this time in terms of animal use:

'Our focus is on contemporary circus but that is mainly because we don't do any work with animals so is all to do with human physical achievement. However, in terms of the training [...] prepare artists to work in either the traditional or contemporary circus context. How they choose to use their skills is kind of up to them [...] we don't decide how we want or students to work; we just provide them with the skills for them to make their choices' (UK admin 5).

## **Circus Challenges in Britain: Recognition and Cultural Distrust**

Three main challenges are observed in Britain: funding, cultural distrust and lack of recognition. They are all intrinsically related. Cultural distrust is mainly attached to a series of preconceived ideas around traditional circus, such as the business model, animal rights, clown's bad reputation, and low artistic quality (see also Chapter 1). Both contemporary and traditional circus manifest the need to overcome such perceptions; the former to gain recognition and funding; the later to can operate their circuses. The main challenge according to a contemporary practitioner is:

'Recognition, always, but I think there has been a lot of progress made in the area; there are cultural stigmas and stereotypes. You hear the same jokes, the same insecure comments that people make about circus and clowns, and animals, and other stereotypes of the traditional circus and then having to educate them about what it is what we really do; so I think misconceptions and cultural awareness are some of the challenges we have [...] awareness of what circus actually is. That's gonna help us by default getting funding, grants, recognition' (UK artist 3).

The situation has indeed improved for the contemporary circus. They count with the recognition of the Arts Council and public funds. Traditional circuses are excluded from these possibilities. Traditional circuses are blamed for not 'pushing up the form' and associated with a 'funny business' and job exploitation

(UK admin 9): 'artists have to do many other tasks such as setting up the tent, selling the merchandising or clearing up after the show' (ibid.). Their interests are linked to money making where 'some are doing really well' (UK admin 4). However, this is not the reality of many circuses such as the one described above (see also Carmeli, 2002; Beadle, 2009; 2013). While an important section of the contemporary circus counts with public grants, traditional circuses rely on the box office to fund their enterprises.

According to a traditional circus artist, one of the main challenges is:

'People in this country seem to have more respect for theatre than circus, you know. We have to work really hard with the circus to overcome that kind of image of seating in a freezing, cold field and in the mud on a wooden bench, not toilets. People think that it is as 30-45 years ago, they don't realise now is more like a portable theatre inside, we are heated, we've got lovely lighting, and you know, is like a portable theatre inside really' (UK artist-admin 3).

Following official descriptions attached to circus movements, the traditional circus representative referenced above, could be rather classified as 'new circus'. Animals are not included in the performance while the show is described as 'quite theatrical, we do have lot of costumes, choreography, production values, is not just one act follows an act, we are trying to give a theatrical base.' (UK artist-admin 3). This participant 'wasn't born into circus [but] always loved it as a child'. Holding a degree in theatre studies his/her initiation in circus was with a traditional

French circus where s/he trained as a clown. Together with his/her partner they founded their own circus where this participant interprets the white-face clown. This is an example of the reality of a great section of traditional circuses in Britain, coming from theatre rather than circus dynasties while identifying their practice within the circus tradition.

### **Contemporary Circus in Britain: A 'Funny Business'**

Paradoxically, the contemporary scene is not that distant from a business mentality as the testimonies below suggest:

'People are kind of realising there's an audience for this, and actually that audience buy food, they bring their families, they stay for the night, you could put an interval; is a kind of buzzy fun audience, so actually you are better off programming circus than you are programming a theatre show [...] circus is also good in attracting young audiences [...] if they consume from early age, they will consume forever' (UK admin 4).

Another participant highly involved in the development of contemporary circus comments on the future plans they have:

'The next big step in terms of art [...] we'd like to see circus penetrate the West End a little bit more; the West End is just dominated by the musicals and straight plays and we would like to see a big West End, a commercial hit [...] that is absolutely circus and not something that has a little bit of circus in

it' (UK admin 5).

To what extent is the contemporary movement divorced from a business mentality? Are they finding a profitable business as traditional circuses did centuries ago? A contemporary artist would probably explain the situation in terms of the different styles found today:

'Traditional circus, new/contemporary -I don't know how you call it- represented by Cirque du Soleil and these companies that in my head are like traditional circus but look better [...] and the kind of the French tradition [...] that mixes theatre, circus and storytelling. There is a reason for why you are doing the piece you are doing.' (UK artist 1).

This participant describes 'the French tradition' as a reduced section that is combining theatre, circus, storytelling, and meaning, while divorced from commercial purposes. S/he comments how 80% of artist in London work in 'corporate stuff':

'I mean, is amazing the amount of money that you can make working in corporate stuff, it's just unbelievable. It cannot make sense [...] Few companies are trying to do things a little bit different. But the biggest strength in the UK is corporate circus, loud music, incredible acrobatics and stuff like that. It sells extremely well, there's a lot of funding. I don't think is bad but is not my favourite' (UK artist 1).

Further divisions are found within the contemporary movement also attached to the business model and meaning beyond money making. Cultural distrust is thus extended to 'purpose and meaning' where just a reduced circus section seems to pursue that meaningful goal. Business and money making seem to surround the circus practice as a whole with the exception of a few.

Looking closer at the Arts Council grants, representatives from the entity confirm the exclusion of traditional circuses: 'They are not pushing forwards the form. The Arts Council invests in contemporary and non-commercial tendencies only; commercial theatres or folk arts are neither funded [...] there is also distrust around business purposes and still, animal issues' (UK admin 9).

Following the Arts Council general criteria, about seven circus organisations are regularly funded (UK admin 7). These organisations redistribute the funds amongst artists, offering circus training, performing spaces and capacity building such as management and fundraising workshop (UK admin 5; UK admin 6). Artists can apply directly to the Arts Council but they must be supported or 'certified' by a 'recognised' organisation, which are usually those seven funded organisations (UK admin 7). How does that affect emerging artists?

'Well... to be honest if they're entirely emerging, they just graduated, they've got a great idea, they've done nothing yet, they will probably don't get funding from us. We're not their first point of call. They'll probably need to start to get involved with some of the initiatives that theatres or producers run to develop emerging artists. So they need to start to find ways of getting

noticed, and getting their work seen, making a bit of a name for themselves. We don't tend to fund absolute first timers.' (UK admin 7).

Some artists interviewed for this research have commented on how the renewed interest of the Arts Council is not really supporting their artistic development. According to these participants, funds are mainly allocated to the 'network' (UK artist-admin 4; COL-UK artist 2). An example given is the Millennium Dome opening ceremony which included a circus show as the central act. More than 100 new artists were trained while established artists, coming mainly from traditional circuses, were not considered (UK artist-admin 4). This event is acknowledged as the 'milestone' in the recognition of contemporary circus in Britain (UK admin 4, UK admin 5; UK admin 6). A participant even suggests that the contemporary circus circuit is mainly composed by the team involved in that event:

'They trained up to 100 people [...] dancers, acrobats and break dancers, they got 1 year at Circus Space and they performed in the shows [...] there was an explosion of circus performance in 2001 [...] when you look around, people involved in circus today, the directors, the producers, the filmmakers, [...] in some way they came through that programme; the riggers, the production managers, you know, is quite interesting thing' (UK admin 4).

The seven organisations, or rather 'the network', are thus playing a central role. To some extent, they are deciding the future of the form and the kind of artists and styles to support. In the meantime, public relationships, networking

and marketing abilities are becoming fundamental for any circus artist to perform and to develop their artistic careers. The way for the Arts Council to regulate the situation is allocating resources based on 'quality' which is defined in terms of 'excellence':

'Excellence in quality of work, diversity of work, the way they're developing talent, developing their own financial income, sustainability, young people [...] Around individuals, the quality question is a good one [...] describing it brilliantly, you know, making it sound good, the way we saw quality is around their partnerships that they acquire, being reviewed, as well as the sort of partnerships they developed to raise money [...] we are looking that around them they have people that also value their work [...] when people apply for making a work we don't have elements to judge it.' (UK admin 7).

Is the storytelling, the inclusion of narrative, innovation, creativity, and pushing up the form the main criteria followed in the development of contemporary circus? This depends on the criteria of the seven organisations and a group of experts. Nonetheless, the business model prevails: capacity building, marketing, pitching, networking and other crucial abilities required to survive in post-industrial times where quality and 'creativity [are] closely linked to the management of cultural production and cultural distribution' (Bilton 2011, p.34).

## **Circus and Cultural Policies: A Place where Colombia and Britain meet**

Circus administrators in Britain find in circus a perfect tool to attract new audiences; circus is a 'hook' or a 'getaway' that is being used within art engagement policies:

'We are attracting audiences who maybe not having English as a first language, which is a high proportion of London's population; is hardly appealing to go and see a Shakespeare play if you only recently learn English; is very challenging even to anyone where English is your first language. So really is like a getaway form I think; and from that they are braver to go into other kind of art forms' (UK admin 4).

'We still need to scale a spectacle to bring a wider audiences. Like the drug dealer mentality, that you start with the easiest substance first and then you can introduce them to more difficult things until they yeah!' (UK admin 8).

Circolombia is playing a role in the delimitation of these cultural policies in Britain and the transition that both policy makers and administrators are offering to circus audiences from a traditional to a contemporary offer. This was clearly evidenced in the pilot project in Blackpool (see Chapter 2). In 2015 Circolombia performed at the Showzam! Festival organised by Visit Blackpool. From its inception in 2007, the Showzam! festival counted with the curatorial assistance and participation of local circus artists (UK other 2). The versions 2014, 2015 and 2016, were commissioned to LeftCoast, 'a programme of arts, culture and creative activity happening across Blackpool and Wyre on the Fylde Coast' (LeftCoast, 2014).

The aim of LeftCoast is 'to provide opportunities to experience high quality arts and culture that is accessible to all' (UK admin 2).

Funded by the Arts Council England, LeftCoast is part of a national programme to increase level engagements in culture (UK admin 2). In 2015, LeftCoast commissioned Great Yarmouth based SeaChange, an independent arts development charity dedicated to delivering 'outstanding Circus and Street Arts events, bringing their experience from the Out There Festival in Great Yarmouth' (UK admin 3). The 2015 version 'reinstates circus quality' (UK admin 3), bringing the best of the national and international circus shows to Blackpool (UK admin 2; UK admin 3). Despite the strong entertainment heritage of Blackpool, this is 'very, very dominated by commercial entertainment' (UK admin 2). The purpose is to encourage this entertainment and circus tradition through a renovated offer (UK admin 2). The priority then is to offer a renovated cultural agenda in the region, which is mainly dominated by commercial entertainment (UK admin 2). Circolombia's performance was part of this strategy, which involved bringing the best international circus offer, attracting new and younger audiences, offering a perfect combination of entertainment and art, and promoting cultural diversity and cultural exchange (UK admin 2; UK admin 3).

'There is not much cultural diversity going on here. They have probably never seen a Colombian artist so I think that's really important. Most of the people are not necessarily coming to see Circolombia [...] They are expecting a traditional circus and suddenly [they] find this show [...] They have a

completely different experience and people are just telling other people, and the show is sold out now, which is incredible! [...] Sometimes, there is this assumption that only certain people can really appreciate art and culture of a certain quality, and I think that's wrong. People are very good judges of what is good and what is bad. [...] To have such a great performance here and for so many people... we never thought we'd get that many people going to see it, it is just wonderful' (UK admin 2).

An interesting exercise would be to compare London's and Blackpool's reception to Circolombia's shows, as London is 'more open' and Blackpool is more attached to 'traditional circus and commercial forms of entertainment' (UK admin 2). Although this exercise is outside the scope of this analysis, audiences' opinions in Blackpool were collected during the fieldwork. Out of 15 spectators interviewed, two participants completely disliked Circolombia's show. A woman in her 40s described it as 'boring' (UK audience 4) and a regular female customer in her 60s or 70s found it 'appalling and a sheer waste of money' (UK audience 13):

'Absolutely dreadful. I've been to Blackpool year after year for about 40 years. This is the worst show I have ever seen and a sheer waste of money. There was just one same thing over and over. It was dark, the music was boom, I've got a headache. I think they weren't particularly good and I can see the same thing on television every week' (UK audience 13).

The rest of the group found the show 'amazing' (UK audience 3) and completely different from what they have seen before (UK audience 6). Among the aspects highlighted were 'the wow! factor' (UK audience 6), the 'trick after trick after trick' and the skill level (UK audience 10). It was 'more exciting and dangerous' than other circus shows (UK audience 8) and there were no clowns (UK audience 11). For a Colombian citizen living in Blackpool, Circolombia's performance 'took her back to her roots', reminding her about 'the different vibrations' in which Colombians and Britons live (UK-COL audience 15). She described the experience as an 'exciting' and 'liberating' experience (UK-COL audience 15). It was a 'reconciliation' with 'what you truly are and where you come from' (UK-COL audience 15):

'These guys offer a proper spectacle; the sounds, the dialogues, their physiognomy, their physicality, their movements. They offer fresh air and a renewed life [...] My 'colombianidad' [Colombian identity] vanished in Blackpool. Cultural differences are huge and profound between Colombia and Britain. This show came at the perfect time. Although we are all humans, our culture and behaviours are not. They reminded me of Colombians' aliveness and the warmth of home. British vibes run at a lower tone; ours are a lot higher. My own vibration was tuned up with the show' (UK-COL audience 15).

These opinions, related to audiences' perceptions and the distinctive characteristics of Colombian artists, provided a great insight into other areas of

analysis. The majority had a positive reception of the renewed proposal, while some other circus lovers found the show disgraceful and noisy. On the other hand, this confirms the opinion provided by the participant above regarding Circolombia's success in terms of its diversity and youth. Responses from Colombians and Britons did not differ much. Both stated that they felt alive despite the cultural differences. What is clear to some extent is that Circolombia was offering something different to British audiences and promoters. Opinions given in London do not differ much from the ones reported in Blackpool. The mix of acts, the dance, the music, the skills are some of the main aspects highlighted as evidenced in the media report of the Roundhouse (e.g Roundhouse, 2015).

On the other side of the picture, there are local traditional circus artists. The renewed scenario was not necessarily positive. Circolombia and Showzam!'s renewed proposal represent another challenge for traditional circuses in Britain. Interviewed for this research, mature traditional circus artists commented on the reduction in spaces available to them to exercise their practice and to fund their circus initiatives (UK instructor-admin-artist 1; UK instructor-admin-artist 2). Part of Circolombia's engagement at the festival was the provision of circus workshops to children and local schools inside Blackpool Tower. These workshops were previously given by local circus schools and practitioners from a traditional background (UK admin-artist 1; UK instructor-admin-artist 1). The few places still available for traditional circuses such as the Showzam! festival were threatened by the contemporary circus offer.

Traditional circus is not just excluded from the Arts Council policies and funding but the renovated policies are compromising the presence of traditional circuses. A series of dichotomies are thus observed in terms of decentralising public funding investment outside London and diversifying the circus offer. This is happening at the cost of local proposals and traditional circuses. In the meantime, audiences seem to enjoy the renewed offer although an important section prefer the older version. Is there any possibility to offer both without threatening the other? This is the main question one should ask in terms of the renewed recognition and the new peripheries found in circus.

### **What is Circus? A Global Approach**

This final section addresses the question 'What is circus?' from the perspective of circus practitioners. Responses given by circus practitioners to this question is one of the main similarities found in Colombia and Britain. Circus meanings are shared across groups regardless of socio-cultural differences or national borders. Answers to the question 'What is circus?' were fairly similar, not only across nations, but also among artists, administrators and policymakers, as well as circus movements and styles. They were in line with circus values and the distinctive characteristics they recognise in the form. The analysis suggests that circus disputes are grounded on narratives attached to each movement more than intrinsic differences within the circus practice. The examples below illustrate the influence of history in the current understanding of circus and the limitation they are imposing on the contemporary

practice. However, the tendency is to replicate the same story by simply replacing the 'traditional' definition by a 'contemporary' one, regardless of what contemporary circus really means. Contrary to fixed and rigid ideas of circus, limitless and possibility are the most distinct characteristics attributed to circus:

'I think it is a difficult name, because obviously it does refer to the Ringling Bros and all that, and you know, circus is a very old tradition, like you say, variety. I wouldn't want to use the word variety now either because it is historical, and circus is a kind of historical connotation, but I don't love contemporary circus but I'd call it contemporary circus' (UK admin 7).

'I think that's a good question. I actually don't know... I said I don't know because if I said I'm in a circus school... and they do that [march-circus music], that's not circus but an example of circus... I think circus for me is... limitless' (UK artist 1).

Two artists found performing at the traffic lights in Colombia also referred to history and the strong circus tradition, which is associated with a location or a space where acrobats, jugglers and clowns perform. One of them stated that circus is not a location or a building. It is not a tangible place but an ephemeral space where one can learn and see life from a different perspective (COL artist 4). Another artist suggested that circus enables you 'to express your soul in an incredible way; it is a place where the impossible becomes possible' (COL artist 1).

In the words of the traditional and contemporary practitioners interviewed for this research, circus is 'adrenaline, emotions and sensations' (COL artist 2); 'circus is gravity' (UK artist 3); 'circus is too many flavours, too many colours, many people betting on something' (COL policymaker 3); 'circus is a spectrum, it is not a tight circle' (UK admin 3); 'circus is a world of fantasy, an artistic expression of individuals challenging the human to reach the sublime and the magic' (COL admin 4 ); 'circus is the magic of something appearing out of nowhere, it's amazing acts, it's comedy. Ideally is animals [...] it is just magical' (UK artist-admin 3); 'circus is a circle in which everything fits. A circle where everybody has a place' (COL student 2); 'circus is acrobatics; circus is to fly, to dream, to laugh' (COL-UK artist 1); 'circus is circus, is circus' (UK admin-artist 1).

The main difference found between contemporary and traditional circus is that contemporary practitioners are more distant from the definitions of circus in terms of presenting all the acts together or characteristics attributed to traditional circus, such as family and nostalgia. Practitioners closer to traditional circus refer directly to the mix of acts, which is aimed at the family. However, when looking more closely at the answers and testimonies provided in the interviews, the essence of circus is shared. Diversity, exploration, challenge and difference are at the core of circus definitions, which are in line with the values and distinctive characteristics that participants identify in the form.

Four additional questions were considered to identify values and distinctive elements: 'Why circus?'; 'What has circus brought to your life?'; 'What do

you enjoy the most in working with circus?'; and 'How does circus differ from other disciplines?'. When answering these other questions, participants used expressions such as 'the interesting thing in circus is...', 'what I like the most in circus is...' and/or 'the reason why I really like working with circus artists is', so those extracts were also included in the analysis of values. Content analysis was applied in the analysis. The exercise evidences the difficulties and limitations when trying to pack diverse meanings and points of views into specific words that could be counted. However, this helped to identify the prevalent elements without generalising specific responses. Based on the words and meanings most commonly used, the main characteristics attributed to circus were difference, crossover, diversity, accessible, challenge, communication, physical, dream, engaging, travel, and trust. In Britain, the words most commonly found were difference and physical, while in Colombia they were challenge and accessible. Nonetheless, all the words mentioned above are recurrent in responses given across countries and circus movements.

Circus is recognised as a diverse and inclusive art form in various ways. The first way is through the possibility of exploring different skills and reinforcing the aptitudes each participant has (e.g. flexible, strong, funny, stiff, clumsy) in a diverse range of techniques, such as acrobatics, contortionism, clowning, balancing, etc (UK artist 3). Second, circus attracts audiences from different backgrounds regardless of age, social class or gender (COL policy maker 4). It is not discriminatory in terms of knowledge like other artistic forms; there is no need to 'understand' to be able to enjoy circus (UK admin 4; UK admin 5). Third, it is regarded as more open and

available to practitioners from different backgrounds, for example, it accepts artists rejected in classical theatre and allows individuals to start a circus career at a later age (UK artist 1; UK artist 2). Some full testimonies are:

'When [circus] is good, it creates a response in me that is entirely emotional and in some cases physical and is not intellectual; it speaks to me in a way that is not about being clever, or articulate or intelligent; it's about feelings' (UK admin5).

'Circus is integral and unique; in theatre you have genres: theatre for children, indoor theatre, etc. Circus is for every kind of public. At the performance, you have children, young people and adults, and that makes it unique.' (COL instructor-artist 1).

One of the main characteristics that circus practitioners highlight is the multidisciplinary character of the form and the crossover with other artistic disciplines. Both contemporary and traditional practitioners, coming from social or street circus, mentioned the interaction and closeness with other artistic disciplines:

'Circus is crossing over now with many other forms: physical theatre, dance, proper theatre, music, ballet, so many other things, but I think it is perhaps the purest exploration of what the human body can do and that's what the exciting thing is. The difference with other art forms is that circus is to do what really is the impossible, to do what looks really impossible with our bodies, with objects, with things, with each other' (UK admin 3).

'Circus is holistic; it has music, dance, theatre, acrobatics, gymnastics, poetry, and it has been always like that' (COL instructor-artist 1).

The crossover of disciplines is not something solely attached to contemporary circus as the narratives explored in previous chapters suggest. This is not a new transformation that circus is experiencing but a definitive and distinctive characteristic of the form. Both in Colombia and in Britain, practitioners mentioned this element, especially in Colombia where the contemporary phenomenon is more incipient and the traditional circus is the main reference. It is worth noting that both Colombian and British artists seem to have found in circus the place where interdisciplinarity is allowed:

'Circus gave me the opportunity to find a place within the arts. Before, I was multifaceted, painting, singing, and now I can call myself a circus performer. I can combine all of them in circus' (COL artist 1).

'In circus, I found that everything united except my vision for circus, that's not there yet, but it's united in the sense of using all the different skills I acquired over the years, whether being in education or just in life... circus kind of put the full stop' (UK artist 4).

'Circus is the mix of what I always wanted to do: to fly, to act, to dance, to travel; all in just one word: circus' (COL artist 2).

Another distinctive characteristic highlighted by the interviewees is that in circus, 'the impossible becomes possible'. This phrase is regularly found in popular circus literature and accounts linked to traditional circus (Ward, 2018, p.xi) that critics of this tradition could perceive as romantic ideas, as discussed above. However, both contemporary and traditional participants used the phrase to explain that circus is about challenge and achievement. As a traditional circus participant in Britain commented:

'If you come to circus and you've never done it before, it is impossible, but with practice it becomes possible, so you change the impossible to the possible and that gives you a terrific personal boost to think, well, if I can do that, what else can I do?' (UK instructor-admin-artist 2).

This final idea is confirmed in testimonies given by contemporary practitioners. A Colombian artist based in London answered the question 'What has circus brought to your life?' in terms of the many things s/he has learnt, ranging from the way of thinking to the capacity to believe and to dream, to persevere and to strive for what you want in life, knowing that 'everything is possible' and that dreams can come true and goals can be achieved (COL-UK artist 1). This description coincides with the perception above of looking at circus as an ephemeral space where one can learn and approach life from a different perspective (COL artist 4).

To participants, circus means the possibility of accomplishing something, of challenging themselves, of challenging their bodies. Not as super

humans with special powers able to defy nature and other beings, as regularly attached to traditional circus and criticised by contemporary narratives (e.g. Lievens, 2015), but through the physical capacity of the body. This physical work shows that one can learn other ways to approach life, to accomplish dreams and goals: 'In circus, the word CAN'T doesn't exist because the body can do it! [...] Step by step you can do it [...] is not what you can do, it is about what you want to do' (UK artist 3). Through practice and discipline, an individual hone a skill. A contemporary artist in Britain emphasised this:

'We are the same; you and I are exactly the same. I have practised to do the splits, you may have practised to do the splits too, I have no idea. But if you do practise to do the splits, you'll be able to do it too. There's no actual like crazy divide between us, it is just I've taken time to hone a skill like any other skill. I'm a terrible cook, you might be a great cook, I don't know' (UK artist 2).

The 'impossible becomes possible', a phrase found more often in Britain than in Colombia to express that if the body can do it, one can not only do unimaginable things such as 'flying' (UK admin 3) or 'earning euros or pounds' (COL-UK artist 1), but also challenge norms and the status quo. A contemporary artist in Britain who graduated in social sciences before becoming a circus artist stated that his/her 'intellectual' background came mainly from his/her family and the limitations one could have in doing 'crazy things' such as studying

circus. Referencing a cabaret performance, this participant recalled a scene in the show that illustrates exactly what circus means to him/her:

*'Ladies and gentlemen. This is how I earn my living, it might look like the most stupid way of doing it but I love it, and I'm earning my living very well; this is just a thought for you to remember that you can do whatever you want with your life, which I think is something that circus has in the sense that to me all this, why you throw balls in the air, why you hang from things, to me is just saying in the world, there are all these things that you are supposed to do, there's millions of things that you can do and it is very important that you look for the one that you like and just do it'* (UK artist 1).

This participant found circus in the university, where s/he took a juggling workshop. His/her circus practice started in the streets while travelling within Europe in an Erasmus programme:

*'I never thought in my life that I'd be a circus performer [...] At the beginning I was juggling in the park [...] Then I realised that I could actually do something else with that apart from just having fun. I started doing some dance, acrobatic, theatre classes and slowly, slowly I went into circus.'* (UK artist 1).

The impossible/possible is also about defying society, social norms, and socioeconomic and cultural limitations. Sometimes, the impossible is earning a decent wage or pursuing a professional career in societies where education and job

opportunities are limited like in Colombia. However, the impossible could also be in terms of social norms and beliefs, such as pursuing a 'respectable' career in societies where the possibility of having a professional degree is less restrictive like in Britain. Circus is about doing what you really want to do:

'Ambition [is] what we offer [...] many kids say, *'oh no, I'm not that smart, I'm not this, I'm not that'* and they limit themselves into boxes. They figure what they're gonna do in their lives by a process of elimination, which is a terrible way to decide what to do with your life'. (UK artist 3)

Another common characteristic found in Britain and Colombia is 'to travel'. That is one of the main significant and attractive elements that practitioners identify in circus, and the way they have found circus as participants above commented. Further testimonies are:

'Because you travel a lot, you give out a lot, you push your physical maximum, but when you've done it, you've done it' (UK admin-artist 1).

'I got the best friends, I got the best lifestyle, I travel all over the world, I see incredible things. I'm like constantly inspired and impressed by people around me and I think anyone else can say that about what they do' (UK admin 4).

One of the values artists appreciate the most is the opportunity to travel to get to know the world and learn from other cultures. Travel and artists' mobility are driven mainly by the will to find better living conditions, not only

regarding work and remuneration, but also in terms of development and better living standards. That goes beyond a minimum wage and includes training, recognition, interesting relationships, and opportunities to work with artistic directors and organisations, learning other ways of living, techniques and practices.

In Britain, one of the main challenges managers and policymakers mentioned is how to retain artists in the country. Most of them move to France, Australia, Canada or the United States due to the working conditions and opportunities for circus artists (UK admin 6). Accordingly, one of the main challenges the sector faces is how to improve the circumstances for artists in terms of wages, working conditions and artistic development nationwide:

'There's still not much investment in this country; many artists here are not English but that's irrelevant because [circus] is a kind of international. They're creating work here and we want to keep them whether they are English, Spanish, or Italian. But many of them are going to Berlin, or France, or Finland. And if we don't invest in the artists, in create work for them, I think that's a big challenge we have' (UK admin 6).

More than a crazy idea or a special nomad condition specifically found in circus artists, travelling and itinerancy respond to the need to develop their talents in a more complete way, which is not being met in their country of origin. When there are no developed circus markets, artists are being forced to look in different places, which helps them to find new opportunities. Circus is a form that

provides an easy way to cross borders. As the body rather than language is the main tool, circus artists are able to perform worldwide regardless of their origins (COL admin-artist 8). The input each country or individual puts into these techniques is the key for them to enter other markets by adding a new 'flavour' (UK artist 3). Circus therefore helps to cross both cultural and national borders. In Colombia, work opportunities for some artists are very precarious, so travelling is more significant, allowing them to gain opportunities and have better chances in foreign countries where the socio-political situations are more favourable.

Therefore, the possibility of being an itinerant artist works in both ways, not only from peripheral countries to industrialised ones. While itinerancy and migration require a more detailed socioeconomic analysis in context, my initial conclusion from testimonies is that they relate mostly to the need for new circus markets and more favourable conditions for their practice rather than a particular weird condition of circus. This becomes more and more important when we try to understand the rejection of this nomadic characteristic that involves the notion of circus.

## Chapter Six

### The Role of Colombia and South America in the Emergence of Social Circus

Social circus is one of the many categories found today in circus practice. It is commonly located within the contemporary circus world together with the categories of community circus, youth circus, and other sub-genres that materialised after the 1960s. Social circus is broadly understood as a program operating outside the professional and performance circus worlds that uses circus skills as a tool for 'assisting' vulnerable populations (Lavers, 2016, p.509). An alternative approach is found in Latin America where social circus does not differentiate itself from the professional scene; rather, it is conceived and promoted as a professional option (e.g. CPT, 2017).

Revisiting the official definitions and the origins of social circus yields two crucial insights. Firstly, there is a complex history behind the emergence of this circus category in which Colombia and Latin America have played a more central role than is generally recognised. Secondly, social circus, according to its official narrative, is a hybrid; it emerged from a combination of different approaches involving circus training and peripheral populations around the world. In this process of hybridisation, the original meaning of social circus in its accepted Latin American usage was translated into the principles and priorities of funders and stakeholders, as this chapter will further discuss.

The first part of the chapter revisits the official definition of social circus and its historical construction, both of which are associated with Cirque du Monde and what is called community circus in the global North. It later explores the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, acknowledged as the occasion where related initiatives from all over the world agreed to use the term 'social circus' as a common identifier (Lavers, 2016, p.509). This meeting indicates that Latin America was the place where the term social circus was first used to denominate this common goal. This revision opens a parallel history in the emergence of social circus and the confluence of forces that gave birth to the way this practice is officially understood. The second part of the chapter illustrates the differing uses of the term social circus in Colombia and Britain and the implications of the official narrative on the practice of circus.

I conclude this chapter by opening a debate about whether the issue in question is that of circus professionalisation or about issues of distinction between those who are able to make art (according to experts), and those for whom art is seen simply as therapy or a tool of intervention. I further explore the extent to which the social-professional binary works more at the level of narrative, thereby perpetuating the stratification of social practices. The aim is to reflect on the way in which the official narrative of social circus both reproduces and reinforces the hierarchical sociopolitical and cultural structures of power.

For this particular analysis, interviews were extended to relevant figures such as representatives from Cirque du Monde, Cirque Pour Tous, and the

directors of Latin American organisations working in the area of social circus, with the aim to understand the 'origins' of the term and the initial relation between Latin American organisations and Cirque du Monde.

### **Definitions of Social Circus and the History of the Term**

The origins of social circus as a practice are generally attributed to a program initiated by Cirque du Monde, the humanitarian arm of Cirque du Soleil, in partnership with non-governmental and community organisations around the world (Arrighi, 2014, p.206). Social circus is explicitly envisioned as separate from the professional world; here, the primary goal is not to learn the circus arts, but rather to assist with participants' personal and social development (Cirque du Soleil, 2017). Social circus thus understood encourages the 'development of self-esteem' and prioritises the acquisition of social skills, artistic expression, and occupational integration over the artistic result (LaFortune and Bouchard, 2011, p.14).

The beneficiaries of social circus practices include a wide range of population groups: 'peripheral youth' (Lobo and Cassoli, 2006, p.62); 'from homeless youth to remote indigenous communities' (Spiegel, 2016, p.51); and 'at-risk youth, homeless populations, or adults living with learning disabilities' (McCaffery, 2014, p.30). The condition of being 'at-risk' is defined as 'not taking their place in society as contributing adults, at risk of suffering disenfranchisement through low achievement in education, or as a result of mental or physical health challenges' (Arrighi, 2014, p.206).

Various attempts have been made to historicise social circus as a practice. Rivard, et.al. (2010, p.182) point to Latin America in the early 1990s. This assertion is questioned by Bolton (2004, p.13), who establishes a direct link between social circus and the community circus of the global North. His claim is supported by earlier attempts to involve vulnerable youth in circus, including Le Grand Magic Circus and the Festival of Fools in the late 1960s, as well as his own work in underprivileged areas of Edinburgh in the 1980s (Bolton, 2004, p.12-13). More recently, Lavers (2016, p.508) highlights Circo de Los Muchachos (Circus of the Boys), a program founded by the Spanish priest Jesus Silva in the 1960s. This program involved the teaching of circus skills to homeless children and youths in fascist Spain. The priest and his Circo de Los Muchachos toured the world in the 1970s, while the program subsequently expanded to various countries in Latin America (see Forero, 2014, p.33).

Community circus encourages non-professional performers to participate in the circus arts by providing community workshops for schoolchildren, disabled people, and other groups (Selwood, et.al., 1995, p.51). The emphasis is on the use of circus arts as a means of self-expression and personal development. A similar movement, referred to as youth circus, emerged alongside community circus and focuses attention on the needs of young people. Both community and youth circus are defined as mainly recreational and extracurricular activities rather than a method of pursuing professional goals.

In Australia, for instance, social circus and youth circus are analysed under the broader category of community circus to 'indicate a re-imagining and a re-purposing of the circus arts within a social situation other than the professional/commercial entertainment arena' (Arrighi, 2014, p.200). Youth circus, which provides recreational, extracurricular circus skills training to young people, involves activities programmed in accordance with school terms and the quotidian rhythms of the family (Arrighi, 2014, p.204). More than simply a recreational pursuit of the circus arts, social circus designates 'the co-opting of circus skills to an agenda of social change' (Arrighi, 2014, p.206).

These categories are all defined as being outside of the professional world. Differences are marked more in terms of the participants' psychological and sociodemographic background. Youth circus is directed at schooling youth with a family unit, while social circus is extended to children and directed at those living in perilous conditions; the first program provides recreation and extracurricular activities, while the second intervenes in the lives of 'targeted' groups and supports an agenda of social change.

### **The First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, La Seyne-sur-Mer, France, 2002**

The early years of the new millennium witnessed crucial moments in the history of contemporary circus. While French scholars debated the repercussions of the institutionalisation of the new circus (Wallon, 2002, p.11), the Arts Council of

England reiterated its commitment to the recognition of circus as art and its inclusion in cultural budgets (Hall, 2002, p.5). At the same time, circus practitioners from the global North and South signed the Charter of the Creation of the 'United Nations of Social Circus' (PRICT, 2002, p.8) at the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, organised by Cirque Pour Tous, the international fundraiser arm of Colombia's NGO Circo Para Todos (Circus for All).

This meeting is credited as the moment when circus organisations from twelve countries agreed to use the term social circus to denominate the pursuit of a common goal of combining 'circus and social work to assist young people at risk' (Lavers, 2016, p.509). Among the participants were the Australian Women's Circus, Cirque du Monde, Circo de Los Muchachos, the Belfast Community Circus (UK), La Fabrik (France), and Latin American representatives Circo Social del Sur (Argentina), Circo del Mundo (Chile), and Circo Para Todos (Colombia), all of which are recognised today as pioneers of social circus. Over the course of the meeting, crucial issues were discussed around social circus, the different terminologies used around the world to denominate circus initiatives, and the distinctive characteristics of their common agendas. At the end of the meeting, a set of principles and common objectives were agreed and endorsed under the *Charter of the Creation of the United Nations of Social Circus* (PRICTS, 2002, p.8).



Les participants de Premières Rencontres Internationales du Cirque et du Travail Social

Fig. 6.1: First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, France, 2002  
Photo: PRICTS (2002, p.11)

The charter describes circus as an appealing endeavour for disadvantaged groups and an effective way of engaging with these populations whilst transforming their lives. Rather than envisioning circus 'to assist' individuals (Lavers, 2016, p.509) with their self-esteem (Cirque du Soleil 2017), circus is linked to education, emancipation, and economic development. The common goal and commitment of the new collective is defined as 'the use of circus as a tool for social transformation' (PRICTS, 2002, p.8).

At the same time, the understanding of social circus as 'assisting' was problematised in the meeting. French sociologist Brigitte Bailly drew attention to the terminology used by conventional social work programs, where participants are addressed as objects in an assistance equation, depicted as potential victims or problematic entities in need of help. Such perception leads to a denial of participants' competencies and potential (Bolton, 2004, p.12). With support from her study on Circo Para Todos Bailly noted:

'The logic underlying the project in Cali is different. The participant is not considered a victim or a potential malefactor, but as a student [...] Circus

breaks the 'aid' paradigm which prevails in work with "youth at risk" (cited in Bolton, 2004, p.4).

By teaching circus skills at a professional level, Circo Para Todos offers an alternative to the youth to construct a positive future path (CPT 2017). Under this model, circus arts are used to support their social and economic integration into society beyond a mere recreational or psychological tool.

An apparent contradiction can thus be observed when revisiting official descriptions of social circus as an intervention tool for assisting marginal children and youth at risk, along with the common goal defined at La Seyne-sur-Mer. The document and further analysis (e.g. Bolton, 2004, p.11) evidence the critique raised by Latin American participants in conventional social work programs where participants are portrayed as in need of assistance. By contrast, an alternative approach is suggested in the case of Latin America, as will be further explored in the following section.

Another key discussion at La Seyne-sur-Mer concerned different terms used in the global North and global South to describe similar approaches. Even though the term social circus is adopted and intrinsically accepted in the charter, the proceedings of the meeting recall different terminologies while suggesting 'substantive disagreements' to be addressed in future debates, stating:

'The very topic of the meetings gave rise to semantic 'contortions'. When referring to the same subject, Latin Americans would evoke social circus,

where English and Nordic (language) speakers would refer to community circus, as the French (speakers) sought to underline a clear distinction between the artistic dimension and social work' (PRICTS, 2002, p.3).

Beyond semantic and cultural disputes, the debate held in France touches on several crucial points concerning the construction of social circus and the social-professional divide: firstly, the hybridisation of diverse approaches under a single category called social circus; secondly, a crucial distinction marked between art and social work. Representatives from Europe, especially France, insisted on separating social from artistic aims; one of the reasons highlighted was that in countries such as France art enjoys a more elevated reputation and attracts more funding than social work. In addition, the combination risks 'moralising art,' 'depoliticising social issues,' or confounding the roles of the art instructor and social worker (PRICTS, 2002, p.3).

Such differentiation could be understood in the light of the modern discourse of aesthetics coined during the European Enlightenment, the moment when art was conceived as a supreme and independent realm from other human endeavours (Eagleton, 1990, p.9; Wolterstorff, 2015, p.26).

### **Circus in Latin America: An Alternative View**

Representatives from Cirque Pour Tous and the above-mentioned Latin American organisations were interviewed for this research in order to obtain clarification about

the debates that occurred in France. Two previous meetings are reported as the direct antecedents of La Seyne-sur-Mer: the first and second Latin American summits on social circus, organised by Chile's Circo del Mundo in 1998 and Argentina's Circo Social del Sur in 2000. This confirms that the term social circus was in use in the Latin American context before the meeting in France. All of the interview participants concur that a resistance to the term social circus was evident at La Seyne-Sur-Mer. This debate is still an open one today in contexts where structural disagreements concerning understandings of social circus continue to exist. One interviewee said:

'The idea of the meeting in France was to clearly differentiate professional circus from circus with non-professional goals; although the contents of the two forms are similar, the European way of naming them at that time was not.' (Latin American admin 2).



Fig. 6.2: First Latin American Summit of Social Circus, Chile, 1998  
Photos: Provided by Circo del Mundo (Chile)

While art and social work may be considered separate or mutually exclusive in the European context, this is not the case in Latin America. Analysing the case of Circo Social del Sur in Argentina, Infantino explains:

'Many young artists active in the renewal of the circus genre found in social circus an innovative way to combine their artistic interests with their desire to transform inequalities and social problems affecting different social sectors, especially disadvantaged children and young people' (Infantino, 2015, p.57).

In the words of the Director of Circo Social del Sur:

'We intend to confront the problem of exclusion of certain sectors of society that are often pushed to a relegated cultural life. We bet even more: not only we intend to guarantee access to cultural goods and services but also to the right to produce art in social sectors that otherwise would not have access to it, on an equal standard of opportunities. In this sense, we do not appeal to youth as beneficiaries of social assistance, but rather as producers and actors in artistic events, as creative subjects.' (ctd. in Infantino, 2015, p.57).

Again, social and professional components are neither divorced nor considered mutually exclusive in this approach; instead, the aim is to break down the cultural and socio-political barriers imposed on low-income groups via circus professionalisation. Rather than attending a therapy session to increase self-esteem, participants are approached as capable individuals who aim to learn circus skills and eventually become professional artists like any other circus student. The three Latin American organisations mentioned above offer professional and artistic training, and their participants perform at both professional and artistic levels. These organisations all emerged at different points in the late 1980s, becoming formalised

and institutionalised around 1995. All recognise the origins of the movement in Brazil and the work of Intrepida Trupe, a collective of artists performing and providing circus workshops to middle-class and low-income youth in Brazil.

The co-founders of Circo Para Todos, were part of this collective of artists. Inspired by their work with Intrepida Trupe, they decided to open a professional circus school in Cali, Colombian co-founder's home town. In an interview for this research, they comment how the initiative emerged in a very spontaneous way; at the time, 'our aim was not to save the world.' The energy, the attitude, and the resilience of the low-income group provided them with a more challenging and interesting environment in which to practise circus; as one participant adds: 'they were not cry babies; they threw themselves into the activities. That was pure joy for both participants and teachers' (UK admin-artist 1).

The Latin American initiatives soon crossed paths with Cirque du Soleil and the Canadian NGO Jeunesse du Monde working in Brazil. The initial involvement of Cirque du Soleil came in the form of benefit galas in the name of Latin American organisations, the provision of circus instructors, and complimentary tickets to Cirque du Soleil shows (Latin American admin1; Cirque du Monde 1). Cirque du Monde was born in the midst of that process as a 'stakeholder in an emerging alternative trend' (Rivard, et.al, 2010, p.182). A crucial difference exists between Cirque du Monde, as the so-called initiator of social circus, and Cirque du Soleil as a sponsor of and contributor to initiatives already taking place in South America and other parts of the world. In 2000, Cirque du Monde launched a

program for training social circus instructors, which has since been implemented widely across the world in newer organisations that use circus as a tool for education and social agendas.

The movement in Latin America differs from Cirque du Monde's approach in terms of circus professionalisation and its understandings of social transformation beyond aid, intervention, and assistance, as well as its pre-established divisions between art, professionalisation, and the engagement of peripheral groups. The trend responds to particular forces in the region throughout the 1970s, a decade marked by complex cultural, socioeconomic, and political phenomena in the so-called developing world, which rejected the transplantation and assimilation of Western ideals and models that had characterised the previous two decades.

As Healey explains, in the 1970s the 'indigenization of social work' (2008, p.82) began in Latin America as a response to traditional models of social work—shaped in Britain and the US in the 19th century—that had expanded across the world in the post-war period to counter 'underdevelopment' (ibid., 82). Over the course of the decade, ideas of social work in the region were re-thought as emanating from Latin America's own reality rather than borrowing models from industrialised countries (Healey, 2008, p.83; Parada, 2007, p.563). All social action was seen as having a political dimension. Healey (ibid., p.84) highlights the influence of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on the reconceptualisation of social work in Latin America, which was grounded in participation, organisation, and

consciousness-raising, moving away from the three accepted U.S. social work methods of casework, group-work, and community organisation.

Freireism and Boalism, are on the other hand acknowledged as the currents of thought behind the emergence of social circus in the 1990s in Brazil (Rivard, et.al., 2010, p.182). During his exile in Argentina in the 1960s, Brazilian director and playwright Augusto Boal wrote his famous work *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which he further developed in Paris in the following years. In 1986, Boal returned to Rio de Janeiro to establish a major centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed. This coincided with the circus initiatives emerging in Latin America, mostly in partnership with 'theatre and social science professionals' (Latin American admin 1; Latin American admin 2). The influence of his work on combining art and social change worldwide is widely documented (e.g. Jackson 2009; Mills 2009; Vieites-García, 2015).

The circus movement in Latin America, thus, came to be understood as having emerged at the intersection of Boalism and Freireism, the very intersection between art and social work that worried European participants at La Seyne-Sur-Mer. The movement developed an attractive approach that captured the attention of NGOs and circus authorities, including Jeunesse du Monde and Cirque du Soleil. La Seyne-sur-Mer marks the formal occasion when similar approaches came together, influencing one another and triggering the hybridisation and separation of circus movements.

## **A Gap between Terminologies and Aims: From Professionalisation and Social Transformation to Intervention for At-Risk Groups**

As discussed above, the predominant narrative points to Cirque du Monde and the assistential approach; several circus organisations have adopted the official narrative and terminology. Nevertheless, the objectives and principles of various organisations classified today as social circus seem not to be crucially affected; many of them are training artists at professional levels and occupy a central place in the development of contemporary circus around the globe, as will be further explored in the second part of the chapter. They are indeed transforming the realities of children and youth across the globe.

At the narrative and institutional level, however, several additional forces are at play: on one side, the adoption of certain terminologies and categories in order to comply with funding bodies and bureaucratic language; on the other, the impact that such terminologies have on the collective consciousness. The combination of both of these factors works to diminish the real impact that social circus is having in breaking down cultural and political barriers and balancing the unequal global structures that resulted in the rise of the Western empire. If France rejects the term social circus because what it understands as art is more reputable and better-funded than what it understands as social work, the opposite is true in Latin America and other geographical regions, where funding is more readily allocated to socioeconomic targets than art.

In the fundraising and formalisation process, artistic language is translated into bureaucratic language. This was another crucial topic of discussion at La Seyne-sur-Mer where the religious and military connotation of terms such as 'vision' and 'mission' employed by social circus organisations was debated at length (PRICTS, 2002, p.6). Participants voiced their discomfort owing to the fact that their aims and ideals were not identified with such terminology, which was inherited from the donors' lexicon (ibid., 6). A question arises about the negotiations made by cultural organisations in the course of fundraising, such as the terminology used to describe their initiatives and aims. To what extent are these organisations able to safeguard their own lexicon and principles?

### **Social Circus: A Hybrid**

More than a direct descendant of community circus in Europe or the work of Father Silva, then, social circus is the result of the hybridisation of various approaches. Tracing the origins of social circus exclusively via Cirque du Monde and the global North neglects the role played by fundamental actors such as Latin America and so-called marginal groups. It also both neglects the role of resistance against hegemonic structures of power and, in fact, reinforces these structures. The 1990s constituted a specific moment in circus development when an alternative movement arising in Latin America became organised and institutionalised. In the process of hybridisation, the movement was translated into the narratives and canons of the North. The role of Latin America and so-called marginal groups in the emergence

and consolidation of a circus movement has been overlooked and even neglected by official narratives. Distinctive elements of that approach, such as offering professional and artistic training to peripheral populations and challenging modern ideas of art and social work, were removed during the construction of the hybrid and the appropriation of the movement.

Social circus is understood today in terms of an orthodox, top-down version of aid and social work, a program developed by those at the centre of socio-political and economic structures to help those in the peripheries. Latin America and other peripheral groups are once more portrayed as populations in need of assistance; they are regarded as the recipients, rather than the architects, of a circus movement. Children and youth, Indigenous groups, disabled populations, homeless citizens, refugees, and women affected by violence are all placed together under the category of 'marginal' or 'at-risk' populations, following the terminology used in traditional social work directed to children and youth (e.g. Follesø 2015, p.243; Infantino, p.2011, 36). They are all portrayed as targets lacking in self-stem and other psychosocial skills. The result is a hybrid and confounding entity that reflects hegemonic socioeconomic and cultural inequalities stemming both from the global North and the global South.

In spite of the different approaches and specific contexts, crucial similarities are observed between community, youth, and social circus: in short, they are all responses to limitations imposed on various groups across societies, and especially on those traditionally regarded as the other.

Looking more closely at the work of Reg Bolton, a pioneer of community and youth circus in the global North, it becomes clear that his intention was not to become a circus professional or circus performer; rather, he wanted to open the learning of circus skills to everyone. In reaction to a 'repetitive and discouraging' experience as a student at L'École Nationale du Cirque in France, Bolton opened a summer circus school in Edinburgh in 1977 'that was, at least, fun' and different from his experience in Paris (Bolton 2004, 150). In the preface of *Circus in a Suitcase*, Bolton clarifies that his work was written 'not for these already highly skilled performers, but for the thousands of individuals, young and old, who are trying circus skills for the first time.' It was an equal-opportunity book, driven by the belief that both girls and boys can and should do everything, and challenging the aesthetic standards imposed on gymnasts and professional circus artists (Bolton 1988, 19).

A similar testimony is provided by the co-founders of *Circo Para Todos* in Colombia. Their *Intrepida Trupe* was created with eight Brazilian 'dissidents' from the National School in Rio de Janeiro (Pratt 2000). Looking for explorative approaches outside formal training, students left the Brazilian circus school to organise the collective of artists. Felicity Simpson, co-founder of *Circo Para Todos*, who also studied at L'École National du Cirque in Paris, soon became disenchanted with the European style of circus; in looking for something different, she arrived in Brazil only to find that 'the school was a copy of Europe!' (Pratt 2000).

Community, youth, and social circus in the global world speak to the confines of a professional sphere, including aspects such as enrolment fees, socioeconomic background, aesthetic style, physical attributes, race, and gender. The elements they share include circus practice and a clear political agenda of fighting cultural and socioeconomic discrimination, reinforced by the modern art world. A final note on Father Julio Silva: his proposal shares many of the elements of social circus, including that of circus professionalisation. More needs to be said, however, about its functioning under the colonial structures of social assistance run by the church under charitable models.

### **Implications of the 'Social Circus' Narrative in Colombia and Britain**

In the cases of Colombia and Britain, social circus organisations have been crucial in both the development of contemporary circus practice and the recognition of circus as art in recent decades. Artists who were trained through these initiatives are now performing at professional levels. In spite of this reality, the official narrative of social circus remains powerful. In both countries, social circus is associated with specific populations or nation-states and undervalued through stigmatised preconceptions associated with low artistic quality and the poor, as this section further explores.

### **Social Circus in Colombia**

Social circus is regarded as a constitutive part of contemporary circus in Colombia. The movement is reported as being introduced to the country by foreign

organisations sponsored by 'international circus companies (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, 16). Social circus is described as offering circus training and professionalisation to children and youth who have been overlooked by formal education systems (ibid.). Organisations such as Circo Para Todos (Cali, 1995), Circo Ciudad (Bogotá, 2003), and Circo Momo (Medellín, 2006) are the most representative examples of social circus organisations and all offer training programs. Circo Para Todos is acknowledged as the only professional circus school in the country (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.17; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.44; Forero, 2014, p.30). It offers four types of programs: community circus workshops, professional circus school, training for trainers, and a 'bridge program' (programa puente) that supports graduates in starting their professional careers.

In 2005, Circo Para Todos updated its name to National School Circo Para Todos with the endorsement of the Ministry of Education, offering a four-year fully-subsidised professional program. Applicants must complete an audition process, which assesses physical, acrobatic, and artistic skills (COL instructor 2). 70% of places are guaranteed to low-income groups, while 30% are allocated regardless of socioeconomic background. The program was designed by circus and theatre professionals and based on a thorough investigation of curricula from national circus schools in Cuba, Brazil, Canada, China, and France.

Graduates of Circo Para Todos now perform all over the globe in the professional and performance worlds. They take part in circus Olympiads and have obtained medals in renowned contests such as the Festival Mondial du Cirque de

Demain (Paris), the Wuhan International Acrobatics Art Festival (China), the International Circus Festival Circuba (Cuba), and the Circus Master Awards (Russia). They run their own circus-training programs in Colombia, France, Croatia, the USA, and the UK. Those working with the production company Circolombia perform in various settings including the Roundhouse in London, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Cirque en Chantier in Paris, New Vic Theatre in New York, the Adelaide Fringe Festival in Australia, and the International Circus Festival in Rio de Janeiro. Graduates of Circo Para Todos perform regularly at venues such as Jackson's Lane, the Place, and the Hippodrome in London. Others teach at the National Centre for Circus Arts, and those working permanently in London run their own training programs in artistic and community centers. Graduates of Circo Ciudad have also performed with Zippo's Circus (London) in their 2016 Hyde Park Christmas show. Those graduates interviewed for this research comment on their long history of performing in Colombia with La Gata Cirko and in various countries such as Italy, Cuba, and France, as well as auditioning to enter the national circus in Canada (although this was prevented by funding and visa issues). All of these performers are part of the pool of circus artists in Colombia and Britain, working in partnership with artists from all over the world, influencing and constituting the contemporary circus scene.



Fig. 6.3: Circo Para Todos and Circolombia Performances and International Contests.  
 Photos: Circolombia and Circo Para Todos archives (2006-2012)

### Social Circus in Britain

Social circus is a relatively new term in the 'U.K.-based discourse' (McCaffery, 2014, p.33); community circus has historically been the term used to describe initiatives involving circus and non-professional performers (ibid., p.33). The term social circus is now increasingly applied to these initiatives. The most representative example is the Belfast Community Circus, which is classified today as social circus both in the practice and the academic literature (Bolton, 2004, p.164; BCC 2017). Social circus has recently attracted the attention of the UK media, where circus is reported no longer as 'a romantic way of escaping the family and leaving behind conventional society,' but instead as 'a way of preventing marginalised young people from dropping out' (Pickles, 2015). In short, circus is now portrayed as offering an opportunity to join the system rather than challenge it. Emphasis is placed on the social impact of circus and the increasing number of scholars, or circademics, who are analysing the socio-economic impact of the form. Social circus is becoming a

crucial means of demonstrating both the overall value of circus and its specific advantage: namely, its power to transform societies and to contribute to the social order.

Social circus is associated with determined populations and nation-states and located outside the performance world. The above-mentioned article by Pickles (2015) reports the power of social circus as 'particularly useful for young people in conflict zones and divided societies such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland.' On the other hand, *The Circus Diaries* blogsite clarifies that 'as a website primarily devoted to circus performance,' little information is provided about social circus 'where skills are used to benefit communities and the disadvantaged—to help people learn, grow and develop as individuals' (2016). It is also reported as a 'widening area in which circus-trained artists are working' (ibid.). The relationship with the professional world is established in terms of a job, rather than a constitutive part of artists' or participants' performing experiences.

Inspired by a visit to Ethiopia and research in Colombia and Brazil, the Roundhouse in London developed its street circus and youth circus programs directed at youth in the borough of Camden (UK admin 4), with special emphasis being placed on vulnerable groups (ibid). They offer circus training and a performance space for the local youth as a platform to either continue an artistic career or simply enjoy circus and artistic engagement. Even though the program follows the social circus methodology, different terms are used to denominate their initiatives. Similar programs are run by commercial venues and circus organisation

working with excluded communities in the UK. Circus administrators interviewed for this research refer to those initiatives as 'education programs,' (UK admin 6) which are described as similar initiatives 'to the work Circolombia is doing with social circus at the Roundhouse' (ibid.).

Various related terminology is used in Britain, and some confusion and contradictions have arisen as a result. For example, even though community circus and/or social circus are regarded as being separate from the professional and performance worlds, organisations classified as such are described as offering professional and performance spaces. Community circus, for instance, has been reported as an influential movement in the emergence of the new circus of the 1980s (Selwood, et.al., 1995, p.61). It is also recognised as the initial motivation for the Arts Council to invest in circus in the 1990s (ibid., 53) when the contemporary movement began to emerge.

The Belfast Community Circus (BCC) is described as both a school and performance venue, providing circus workshops and professional training (Hall, 2002, p.13; Bolton, 2004, p.164; BCC 2017). In the 1990s, the organisation was mentioned alongside Circus Space (today the National Centre for Circus Arts) and Circomedia as places offering circus training (Hall 2002, 13). BCC is recognised as a central actor in the emergence of the circus artists who gave birth to contemporary circus in the 1990s (ibid.).

An increased number of professional and performing circus companies have chosen to incorporate into their work the desire to break down social barriers

and transform the lives of performers, audiences, and communities. An example is Diversecity, a circus organisation that involves the participation of diverse artists, hidden stories, silenced voices, and excluded talents, both at the level of circus training and performance (Diversecity 2017); producing circus shows featuring a cast of disabled and non-disabled young performers without making clear divisions between them (ibid.). While these initiatives are not necessarily classified as social circus, this terminology is increasingly used to describe the combination of circus and socially excluded groups.

### **Social and Community Circus in the Recognition of Circus as Art**

As alluded to above, official descriptions and narratives attached to terms such as social circus do not correspond to the reality of the circus practice. Community circus in Britain and social circus in Colombia are both influential movements linked to the professional circus scene and the emergence of the contemporary circus. Moreover, they have also played a crucial role in the recognition of circus as art, as well as in circus developments worldwide. The work of Circo Para Todos in Colombia and the success of its graduates performing across the world with Circolombia are recognised as being among the main reasons and motivations for the Ministry of Culture to invest in circus and to recognise circus as an art form (see Chapter 5).

A similar situation can be found in Britain with community circus and organisations such as the Belfast Community Circus, as described above. The Arts

Council began to invest in circus and to open a place for it within the cultural sector in response to the community initiatives of the new circus movement of the 1980s. The performance element of the new circus was rather overlooked, however, when the Arts Council began to include circus within its cultural policies and funding (Selwood, et.al, 1995, p.53).

In the 21st century, circus is recognised as art; however, further divisions and segmentations have taken place, and, with them, resistance towards and internal rejections of social circus. Notwithstanding the close links between social circus and the professional world of contemporary circus, there remains a tendency for the art world to reject both individuals and organisations coming from the social circus movement. This resistance operates more at the level of narrative and ideology than that of real practice, where individuals with social circus backgrounds are indeed performing on professional platforms. In Britain, a circus administrator comments on the opposition raised by certain artistic circuits in Europe, and more specifically in France, to the programming of 'social circus' groups in arts venues. Amongst the arguments provided, the participant declares 'an eventual responsibility of the arts to resolve the problems that governments are meant to solve; together with questions such as: are they artists if coming through a social program?' (UK admin 4).

Fifteen years on, the discussion held at La Seyne-sur-Mer prevails. When arguing for a separation between art and the 'responsibility... to resolve the problems that governments are meant to solve,' the artistic circuit is not only

neglecting the central role they play in social stratification and cultural distinction (Belfiore and Bennet 2008, 165-66); they are also endorsing the place that modern societies have assigned to the so-called poor, vulnerable, and other as residual members of society (Hall, 1992, p.277-80). The responsibility for these people appears to lie with the church or the government, rather than society as a whole. Both in Britain and Colombia, a series of stigmas and stereotypes still exist. A contemporary artist in Bogotá refer to the 'Cali school' as 'training gymnasts' rather than artists, while s/he is 'looking for the kind of dramaturgy, dance, and integral programs offered by circus schools such as those found abroad' (COL artist 2). An amateur acrobat from an upper-class background comments on the absence of circus training in Colombia, mentioning the 'Cali school' as the only option directed at 'the poor' while s/he is looking for 'quality' and 'proper training' (COL other 4). In the meantime, one student participant returned to Colombia after finishing a degree in Contemporary Circus and Performing Arts at the Universidad Mesoamericana in México and decided to audition for Circo Para Todos. This student became aware of the Colombian school while studying abroad and joined looking for further circus training: 'I think in Latin America it is one of the circus schools with a higher technical level; besides this, the social component makes it a more valuable venture for this country.' (COL student 2).

Further concerns are raised by circus administrators, mainly regarding use of the 'social' label as a mere fundraising or commercial tool. In Colombia, the director of a contemporary circus company comments on the various artists who

come from the city slums and difficult backgrounds: 'I have never used this information to raise money as many other organisations do. I work hard every day to dignify the artistic profession rather than presenting artists as 'street kids'.' (COL admin-artist 3). In Britain, when artists from Circo Para Todos are seen performing with Circolombia at a professional level, the socioeconomic background and artistic commitment of these performers are rigorously questioned; for example, two comments found in interviews with different circus administrators: 'I have worked with them and they are not all street kids,' (UK admin 5) or 'are they doing circus as the only option they had?' (UK artist-admin 4).

During the pilot project in Blackpool, artists graduated from Circo Para Todos were interviewed by the *Time Out* magazine. Recorded for this research, the journalist asked them how did they start doing circus. One of the artists explained that it was in Buenaventura through the Foundation *Bosconia Marcelino* where s/he received various workshops in music, bakery, woodworking, welding, and many more. 'I like none of them' (COL Artist 8). Circus was on Saturdays and 'that is the beginning of my circus life; no music, no bakery, no woodworking" (ibid.). The next question was: 'How do you feel about the fact that you are now professional guys, doing amazing shows and travel all around?' The same artists responded:

'We feel good because people really like our work and we enjoy doing it. This is not something I have to do to survive; I do it because I like it. When I am on stage I really enjoy myself' (COL Artist 8).

Another artist intervened to add:

'This is something we do from the heart. We don't work only for the money; we do it with joy and it feels amazing when the audience responds in a completely different way from what you expect [...] There are excellent acrobats in Russia and China; we also do acrobatics and we give joy to people' (COL Artist 9).

Finally, the journalist asked them: 'if you haven't done circus or the school, what you might have done?' The second artists responded 'playing football' (COL Artist 9) and the former said: 'I don't really know. I used to live in Buenaventura, and I wasn't doing much before. I was with friends doing 'bad things' I don't really know what I'd be doing now' (COL Artist 8). Playing football and doing 'bad things' are probably the only options available for many youth in Colombia, and more precisely for those in the 43% of 'poor' and 'vulnerable' youth outside the educational system, unemployed, or not looking for work (Angulo et.al, 2013, p.18). Despite the reduced opportunities to study and to have a formal job in Colombia (see Chapter 4), these artists did have options to choose from: either football, music, bakery, 'bad things', or circus. They chose circus, they studied for four years in a circus school and have spent more than 10 years performing all over the world.

Varying evaluations in terms of skills and artistic level are also made in Britain as found in testimonies provided by participants interviewed for this research. Adjectives such as 'raw,' 'crazy stuff,' and 'messy' are attached to

Circolombia's performances, while the skills of their performers are reported as not being 'at the level of the Russians or the Chinese' (UK admin 4). One participant describes Circolombia as doing 'astonishing things,' although 'very scary' and 'a bit undisciplined in theatrical terms. (UK admin 5). On the subject of circus and its distinctive characteristics as an art form, this same participant comments:

'In circus there is no established way of doing things; in theatre you are very much bounded by sort of established methods [...] dance never feels like it is risking everything to me; there is too much discipline in dance.' (ibid.).

When another participant was asked how Circolombia is received by the contemporary scene in Britain, the answer was:

'Mixed. Nobody doubts their skills and everyone thinks they are amazing, which they are, and it is a real spectacle and they have done so much in this country in terms of developing circus audiences. Contemporary circus audiences stay away from it because they went, "oh! commercial." It wasn't playing to them, it was playing to a wide audience; and I think it is a bit of jealousy.' (UK admin 6 ).

Several questions emerge in terms of the criteria by which these artists and organisations are evaluated by the contemporary circus world. To what extent do professional artists in Colombia and Britain meet the standard set by the Chinese and the Russians? Is this the gauge by which a circus artist in the 21st century

narrative-driven form should be judged? Is the 'messy,' 'raw,' and 'undisciplined theatrical style' a positive or negative factor when assigning value to a circus performance? Is this a response grounded in theatrical and dramatic canons, rather than the distinctive character of circus as a diverse, physical, and flexible form? Is circus professionalism being questioned here, or a specific aesthetic taste, or the socioeconomic and cultural background of the artists and organisations? And, finally, to what extent is this response a matter of funding and market segmentation?

In the meantime, while a particular subset of funders, arts managers, and artists debate whether individuals coming through social circus initiatives are artists or not, street kids or not, artists from Circo Para Todos performing at professional and commercial levels around the world respond:

'What makes me an artist? A long process of 10 years of my life invested in this endeavour and now I am seeing the results, and understand it is indeed possible.' (COL artist 6).

'For me being an artist is to be on stage and make people applaud and when you come out after the show and they all say WOW, that was incredible! That's the only thing that makes me an artist, right?' (COL-UK artist 1).

When asked if the 'social' label had opened or closed opportunities in their artistic careers, answers lean towards:

'No, people don't even pay attention to that... people, artists, and society in general care about the quality of the show and how good you are on stage... While those who manage the projects like circus schools, the consul, the venues, those who deal with the money, they must pay attention to that because it is what brings them benefits and what provides them something... but people in general... no way! How many years working here and I've never used the 'social' story... some people are interested in hearing it and I told them, but people here... no way!' (COL-UK artist 1).

The above-quoted professional artist, named both in the literature and in the media as a street kid, vulnerable, marginalised, disadvantaged, at-risk, and poor, arrived at a similar conclusion to this analysis, summarising in a straightforward and sharp way the situation of social circus today: in short, it is a matter of funding and structures of power.

In another interview, an artist who had graduated from the National Centre for Circus Arts in Britain was asked if s/he considers him/herself an artist; the response was:

'Yeah I'd like to think so. I don't know what makes an artist or not; I think I'm an artist of intention. I want to create art... at the end of the day creating art is not that easy; well, because you have to sell tickets; is not that easy... Art is a weird word.' (UK artist 1).

Art: a 'weird word' coined in the European Enlightenment (Shiner, 2001, p.3), together with the 'bourgeois modern aesthetics' (Eagleton, 1990, p.8) discussed above; 'a weird word' that is influencing both the practice of circus and its recognition in the 21st century.

### **Is Social Circus the Other of Professional Circus?**

This analysis of social circus and professional circus in Colombia and Britain suggests that the construction of the social-professional divide, as well as the disputes between these two worlds, have deeper roots that transcend the professionalisation of circus as such. Social circus and professional circus are highly intertwined, as artists who came to the art form through social circus initiatives are performing on national and international platforms, at commercial and artistic levels. The question, then, is to what extent the debate centres around professionalisation—understood as training under a consistent program over a certain period of time, combined with a career trajectory in circus—and to what extent it concerns issues of class, otherness, aesthetic taste, and funding and commercial strategies. In short, to what extent is this divide a result of social stratification and the perpetuation of modern socio-political structures of power, as maintained by the 'grand narrative of art' (Wolterstorff, 2015, p.25) and traditional social work?

Returning to the initial question of the conflicts between social circus and professional circus, social circus is becoming the other of professional circus at the level of narrative, discourse, and ideology. The definition of social circus and the

social-professional divide, far from reflecting the real practice of circus, is operating more as a discourse; a discourse that produces knowledge through the use of language, entering and influencing practices while shaping new realities (Foucault, 1980, p.201-3). The term social circus was initially used in Latin America to denominate an alternative circus movement that emerged when circus and theatre artists encountered children and youngsters who had been excluded by society. Inspired by their attitude and energy, as well as their physical, intellectual, and emotional capacity for learning circus, these young professionals found a new way of practicing their artform. The result is a consolidation of professional training programs offered to those traditionally labelled as deprived youth that also breaks down cultural and sociopolitical barriers.

A more horizontal and complementary approach is observed between participants and social circus organisations. A different relationship is also observed between Cirque du Monde and the Latin American organisations that worked with peripheral groups and facilitated circus professionalisation in the early 1990s. Various forces emerged and worked to translate the initial meaning of social circus; among these were the modern division between artistic, political, and social spheres, as well as the hybridisation of the Latin American approach with similar programs found in the global North such as community circus and youth circus, both of which are defined as non-professional and outside of the performance world. Another factor was the consolidation of Cirque du Monde as Cirque du Soleil's corporate responsibility platform, supporting and investing one percent of

their benefits in social initiatives around the world. The relationship seems to have been transformed at the level of narrative, funding, and institutionalisation.

Social circus is understood today as social work rather than art, following a division established in the global North. Individuals taking part in social circus are referred to as marginalised or at-risk populations and portrayed as targets in need of assistance, following the lexicon of development programs applied in the global South. The result is an ambivalent category that combines global structures of power and the stratification of cultural practices according to the individuals' socioeconomic background. The social component dominates the narrative while the political component disappears.

Nevertheless, social circus is transforming the reality of peoples all over the world while also breaking down traditional socioeconomic and political barriers. The practice constitutes a palpable example of the emancipatory struggles of our times (Sousa-Santos, 2014, p.ix) through its contribution to global social justice. The model in Colombia evidenced an alternative that is tackling (directly or indirectly) some of the most pressing needs in the country. However, the translation of the movement into the languages of the Centre and the North is diminishing both the transcendence of the social circus movement and the reality of circus practice as a whole. Funding disputes and cultural respectability are dividing circus and circus practitioners according to old-fashioned narratives coined in the European Enlightenment and the construction of the modern world.

This case evidences the prevalence of 'the West and the Rest discourse of power' and the internal peripheries of the West (e.g Hall, 1992). In the case of contemporary circus, the world's peripheries are coming together under the umbrella of 'social circus' and 'marginal' groups in need of help. Professional circus artists 'assist' them to become 'better citizens', to become the norm. They are seen as receivers of circus rather than capable individuals able to become artists, to write the circus history and to constitute the contemporary circus as it is today. Finally, this is a clear example of the need to transcend the understanding of the world beyond de West and the imposition of western notions and histories in the making of the global world. An example that joins the claim for an epistemological break (Sousa-Santos, 2014, p.ix).

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion and Further Discussion in the Recognition of Circus in the 21st Century

This research analyses circus arts in Colombia and Britain in the 21st century. It finds a divided practice separated in rigid movements called traditional circus, contemporary circus and social circus. A fourth category is found in Colombia called 'circus at the traffic lights'. Community circus is another category found in Britain, which is becoming part of social circus, as explained in Chapter 6. Two main reasons are identified behind the separation of movements: first, differences between fixed ideas of circus as the spectacle of clowns, animals and human skills presented under the big top, and wider understandings of circus as a flexible and unlimited form; second, differences between art, entertainment, social work, and busking. Traditional circus is associated with the fixed understanding of circus and regarded as entertainment and a business rather than art. Social circus is part of the contemporary movement associated more with therapy and social work. Circus at the traffic lights is linked with busking and money making rather than qualified circus. Contemporary circus claims for wider understandings of the practice and recognition as art; it is described as animal-free, narrative-driven and found in a wider range of open and private spaces.

Divisions and descriptions vary across countries, as explained in previous chapters. The summary above corresponds to a wider description found

both in the academic literature and in the circus sector. This summary is identified as the general narrative that is complicating circus understandings, the recognition of the form in the 21st century as well as creative processes and identification of circus performers. This thesis traces the root of the conflict to find modern circus and modern aesthetics at the core of the debate. Chapter 1 dedicates special attention to modern circus. It finds that, more than a historical reference, modern circus is regarded as the point when circus emerged as a distinct generic form (Stoddart, 2000, p.15). The moment when circus takes the form that we know today (Ward, 2014, p.15). This phrase is regularly found in past and present circus literature in spite of little agreement on the form that circus takes today.

It is in the 19th century with the work of British journalist Thomas Frost (1875/1881), that circus is officially recorded as the specific spectacle that Philip Astley brought together in the 1760s. The spectacle is characterised for the display of horse-riding acts and other 'circus-type' acts previously found in the European fairgrounds (Speaight, 1980). They were now performed in an equestrian ring of 13m diameter. Astley's spectacle was presented in a private venue called Astley's Amphitheatre where an entrance fee was charged to the public. Competition arose and years later, in 1783, Charles Hughes and Charles Dibdin presented a renovated spectacle and venue. A stage – where pantomimes were performed – was added to the equestrian ring. The renewed venue and spectacle were closer to classic theatre and called 'Royal Circus'. Circus had found its name, wrote theatre historian George Speaight (1980, p.33). Astley established an amphitheatre in Paris and years later in

Dublin and from there the form extended to the rest of the world. Royalty and other respectable figures attended circus performances. It is here, around 1783, that circus becomes an international form and a distinct genre (Stoddart, 2000). It is also in the European Enlightenment that circus is defined as the fixed format that is complicating the understanding of circus as a flexible and unlimited form.

Differences between art, entertainment, social work, and busking, can be also understood in the light of modern aesthetics and the 'modern art world' (Wolterstorff, 2015, p.5). The modern discourse of aesthetics, also coined during the European Enlightenment, conceived art as a supreme and independent realm from other human endeavours (Eagleton, 1990, p.9; Wolterstorff, 2015, p.26). Art was separated from the ethical, political and religious realms (Eagleton, 1990, p. 9). These ideas were the product of the specific socioeconomic and political conditions of 18th century Europe, when artists were trying to gain independence from religious and political patronage to exercise their practice (Belfiore and Bennet, 2008, p.182-83). Such discourse was promoted by the growing European middle class in their struggle for political hegemony and class differentiation (Eagleton, 1990, p.3). The result was the consolidation of an 'elitist' and 'inaccessible' modern art world (Wolterstorff, 2015, p.5-16), only 'judged by experts' and accessed by 'those with the taste to appreciate it and the money to buy it' (Eagleton, 1990, p.368). In the struggle of independence, artists found in the market the place to fund their enterprise. As Eagleton (1990) explains, it was in a

paradoxical way that artistic independence was gained through the insertion of artworks as any other commodity in the market.

### **Modern Circus: The Emergence of Circus as a Performing Art?**

I provide an alternative reading of the circus history where my argument is that modern circus, rather than the emergence of a distinct genre and a performing art, represents the moment when the entertainments of the fairgrounds were enclosed in a private venue that was now closer to theatre and the entertainments of the European bourgeoisie. Moreover, circus performances were enclosed and immersed in the growing capitalist market, run in private buildings and administered by a businessman. The distinct genre and performing art were already there before modern times with the work of 'saltimbanques' or 'circulatores', some of the names given to 'circus-type' performers before Astley's time. They were 'histriones' and polyvalent artists. Acrobatics and physical acts were performed together with poetry, comic characters, animal tamers, musicians and dancers, travelling all around the globe (Speaight, 1980). These artists were found in 'ancient' times all over the world. Stoddart (2000, p.28) maintains that it would be a mistake to interpret the gap between 'the' circus and circus found in the 20th century, as any kind of return to 'pre-Astleian days before these disparate acts were collected under one roof, since the status and association of these acts were entirely transformed by the establishment of circus as a distinct generic form of entertainment'.

The crucial aspects highlighted by Stoddart (2000, p.28) in the transformation of 'disparate acts' into a generic form and a performing art are 'status', 'association' and 'the establishment'. Looking at definitions of genre and performing art, 'genre' is a French term coined within literary studies to differentiate comedy, tragedy, epic, and other styles (Berger, 1992, p.xi). The term was extended to other artforms to denote 'kind' or 'class' where differentiation is made in terms of 'sharing certain conventions', of sharing elements in common (ibid.). Performance, broadly, is defined as 'any activity that involves the presentation of rehearsed or pre-established sequences of words or actions' (Bial and Brady, 2016, p.59). Is Astley's time the first moment when these acts depict elements in common to become a distinct genre? Is Astley's circus the first moment when these acts are found as a presentation of rehearsed or pre-established sequences of words or actions? Are London and Europe the places where these performances and distinct genre are found for the first time?

The work of Fu Qifeng (1985) on the history of Chinese acrobatics provides various examples one can use to contradict such appreciation. 'Acrobatics', the term associated with the word 'circus' in ancient China, became an independent performing art around 770–476BC as the result of the division of labour and the specialisation of practices (1985, pp.1–10); it was also at this time when acrobatic arts went from the common people into the homes of dukes and marquesses (ibid.). There is also evidence of the advance and specialisation of skills and techniques, as well as the use of acrobatics in diplomatic endeavours since the western Han

dynasty from 206BC (Qifeng, 1985, p.13). Status, appreciation and investments on the technique were not exclusive to 18th century Europe neither.

Is the European modern circus the point when circus emerges as a performing art or distinct genre? My answer is that it is not. My contention is that circus did not escape the modern construction of history and time where 18th century Europe is placed at the centre of the story and the beginning of the present time. When the West, capitalism, urban centres, the bourgeoisie, the state, and white heterosexual men became the central characters in the making of history (e.g. Mignolo, 2011; Bhambra, 2014). The key moments in the 'origins' of circus were found in the West, capitalism, urban centres, the bourgeoisie, and white men. The 'fathers of the circus' are Philip Astley, Charles Hughes, and Antonio Franconi; that is, the manager, the entrepreneur, the proprietor, the white man. The origins of circus and main transformations are located in Britain, France, and the United States, the main economic and political powers of capitalism and the Western empire. The golden ages and the decline of circus are registered according to the ascendance or the decline of urban centres and the taste of the bourgeoisie. In Britain for example, the golden ages are placed in between the 1820s and the 1870s, when circus was the main entertainment in London. Remarkable times at the Blackpool Tower, founded in 1894, are not included within the golden ages. The decline of circus came with massive circus shows and the replacement of circus by music halls, cinema, sports, and TV as the main entertainment in urban centres.

While circus history and circus understandings are recorded according to the central actors mentioned above, crucial actors became invisible figures. Patty Astley and the same circus artists are not included among the circus 'inventors'. It is the manager and the white man. The age-old tradition of Chinese acrobatics and non-Western performers at Astley's spectacle are not part of the formative characters of circus. It is the equestrian ring, the venue, the business model, the organisation of acts, the horse, that gave birth to circus. The successes in rural and peripheral areas are also left behind. It is the institutionalisation and the appreciation of circus in urban centres and among cultural elites that makes circus a distinct form.

The transformations that circus experienced in modern times correspond to the institutionalisation and industrialisation of an itinerant practice according to the specific socioeconomic and political conditions of 18th century Europe. The performing art and the distinct genre existed before modern times. Artists were not called circus artists but they did have distinct name such as *circulatores* (e.g. Revollo, 2004), *saltimbanques* (e.g. Wall, 2013) and *acrobats* (e.g. Qifeng, 1985); names that extended to a distinct genre could result in 'the art of the itinerancy' (Bailly, 2009, p.66) or the multiple interpretations and meaning the term circus represents: ambivalence, transformation, circle, adaptation, travelling, moving bodies, and other characteristics found both in the literature (see Chapter 1) and in the practice (see Chapter 5).

Rather than the emergence of a performing art, modern circus is more representative of the emergence of a cultural industry characterised by privatisation, capitalism, celebrity culture, standardisation and exportation of a format, while profits are collected by a manager and intermediary rather than artists directly from their audience. This conclusion points to an unexplored subject of study: the analysis of circus in the emergence and development of cultural industries, together with film and the media, the main exponents of the field (e.g. Hesmondalgh, 2013; Throsby, 2010).

### **Contemporary Circus: The Emergence of Circus as High Art?**

Current histories do not escape the same modern construction. Contemporary circus is traced back 250 years (e.g. Jacobs, 2016). Future developments and transformations are found in Europe and the West. New circus appears in France in the 1970s and other industrialised countries (e.g. Bolton, 2004; Tait and Lavers, 2016). This is the period when circus leaves the Big Top to perform in community centres, the street and various other venues (ibid.). Contemporary circus appears around 1995 in France and is the moment when circus 'steps away from the ritual and tradition, to enter the constantly changing field of modern art' (Purovaara, 2012, p.115). Social circus is Canada's Cirque du Monde programme that assists young people at risk (e.g. Arrighi, 2014). This movement is not regarded as art or professional circus but as social work (e.g. Cirque du Monde, 2017). In the meantime, invisible and crucial figures are once more left aside such as Russia, in

the emergence of new circus and the creation of circus schools, and Brazil, Colombia, Latin America and marginalised youth in the case of social circus. Further questions arise. Is 'contemporary circus' the only art today? Has the discourse changed in the last 250 years?

My answer again is negative. In the official history, circus transformations are primarily found as an evolution leading to an improved version that finally becomes art. Distinctive characteristics tend to be reported in terms of the organisation of disconnected acts and distinctions between art and entertainment. A similar rhetoric reoccurs from modern times to the present. Traditional circus is the direct inheritor of modern circus transformed under the influence of the United States into a business and massive entertainment. New circus marks the transition from a corrupted industrial and commercial format to a 'humanised' and democratic form re-emerging in France and the global North (e.g. Bolton, 1987, p.6). Animals and exploitation are no longer part of the format; a theme or a narrative is included giving sense to the disconnected physical acts. Circus schools and community initiatives appear, breaking the monopoly of circus families over the teaching of circus skills. As discussed above, contemporary circus finally imprints what circus was lacking to become 'high art' (e.g. Purovaara, 2012, p. 115).

The history of circus is offered in the same light than the history of the Western civilisation as a linear story of 'progress and development' (Mignolo, 2011, p.171) where the 'victorious wins' (Wolf, 1982, p.5). Each renewed category adds a

narrative, it is more organised and 'humane' than the previous one. Every stage presents the combination of arts and the closeness to theatre as an innovative element of the time. These accounts seem to forget that it is precisely the addition of a stage and inclusion of dramatic elements that have given birth to the so-called modern circus. It was the hybrid between theatre and the fairground acts that gave birth to the distinctive form 'circus'. The European new circus of the 1970s is once more the effort to turn circus into an art form by bringing elements of theatre and the respected arts closer to the form. This was not exclusive to Europe or specifically France. In the 1920s, the same goal is found in Russia with the establishment of the first circus school in Moscow. The aim was to bring the best theatre and dance representatives of the time to teach at the circus school – to make circus a respectable art (see Chapter 1).

These accounts seem to forget that circus before modern circus has always been closer to theatre and other forms. As mentioned above, saltimbanques and circulores were histriones and polyvalent characters performing at the marketplace together with poets, musicians, dancers, comic characters, animal tamers, while travelling all around the globe. The difference is the setting and institutional conditions upon which these performers exercise their practice. This relates more to the formalisation of the form than the invention of an artistic genre. The transformation of the art form has followed different socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. The circle and the Big Top have not always been the distinctive elements of circus, and even less the horse. Astley's spectacle in the

1760s was born in an opened building and oval space. Massive shows appeared with the railway and the possibility of transporting more people, animals and equipment (Bentley, 1977). Wild animals and freaks were incorporated into the show in the search for novelties to amuse audiences (ibid.). The decline of family-run circuses responded to changes in family structures and the role of women within them (e.g. Beadle, 2009). The horse was just present in a short period of less than 100 years when England was at the centre of circus developments. By the 1870s the horse was no longer the central figure of circus (Ward, 2014).

Circus has been understood as a spectacle as well as an institution that gathered fairground acts in an ordered sequence within a ring of spectators. The managerial structure that adopted itinerant artists and their ambivalent and criticised characters, became the central and defining aspect of circus. Such a format represented the way in which itinerant artists could perform at a time of criticism and rejection of open gatherings and public encounters. The enclosure of such entertainment meant that artists could perform in a safe space, enjoying increased career prospects. Under the new economic model of public entertainment, circus and commercial theatre became an important asset to entertain equally the elite and the working class. The ring, the amphitheatre, the circus or the venue represented, to a great extent, the 'clinic' and the 'school' described by Foucault, in which people could be contained and governed during their leisure time. The enclosure of the market entertainment within a ring during the 18th century and the definition of circus around its managerial aspects a century

later could also be read as the policing of public entertainment and its 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1984). Although liberated from criticism and struggles on the streets, circus artists became subjected to the power of the manager and the state.

### **The Turn of the 21st Century: The Recognition of Circus in Britain and Colombia**

The first decade of the century marked a time when circus was recognised by cultural authorities in Britain and Colombia. At the turn of the new millennium, the Arts Council of England reinstated its commitment in the recognition of circus as an artform on its own and to guide the relationship between the sector and the whole funding system (Hall, 2002, p.5). A decade later, The Colombian Ministry of Culture recognised the existence of an overlooked practice and commissioned a diagnostic report that would inform a cultural policy for circus (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.6). Both efforts resulted in the immersion of circus in contemporary cultural institutions, funding applications, and the criteria upon which circus artists and circus organisations were judged.

Institutionalisation, cultural policies or public investments in circus are not something new as discussed above. The same idea of circus relies upon processes of emplacement and before the 2000s other examples are found in both countries. In the early 1990s, the Arts Council in Britain invested a modest amount of resources to circus schools and training programmes associated with the 'community circus' movement that encouraged non-professional performers to

participate in circus arts by providing community workshops for schoolchildren, disabled people, and other groups (Selwood et al., 1995). In 1995, the local mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus, designed his famous 'cultura ciudadana' (civic culture) strategy in which mime artists and clowns educated pedestrians and drivers on civic norms (King, 2017). Those efforts can be described as 'embryonic' (Selwood et al., 1995, p.54), or incipient and isolated attempts which were not necessarily directed towards the strengthening and development of circus sector. Both interventions used circus in a peripheral way for the achievement of other agendas. In the case of Britain, they were mainly directed to the democratisation of culture and the motto of 'arts for everyone' (Selwood et al., 1995, p. 54). In Colombia, they were associated with the governance of citizens and traffic control.

The antecedent of such investments is found in the late 1980s with the emergence of the 'new' circus movement in both countries with a new generation of artists; most of them were young individuals looking for alternative forms of artistic expression outside of traditional circus family networks. They were amateurs performers in raves and underground movements, or theatre professionals who found in circus the inspiration to renovate their artistic practice. Organisations such as Circus Space in Britain and Circomedia were initially funded by the Arts Council (Selwood et al., 1995). Both institutions paved the way for the contemporary circus scene to develop in Britain. In the case of Colombia, Mockus' campaign was led by Felipe García, founder of the circus-theatre collective Muro de Espumas, an organisation actively involved in the promotion of circus without animals in

Colombia and the corresponding Ministerial lobby (COL admin-artist 1). These instances were involved in those initial campaigns, contributing to the formalisation of the contemporary circus scene years later; these strategies were part of various attempts made by circus practitioners in search of the investment of public funding towards the form. Even though both efforts paved the way for recognition, they were not sufficient. In 1995, the Director of Combined Arts at the Arts Councils referred to the 'poor quality' of new circus as an explanation for low investments in the form (Selwood, et.al. 1995, p.54). In Colombia, Bogotá's major campaign was an isolated effort directed to a completely different agenda. It was just until the 2009 clown's protest that cultural authorities became aware of the existence of circus.

At the turn of the 21st century, circus was a form in the forgotten past, performing in the peripheries. The stronger presence of circus collectives and circus initiatives combined with international trends and the success of Cirque du Soleil marked the turning point of an invisible practice. More importantly, the particular interest of cultural administrators was decisive in the recognition of circus. In Britain, this led to the creation of a circus position within the Arts Council and in Colombia, the creation of the Subdivision of Theatre and Circus within the Arts Department at the Ministry of Culture. Today, circus has re-entered the cultural establishment through the consolidated figures of arts administrators and experts, who have replaced circus owners and ring-masters. This transformation is a result of the long process of economic and social changes, which have taken agency away from circus families. Circus artists of today are instructors, managers, and impresarios

embracing the format of the creative economy based on freelancing and job precariat (e.g. Gill and Pratt, 2008), a practice not that unfamiliar to them.

Circus was finally recognised as art in the first decade of the 21st century. This recognition can be understood as a process of formalisation resulting from the immersion of circus in cultural institutions, funding applications, and the criteria upon which circus artists and circus organisations are perceived. The 'quality' of a circus company or circus artists is approached in both countries in terms of artists' ability to 'present' their work and to complete funding proposals. Funding is directed to those who could complete the forms and provide managerial and administrative systems, allowing them to meet the funding criteria. This process of formalisation is evidenced in the consolidation of circus companies, circus schools and venues, the inclusion of circus in cultural agendas, showcase markets, funding allocation, and the emergent discipline of circus studies. In summary, the consolidation of the 'circus sector' and its incorporation into contemporary cultural policies, understood as the embodiment of practices under systematic, regulatory guides to action, adopted by organisations to achieve particular goals (Miller and Yúdice, 2002, p.1). This is exactly the point of differentiation from previous public and private interventions found both in Britain and Colombia: a coordinated system in which local authorities, NGOs, multilateral banks, national governments, social movements, community groups, and businesses are 'funding, controlling, promoting, teaching, and evaluating' (Miller and Yúdice, 2002, p.1) circus artists today.

Such recognition and formalisation have been accompanied by the separation of circus movements into traditional, new, contemporary, social circus, and many other categories, which are entering the renewed system in different ways. In Britain, traditional circuses do not meet the criteria for the support of the Arts Council as they are regarded as commercial businesses. In addition, an effort is being made to bring contemporary circus to renovate the traditional circus offer in regions such as Blackpool or Great Yarmouth. Traditional circuses are not just excluded from public policies but they are once more threatened by governmental interventions. In Colombia, contemporary circus is mainly urban and the traditional circus is still found in rural areas and the city's peripheries. Both are eligible for the support of the Ministry of Culture. However, the bureaucracy required, such as funding applications, entertainment licenses and permits, and other formalities like health insurance, complicate funding access and recognition to a population with low education levels (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.34; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013, p.56).

Within the contemporary circus further peripheries are found. One of them is emerging artists and other practitioners without managerial and networking skills, or simply without the resources and opportunities required to access networks and professional schools. In Colombia, the social circus movement is offering this possibility to low-income youths and other artists. These organisations were heavily reliant on income sources coming from international aid programmes. Nowadays, they count with limited resources offered by the Ministry of Culture and other local authorities, which are not sufficient to cover the expenses involved in the

maintenance of a circus school (Pinzon and Villa, 2011, p.17). This has led to the reduction of costs and the consequential decline of artistic quality, and even permanent closure of these organisations.

Internal peripheries and old-fashioned disputes between circus movements are thus reinforced by the renewed system in which circus operates today. Such disputes are highly questioned when looking closer into circus. On one hand, an important section of the contemporary circus is revealed to be as commercial and business-oriented as traditional circuses (see Chapter 5). As a contemporary artist in Britain commented, this section is criticised for being the same as traditional circus without animals and 'looking better' (UK artist 1). According to this participant, it is just a reduced section that is really offering innovation in circus today. This is the group following 'the French tradition' in Britain or 'the European style' in Colombia, which is mixing circus with other art forms while including a narrative. On the other hand, social circus in Britain is regarded as therapy and social work rather than art. In Colombia, they are considered as a mere fundraising tool and a new form of artist exploitation (see Chapter 6). In a similar way, circus at the traffic lights is considered 'busking' rather than professional circus. Efforts are being conducted towards the professionalisation of this circus section.

The contemporary movement is thus further divided and divisions are once more declared to be in terms of the business model, lack of innovation, and 'art' versus other non-artistic forms. The great innovation and reinvention of contemporary circus, which is now reduced to a limited section, is thus observed in

the inclusion of narrative, the mix of circus and other recognised art forms, and a more humane form, which is no longer exploiting animals and artists. However, this innovation and reinvention of circus is not something new. A similar discourse is found from the 18th century onwards with the invention of modern circus and the emergence of circus as a performing art in Europe. As George Speaight (1980, p.34) illustrates, Charles Hughes, Philip Astley's main competitor, joined the 'clever composer and man of the theatre' Charles Dibdin to present horsemanship in a more 'classical and elegant' manner, uniting the 'business of the stage and the ring', combining horse-riding and drama by writing plays on themes of chivalry. According to Speaight, Dibdin associated circus with 'blackguardism', which could be interpreted as the performers 'being rough, uncouth fellows and audiences not much better' (ibid., 34). After losing his position as a house dramatist and composer in Covent Garden, Dibdin joined the circus in search of an income source and new opportunities to use his talents (ibid.). This account is fairly similar to the current situation observed in circus and the multiple disputes between traditional and contemporary circus, as well as within contemporary circus.

On the other hand, the crossover of disciplines is not something solely attached to contemporary circus. This is not a new transformation that circus is experiencing but a definitive and distinctive characteristic of circus. Both in Colombia and in Britain, practitioners mentioned this element, especially in Colombia where the contemporary phenomenon is more incipient and the traditional circus is the main reference. It is worth noting that both Colombian and

British artists seem to have found in circus the place where interdisciplinarity is allowed (see Chapter 5).

To what extent is contemporary circus, and more precisely the reduced 'French tradition' innovating circus? Is this another example of the circus discredit/ascendance according to cultural elites and modern art? Are such disputes still revealing the weight that classic theatre and other recognised arts still impose over circus and 'other forms' outside official and moral canons? Is the reduced circus section aiming at coming closer to theatre and other arts in order to gain recognition in the same terms of those arts? Some participants outside the French tradition consider this circus style as 'boring, sterile and clean' (UK admin-artist 1).

While others comment:

'The theatre, the French, and each movement, and the story and all that... is good but sometimes you get bored. The interesting part to me, to work with theatre and the story and to bring all that into circus, is when you can make your own show, when you're with friends creating [...] but when you work in a company following an artistic director, where they create everything and you have to do what they want you to do, that's a bit boring [...] The French are quite complicated with the theatre thing; they're perfectionists, I don't know [...] They don't care about the technique, they care more about each movement you make, each expression, that everything has a 'why'... sometimes that's cool as well... it depends' (COL-UK artist 1).

Innovation seems to be found in the peripheries. In Britain, various testimonies given by practitioners and circus audiences suggest that 'nothing really innovative has happened in circus since Archaos' (UK other 2). The highly political and irreverent French circus performed at 'The First Ever Festival of New Circus' at the South Bank of the River Thames in 1988 (UK admin 8). Archaos returned in the following years with sold-out shows on Clapham Common and Highbury Fields (Kennedy, 2010). As the former UK tour manager commented for this research, the circus collective continued growing until reaching the American market where the success was not the same as it was in Europe (UK admin 8). At the same time, Cirque du Soleil was significantly growing in the United States and other countries. Supported by Quebecois cultural authorities, Cirque du Soleil became the main representative that 'transformed' circus without animals (e.g Jacobs, 2016). Its commercial success is also mentioned as one of the main reasons behind the recognition of circus in 2002 in Britain (e.g. Hall, 2002). In Colombia, the Canadian circus is also the main reference in terms of new circus developments (e.g. Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013), and its first performance in Bogotá in 2010, as a booster in the renewed recognition of circus (COL policy maker 1).

Both in Colombia and Britain traditional circuses seem to be more transgressive when maintaining the classical format in spite of opposition. Critics could suggest that the box office and profitable business maintains them on the road. However, they continue operating in spite of official recognition and funding, struggling against bureaucracy, permits, licenses, and the many other restrictions

they face to operate their circuses. On the other hand, meaning and transcendence can also be found in traditional circuses. An anecdotal example is found in Colombia where the owner of a circus tent for an audience of 300 people, performing on the edge of the roads, when asked the question 'Why circus?' gave the answer: 'While many folks out there wander from village to village, hurting, killing people, making them suffer, we wander from town to town making them laugh, allowing them to de-stress and allowing them to forget all the bitter moments. That's why we exist!' (COL admin-artist 9).



Fig. 7.1: Circus on the Roads of Colombia  
Photos: Circus Found on a Road Trip from Bogotá to Medellín

The example above aims to reflect on different ways to deal with life and transcendent issues beyond introducing specific drama elements or narratives to circus acts. It is not an exclusive characteristic of contemporary movements and neither is it the only way to make a performance meaningful. The inclusion of narrative according to participants can be rather read as 'expressing yourself in an incredible way' (COL artist 1), where expression transcends 'a text' in terms of dramaturgy in a theatrical way. The act of an individual wearing colourful and bizarre clothes, massive shoes, or a wig, challenge official cannons besides mere entertainment and laughter. Traditional circus is the only form of entertainment that

many people around the world have access to, suggesting a distinctive character of this format. It reaches diverse audiences and more people from different backgrounds than many recognised and modern art forms.

While Colombian policy makers and the reduced contemporary circus invest a great effort to include a narrative following the European tradition, many other artists – including those who gave birth to the contemporary scene – are in search of their own narratives and inspiration. The effort here is to find their own aesthetic proposals while exploring their hybrid roots and cultural identity in the mix of populations and circus traditions. Following European styles is nothing new or innovative in Colombia. It is, on the contrary, the rule in the construction of official culture and national identity (see Chapter 4). These movements are part of an invisible group in the dual division seen in Colombia, outside right-wing and left-wing politics, guerrilla and paramilitary groups and even social activists. They are a significant part of the civil society that is transforming realities inside and outside the system, inside and outside the formal economy, inside and outside unions and activist groups.

### **The Turn of the 19th and 21st Centuries and the Emergence of Circus as Art**

A parallel is thus observed at the turn of the 19th and the 21st centuries. Both epochs represent moments when circus is recognised as art. This thesis brings them together as an attempt to clarify current understandings and debates surrounding circus practice. The parallel reveals a cyclical condition of an itinerant and

ambivalent practice entering formalisation and cultural establishments at different points of time, under different circumstance. These two centuries are the closest moments in time when circus has gained recognition from official society, and subsequently is regarded as art. The 18th and 20th centuries, are characterised by the invisibility and de-valuation of the form. They are described in the literature as 'eclectic' (Stoddart, 2000) or 'gloomy' (Ward, 2014) periods. Circus artists were regarded as vagabonds or animal exploiters.

The entrance of the 1800s is recognised as the time when circus emerged as performing art stepping away from its fairground origins and eclectic nature; it becomes an organised performing art and international form (e.g. Stoddart, 2000). Its immediate historical antecedent is the emergence of modern circus in London in 1768. In a similar way, the entrance of the 2000s is identified as the re-emergence and re-invention of circus and the time when circus moves away from a mere display of physical virtuosity to the art field (e.g. Purovaara, 2012). It separates itself from the aesthetics and institutional components of the modern circus denominated today as traditional circus. Its historical antecedent is placed in Paris around the 1980s with the recognition as art of the so-called 'new circus' by French cultural authorities. The renewed format is again internationalised and consolidated in today's 'contemporary circus'. Both periods of time are characterised by institutionalisation and formalisation of an itinerant, ambivalent, unrecognised, invisible and peripheral form, translated into the correspondent

parameters of the centre and the official world. They both represent a moment when further circus forms are sent to the peripheries.

In the process of recognition, institutionalisation and artistic transformation, various forms constituting the totality of the circus ecology are left aside and relegated to a peripheral condition in terms of what is art and what is not, of what is circus and what is not. Modern circus displaced to the peripheries circus developments found in other places and times, such as those still found in the marketplace and other unofficial forms (e.g. variété, cabaret, saltimbanques). 'Contemporary circus' is displacing the various forms that gave birth to the movement and that constitute circus practice today. Community circus, social circus, and the ever present street circus are not regarded as art but the outsider of contemporary and professional circus. modern circus and 'contemporary circus' are recognised as 'art'; they are placed at the centre of narratives where the 'art' label seems to indicate more the institutionalisation, formalisation and homogenisation of a diverse and itinerant form.

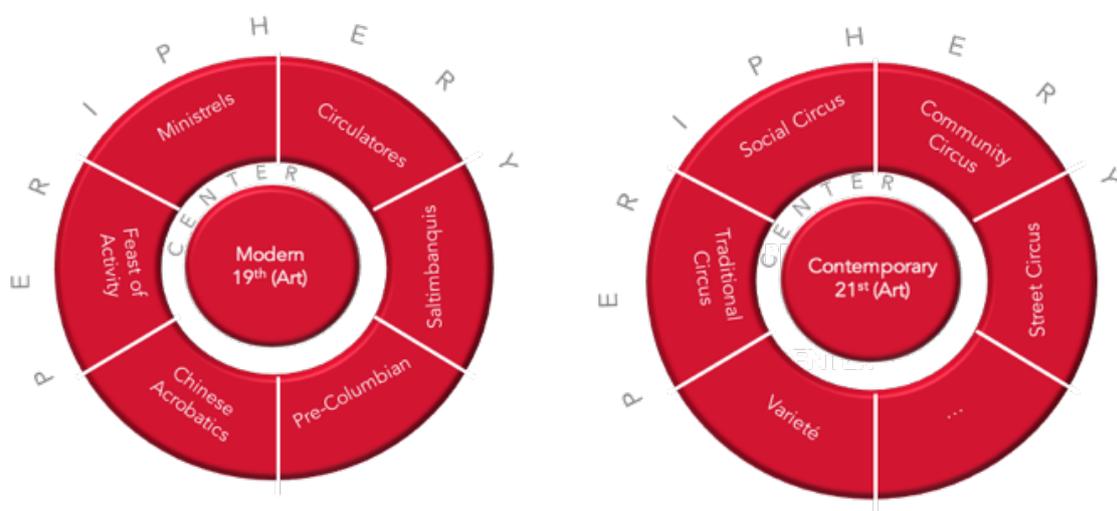


Fig. 7.2: Circus Between Centre and Periphery: The Internal Margins of Circus

## **Contribution to the Academy and to Circus Practitioners**

The premise of this research is that a similar process to that at the turn of the 19th century is observed today, under very similar circumstances. Circus is becoming formalised, entering the cultural establishment, languages and dialectics. These two moments have not been contrasted in the literature in terms of their similarities and the institutionalisation of the form. This thesis brings them together with the aim to clarify circus understandings while highlighting similar situations that both scholars and practitioners are facing today. Similar to the construction of circus definitions and modern history in the 19th century, contemporary circus scholars and academic are re-constructing that history today. This new generation will certainly inform present and future understandings of circus.

Persistent claims are found both in the literature and in the practice to find renewed definitions of circus (e.g. Tait and Lavers, 2016) or contemporary circus (e.g. Lievens, 2015). Some artists in Britain prefer to be called 'performers' rather than circus artists as their practices do not fit with the general idea of circus. Further claims are found in both countries towards the need to educate people about what circus really is. Circus is described in the literature as an international form (e.g. Speaight, 1980; Revollo, 2004); as antique as humanity itself (e.g. Seibel, 1993; Jacobs, 2016); a diverse endeavour taking multiple forms (e.g. Tait and Lavers, 2016); and defying any limits and attempts of definition (e.g. Bailly, 2009). Artists define circus as 'limitless'; 'a spectrum not a tight circle'; 'adrenaline, emotions, and

sensations'; 'many flavours, many colours, many people betting on something' (see Chapter 5). Historical and official circus constructions are not that diverse. Circus is directly or indirectly understood as modern circus. 'Pre-modern' forms are considered a distant past (e.g. Jacobs, 2016) or the roots of circus (e.g. Speaight, 1980; Revollo, 2004). Scholars debate whether ancient forms are part of the circus lineage, which depends on their narrow or inclusive perspective (Wall, 2013, p.44). However, phrases such as 'the circus proper', 'circus before circus', 'circus as we know it today' regularly found in past and present literature equalise circus to modern circus (see Chapter 1). Such historical accounts offer limited views and reduced possibilities to understand circus from wider perspectives.

My argument is constructed from the problematic observed in circus today. As a circus practitioner comments in Colombia, the fixed idea of circus was inherited from Europe (COL admin-artist 1). This analysis aims to support this artist and many others who do not identify their practice with a fixed idea of circus, by providing them with a global reading of circus history. This research provides them with historical references, theoretical background and evidence that they can use to understand the foundations of the fixed idea and how to transform their own practice beyond narratives. The analysis calls for the revision of circus history including a global perspective. It contributes to circus studies and circus analyses in search of renewed definitions of circus. The study unveils the invisible figures in the making of circus contributing to current debates on circus and its others (e.g.

CAIOC, 2018). It reflects on how traditional circus, social circus and other forms are marginalised while becoming 'the other' of contemporary circus.

Analysing circus and its historical construction under the lenses of the global studies literature, this research contributes to a general understanding of circus by bringing it to the forefront of political forces determining past and present definitions of circus and the historical appropriation of a global practice by modern history. This is not just observed back in the 19th century when the first circus definitions and circus histories were written in the West, but in the midst of the 21st century, where future developments and circus transformations are also located in Europe and the global North and its historical motivations are supposed to be European events. The analysis presented in Chapters 1 and 6 demonstrate how this procedure has turned crucial circus makers into invisible figures while specific forces and struggles are appropriated by the entity of the North.

Analytical and theoretical tools provided by the disciplines of cultural studies and global studies were fundamental in this analysis of circus. The trajectory of the fields in rethinking understandings of culture as a fixed and universal entity contributed well in addressing current questionings around what circus is and the need to redefine the practice. Revisiting circus history and notions by considering their relationship with power can contribute to easing understandings of the form and the conflictive relationship between past and present transformations. In doing so, the research addresses issues of representation and who is claiming the definitions of circus while paying attention to the different players and points of view

in the making of circus. The outcome of this investigation challenges the hierarchical understandings and representations found in official narratives.

The observed tendency is to concentrate the attention on the accepted forms and accepted figures at specific moments of time. The general idea of circus inherited from modern circus is limited to the institutionalised side of circus and organisational components of the time: a history constructed under the shadow of theatre (Kwint, 2013). The result is understandings of circus as low-brow, a business and opportunistic enterprise focused on the box office and managerial components beyond the quality and content of the performance. Current definitions transcend the limited canons of modern circus and look for broader definitions that can incorporate the performing character of the form. These attempts focus the attention on the human body and its aesthetic potential, leaving aside animal performances and/or larger understandings of circus as an embedded community practice that forms a ritualised and socially engaged art form.

Interdisciplinary approaches promoted within cultural studies contribute to filling some of the gaps left by understandings of circus constructed from particular disciplines. History and performing arts and more precisely theatre have dominated the analysis of circus; the consequence is limited definitions of circus. Such definitions have been broadly analysed under the lenses and the canons of theatre, blurring the complex history and formation of circus beyond the theatrical and performative tradition. The most evident consequence is definitions of circus as a fixed spectacle conformed by determined elements such as a ring,

clown and animals, and recent definitions towards the mere display of the human body. Circus embraces deeper connotations not captured within these definitions.

This thesis contributes to the analysis of circus and modernity, which is extensively analysed in the academic literature both as an alternative to modern life (Beadle, 2009) and a product and reproducer of modern values (Carmeli, 1995; Stoddart, 2000; Arrighi, 2016). More needs to be said, however, on the modern canons upon which circus definitions, circus history and circus transformations are reported. This includes the location of its origins as a performing art in Europe at the turn of the 19th century and statements of circus as a rejected and neglected subject when these asseverations respond more to the rejection of the official structures such as the academy and the legitimised art world; but also, the discredit of romantic and non-serious circus accounts when they are in fact providing crucial evidence and information about the meaning of circus and revealing aspects of societies across the times.

The revision of circus posters in Colombia and 'non-serious' accounts such as the *Reminiscences of SantaFe de Bogotá* (Cordovez Moure, 1893), for example, revealed crucial information about the close link between theatre and circus in the 19th century and the coexistence of European and mestizo forms. A crucial difference is observed between theatre and circus, with the former described as mainly coming from Europe, presenting European artists, music and performances, and directed to Bogotá's elite. Circus acts, in this respect, refer to local cultural expressions referencing artists from Bogotá, Mexico or Venezuela and

local rhythms such as bambuco, which resulted in the encounter of different cultures after the colonisation of the Americas (see Chapter 4).

On the other hand, circus practitioners coming from different backgrounds and styles relate circus with magic, dreams, the impossible becoming possible, and other romantic accounts that reveal what circus means to them and the distinctive characteristic of the form (see Chapter 5). The idea that the field may choose to reject folklore and fairy tales is a rejection of the same characteristics that make up circus. There is an inescapable truth in the romantic tone that cannot be eliminated from the understanding and definitions of circus or its social processes. This aspect cannot be negated, marginalised, or set aside in order to satisfy the modern form of rational thinking, formality and categorisation.

This modern construction is an evidence of the crucial role that Britain has played in circus worldwide. As London is regarded as the birthplace of modern circus and modern circus the moment when circus emerged as a performing art, a distinct genre, an institution, a commercialised entertainment, and the form that we know today, Britain is at the core of circus understandings and developments. British history became to a great extent the history of circus worldwide. Particular socio-political, cultural and economic conditions that London and other European cities were experiencing at the turn of the 19th century have dominated circus understandings. The first history of circus written in the British Isles imposed the tone in which future histories and circus analysis were written (Arrighi, 2016). This history delimited the definition of circus as the specific format that appeared in

London in the 1760s. Philip Astley's Amphitheatre was called 'the first circus', marking a division between circus in the middle ages and circus in modern times. Philip Astley, mentioned by Frost as 'a great name in the circus annals' (Frost, 1881, p.16) was decades later baptised 'the father of the circus' (Speaight, 1980, p.31). Debates proper around developments in 18th and 19th century Europe have dominated circus definitions and are regularly found in past and present literature worldwide. One of them is the complex relationship between theatre and circus worldwide. This central role that Britain has played in circus lasted less than a hundred years between the 1760s and the 1850s, when France and the United States took the lead in circus developments. From then on, Britain has been at the periphery of circus due to the discrediting of the form as low-brow and the consequential lack of funding towards it.

This history is becoming especially relevant in the present time. In 2018, Britain commemorates the 250th anniversary of 'the world's very first circus' (Circus250, 2016); the celebration aims to raise awareness about what circus is and the historical legacy of the form. The event represents a perfect opportunity to gain general recognition and gather the multiple efforts of the sector in the last two decades. Astley's myth will likely revive and, with it, the historical legacy of the modern construction of circus and time. In Colombia, initial efforts are being conducted to construct the history of circus (e.g. Pinzon and Villa, 2011; Ruiz and Ramírez, 2013; Forero, 2014). The sector provides a blank page on which to write its own history, which will inform present and future developments and representations

of the form. Different options exist: to follow the history of 'the world's very first circus' and the modern construction of time, or to follow the developments of its own practice outside modern canons. Following Colombian practitioners and tendencies developed in the country and in the Latin American region, which are offering something different to the circus scene worldwide. Rather than aiming at 'catching up' with Europe, Colombian policymakers have a huge circus ecology to support and to promote, regardless of the inclusion of narrative in the 'French style'.

The influence of that historical construction in the present moment of circus development in Britain and Colombia demonstrates that it is not a matter of the past, but a central aspect in the construction of today's history and the development of the form. It highlights the relevance of revisiting the history of circus and the multiple factors behind that historical construction. This will inform current issues of identity manifested by practitioners and a better representation of the form to the outside world. As these external factors are clearly understood, the practice will be better informed to gain recognition and the valuation of the form. While old-fashioned narratives deeply influence today's practice, fewer ideological and artistic aspects determine the place of circus within society and the recognition of form. Concrete socio-political and economic forces, such as funding cuts in Britain and Colombia's social security system, have played a more crucial role in the recognition of circus.

This study also contributes in a definitive way to highlight the role that Latin America and Colombia have played in the emergence of the so-called 'social

circus' movement, often regarded as an intervention programme initiated by Canadian Cirque du Monde (Arrighi, 2014). Latin America and marginal youth are regarded as the receivers of 'social circus' when they are in fact the architects of a distinctive movement that is calling the attention of circus studies and circus practitioners. This research analyses the definition and the history of the movement, discovering an alternative history that has been overlooked by official narratives and academic literature. 'Social circus' is increasingly attracting the attention of scholars and practitioners as a mechanism to demonstrate the value of circus and the measurement of its impacts; however, as this thesis demonstrates, it is not recognised as art but rather as therapy or social work; it is not affiliated to Latin America but to Cirque du Monde's programme.

This thesis argues for the value of 'social circus' worldwide, beyond the borders of Colombia and Latin America and beyond the circus practice. 'Social circus' is transforming the reality of peoples all over the world while breaking with traditional socio-economic and political barriers. It constitutes an evident example of the emancipatory struggles of our times and its contribution to global social justice (Sousa-Santos, 2014, p.ix). However, the translation of the movement into the languages of the centre and the North is diminishing the transcendence of the movement and the reality of the circus practice as a whole. This case, in particular, is evidence of the epistemological break demanded in the global literature. On the other hand, peripheral youth in Colombia and a peripheral form such as circus are tackling some of the main social demands in the country. The discourse is used to

allocate and to receive local funding; nonetheless, these organisations still struggle to fund their enterprises.

Social circus and Colombian artists in particular, have transcended international and performative borders where individuals from difficult backgrounds are performing in the main circus and cultural venues as any other artist. Britain has played a crucial role in opening main performative spaces such as the Roundhouse in London to the inclusion of these proposals, in spite of the resistance imposed by cultural programmers in Europe, especially France. This door opened various other opportunities for the collective of artists to perform. In the meantime, Colombian artists are offering something different to circus programmers and audiences, while bringing diversity to circus. More needs to be said in terms of the 'exoticism' of artists and their portrayal as street kids as some practitioners criticise (e.g. UK admin 5). However, audiences' opinions do not refer to the exotic character of the artists' backgrounds. They were related to the artistic quality and technical skills (see Chapter 5). This perception is also found in circus programmers. When asking about Circolombia's success in Britain, a circus programmer commented:

'Cause it's really good. If it wasn't really good it wouldn't work. We totally let the bleeding-heart story, like '*these are young people that grown up on the streets of Cali...*' – we let that be used to sell tickets. I think Circolombia was always very uncomfortable about that; and to some extent I regret it but I think people love that element of it [...] is like the Venezuelan Orchestra. I don't think it affects the way British people see them as artists. I really don't. I

think in France, it probably does, but I think people just are really happy they make a brilliant show and that is great' (UK admin 4).

The three existing studies of circus and Colombia coincide in the social engagement and transformation of societies through circus arts. Colombian circus is not just inspiring British and global circus (see Chapter 6) but the social character is being used in cultural policies in Britain. This topic opens up further questions and topics of analysis to address in future research conducted in both countries. What is important to note is the two-way influence between circus in Colombia and Britain – not just through history but also through collaboration across borders, where British circus programmers have played a role in opening performing spaces to Colombian and low-income youth to perform in professional and recognised venues at the same level as any other artists. Britain did open a place for these artists and other international companies to perform 'raw' and 'dark' circus shows challenging the taste of the elites. Finally, Circolombia and Circo Para Todos are composed of both Colombian and British individuals, by cultural elites and low-income groups. Many other nationalities have also been involved such as Cuban teachers, French fundraisers and instructors and many more. They have all imprinted crucial elements in the making of these organisations. They are both offering a hybrid between traditional and contemporary circus, between art and entertainment (UK admin 2). This hybrid and mixed background is perhaps the reason behind their success and inclusion in cultural policies in both countries.

The contrast of two apparently unconnected places as Britain and Colombia reveals crucial aspects in the analysis of circus and cultural practices. It demonstrates the relevance of applying a global perspective in the analysis of cultural practices. Phenomena considered as particular to a certain place and time are indeed highly influential in other times and societies. The analysis of circus reveals the difficulty and non-veracity of rigid categories upon which people and practices are classified. What is called circus in Britain or Colombia is the product of transformations happening all over the world. Categorising people and practices according to rigid categories such as nation-states or circus styles provides just a reduced side of the story. This research demonstrates how the circus world is a 'manifold', a totality of interconnected processes (Wolf, 1982, p.3) and 'connected histories' (Bhambra, 2014, p.4).

This makes it more important than ever to evidence the importance of global interconnections and fluid models. What is considered the centre today is the periphery of tomorrow. Britain in the 19th century was central to the definitions and yet today can be seen as another circus periphery; similarly, modern circus was the centre in the 19th century and today sits in the periphery. Colombia represents a circus periphery and yet today is moving to the centre with 'social circus' and a reference point across the world for the development of similar models of practice.

## **Recognition and Formalisation Versus Marginal Circus**

A crucial debate in circus is recognition versus the marginal character of the form. Scholars debate whether an ungovernable form such as circus can be governed. Wallon (2002) alludes to the centrifugal forces of the circus ring and the resistance exercised by the peripheries to inhabit the centre. The centrifugal forces are depicted by Wallon to symbolise the rebellious character of the circus artists and the deliberate desire to reside at the margins of society. Contrary to this position the centrifugal force is indeed observed in this research. However, it is revealed that circus artists have permanently looked for recognition – not only as ‘art’, in the modern European conception, as separated, independent, and specialist realm, but as a cultural and respected endeavour. They are looking for resources and opportunities to exercise their practices without being harassed and diminished. Once the practice is accepted and formalised, the languages of the centre apply and the centrifugal forces start to operate, to displace those other forms that do not coincide with the narratives of the centre. Those other practices and artists continue on their way, performing in the peripheries transforming societies and transforming practices; they enter the liminal stage to re-enter the establishment at a future time.

The recognition of the 21st century reveals the fragmentation and stratification of cultural practices by the structures of power. Divisions between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’, between ‘social’ and ‘professional’ are following the categorisation that other artistic practices have followed. In the case of circus, divisions are striking in front of the values and distinctive characters assigned to the

form such as diversity, multiplicity, international, inclusive, limitless, and hybrid. Circus, the art of the difference, of the tradition and the modern, of the social and the professional co-existing together, making the distinctive form it represents. In the 21st century it is divided following the categories of the modern art system and modern social work. Circus was and still is the art form of a global interconnected world.

The word 'art' has played the role to gain recognition even though it has been those other 'non-artistic' forms that attracted the attention of societies and gained a place within cultural establishments. Concrete examples are presented in this research such as community circus in Britain and social circus in Colombia. They were influential artistic practices developing circus in its diverse forms, as artistic, political and social practice. Today, they are regarded as non-professional and non-artistic, as therapy or social work. Another example is the protest of clowns and traditional circuses to alleviate their working conditions. Today, they hardly obtain funds because of their informality and reduced capacity to fill out funding applications forms.

Narratives and the criteria of recognition are dividing artists and confusing them. Some highlight the 'social', some other the 'traditional', while other the dramaturgy. Nonetheless, they are all performing in a hybrid space where all those aspects meet and collide – in between art forms and disciplines, in between innovation and tradition, in between ritual and technique, in between life and death, in between fun and seriousness. The responsibility of circus administrators, policy

makers and scholars is to understand and to respond to that resistance, to represent the interests of the art form, the interests of practitioners and audiences rather than the interests of the structures of power, such as the academy, the circus school, capitalism and neoliberalism, socio-political hierarchies, and the bourgeois art world.

Managers, arts administrators and scholars play a vital role. They are the mediators and the in-between of the institution and the practice; they are in between artists and policy makers. They are the ones able to speak and translate the languages of those worlds. They stand in between and negotiate on the behalf of the cultural sector. The question remains whose interests are being served: those of the centre, or those of the peripheries, or something in between? Suppose for a moment that shamanism is the philosophy or the valid epistemology to understand social practices today. Arts managers would be understood as the middle man, as the shaman that travels from one world to another, creating meaning and translating languages. Artists have their own language and priorities. Policy makers have their own priorities as well. The cultural administrator is the mediator in between, a crucial figure rather than a mere bureaucrat at the service of profit, efficiency and productivity, the values of the modern world.

Is circus marginal? The analysis reveals that the peripheral and marginal condition of circus, more than an intrinsic and desirable characteristic of the form, responds to a depiction portrayed according to cultural elites. Circus is tagged as 'marginal' compared to the forms accepted in urban centres and official

structures. This is not a permanent condition but rather a cyclical condition of circus entering and leaving cultural establishments across times. Beyond formalisation, what is needed is resources to operate. Quality depends on resources. Golden ages responded to investments from official society towards circus. This is what made France, Russia and Canada the main circus powers at different points of time: the decisive interest and investment from the government. In Britain, in contrast, it was this lack of governmental support that stopped the growth of the form at different points in time. Like in the United States, traditional circuses continued operating by relying on an established market and the box office. In this way, circuses continued on the road. That was the way circuses paid for their shows and guaranteed good quality. The decisive decline comes in the second half of the 20th century when animal campaigns rightly attacked circuses, reducing audiences and then the circus market.

### **Towards a Global Definition of Circus**

The final proposal is for the emerging academic discipline of circus studies to reconstruct past and present circus histories following the values attached to circus: international, community, different, multidisciplinary and diversity. To contribute to the study of social practices from the point of view of a 'gay' form (Frost, 1881, p. 316) transcending modern canons, not as an alternative to modernity or a separated world, but a world that is part of this modern construction – one that transforms societies and is being transformed by societies. The invitation here is to understand

and to re-write circus under the eyes of a global and interconnected society, under the eyes of the same values that characterise the art form.

The proposal is to understand circus by following artists and people, rather than the nation-state, economic systems, institutions and specific sociocultural political meanings. Contemporary artists and their circus practice are more similar to what could be called 'pre-modern' circus than modern circus. Contemporary circus is driven today by individual, polyvalent and entrepreneurial artists constantly looking for new projects worldwide; it is a characteristic shared with 'saltimbanques' and 'circulatores'. The modern construction is not just a matter of the past or a flexible criterion each analyst adopts according to their narrow or inclusive approaches (Wall, 2013, p.44). It provides a limited version of circus while crucial creators of circus become invisible. This has limited the potential of the form and significantly influences the current development of circus and its yearning for recognition. Internal disputes are evident, while external forces play a more crucial role in the recognition of circus. The practice is divided by narratives and time frameworks, when in fact all those circus categories have many more elements in common. As cultural historian Marius Kwint points out, 'if circus took a stronger interest in its own history, it would be better equipped to play a more decisive part in contemporary culture' (2013, p.223).

The historical construction of circus and circus definitions have been done on the name and around various entities such as theatre, the performing arts, the academy or structures of power. They barely represent the interest of the circus

practice and the spirit of the form. They are informed by bourgeois attempts to be recognised and 'respected' in the name of the high arts and the centre – to fit analytical categories and critical approaches demanded by modern sciences. The 'magical', 'enchanted', 'communal', 'familiar' and 'limitless' character of circus is diminished on behalf of the 'rational' and the 'serious', or eliminated when it is demonstrated that such 'values' are opportunistically used by circus as a selling point and commercial strategy. Is this the procedure of a rejected form trying to have access to opportunities and resources closed to it?

My final argument is that the origins of circus are found in the streets. The section about 'circus at the traffic lights' in Chapter 5, presents the case of an important section of the contemporary circus in Colombia. The street is both the place where performers have found circus and a training space. Random encounters with circus friends and circus artists represent their initiation in circus. Peer-to-peer training is their way of learning circus skills as many other contemporary artists in Britain and Colombia. Various other examples are found in the contemporary scene regardless of their socio-cultural backgrounds and income groups; some of these testimonies were also presented in Chapter 5. Similar to Cirque du Soleil, who also started performing in the streets (see Leroux, 2016) , Philip Aslley, the father of modern circus, was also a street performer and 'busker'. He 'formed his first ring with a rope and some stakes, going round with his hat after each performance to collect the loose half-pence of the admiring spectators.' (Frost 1881, p. 17). Street performers are not only unemployed youth looking for money. They are artists that

have found circus in the streets to later enter institutions and formalisation in search of developing their art form. This is offered as an example where circus in Britain and Colombia and many other places meet. Rather than in the private venue as commonly told, the street and the public space are the places where circus emerge.

## Annex One

### Questions That Informed the Data Collection

#### Research Questions

- What is the place that Britain and Colombia occupy in circus today?
- Is Colombia influencing circus developments in Britain or vice versa?
- How is the recognition of circus happening in both countries?
- Is the circus history influencing the contemporary practice in both countries?

#### Broad Areas of Analysis and Specific Questions

##### 1. Circus and its Distinctive Characteristics

- a) What is circus?
- b) What are the distinctive characteristics of circus?
- c) Is circus a peripheral and alternative form?
- d) How is circus different from theatre, music, dance, gymnastics and other forms?

##### 2. Circus Movements in Colombia and Britain

- a) What is the present situation of circus in both countries?
- b) What are the main challenges of circus both countries?
- c) What is the place they occupy in the international circus circuit?

- d) Is there a relationship between circus transformations in Colombia and Britain?

### 3. Renewed Interest Towards the Form

- a) Is there any cultural policy in circus?
- b) Has circus recently attracting the attention of governmental authorities and cultural establishments in Britain and Colombia? When and how?
- c) What are the reasons behind the renewed interest?
- d) Is this happening both in Britain and Colombia; is there any relationship in between both processes?
- e) How is the renewed interest influencing the circus practice and artists?
- f) Is circus coming in to the centre? Is this transforming the distinctive character of the form?

## Annex Two

### Fieldwork: List of Organisations, Interviewees and Main Academic Conferences

#### Organisations in Colombia

Bogotá's Instituto Distrital de las Artes (Distinct Institute of Arts) - IDARTES

Circo Para Todos

Circolombia

Colombian Ministry of Culture

Fundación Recuperate

Independent Artists

La Gata Cirko

La Ventana

Latin Brothers Circus

Muro de Espumas

Teatro Colón

#### Organisations in Britain

Arts Council England

Blackpool Circus School

Canvas

Circolombia

Circumference

Circus Wonderland

Independent Artists

Jackson's Lane

LeftCoast

National Centre for Circus Arts

Non-Fit Sate

Thames Festival

The Roundhouse London

The National Fairground and Circus Archives

Zippo's Circus

## **Main Interviews Conducted**

### Colombia

COL admin-artist 1	Bogotá, 6 March 2015
COL instructor 1	Bogotá, 10 March 2015
COL instructor 2	Bogotá, 10 March 2015
COL student 1	Bogotá 10 March 2015
COL student 2	Bogotá, 10 March 2015
COL instructor-artist 1	Bogotá, 10 March 2015
COL admin 1	Bogotá 17 March 2015
COL artist 1	Bogotá 17 March 2015
COL instructor-artist 2	Bogotá 18 March 2015

COL instructor 3	Bogotá 18 March 2015
COL policy maker 1	Bogotá, 19 March 2015
COL policy maker 2	Bogotá, 19 March 2015
COL policy maker 3	Bogotá, 19 March 2015
COL admin-artist 2	Bogotá, 20 March 2015
COL admin-artist 3	Bogotá, 20 March 2015
COL artist 2	Bogotá, 20 March 2015
COL artist 3	Bogotá, 20 March 2015
COL Journalist 1	Bogotá, 20 March 2015
COL admin 2	Bogotá, 20 March 2015
COL other 1	Bogotá, 24 March 2015
COL artist 4	Bogotá, 24 March 2015
COL artist 5	Bogotá, 24 March 2015
COL other 2	Bogotá, 25 March 2015
COL policy maker 4	Bogotá, 25 March 2015
COL policy maker 5	Bogotá, 25 March 2015
COL policy maker 6	Bogotá, 25 March 2015
COL admin-artist 7	Bogotá, 26 March 2015
COL admin-artist 8	Bogotá, 26 March 2015
COL admin 3	Bogotá, 26 March 2015
COL other 3	Bogotá, 27 March 2015
COL admin-artist 9	Cocorná, 5 April 2015

COL admin 4	Bogotá, 6 April 2015
COL other 4	London, 11 May 2015
COL artist 6	London, 30 April 2015
COL artist 7	Bogotá, 25 May 2018
COL artist 8	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
COL artist 9	Blackpool, 16 February 2015

### Britain

COL-UK artist 1	London, 19 February 2015
COL-UK artist 2	London, 16 November 2016
UK instructor-admin-artist 1	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK instructor-admin-artist 2	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK other 1	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 1	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 2	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 3	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 4	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 5	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 6	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 7	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 8	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 9	Blackpool, 16 February 2015

UK audience 10	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 11	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 12	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 13	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK audience 14	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK-COL audience 15	Blackpool, 16 February 2015
UK admin 1	Blackpool, 17 February 2015
UK admin 2	Blackpool, 17 February 2015
UK admin 3	Blackpool, 17 February 2015
UK admin-artist 1	London, 30 April 2015
UK artist 2	London, 30 April 2015
UK admin-artist 2	London 18 May 2015
UK admin 4	London, 2 June 2015
UK admin 5	London, 10 June 2015
UK admin 6	London, 11 June 2015
UK artist 1	London, 21 June 2015
UK artist 2	London, 21 June 2015
UK artist 3	Skype, 30 June 2015
UK admin 7	London, 23 July 2015
UK artist 4	London, 25 August 2015
UK artist-admin 3	St Albans, 23 October 2016
UK artist 5	London 18-30 November 2016

UK-US artist 1	London 18-30 November 2016
UK-KENIA artist 2	London 18-30 November 2016
UK admin 8	London, 9 December 2016
UK admin 9	London, 16 December 2016
UK artist-admin 4	London, 16 November 2016
UK other 2	Sheffield, 11 January 2017

Lain American admin 1	Skype, 28 March 2017
Latin American admin 2	Email, 29 March 2017
Cirque du Monde 1	Email, 3 September 2017

### **Main Academic Conferences**

Circus and Beyond Conference, Rethinking the history of entertainment, University of Sheffield, 11 May 2018.

Circus and its Others Conference, July 15-17 2016, Montréal, Canada.

Circus Arts Research Development Congress (CARD2), Circus on the Edge, Stockholm University of the Arts, 10 December 2015

First African Circus Arts Festival, Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, 30 Nov 2015

"(In)Visible Cultures"! CMCI Conference. Kings College London, 13-14 June 2016.

Otherhood / Circus and Identity conference Zagreb, Croatia, 14-15 November 2016

Theories and experiences of circus practices that build connections, Altra Risorsa, Volvera, Italy, 21-22 April 2018.

## **Main Circus Festivals**

African Circus Arts Festival, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2015, 2018

Canvas, 2015

Circus Fest Roundhouse 2014, 2016, 2018

Complement Cirque Montreal, 2016

Festival Solos y Solas, Bogotá, May 2018

La Ventana Productions – ‘La Ventana Baudeville’, Bogotá, March 2015

Out There Festival, Great Yarmouth, September 2015

Showzam! Circus festival, Blackpool, February 2015

Various Performances at Jacksons Lane, The Place and other contemporary venues  
in London

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