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Circus-Polis
Politics, Community, Animality and Contemporary Circus

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In Liebe und Dankbarkeit,

Tata

Circus-Polis

Politics, Community, Animality and Contemporary Circus.

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Introduction

The Circus Wants its Circus Back

In the fall of 2016, the now defunct American style three-ring circus, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (RBBBC) had enough of the media calling the 2016 presidential election (between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton) a “circus.” Apparently insulted to its core, RBBBC responded with its own social media campaign. RBBBC produced several short video clips that addressed the blatant appropriation of the term circus. These videos poke fun at politicians while simultaneously elevating the acrobatic feats of RBBBC’s circus entourage. One clip features female contortionists displaying difficult backbends. During the execution, one of them asserts: “Politicians bend the rules. This is bending!” (Ringling: 2016 video). The agile artist suggests that, contrary to widespread opinion, the circus is a place where honest and industrious individuals proudly display the fruits of their labor. In contrast, the realm of politics is full of deceit, trickery, and dishonesty.

In another clip, Ringmaster Jonathan Lee Iverson directly addresses on screen viewers as potential ticket buyers. A medium close shot shows him in traditional ringmaster attire, wearing a top hat and a flamboyant jacket in red and blue. With his deep baritone voice Iverson declares: “We are Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Come see the Greatest Show on Earth! That’s not political!” (Ringling 2016b video). Then, the camera zooms out in a long shot, thereby revealing a chorus of around fifty other circus artists congregated under Iverson’s podium. In unison, the community of performers forcefully declare “The circus wants its circus back!” (ibid).

RBBBC’s social media campaign is more than an advertisement strategy of a company that has struggled with low audience numbers, diminished revenues, and a stained image due to

the showcasing of now ethically questionable animal acts. Rather than make a pun out of the media's use of the term circus during a heated presidential election, by juxtaposing the "real" circus against the "fake" circus, RBBBC's media campaign disclosed a deep-held suspicion against politics. Here, politics is considered a space of discord and dispute that threatens community. Circus, on the other hand, allegedly fosters community by creating a spectacle that is enjoyable for all classes and creeds, independent of political inclinations. It presents itself as a model of unity and harmony—bringing everyone together under one big tent.

The irony of this media campaign can be seen as RBBBC's double move. While the video clip disavows the political in the strongest terms, it simultaneously conjures a sense of collectivity, a polis, which is a political gesture par excellence. The circus community invoked in each short ad, is, however, a particular one. Each ad hones in on a specific circus skill, featuring each artist's specialization, which, in turn, benefits the whole of the show. All circus members know their respective place and do not question it. By doing so, for Ringling, "circus [becomes] a template for moral peace" (Ringling: 2017 video). What is so uncanny about RBBBC's vision of a harmonious community is that it seems to conjure up Plato's ideal polis, in which members are supposed to follow a strict division of labor to obtain social harmony of the body politic.

The understanding of the circus artist as a craftsman is not original to RBBBC. Already in the 1950's, circus historian Anthony Hipsley Coxe compares the circus artist to the stage actor, assigning the actor to the realm of pretense and the circus artist to the realm of actuality (Coxe 1980: 25). Coxe reasons that an actor slips into different roles and assumes different identities. In so doing, actors pretend to be what they are not. Circus artists, on the other hand, do not play roles; instead, they work their acts (ibid). Circus artists "do exactly what they appear to do. Their feats of dexterity and balance and strength should never be confused with the

make-believe world of the actor” (ibid). For Coxe, circus artists are superior, not only because their acts are real, exposing performers to risk and danger, but because the circus artist does not complicate identity, status, or rank.

By making such distinctions between circus artist and actor, Coxe rehearses Plato’s danger of representations. For Plato, the actor labors in the realm of representations. The actor is “an image-maker, a representer, [who] understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him” (Plato: 601b). Appearances offer the possibility of generating a simulated, unreal world-view. Hence, the theatrical stage has the potential of mixing up the rightful order of things. The danger for Plato’s community is its exposure to confusing representation and its “capacity to deform even good people” (Plato: 605c). Therefore, art must be judged for its pedagogical and educational ability to create good citizens. In order to foster good citizenship, Plato calls for the censorship of poetic practices that could lead to confusion and ambiguity, only willing to admit those practices that produce “hymns to the gods and eulogies of virtuous men” (Plato: 607a). For Coxe, circus’ value for collectivity consists in the fact that it does not allow the illusions so common to other art practices. Circus is honest and authentic. In the words of RBBBC’s contortionists, circus artists display the rules of bending, but do not bend the rules.

This seemingly depoliticized but ultimately conservative stance on the value of the circus as an artform, has been repeatedly reasserted in the emerging field of circus studies. Circus historian Janet Davis, suggests that the circus that travelled by railroad in the US at the turn of the 19th century used “normative ideologies of gender, racial hierarchy, and individual mobility to explain social transformations and human difference“ (Davis 2002: 10). The spectacle of the human feats, particularly acts performed in the center ring of the big top helped to consolidate a sense of national identity and a sense of pride. Peta Tait, further suggests that the display of

physicality of the circus performer was in correspondence to the “nineteenth-century Euro-American beliefs that discerned moral superiority from physical appearance” (Tait 2005: 29). The physical prowess and dexterity demonstrated by the circus acrobat, provided evidence of the moral superiority of their performers, the majority of them from European descent.¹

Circus affirms hegemonic beliefs by assigning to each community member their appropriate representational role (Plato 395 c). Like in Plato’s ideal polis, each member adheres to a specific role, allowing the community to function as unity and not as plurality (423d). In addition, each individual is born into their representational role, thereby, endorsing Plato’s myth of the metal in which each individual innate quality is represented by a metal (gold being the metal of the ruler, silver the metal of the auxiliary, and copper the metal of the craftsman); each individual is assigned to a status that is appropriate to its nature (415a-c). Hence, while expressions of caucasian prowess, self-discipline, and courage were part of the center ring activities, people of color and impoverished blue collar whites labored as unqualified work force. The audience, too, was segregated by class and race affiliation (Davis 2002; 32-33). While in colloquial use circus has become synonymous for disorder, the circus operations were meticulously planned and executed, each worker playing their part in the success of a city on wheels. Therefore, Janet Davis suggests that witnessing the circus coming to town, not only the

¹ The notion of whiteness had to be constructed from a diverse European ethnic pool. Davis refers in her book mainly to immigrant groups coming from the British Isles and Germany (Davis 2002: 26). Scandinavian Americans occupied a higher order in the racial hierarchy; immigrant groups from the Mediterranean Basin and the Balkans were regarded as inferior to their Northern counterparts (Brødal 2014: 17). Hence, at the turn of the 20th century, whiteness was contested. Some ethnic groups were regarded to be whiter than others, leaving the line between white and not white ambiguous (Jacobsen 1998:7). A case in point is the reception of Southern Italians who were often exposed to racial insults such as “white nigger” and “nigger wop” (New York Times 2019). Circus performers, too, reflected the ethnic diversity that constitutes Europe. At the same time, the extraordinary acts performed by European performers helped to solidify a more stable and more homogenous understanding of whiteness. Davis, therefore, suggests “the circus played a double function because it codified European ethnicity as racial difference, while simultaneously promoting a uniform “white” American racial identity” (Davis 2002: 26). Lastly, whiteness is not simply about skin color, but denotes a complex set of power relations, including aspects such as class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

show but the assembling and disassembling process “ — with its cooperative and efficient division of labor— was an instructive, patriotic act” (ibid: 78). Between 1870 and 1920, at the height of its popularity, the large-scale circus offered a model for the nation state in terms of organizational efficiency, social arrangements, and political peace.²

Another important aspect of 19th and 20th century circus was its reliance on animal performers. Showcasing mastery over animals denoted superiority of higher over lower instincts in humans. In simple Cartesian fashion the human was associated with rational mind and the animal with bodily passions. As a result, these performances reaffirmed the belief that humans’ rightful place was domination of the natural world. But animals often serve as metaphorical representatives of a people’s geographical origin, and thus the use of wild and exotic animal acts associated with non-European locations reified European superiority over the rest of the world. Animal acts transposed colonial logic into the big top, suggesting that even the wildest beasts can be tamed under the forceful and guiding hand of the master race/colonizer (Arrighi 2008: 613). Mixed animal acts that showcased prey animals (e.g. horses) with predators (e.g. tigers) offered powerful analogies of colonial rule. By displaying that natural foes could cohabit the same space and even cooperate, the animal tamer becomes the guardian of social peace (Tait 2011: 31). Importantly, for Tait, social peace was only achieved under the guidance and force of the European master (ibid: 40).

² Circus life was complex and multifaceted, reflecting wider social and cultural transformations, also progressive ones. With their acts, female artists provided vivid examples of the changes regarding traditional gender roles. However, circus impresarios tried to weaken the radical potential displayed by female acrobats by reconfiguring their gestures of female independence back into a narrative of domesticity (Davis 2002:12). While the visit of a circus could offer a carnivalesque intervention by “calling into question what it meant to be male, female, indeed even human” (ibid.: 29), its performances stabilized rather than destabilized social hierarchies and cultural assumptions. The anonymity and ephemerality of circus day also provided outlets for deep-held prejudices that could lead to violence against racial others (ibid.: 30). Furthermore, while the circus of the golden age was socially and culturally diverse, its population was separated by class, occupation, race, gender, and species, allowing little unsanctioned intermixing and intermingling. The lowest members of the circus workforce were replaceable and unprotected by worker unions, each new town offering the possibility of replenishing unskilled workers. It could be argued that the particular hierarchical body politic and the access of cheap, fungible labor, contributed to the circus’ profitability.

The circus supplied its audience with a visceral and powerful template of social stratification and hierarchies. While the big top provided the spectacle of white European superiority and human exceptionalism by showcasing model citizens, the adjacent sideshows offered a counterimage, opening a space for “the freak show.” Corporeal differences were spectacularized “in a ritual that enacted [and reinforced] the social process of making cultural otherness” (Thomson 1997: 60). In freak shows, people of color, people with disabilities, and people with bodily differences were dehumanized through a narrative that questioned their humanity. Drawing on Darwin’s theory of evolution, freak performances staged the racialized other as a missing link between ape and human. Such processes of *enfreakment* (Hevey 1992: 53) created and fed into existing racial biases and stereotypes, dividing human collectivity into groups: the full human, the not-quite-human, and the nonhuman (Weheliye, 2014). While the prowess of the acrobatic body served as a compass for moral superiority, the freak displayed the racialized and disabled body as a marker of deviance and criminality associated with inferiority (Krugmann 2018: 99).³ The ambiguous body of the freak elicited notions of moral perversion, and “sensationalized narratives contributed to the mistreatment and misrepresentation of those with disabilities” (ibid.: 98). The circus was a powerful tool to establish the *normate*, understood as “the corporeal incarnation of culture’s collective, unmarked, normative characteristics” (Thomson 1997: 8).⁴

³ In a sense, the freak performer resembles the person who is “able to assume all kinds of forms and to represent everything in the world” (398a). Yet while this person can illicit awe and wonder and might serve as a momentary source of laughter, entertainment, and pleasure, Plato’s community members would “tell him that not only is there no one like him in our community, it is also not permitted for anyone like him to live among us” (ibid.). Hence, it is important to note that freak performers never performed under the main top, but in segregated performance spaces, so called side shows.

⁴ While much of the critical work on circus scrutinizes the circus of the 19th and 20th centuries, circus studies scholarship insists that new and contemporary circus continues to promote hegemonic cultural beliefs (Zaccarini 2013, Lievens 2015, Priest 2019, Lavers et al. 2020)

The circus city promoted and cemented many of the existing social hierarchies, with minimal possibilities of modification. A strict hierarchical division permeated the travelling circus city. The white, male, heteronormative, and able body took the center stage in the circus. Each body was policed into a specific, pre-assigned natural role, according to its “essence.” By doing so, the circus minimized the native-born anxieties of turning into a “racial minority, potentially stripped of their political and social power” (Davis 2002: 10) while consolidating “a shared sense of white racial privilege among its diverse, white ethnic audiences” (ibid.: 26). Circus, hence, provided a model for social hierarchy and political order. In many cases, the circus not only profited by reaffirming dominant cultural beliefs and prejudice. It also presented itself as an educational experience, especially for its younger audiences (ibid.: 143).

RBBBC’s demand to have its circus back must be seen also in the context of the emergence of social unrest and perceived uncertainties in the last decade. Social, ecological, and political movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, Climate Strike, and Dakota Access Pipeline Protests, to name just a few examples, have put pressure on systematic racism, ongoing settler colonialism, unequal wealth distribution, and the fatal effect of climate change in late capitalism. These movements question the existing body politics and the social hierarchies that uphold and perpetuate a system that excludes people not only from participation, but from even being considered human (Wynter 2003). In the context of such political challenges and demands, RBBBC presents itself as a place where the social make-up and long-held values are not up for debate. RBBBC’s request to want the circus back is fundamentally conservative. It desires the status quo or a return to some imagined time when a perceived social tranquility reigned, and with it an unquestioning acceptance of hierarchical divisions that historically have been based on class, race, gender, ableness, and sexual preferences, among other characteristics

of social inequality. In that sense, “The Circus Wants Its Circus Back” resonates with Trump's “Make America Great Again!”. At its core, both demands articulate nostalgic worldviews in which each member accepts and adheres to the given rules without trying to bend them.

I propose the term circopolis in order to consider circus as always already enmeshed in questions of the political.⁵⁶ Circus presents us with differing visions of community. One notion of *circopolis* attends to circus as a body regime. It is concerned about the polis understood as a communion. A communion addresses the closure of the community because it sees it as a single thing (Nancy 1986: xxxix). It is from the position of communion that RBBBC can refer to itself as *the circus*.⁷ RBBBC sees itself as a rightful bearer of its history and tradition, and, therefore, determines the right to determine the parameters of *the circus*, its politics of exclusion and inclusion, its aesthetic, and its (social) purpose. The gesture of the nonpolitical is always meta-political because it speaks with one voice (the ringmaster, or the chorus), disallowing other voices to emerge. While *the circus* presents itself as a place of diversity (in RBBBC's media

⁵ The neologism circopolis can be pronounced in three ways, with each pronunciation carrying a particular meaning. First, the pronunciation circōpolis, might be most truthful to the greek origin. Yet, in my perception, it evokes a sense of dystopia, as it re-echoes Fritz Lang's masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927). Here, circopolis describes a state that demands of its subject a virtuosity, creativity, and risk defiance as *sine qua non*. Second, circopolis is pronounced circōpolīs. Here, polis is pronounced like police. Resonating with the dystopian notion of circopolis, such an understanding of circopolis emphasizes circus as an order, a regime that polices certain bodies to certain functions and roles. Lastly, the pronunciation circōpōlis is most true to the project of the dissertation. Circōpōlis does not simply consider the circus a state, order and/or body politic (first and second pronunciation), but attends to circus as a place of interaction, relationality, and experimentation.

⁶ After thinking up the term circopolis, it came to my attention that a variation of the term is already in use. *Cirkopolis* is both the name of a show produced by Montreal-based Circus Company Cirque Éloize and the name of a contemporary circus festival held annually in Prague.

⁷ In his dissertation, John Paul Zaccarini, too, distinguishes circus from *the circus* (2013: 19). Drawing on a psychoanalytic framework, *the circus* represents the symbolic order. Circus artists can liberate themselves from *the circus*, only through means of psychoanalytic treatment. Only by uncovering “the real of the drive/what drives the [circus] act (Zaccharini 2013; 32), the circus artist can emancipate themselves from the circus. In Zaccarini's model, circus artists are controlled by *the circus*. They can only acquire agency after scrutinizing what had propelled them to *the circus* in the first place.

campaign we see a cast of multiracial and ethnical artists), it does not leave room for plurality (Arendt) nor does it allow for disagreement (Rancière).

RBBBC's tagline, "the circus wants its circus back!," however, suggests the existence of a different kind of circus, one that is beyond the control of *the* circus. It is a circus that can't be easily reduced to a stable form or single, substantial identity. Rather than reproducing the existing order hierarchical division based on notions such as gender, race, ableness, and species, circopolis, addresses the possibility of undoing/unworking the work of *the* circus, understood as a communion. This particular circus is a mythopoetic practice as it produces "instabilities, disjunctures, insecurities" (Ravetto 2017: 10) in the fixtures of the circus. By doing so, it assists in the materialization of a community, understood as a shared "existence inasmuch as it is in common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance" (Nancy 1986: xxxviii). The notion of circopolis, therefore, acknowledges the heterogeneity and diversity of existing circus performers, performances and practices, and the impossibility of reducing them to one essence, form, or aesthetic vision. Circopolis addresses the existence of the circus as a polis—the very site of the political.

Circus and the Political Realm

Both Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt offer an anti-Platonic understanding of politics. Rather than arguing that politics emanates from the organization of the polis whereby a regime puts bodies into predefined places, their understanding of the political realm is a highly dynamic one. Rancière starts from the presumption that each and every social order maintains its own regime of exclusion and inclusion, what he calls "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2004:12). For him, the political moment occurs when a given order is challenged or brought into question by those who were excluded. Politics is defined by the moment of disagreement; it puts

the established order into crisis by re-distributing the sensible. For Arendt, too, the polis has nothing to do with an arrangement of a community. The polis can't be predetermined, but rather is a space that is produced through interaction and plurality (Arendt 1998: 7-8). For her, the polis is permeated with a democratic spirit, allowing its members to appear in a shared public realm. Each individual is an active participant in the public sphere of debate and action. For Arendt, the polis provides a place of appearance of the political. For Rancière, on the other hand, politics is an emancipatory endeavor; it addresses the wrong of being excluded from the space of appearance. Both are concerned with a notion of politics that is not predetermined, but a social force that produces change and transformation.

Both thinkers find models for their respective understanding of the political in the realm of the arts and aesthetics. For Arendt, the “theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others” (Arendt 1998: 188). For Arendt, the theatre imitates the sphere of human interaction and plurality; it showcases agency through speech and deeds. Protagonists of the dramatic play present the “willingness to insert oneself into the world” by becoming active participants of the polis (ibid: 186). The concept of circopolis is influenced by Arendt's understanding of polis as a space of interaction that fosters plurality and togetherness. Yet, at the same time, circopolis acknowledges the long history of animal-human relationship, something left unaccounted for in Arendt's writing. Therefore, circopolis sets out to expand Arendt's strict anthropocentric understanding of politics, by addressing the agency of the nonhuman.

For Rancière, politics is dramatic, even spectacular, as it transforms a given space into a different space. The possibility of re-arrangement and change troubles the given order, the

dominance of a regime that understands itself as authority over a given configuration. In contrast to Althusser's famous understanding of the police hailing the subject into ideology through a forceful "Hey You!", Rancière provides us with an alternative, yet equally familiar expression of police vocabulary, that of "Move along!" (Rancière 2010: 45). While the police insist that the street exists only as a space of circulation, politics consist in transforming this space of "moving along, of circulation into a space *for* the appearance of the subject: the people, the workers, the citizen" (ibid: my italics). From a Rancièrian perspective, the expression of turning something into a circus, therefore denotes the spectacular function of politics. It denotes the endeavor of making a spectacle of something that resists being spectacularized; it disturbs business as usual, brings into visibility what was previously invisible, makes seen what was unseen.

Circopolis comprehends circus as a space of appearance (Arendt) and about appearance (Rancière). At the same time, circopolis addresses the danger of stratification and solidification, that is the reduction of circus by turning it into a particular body regime that denies political appearance. Hence, circopolis, as a concept, is meant to address interrelations and tensions evoked by notions such as circus, polis, community, and, of course, politics. Yet, it is precisely these tensions, articulated in the term circopolis, that allows circus to be understood as a complex, multifaceted object of study, that can't be easily subsumed to one understanding of the circus that adheres to a one-dimensional idea of the political.

Traditional, New and Contemporary Circus

In contemporary anglophone circus studies literature the distinction between traditional, new, and contemporary circus is omnipresent, but such appellations are barely defined or explained. On a most basic level, the traditional circus employs animal performers while new and contemporary circus eschews them (Tait & Lavers 2016: 2, Lavers et al. 2019: 6). Contemporary

circus is simply a further development of New Circus practices, which emerged in the 1970s (ibid). Besides utilizing animal acts, traditional circus is further characterized by employing a ring master who guides the audience through the show, clown entrées that provide comic relief, and a variety of acrobatic feats that display extraordinary human skill and dexterity of human actors.

Traditional circus acts follow a predetermined structure, from “easy” to the “most difficult.” The stakes increase continuously, until a moment of crescendo is reached.⁸ Also, circus acts are presented on a circular stage, often as part of a touring production under a big top. RBBBC, French Cirque Alexis Gruss, German Circus Krone, and Swiss Circus Knie, are all considered traditional. On the other hand, Quebec-based Cirque du Soleil and Cirque Eloize, and French Cirque Plume, are often associated with new/contemporary circus. Because animal acts are still an intrinsic part of traditional circus, its aesthetics and rules appear to be obsolete. It seems only a matter of time for the last traditional circuses to close their production, making room for what is considered to be the morally superior sibling.

France is regarded as the birthplace of the new circus (Nouveau Cirque). It developed out of 1960s counterculture and the desire to create a visceral, immediate, non-hierarchical performance experience. Martine Maleval argues that the new circus emerged out of a “radical critique of a theatre scene judged to be ossified“ (Maleval 2016: 52). Cie Baroque (Christian Taguet), Archaos (Pierre Bidon & Guy Carrara), and Cirque Plume (Bernard Kudlak) are emblematic of this new kind of circus. Radical theatre approaches of practitioners such as Vseveold Meyerhold (*Balagan*), Jerzy Grotowski (*Poor Theatre*), and Antonin Artaud (*Theatre of Cruelty*) (Goudard 2010: 85-90; and Purovaara 2012: 95) inspired new circus practitioners.

⁸ The increasing risk of the acts highlight the possibility and nature of failure. The more difficult the trick, the bigger the potential collapse. Jean Michel Guy, therefore, refers to circus acts as having a Babelian structure (Guy 2001:17)

The pioneers of new circus were also informed by explicitly political theatre practitioners from the US such as Bread and Puppet, Living Theatre and San Francisco Mime Troupe (Goudard 2010:95 and Purovaara 2012: 97-99).

New circus has been defined by circus scholars as an aesthetic, ethical, and political movement towards a theatre of the future.⁹ Small circus tents generate conviviality and intimacy between actor and spectator and aim to restore a sense of togetherness, recovering a “lost magic” (Goudard 2007: 99). Goudard, himself a new circus pioneer turned circus scholar, describes an artistic lifestyle in which devotion and passion were more important than high level circus skills. To him, the amateurism of the first new circus practitioners epitomized the simplicity and authenticity of Grotowski’s poor theatre (ibid:100). He argues new circus was always political because it aimed to produce an alternative theatrical experience and was geared to generating a sense of solidarity and collectivity among performers and their audiences.

According to Goudard, enthusiasm for the new circus was short-lived, lasting only a decade, from 1975-1985. The political attitude of its protagonists declined steadily and by the mid-1980’s the new circus got integrated into the mainstream (ibid: 102-104). While the founders of Archaos, Cirque Baroque and Cirque Plume were part of the first generation of new circus practitioners, Goudard problematizes their willingness to be co-opted into the establishment. New circus changed from a socially engaged performance practice to an entrepreneurial driven enterprise; it opened to commercialization, institutionalization and professionalization. These changes reduced the gap between new circus and traditional circus to

⁹ The first practitioners of new circus often possessed a background in theatre and dance prior to participation in circus. For them, circus offered a possibility to enhance the theatrical experience. Circus and theatre were not approached as incommensurable. Instead, these practitioners were interested in creating hybrid experiences, making circus more theatre-like (e.g. through character work and a dramatic plot) and theatre more circus-like (e.g. though pronounced physicality and immediacy).

such an extent that the distinction between new and traditional circus has collapsed (ibid: 106-18).

Hit by the devastation of two world wars, economic recessions, and competition with other, cheaper and more captivating, entertainment possibilities, the French circus set off to “re-invent” itself by emphasizing its rich heritage in the 1970’s. Instead of employing the credo of the newest and the never before seen, circus evoked notions of historic origins, authenticity, and legacy. The circus in itself becomes a main theme, a privileged spectacle of subject and speech (Barée 2011: 42). An imaginary circus, filled with nostalgia and sentimentality was created, explicitly targeting a symbolic, idealistic and romantic image of the genre (ibid). Ironically, traditional circus, while promoting the idea that circus has changed little since its emergence in England in the 1760’s, is a relatively new type of circus. Hence, in order to address the current transformation in circus aesthetics and self-presentation, Sylvestre Barré prefers the term neo-classical over traditional circus (ibid: 41).

Barée stresses a second type of traditional circus practitioners, the so called “innovators” (ibid: 43). Practitioners and entrepreneurs affiliated with this type of circus display an openness to multidisciplinary and cross-genre collaborations. Instead of staging a nostalgic circus of the past, these shows often create a story and an atmospheric through-line (ibid: 43). The main topics, often loosely employed, are taken from other performing arts such as literature, painting, cinema, science, or music.¹⁰ Yet, they still gesture toward traditional circus: the performances are divided into separate acts and follow a classical build-up towards a crescendo. The audience is further directed to applause during certain key moments, as when performers display a

¹⁰ The employment of a thematic throughline is demonstrated by shows produced by Cirque du Soleil. *Totem*, for example, follows vaguely the theme of evolution. It employs a character who resembles Darwin and a scene that stages the evolution from ape to homo sapiens. Yet, the majority of acts have little or no relation to the issues of evolution.

particularly difficult feat. Many circus companies, commonly referred to as a new or contemporary circus, such as Cirque du Soleil, Cirque Eloize, Australian Circa, French Cirque Plume, fall under the banner of the innovative, traditional circus.

Given some scrutiny, what is considered to be traditional versus new circus is more vague than obvious. Guy even suggests that the notion of new circus has become an advertising strategy devoid of any aesthetic or political meaning (Guy 2001; 14). While the term might have had its importance in describing a politically driven new form of theatre that used minoritarian art practices as a tool to unsettle bourgeois centric theatre traditions, today it simply denotes circus without animals. However, even the distinction based on the presence or absence of the animal performer is a problematic one. While self-defined new or contemporary circus companies rarely employ animals, they still do so (ibid: 16), thereby further complicating questions about definition and categorization of such types.

Contemporary circus, which emerged in the mid 1990's, distinguishes itself from new and/or traditional circus by incorporating a more discursive approach to circus practices and performances.¹¹ Contemporary circus practitioners consider circus as an artistic genre on equal footing with other genres like theatre and dance. This understanding has led to an engagement with circus techniques beyond the dictates of feats guided by the display of virtuosity, spectacularity, and sensationalism, effectively opening up new lines of inquiry and composition. However, these new modes of exploration don't follow a strict pattern. Some artists seek to focus on their own disciplines while others are interested in collaborating with other genres to create hybrid performances. Mono-disciplinary productions such as Cie les Colporteurs tight wire piece, *Les fils sous la Neige* or Cie XY's partner acrobatic-centric *Les Grand C* are emblematic

¹¹ *Le Cri du Caméléon* (1995) by Josef Nadj is widely regarded to have initiated the contemporary circus movement (Guy 2001: 20). I am, however, cautious of elevating one particular performance over others, especially because of contemporary circus' intrinsic heterogeneity and diversity.

for the inclination to explore the poetic and dramaturgic aspects inherent in each discipline. On the other hand, the work by John Baptiste André and Alexander Vantournhout provide vivid examples of hybridized tendencies in contemporary circus, which dissolve the boundaries between dance and circus.

The vast majority of circus artists are technically versatile, many of them being educated at elite circus schools.¹² Traditional and new circus performers tend to produce an act that can be showcased for years to come. The act, often simultaneously innovative and skillful, is the main unit for economic exchange in the global circus market. In contrast, contemporary circus practitioners emphasize creation and research; they develop pieces that are dedicated to particular aesthetic, political, and/or ethical questions. These artists depend on governmental subsidies in the form of grants, residencies, and performance possibilities. France has offered the strongest institutional support for circus practitioners. It comes, therefore, with little surprise that the majority of and most daring work in the realm of contemporary circus has been produced and showcased in France.¹³ That said, it is important to understand that the boundaries between traditional/new and contemporary are quite porous. Many contemporary circus artists perform equally well in traditional or new circus settings.

One of the main features of contemporary circus is its self-reflexivity and its critical inclinations. Johann Le Guillerm, for example, takes the circular mode of presentation as fundamental to circus. To him, circularity assures the multiplicity of “viewpoints,” allowing the performance to be observed and scrutinized from different perspectives. It follows that a

¹² Prime examples of elite institutions are Centre national des arts du cirque (France), École supérieure des arts du cirque (Belgium), and École nationale de Cirque (Canada), and the School for Dance and Circus (Sweden). For more schools, consider the information provided by the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC).

¹³ With the election of François Mitterand in 1981, the circus’ jurisdiction changed from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Culture. The official recognition and legitimization entailed subsidies and support on a regional and national level. This shift has led to a thriving circus scene, comprised of fourteen Pôles Nationaux du Cirque (creation and performance centers), numerous circus schools, and countless circus festivals.

performance on a proscenium stage lacks this possibility and thereby can never genuinely foster a “true” circus experience, even if it showcases circus disciplines such as juggling or acrobatics.

On the other hand, some practitioners dispense with the term circus all together. They want to be referred to as wire walkers, jugglers, clowns, acrobats, or aerialists, thereby emphasizing their discipline. The emergence of circus studies as a new academic field is indebted to the diverse approaches and understanding provided by contemporary circus practitioners. Many of the upcoming scholars in the field have been circus practitioners themselves, resulting in the emergence of a circus discourse that is intrinsically part of the contemporary circus moment.¹⁴

Circopolis, therefore, also addresses the agoral spirit that permeates contemporary circus—the joy of discussion, reflection, and argumentation. *The circus* (if it ever existed), understood as a nonpolitical entertainment experience, is far removed from its present reality. Many of the debates around the socio-cultural importance of past, present, and future circus practices are already imbued with political questions. Yet, little scholarly work has directly addressed the question of the political and how it applies to contemporary circus. Circopolis aims to fill this gap in circus studies scholarship by bringing contemporary circus practitioners and performances in conversation with political and critical theory. While questions of politics and political theory as they relate to the circus might seem a strongwoman’s task, my aim is more specific. I will focus on three particular issues concerning the politics and polis of the circus: how the discourse of circus is entwined with the discourse of danger and risk; how circus relates to the notion of animality, and, as elaborated earlier, how circus conjures different, often opposing visions of community.

¹⁴ Some examples of Circus artists turned scholars are Dana Dugan, Marion Guyez, Bauke Lievens, Laura Murphy, Marie-Andree Robitaille, Jonathan Priest, Kristy Seymour, John Paul Zaccarini, among others.

Circus and Risk

Despite including a heterogenous set of practices and performances, many circus studies scholars attempt to homogenize the circus by positing that it has an essential quality that can unify different types and styles. Paul Boussiac, for example, comprehends circus as a secular ritual that deals with matters such as “pollution and purification, survival and redemption, life and death” (Bouissac 2012: 27). In his account, circus artists serve as quasi sacrificial figures, they are “heroes who risk their lives (ibid). By so doing, they instill a sense of unanimity among audiences, a spiritual transformation which creates a sense of belonging. While the ritualistic aspects of circus are less pronounced in other scholarship on circus, a tendency to highlight risk as the underlying feature of circus is apparent. Phillipe Goudard argues that by “triumphing over obstacles, controlling gravity in the face of imbalance, and mastering destiny in front of the uncontrollable,” the circus communicates an aesthetic of risk (Goudard 2010: 42, *my translation*). Fagot agrees that risk appears to be the circus’s most defying factor; it “constitutes the distinctiveness of circus” (Fagot 2010: 30, *my translation*). Similarly, Franziska Trapp, argues the notion of risk continues to be a basic principle for contemporary circus, providing “a fundamental element in the constitution of meaning” (Trapp 2019: 207, *my translation*). For Tomi Purovaara, too, risk “is an integral part of circus” (Purovarra 2012: 14).

Tait follows the apprehension of risk as a constitutive to contemporary circus practices. However, she uniquely situates risk in a particular social-historical context, arguing that the comeback of circus (as contemporary circus) corresponds to the emergence of risk society. Ulrich Beck, defines risk society as the ultimate phase of late capitalism. Here, all responsibility is transposed to the individual alone, leading to the phenomenon of “tragic individualization” (Beck 2006: 336). It also leads to society’s preoccupation with risk aversion (risk being both true

or imagined). Drawing on Beck's model, Tait concludes that the circus "offers an arena of resistance to physical and social constraints" (Tait & Lavers 2017: 542) produced in risk society. The circus artists' intrinsic relation to risk is interpreted as a form of resistance to social and political curtailments. Yet, it is questionable if circus artists really provide an alternative to risk society's paradigm or if they instead substitute the figure of the tragic individual with a heroic one.

In such a framework the risk-embracing circus artist becomes risk society's prime subject. Hence, while Tait suggests that the political potential of contemporary circus consists in the playful encounter with risk, I contend that the intrinsic relation of circus and risk endorses neoliberalism's emphasis on self-reliance, self-investment, and self-improvement. The circus subject's embrace of constant risk as a source of creativity, speaks to Bojana Kunst's analysis of the role of the artist in late capitalism. Rather than model liberation and resistance, the creative class of performers, to which the circus artists without doubt belong, are seen as a new model for contemporary labor practices. The "virtuoso worker" has become an emblematic figure of this capitalist paradigm (Kunst 2014: 31). Despite being knowledgeable in several domains and working continuously (every social gathering becomes a networking possibility for a future gig), this new worker still exists in a constant state of precarity. The notion of the virtuoso worker therefore builds on an understanding of neoliberalism, in which the self-comprehension of a subject is driven by an entrepreneurial impetus. The circus artist is not so much a model for resistance, but rather a model for the desired conduct and behavior in late capitalism. The link between circus and risk recalls the circus's complicity in propagating hegemonic beliefs in a contemporary socio-historical context by providing once again a model of an ideal citizen.

Circus and Animality

Human-animal encounters play an important role in circopolis. Circus is seen as a site of zooësis, a term that acknowledges “the manifold performances engendered by such ubiquitous or isolated cultural animal practices” (Chaudhuri 2007: 9). Animal acts can’t be just subsumed to the representational, solely as a procedure to reinscribe human exceptionalism and superiority. Circopolis also speaks to complex entanglements in animal-human relationships, what Haraway expresses with the compound *naturecultures*, which comprehends nature and culture not in oppositional terms and as universal categories, but always interrelated, entangled and intertwined with each other (Haraway 2003; 6-10). These relationships are in danger of being utilized to reinscribe hegemonic beliefs, but they also decenter anthropocentrism by acknowledging nonhuman agency.

For Deleuze and Guattari *becoming-animal* is an aesthetico-political strategy that allows us to think beyond the confinements of subjectification (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 233-237). It is a way to make a *body without organs* to allow oneself to be part of a field that exceeds (state) regulations, it fosters the possibilities of relationality beyond the dictate of hegemonic beliefs and norms by entering in nonnormative compositions and intensities (ibid: 150-151). The notion of becoming-animal fosters an inquiry into the political that is open to the more than human, as the concept of the human is understood to be delimiting to new creations and arrangements. Yet, becoming-animal should not be reduced to performing or playing animal characters on stage. On the contrary, becoming-animal is evoked when “the function of a form or species” (ibid: 264) is surpassed. Hence, by becoming-animal, alliances are created that offer alternative modes of existence.¹⁵

¹⁵ I understand becoming-animal as a very open and inclusive concept. In my reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s text, becoming-animal can denote a form of association beyond species boundaries as well as a playful destabilization of the human understood as the subject of the state.

Hence, circopolis attends to creative and expressive ways to undo, subvert, and destabilize the regulated understanding of the human, as expressed through the notion of the *normate* (Thomson) or *subjectification* (Deleuze & Guattari: 159). My dissertation follows the invitation provided by circus practitioners and figures who resist being easily subsumed into *the* circus, while still “doing” circus. There is a circus that unsettles what is given; one that allows us to re-imagine modes of relationality. While I draw on Arendt’s understanding of the political, an important aspect of this project is to expand her notion of plurality and being-with to the non-human. By addressing non-human agency, circopolis takes note of the fracture in the distribution of the sensible, thereby acknowledging a space that does not hinder but instead fosters heterogeneity and difference, a community in becoming.¹⁶

Chapter Summary

The following chapters can be read in any order, but I outline their basic thematic and theoretical development. Each chapter attends to a particular circus performance or practice, highlighting the political implications in each of them. I disclaim promotion of a single understanding of the political, the polis, or circus. Instead, I engage different theoretical frameworks in what I propose as a multifaceted investigation into contemporary circus performances and practices.

Chapter One treats the circus as a powerful tool in reproducing hegemonic beliefs and ideals looking at Cavalia’s production *Odyseo*. *Odyseo* blends equestrianism, high-class acrobatics and elaborate stagecraft to produce a mythological origin story of human civilization.

¹⁶ One way is to highlight human-animal encounters as a destabilizer of the taken-for-granted superiority of the human. I do not mean, however, to excuse or justify the violent and exploitative treatment of animal performers in circuses, nor the continuous animalization of racialized, gendered, and disabled bodies. Rather, I want to propose that the circus is not only a site of animal abuse but also a site for interspecies affection and more than human agency.

The chapter explores the horse performer's role as a driving agent in the construction of a primordial community. It is the performance of intimacy with the horse that generates an ideal member of this community. In *Odyseo*, black performers are generally excluded from any intimate horse relationship; being deprived from an agent that generates nobility, civility, and virtue, the black performers are further dehumanized. The horse therefore serves as an "object of orientation of whiteness" (Ahmed), and it is through its closeness, intimacy, and affinity, that a sense of congruent communion (Nancy) is constructed.

While the first chapter addresses circopolis as a form of mythation (Nancy), Chapter Two focuses on the mythopoetic (Ravetto) aspect of contemporary circus performance by analyzing the human-animal relationship in Baro D'Evel's piece *Bestias*.¹⁷ Baro D'Evel destabilizes given hierarchies by questioning the superiority of the human over the animal. Instead of humanizing the animal as in cases of traditional animal acts in the circus, Baro D'Evel explores the animality of the human as it emerges in concrete interspecies interactions. The work of Baro D'Evel offers a circus that is concerned with alterity, heterogeneities, and multiplicities; it is a place where limitography—what Derrida identifies as sites of tension between signifying and asignifying systems— is practiced rather than denied. The work of Baro D'evol invites us to reimagine circus's intrinsic yet vexed relationship with the animal as a site of cohabitation and collaboration.

Chapter Three continues the discussion of the separation of *phôné* and *logos* evoked in Chapter Two by turning to the figure of the August clown. Here, I develop the notion of clown politics, a political force that stems from the position of *phôné*. I draw on Bataille's notion of

¹⁷ For Nancy, the main function of myth is to produce a communal origin, an essence, a structure of identification (Nancy 1991: 45). The term mythation describes a staging or maybe even a dramatic actualization of the mythic foundation of a particular community. Because such an origin story delimits "who belongs to" and "who is excluded from" the community, mythation is inherently conservative. Mythopoetic practices, on the other hand, unsettle mythation by producing cracks, fissures, and ruptures in exciting, taken-for-granted narratives.

“formlessness” and Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” in order to explore August clown’s position as outside to social norms, conduct and rules. The chapter stages a hypothetical theoretical dialogue between Kristeva and Rancière, to elaborate a notion of the political that doesn't need to transform the bearer of *pôné* into a bearer of *logos*, but that insists on the possibility of politics in the space of *phôné*.

Expanding the August clown figure into the realm of political activism, the chapter examines how the act of pie-ing, where an activist throws a pie into the face of a target, is used as a way to express discontent with political and cultural authorities. This simple act suggests that we can see how the scope of circus studies extends beyond the confinement of the ring.

Chapter Four turns to another iconic circus figure: the high wire walker. Beginning with the famous wire scene in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the problematic reception that binds the wire walker to the notion of superman, I address how the figure of the walker became the emblematic, heroic figure of today’s risk society (Beck). Rather than glorifying the high wire walkers as an expression of individualistic freedom, self-reliance, and self-determination, I problematize the wire walker’s drive for virtuous heights as a desire to leave the shared space of togetherness (Arendt), thereby withdrawing from the political realm. I stipulate that contemporary wire walkers have begun to question their role in the symbolic matrix, establishing practices and performances that are interested in collective explorations on the wire. The chapter focuses on the performance *Traversée* by Cie Basinga as well as the *Centipede*, an improvisational score, to address this new political modality by plumbing a “sense of depth” (Arendt). My goal is to rethink Nietzsche’s wire scene, emphasizing his use of the term *danger* over *Übermensch* and bring it in conversation with Arendt’s political philosophy centering around being-with and togetherness. In so doing, I hope to offer an interpretation of Nietzsche’s

philosophy that extends beyond the affirmation of radical individualism, instead inviting collective sociality.

Chapter Five offers a conclusion by re-visiting the notion of animality discussed in Chapters One and Two but expanding the concept to include the non-human. In this chapter, I take up the thing-based circus of Johann Le Guillerm. Over the years Le Guillerm has developed his own circus philosophy which emphasizes circus as a site of viewpoints and minoritarian practice. The circus alchemist Le Guillerm acknowledges the thing-power (Bennett) of the objects in the creation process and performance. He understands objects not as passive entities but as things that are imbued with agency. An understanding that emphasizes nonhuman agency reverberates with Hans Jörg Rheinberger's notion of epistemic thing and Bruno Latour's critique on the "Great Divide," that has separated nature from culture as distinct categories. Le Guillerm's work articulates a circopolis that is concerned with the emergence of unknown possibilities, combinations, and associations. Here, circus denotes a site of experimentation and open-endedness.

Chapter One

White Centaurs: Staging of White Nobility in Cavalia's *Odysseo*

Objects Which Give Orientation

Sara Ahmed describes whiteness “as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience” (Ahmed 2007: 150). Whiteness exists as a sort of field, an atmosphere, a holder, in which certain objects are arranged in specific, habitual and familiar ways. This arrangement makes the environment homey and comfortable for certain bodies and uncomfortable or even inhospitable for other bodies. For Ahmed, whiteness as a category of experience privileges white bodies over nonwhite bodies.¹⁸ Precisely because white bodies feel at home within a certain distribution/arrangement of objects, whiteness is perceived by most white bodies as naturally given and not culturally, socially and politically produced. “[Whiteness] is an effect of racialization, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies ‘can do’”(ibid.). What a body can do, what it can't do, or what it can do with ease or difficulty depends upon the social and cultural topography in which a body is situated; this dependence is further informed by racial and historical dimensions. Furthermore, whiteness affects how bodies can take up space, how they move and how far they can advance, and what objects are in reach or out of reach.

Linked to the category of whiteness is the notion of orientation. Following Edmund Husserl, Ahmed suggests that in order for the body to be able to orient itself properly, a starting point is needed which serves as a point of reference (ibid.: 151). Only through a point of

¹⁸For Ahmed, the white body is a body that is “in line” with the multiple lines which run through white institutions. Examples of such lines that compose white, and hence racialized, institutions are notions such as heterosexuality, middle class affiliations, and ableness. A white body that is somehow deviant in some respects or nonwhite body can still navigate through white institutions as long as they are readable as white (enough), that is in line with the majorities of lines that comprise those institutions (Ahmed 2006: 136-37). To become white or to inhabit different lines of whiteness is to “approximate the habitus of the white bourgeois body” (Ahmed 2007: 160)

reference, what Husserl describes as zero-point, notions such as here and there, left and right, west and east, and above and beneath make sense. An object can serve as a zero-point, a point from which the “world unfolds” (ibid.). This object is of crucial import for one’s own sense of self-understanding of one’s place in the world. It gives orientation and direction. For Husserl, his writing table serves such function: “The family home provides, as it were, the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present, in front of him. The family home is only ever *co-perceived*, and allows the philosopher to do his work” (ibid.:152). For Husserl, the objects (e.g. family idyl, his appointment as professor, social privilege, authority) are co-perceived, consciously and unconsciously in relationship to the table. To be oriented towards one object determines one’s orientation toward other objects. Objects are arranged in certain ways that influence one’s general orientation in the world.

Ahmed suggests that whiteness can be thought of as an orientation point. Whiteness is “here” while the other, that which is different, strange, from over “there,” in the distance, is associated with the other part of the world. “Racial others come to embody distance. The embodiment of distance makes whiteness ‘proximate’ as a ‘starting point’ for orientation” (Ahmed 2006: 121). Whiteness determines and is determined by shared attributes. To have shared attributes means to have things in common. It is from this notion of “here” from which a community, a sense of “we” is created. However, those shared attributes are culturally produced and reinscribed, not naturally given. “It is the idea of community as ‘being in common’ that generates ‘shared attributes’ which are retrospectively taken up as an evidence of community” (ibid.: 122). These shared attributes can be articulations of what is regarded to be the natural spirit of the white community: being noble, endowed with superior intelligence, being reasonable, more civilized, etc. Further, community is not only created through shared attributes

but also through shared objects. “Groups are formed through their shared orientation toward an object” (119). Again, Ahmed gives us two main categories that produce a community (here a white community). First, is the production of attributes which are shared by the members of the community. Second, are objects which attract a community, objects which direct it, and which delimit the integration into the community.

This chapter will trace such an object, that of the noble horse. In Western culture the noble horse has been a crucial figure to explain shifting notions of superiority, civility, and nobility. However, while I will use the term object to describe the noble horse figure in order to stay with Ahmed’s terminology, I would like to add, in accordance with recent scholarship in animal studies, that the horse is more than merely a symbol and more than human projection. For Donna Haraway, the story of human-animal relations is a story of co-evolution, co-inhabitation and co-dependence. “Earth’s beings are prehensile, opportunistic, ready to yoke partners into something new, something symbiogenetic” (Haraway 2003: 32). Because animals are not here for us but for themselves, the animal-human relationship can’t be reduced to the mere symbolic or representational. Hence, horses are agents, historical forces that have shaped human culture as much as humans have shaped horse cultures. For Haraway, nature and culture are not terms, which stay in opposition with each other, but have to be thought of always together. Her compound term “naturecultures”, hence, describes interspecies entanglements. Further, in her writings the term companion species is intrinsically connected to “naturecultures.” Both serve as a “pointer to an ongoing ‘becoming with’”(Haraway 2008: 16-17) in a rich web of complex relations. A becoming with, i.e. a companion species relationality is always situated in specific cultural-historical contexts, and further complicated by the particular contexts in which the specific horse-human entanglements produce a singular instance of interspecies relation. For

this chapter, I look at the cultural-historical context. I am interested in how the noble horse figure travels through different epochs and how a horse-human entanglement not only symbolizes notions of nobility but embodies these. Less attention is given to the singular horse-human encounter, which is mediated by the overall socio-historical context, yet not reducible to it.¹⁹

Haraway complicates Althusser's notion of interpellation in interesting ways. For Althusser, ideology functions as a form of recruitment. Individuals are made subjects by the process of interpellation: "I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (...) or 'transforms' the individual into subjects (...) by the very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing (...)" (Althusser 1971: 163). For Haraway, we are hailed by animals, insofar as they are part of "our ideologically loaded narratives" and we hail animals into our constructs of nature and culture (Haraway 2003: 17). This chapter centers on the noble horse figure as a player in such ideologically loaded narrative, which is embodied through certain instantiations of horse-human relations. For Ahmed too, the notion of interpellation is an important one. However, she focuses on the directionality of the process of interpellation. For Althusser, the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) is a policing, an ordering force. Subjects of the state are recruited into the hegemonic discourse through an address by the ISA from the police, its "hey you!" (Althusser 1971: 163). The call is answered by the individual's turn towards its source (in this case the police). By reacting to the interpellating "hey you!," the individual becomes a subject that subjects its own existence to the dominant ideology. Hence, the turn is a spatial re-orientation of the body. The subject turns

¹⁹ I am especially thinking of feminist scholars such as Kim Marra and Jane C. Desmond who focus on the different, counter-hegemonic embodiments of their particular horse relation, be it with a real horse (Marra) or a fantastic, imagined horse (Desmond), that has been enabled. While I focus on how horse-human entanglements bring certain bodies "in line" and how the horses orient bodies towards whiteness, an encounter with the horse can also offer lines of flight that subvert whiteness. For more see Chaudhuri and Hughes's *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, University of Michigan Press. 2013

towards the entity that represents the state, and thereby becomes aligned (oriented) with its demands.

For Ahmed, objects, too, have the power to interpellate individuals into subjects of ideology. For Ahmed, “recruitment creates the very ego ideal for an institution” (Ahmed 2006: 134). We will see shortly how the horse-human entanglement, more specifically the horse-rider dyad serves as an embodied instantiation of an ego ideal of white institutions. In Western culture, the noble horse has been such a powerful figure because of the world that unfolds from it, the associations that are evoked by it, and the objects and affects that have been co-perceived with it. The noble horse has given bodies orientation and hence recruited them into a specific place of the social fabric. Bodies “turn” towards the noble horse and are hailed by it. Significantly, though, the noble horse is in reach for some bodies and out of reach for others. In Ahmed’s words “some bodies more than others are recruited” (ibid.).

Moreover, Carla Freccero’s notion of figural historiography is helpful here. Freccero calls for a historicity, which is attentive to affective structures and follows temporalities which “do not respect national boundaries nor periodization but follow the promiscuous and errant figures across times and places” (Freccero 2010: 46). She is interested in the affective forces of such figures, the ways they reoccur and haunt the present. We might add that objects, which orient by arranging and delimiting a certain topography, do so because they are also condensations of various affects. Even though certain affects might dominate, it does not mean that the object has gotten rid of other affects. Instead, they carry on and are carried over, and continue to inform the present and the presence of the very object. The noble horse, even though most of us don’t interact with horses on a daily basis, still conjures an ideal representation of nobility and

chivalry, and its rider conveys an epitome of sovereignty, mastery and, starting in the 17th century, civility.

The history of modern circus is intrinsically entwined with the horse. However, horse performers, like many other animal performers, have become a rare sight in contemporary circus productions. Currently, only a handful of circus companies focus on equestrianism in their shows.²⁰ From this little pool of circus companies, Cavalia is the most commercially successful. I had the opportunity to see *Odysseo*, the latest production of the Quebec-based circus company in December 2015 in San Francisco. As a circus company, Cavalia is known for its horse-centered exploits and skillful staging of diverse forms of equestrian artistry such as dressage, liberty, obstacle jumping, Cossack and Roman riding. Additionally, *Odysseo* displays several human-centered circus techniques such as floor and aerial acrobatics. However, even though exclusively human feats get their share of spotlight, horse performers are the undisputed stars of *Odysseo*. It is a great place to experience an enchantment arising from witnessing what Despret calls interspecies attunements.²¹ And indeed, in some moments a kind of magical unfolding of horse-human collaboration flickered through.

Despite such arresting moments of cross-species communication, my spectatorial experience was overshadowed by the ways in which intimate horse-human collaboration was employed to create a highly racialized community on stage. In *Odysseo*, the horse performers are

²⁰ Three noteworthy companies are Le Théâtre Équestre Zingaro—Bartabas (France), Théâtre du Centaure (France), and Cie Baro D’Evel (France).

²¹ For Vinciane Despret, Donna Haraway, and Vicki Hearne animal training and taming are practices that give witness to intersubjective, cross-species becomings, are practices of attending and communicating; practices that at the same time bridge difference without erasing it. Successful animal trainers must attend to the singularity of the living being, the play-mate, before them. But at the same time, trainers are trained by their animal counterparts; training is reciprocal and they accomplish their work together (Despret 2016: 6). Humans and animals are changed, transformed in the process of training and taming. This kind of inter-relationality is described by Despret as attunement (ibid.: 4). This irreducible relationality is striking for an audience which witnesses in a successful animal-human exploit, an attunement, fostered by cross-species collaboration. She calls affects evoked by such attunement “enchantment” (ibid.).

enlisted to conjure a knightly, noble essence of their riders. Crucial for the investigation of this chapter and, in proximity with Ahmed's arguments, only white bodies can turn towards the horse and be hailed by it. For non-white bodies, the horse is out of reach. By the same token, *Odysseo* conjures through human-horse entanglements a figure that embodies a gestalt in which notions of nobleness, virtue, honor, gentleness, uprightness, and beauty merge together. In *Odysseo*, the horse-human dyad embodies the gestalt of whiteness.

The Noble Horse

In *Phaedrus*, Plato stages a dialogue between Phaedrus and Socrates. To describe the nature of the human soul, Socrates turns towards the chariot allegory. For him, the human soul is divided into three parts, a charioteer and two distinctly different horses. The charioteer, the rational part of the soul, commands two horses, a white, good one, and a dark, bad one (Plato 2008: 146).

“The right-hand horse is upright and cleanly made; he has a lofty neck and an aquiline nose; his colour is white, and his eyes dark; he is a lover of honour and modesty and temperance, and the follower of true glory; he needs no touch of the whip, but is guided by word and admonition only. The other is a crooked lumbering animal, put together anyhow; he has a short thick neck; he is flat-faced and of a dark colour, with grey eyes and blood-red complexion” (ibid.).

In this allegory, the soul is divided not only between rational and irrational parts. The human soul consists of two forms of animality: one which is noble, which tries to rise upwards, and one which is vicious and fierce tending to pull the chariot downwards. The charioteer's task is to control the vicious part of the soul, to tame and humble it by all means necessary (ibid.: 149). Only then is the soul able to follow a divine destiny, to rise upwards towards truth and not risk being overtaken by vices (ibid.: 133). Ideally, the charioteer achieves a harmony within the soul by training the bad horse who is inclined to go “heavily, weighing down the charioteer to the earth when his steed has not been thoroughly trained” (ibid.: 131). Plato suggests that the conflict between these different parts of the soul is a sort of probation put onto mortals by the immortals

in which “he who does righteously improves, and he who does unrighteously, deteriorates his lot” (ibid.: 135). And if the probation succeeds, the horses of the mortals might receive wings, like those of the immortals, and hence “live in light always” (ibid.: 153).

For Plato a good soul is a soul in control of its drives and instincts, and hence is not commanded by lower passions of the body. The soul is somehow suspended between two forces. One pulls upwards, towards the truth, the noble, the good, towards divinity, the place where Gods reside, and the other one pulls downward where vices, wickedness, and the unprincipled dwell. Interestingly, the horse figures describe both the good and the bad tendencies in the human soul.

The good horse embodies its moral superiority through its posture. It has an upright stance and “lofty neck”— physical markers of its good character which is noble and modest. Coercion is unnecessary. Only some affirmative reminders are needed to assure that it behaves, and that it stays on the track. Conversely, the bad horse is given a darker color — the color of the rank it naturally navigates towards, earth and dirt. Its physical appearance reflects this downward tendency. It is short, overweight, and heavy footed. With such a beast, reasoning seems to be impossible; violence is the only language it understands. The charioteer forces goodness upon the horse by beating it into the right direction, which is upright. For Plato, true “happiness depends on self-control; if the better elements of the mind which lead to order and philosophy prevail, then they pass their life here in happiness and harmony— masters of themselves and orderly—enslaving the vicious and emancipating the virtuous elements of the soul” (ibid.: 152).

What strikes me with respect to the chariot allegory is that the noble soul is not free of animality. While reason tries to overcome the lower instinctual behaviors, deemed to be base and wicked, reason also builds an alliance towards an animality of higher degree, one might even say

follows it. Reason and animality don't stay in contradiction with each other. Rather, reason orients itself towards a superior expression of animality.

The human can only reach the highest expression of nobility through animality. This upright manifestation of animality of the horse is represented not only through metaphors but also embodied in the real-life human-horse encounter. Thus, it is not surprising that Xenophon, a contemporary of Plato, discusses the proper dealings with the horse in his *Hippike, The Art of Horsemanship*. *Hippike* is the oldest surviving text on horsemanship in Western culture (Mattfeld 2016: 4). Xenophon suggested handling the horse not by brutal domination but through “patience and gentleness” (ibid.). For Xenophon, the task of the animal trainer was to “cause the horse to do the very things in which he himself delights and takes the greatest pleasure” (Xenophon qtd. in Laundry 2008: 28). As we have seen with Plato, the noble character of the horse is embodied through its posture. What is trained is an upward orientation. Hence the horse is trained in such fashion that it resembles the very bodily ideal of the good horse in the chariot allegory.

Xenophon demands that the good horse (a stallion according to his ideal) should wear his head straight up, have a fierce look, toss up his tail and lift his leg up from the ground (ibid.).

Xenophon goes beyond the usual training practices for horses in his training instructions. Even though horses should be able to traverse different territories and get used to different surfaces, Xenophon stresses the importance of learning more choreographed and controlled movement patterns. Susanna Forest suggests that while these more technical rehearsals prepared rider and horse for battle, they also initiated a “process of bringing the horse from open space and free, forward movement into geometry and discipline” (Forrest 2016: 89). For Xenophon, the finest figure was when the horse, mounted by his aristocratic rider, “was able to bring its hind legs underneath its quarters, shifting its weight back, then lifted its forelegs off the ground, and

balanced for a few moments in suspension” (ibid.:90). This figure “should remind the mortals viewing him of another being all together” (ibid.). Even though the rider and the horse are mortals, for a moment they appear godlike. This apparition might have reminded the viewer of the most famous horse-rider dyad of antiquity, Bellerophon and Pegasus who together were destined to achieve heroic feats.

Pegasus is also commemorated in a star constellation. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud speculates that the “observation of the great astronomical regularities not only furnished [the human] with the model for introducing order into his life, but also gave him the first points of departure for doing so” (Freud 1961: 93). Star constellations are important orientation points in many cultures. However, I find it especially significant that the emblematic figure of the noble horse, the winged Pegasus, is one of the major constellations in Western culture. Pegasus, and its many representations, be it as star constellation or as a noble purebred, is a guiding figure, one that has oriented bodies. It is also provocative to consider the possibility that Pegasus guided Xenophon’s favorite posture in which rider and horse are not just upright but rise upwards.

Mattfeld suggests that Xenophon’s teachings were forgotten until they were rediscovered during the Renaissance. Xenophon’s *Hippike* hugely influenced the first riding academies, which were established in Europe in the 16th century. These academies spawned a new attitude towards horsemanship in European court culture. This new perspective towards the horse changed notions of sovereignty, too. Horses had been an important object for orientation in medieval times. Susan Crane argues that a chivalrous notion of self depended upon the coordination of “horse and arms in a mobile performance of selfhood” (Crane 2011: 83). In medieval times, the horse was an apparition of aggressiveness rather than civility. The knight absorbed the belligerence of the stallion he rode (ibid.: 74). Further, Sir Thomas Eliot

(1490-1546) seems to still adhere to the idea of the horse as a symbol of tamed aggressiveness when he suggests that there was no more suitable knowledge for the governing class to possess if they hoped to impress their inferiors by appearing “about the common course of other men, daunting a fierce and cruel beast” (qtd. in Landry 2008: 26).

Starting in early modernity, the horse’s relation to wildness, aggressiveness, and ferocity was minimized. With new training methods the horses’ value and rank changed. For Duke William Cavendish (1592-1676), a famous person in the history of horsemanship and Hobbes’s patron and friend, the horse was, “after man, the most noble of all animals (...) he is wise and subtle” (Mattfeld 2016: 34). A wise and subtle creature, an intelligent being, cannot be handled through brute force alone. To the contrary, horsemanship became an art of “negation rather than coercion” (ibid.: 27). Sovereignty becomes embodied through the horse-rider dyad where the sovereign, the rider, guides the “horse’s will into the virtue of the beautiful performance” (Landry 2008: 27). Still, even while brute force was regarded as counterproductive when interacting with a horse of good nature, the horse must still fear the rider. Yet, this fear possessed a different quality. Instead of being afraid of punishment, this fear had a patriarchal quality and was defined as “the command ‘Fear God’ or the ‘physical enactment of respect’” (Mattfeld 2016: 35). Fear, understood as a form of respectful awe, produced love and obedience towards the sovereign. The rider embodied through the horse an ideal of the sovereign and became semi-divine (ibid).

For Foucault, the 17th century is also the time where a new form of power emerges, which he calls disciplinary power. A century later disciplinary power will become an integral part of the biopolitical regime, which will slowly supersede the sovereign regime. Foucault uses the military complex and the school as sites where the disciplinary power manifests itself first.

The military camp became one of the first sites where power functions through a network that is not only unidirectional from top to bottom but “to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally” (ibid.: 176). For Foucault the chief function of this new form of power is to “train” rather than to select or to levy. (...) It ‘trains’ the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies into a multiplicity of individual elements.(...) Discipline makes individuals“ (Foucault 1995: 170). Importantly, Adrian Sheridan, the translator of *Surveiller et Punir (Discipline and Punish)* into English uses “train” to translate “dresser.”

Even though horses are absent in Foucault’s account, their absence is made present through the word “dresser.” Classical dressage developed in the context of the military in early modern period. The riding academies of Naples (1532), Paris (1595) and Vienna (1665), even though catering towards an aristocratic elite, were part of a military education. In the early riding academies we see the coalition of two paradigmatic institutions of disciplinary power: army and school. In regards to the new attitude towards horsemanship and Foucault’s understanding of a network of power, it might be relevant to think of horses as a crucial agent in developing this new form of disciplinary power. In that sense, it is not only that the riders disciplined the horse, but the reverse is true too, the horse disciplined its rider. One might speculate how the emergent orientation towards the noble horse accompanied an archive of correct horsemanship and horse academies might be the first sites of the disciplinary regime. Thus, the description of the soldier’s correct posture that Foucault cites from an ordinance from 1784 could come directly from a handbook on the correct horseman training centuries before where soldiers are expected “holding their heads high and erect; to standing upright, without bending the back, to sticking out the belly, throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulders; (...) lastly to march with a bold step, with knee and ham taut, on the points of the feet, which should face outwards” (ibid.:

135-6). In the disciplinary regime, power inscribes itself onto the body with unprecedented rigor. The ideal individual in the disciplinary regime displays a successful performance of self-mastery. As much as a good horse is trained to obey and love his master, the populace at large undergoes a training regime as well. The product is a law abiding and morally upright civilian, obedient to his superiors while at the same time a successful patriarch of his own household.

Circus - the Spectacle of the Disciplinary Regime

Philip Astley (1742-1814) is widely regarded as having founded modern circus when he opened his riding school in London on April 6, 1768. Initially intended as a school for teaching horse riding skills, Astley's enterprise expanded into a display of masterful horsemanship, giving birth to the modern circus we know today (Kotar & Gessler 2011: 9). In its earliest phase, the acts were primarily horse-centered but were already beginning to diverge. Comical horse acts as well as cross-animal feats (for instance, monkeys riding horses) were performed soon after the school's first documented performance on May 6th of the same year.²² The program grew more and more diverse, but equestrian displays remained central to the shows and a crucial audience magnet. By 1775, the season opened "with a great variety of new Men, and feats of Horsemanship, and Activity, in a manner beyond conception" (ibid.: 14). Before Astley launched his career as the first circus impresario he was a sergeant major of the Fifteenth Light Dragoons, a cavalry regiment in the British Army. Astley capitalized on the reputation of the unit he served for. His riding school was an institution where militaristic masculinity was taught. In his equestrian performances, Astley restaged military feats in which he celebrated British virtues such as honor, bravery, and unwavering loyalty to the crown (Mattfeld 2014: 21). However, I would like to emphasize that the modern circus was much more than an institution where

²² The monkey-horse act mentioned above was part of burlesque riding stunts that served as comical counterparts to the more earnest horse acts that dominated the shows.

patriotism and militaristic masculinity were displayed. I suggest that what the public execution was to the sovereign regime, the modern circus was to the disciplinary regime, a spectacle of putting to death has been replaced with a spectacle of disciplined life. Modern circus focuses on the body “that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces” (Foucault 1995: 144).

Modern circus, far from being an apolitical performing art form, has served as an apparatus of verification: it verifies, center stage, the dominant prevailing discourse of human exceptionalism (the idea of western Man).²³ In this political fiction, the white, male, heterosexual body is superior to other subjects in relation to it, which are feminized, exoticized, and racialized. Moreover, the horse performer requires special attention, because it has served as a crucial medium to establish the Western vision of masculinity. In Astley’s modern circus, one could witness the techniques of the body that entangled the ideal vision of an honorable, respectable man with his relationship to the horse.²⁴

Donna Landry and Monica Mattfeld stress the importance of the horse as a crucial agent in establishing a sense of British superiority. In Astley’s circus, an idealized male body that governed both himself and others was promoted as an exemplary image of masculinity. The horse was an important point of orientation for British citizens towards a more righteous and honorable expression of masculinity (which was in essence British). This exemplary masculine body was connected to the rider’s relationship with the horse; on the one hand, the rider was

²³Sylvia Wynter calls this superior status the genre of Man. The genre of Man refers to a superior form of humanity, which is regarded to be rational, and, therefore, can rightfully dominate what is deemed to be irrational or subrational. The genre of Man is intrinsically linked to the white, liberal, heteronormative subject. People of color, considered to be non-human, or not-fully-human-yet, are ontologically excluded from the genre of Man (Wynter 2003, 257-337).

²⁴ Marcel Mauss’s definition of techniques of the body as a physiological, psychological, and sociological assemblage emphasizes that these techniques are not just assembled by individuals alone, but through education, through the society which they belong to, and the place they occupy within this society. The body is the first object of manipulation and therefore also the first object that is rendered into a shape that correlates to the hegemonic order (Mauss 1973: 76).

superior to the horse, but on the other, the rider was dependent on the horse, as masculine strength and relative superiority were constituted by it. As in the case of a patriarch who conducts a family business or a monarch who conducts a nation, dominance is dependent on a successful management of subordinates. What is important to stress here is that domination, preferably, was not executed with brute force. Instead, a new understanding of British superiority was tied up with an understanding of a higher grade of civility, which became reflected in horse training. This new understanding of heightened civility reflected in horse training starkly contrasted with ongoing mistreatment of native populations in British colonial territories and lands occupied by other colonial powers. “Self-styled freeborn Britons, both men and women, sought to represent themselves as superior in civilization by riding lightly and exerting control by a means of a silken thread” (Landry 2008: 4). Horse-human entanglements, expressed in equestrian craftsmanship, offered a way to embody the ideology of the time, and in circus and hippodramas, the possibility to dramatically stage it. The emergence of modern circus offered this visceral experience for London’s populace and assisted in crafting a new sense of British self (Mattfeld 2016: 167).

This new self-understanding of British cultural and civil dominance was accompanied by the emergence of a new horse breed, the English Thoroughbred, which epitomized “equine nobility in the flesh” (Landry 2008: 5).²⁵ The English Thoroughbred, was regarded as simultaneously intelligent and tough, fierce and gentle. An English man who looked at the Thoroughbred ostensibly looked at his animal mirror image; the equine stands in for English nobility and gentility, but also aggressiveness and militancy in its idealized forms. Such attributes, because of their unique status, can only develop fully in the horse when the horse is

²⁵ The English Thoroughbred is a product obtained from Eastern bloodstock imported to the British Isles in the 17th century. However, as early as in the 18th century their foreignness was quickly forgotten, they “became English by dint of familiarity” (Landry 160).

treated with devotion and kindness by its human companion; the horse must be cherished in order to bring out its fullest potential and secure its loyalty (ibid.: 30).²⁶ This affectionate entanglement articulated a human-becoming-horse and horse-becoming-human, a state which Donna Landry describes as “osmosis,” in which the horse “allowed his body to be ‘borrowed’ by the rider, and the rider in turn would have ‘lent’ his mind to the horse” (ibid.:27). It is this kind of communion which conjures a powerful interspecies becoming.

This alliance was marked by questions of breeding and gender. Both rider and horse needed to be of the best upbringing and “breed.” The status of the horse reflected the status of its rider and vice versa. Horse and man could both only actualize that which was presupposed by their natural dispositions. A Thoroughbred could never articulate its fullest potential when handled by a human with lesser virtue or intelligence, and even the finest gentleman would not have been able to achieve a superior performance over an inferior, cold-blooded horse.²⁷ Landry stresses, however, that the superiority of one breed over another is a form of fabulation, an “aristocratic mystery making” and that in the case of horse breeds, “geographical cline becomes enabled as a breed apart” (ibid.: 78). Further, the notion that warm-blooded equines are superior to their cold-blooded counterparts has been a widely held belief in Western horse breeding culture since the eighteenth century (ibid.:79). There is no inherent breed superiority, but superiority must be constantly performed by selecting the “best” suited breeds for the specific purposes that they are by “nature” most qualified to execute. This selection practice can be said about horse gender as well. Lynda Birke and Keri Brandt emphasize that mares are still facing prejudice when it comes to questions about horse performance and are often regarded as

²⁶ Horses, too, were segregated in classes, separating common working horses from much more valuable thoroughbreds. However, a highborn horse could lose value over time, for example by displaying bad temperament or aging. While working horses often elicited sympathy from bourgeois and Christian animal activists, they also could display “scars [they had] gained in service to wealthier masters” (Miele 2009: 134).

²⁷ Cold-blooded horses are working breeds used for farming, hauling, and drafting.

“fickle and unpredictable,” less reliable than stallions and geldings (Birke & Brandt 2009: 193). Accordingly, mares are very unlikely to be considered when it comes to higher-level equestrianism.

Returning again to the performance of militaristic masculinity: a happy performative can only be staged when the gender and breed of a horse mirrors that of its rider.²⁸ The performance of an ideal-I is contingent on an animal mirror of the self.²⁹ Only then the idealized I can be produced. This comprehension reaches further back in history and is not specific to modernity. Crane argues that it was of “symbolic importance of mounting a knight on an uncastrated male horse. European chivalric training turned the aggressive tendencies of a stallion (and young man) into an advantage” (2011: 75). Further, the posture so idealized by Xenophon, was modeled upon the courting gestures of stallions (Landry 2008: 28).

While the prejudgment in regards of gender in Western horsemanship stretches back into antiquity, the discourse around breeding with the emergence of purebreds is situated in modernity. Kari Weil, focusing on French human-horse culture in the 19th century, argues that the discourses around race and breed are strongly connected to each other. Studbooks, breeding registries that trace the genealogy of pedigree purebreds considered to be suitable to reproduce, were used to verify that the superiority of one race over another exists and that it was important for a healthy nation to control and enhance the purity of its bloodline.³⁰ “The otherwise

²⁸ J. L. Austin distinguishes between constative and performative utterances. A constative utterance reports something, while a performative does something. Performatives can't be true or false, but only happy or unhappy. A performative is often highly ritualized. In order to be happy, certain conventions must be respected. E.g. a wedding officiated by a marriage officiant is legally binding while a wedding officiated by a person without official legitimation to officiate a wedding is not. For Austin, the former would constitute a happy performative while the latter amounts to an unhappy performative (Austin: 1962).

²⁹ Here, I take inspiration from Jacques Lacan's *Mirror Stage* which denotes a crucial phase in the individual's subject formation (Lacan 1977: 1-7).

³⁰ The incorporation of the discourse of breeding into equestrianism is accompanied by incorporation of the disciplinary regime into the biopolitical regime. In the biopolitical regime, management of the population becomes paramount. See Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978: 136-139)

imprecise, nineteenth-century definition of “race” was given “scientific” explanation in its application to the equine population. (...) From his observations of horses, the author [de Lonny] concluded that contrary to the opinion of some skeptics, races do exist” (Weil 1999: 16). The progression of orientation to the noble horse transformed in the 18th and 19th century towards the orientation to specific purebreds which is inseparable from racial, and hence racist, discourses. The superiority of one’s race became a question of heredity. Proper upbringing and education further redefine its characteristic, but by “nature” it is already superior to other lower races. And even a second-rate upbringing will not taint its purity. Hence, the bloodline of each breed must be safeguarded.

Attending to French equestrian culture, Kari Weil also observes that because horseback riding was intrinsically connected to masculinity, appearance of the female horseback rider in the 19th century, launched by the establishment of the bourgeoisie, was at first a disturbing sight (Weil 1999: 5). She was seen as a disruption to the established order of man-horse relationship. Additionally, the woman-horse relationship was often sexualized: the horse became a rival to man, as it displaced him as the source for sexual enjoyment (ibid.). Of course this intimate woman-horse relationship had to be controlled. Hence, *en amazon* describes a riding style in which the female rider sits “with their legs tightly together on one side” (ibid.: 10), making the mount and demount dependent on external, and in this case male, help, while at the same time reducing the contact, most importantly the genital contact, with the horse (ibid.). The newly appearing woman-horse relationship was not only strictly policed, but also sanctioned. Imagery of the female rider oscillated between two positions. On one hand, riding was regarded as a tool to enhance women’s virtue: her interaction with the horse reflected her higher social standing. Weil suggests that for these women "riding brought out their very ‘nature’ as women of good

breeding" (ibid.:31). On the other hand, another discourse existed simultaneously: female riders were considered to disfigure their natural feminine traits in becoming more like men or like the animal. In contrast to the first discourse, which enhanced female purity, the latter diminished it, and was seen as a breach of her social position (ibid.).

Cavalia's *Odysseo*

With these specific histories in mind which display how a horse-human entanglement has been utilized to embody superior forms of masculinity and femininity, nobility and civility, I turn to *Odysseo*. *Odysseo*, Cavalia's second production, opened in 2011 and has toured through North America ever since. Sixty-five horse performers, representing eleven different breeds, and forty-eight human performers populate the stage. According to its online press kit, *Odysseo* has been performed more than 1300 times and been seen by more than two million people.³¹ A show of superlatives: it is one of the largest touring big top shows in the world, the stage alone spanning 17,500 square feet. A huge projection wall, three times the size of an IMAX cinema screen, serves as a backdrop on which ever-changing landscapes are projected. 10,000 tons of earth and stones are transported to each set to create a hilly, natural terrain. In front of the spectator's eye what the press kit describes as a "world of dreams and fantasy" takes form and shape. This immense stage, with its projections and an idiosyncratic lighting design, conjures a sense of vastness. Cavalia's big top resembles Perkins' tent, which appears larger inside than outside.³² *Odysseo's* horse and human performers give the impression of traversing forests, sand dunes, savannas, and mountainscapes. Nearing the big finale, even a lake is created. To produce this stunning effect 40,000 gallons of water are pumped on stage each performance.

³¹ Subsequent details about the performance are taken from the *Odysseo's* press kit.

³² Perkins' tent is a magical object from the Harry Potter Series. The tent is charmed in such a way that it is a lot bigger from the inside than it seems from the outside.

Even though a stunning scenographic achievement, the way geographical projections are employed can be described as colonial. Native Studies scholar Mishuana Goeman suggests that one must address the power relations in the cultural articulation of space. It gives “authority to some grammars, while denying, erasing and overlaying others” (Goeman 2013: 236). A *settler grammar of place* assumes a space which is empty. Space is regarded to be a blank surface, which must be surveyed, controlled, exploited, and is something to earn profits from. In *Odyseo*, each geographical projection is decontextualized and devoid of any geographical and cultural specificity — besides the rider and its horse no other human and animals are seen.³³ I suggest that the projections of different landscapes function as a representation of a terra nullius, ready to be settled, inhabited, explored and transformed. However, this expression of colonial attitude is devoid of any violence, exploitation, and expropriation of other human and nonhuman beings, which usually accompanies a colonial endeavor. Still, *Odyesso* re-articulates settler colonial politics of space by upholding the fiction of an empty ground which does not belong to anyone, and therefore belongs to the first one who can make use of or prevails in claiming it. Coloniality is rendered innocent by becoming a play zone where different equestrian artistries are displayed.

In *Odyseo*, the horse becomes a crucial agent for the colonial exploit. According to its press kit, *Odyseo* strives to be an ode to the horse that “has marked human history and [human] progress more than any other animal. Horses have taken us to the ends of the earth enabling us to build bridges between cultures and to expand civilization” (press kit). Even though *Cavalia* de-centers the anthropocentric view that humans alone have historical agency, *Odyesso* re-inscribe the Western (colonial) idea of history. Indigenous studies scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts that in Western accounts of human history, historical events are presented in a

³³ The only exception being a projection which depicts Rapa Nui’s Ahu, Easter Island’s stone sculptures.

chronological and progress-driven form, starting from the less to the more developed, from the primitive, savage state of man towards the most developed, civilized human instantiation, symbolized by the white, male, heterosexual western Man.³⁴ History is presented as a universal history of all men, positioning western Man at its center. (Smith 2013: 30-31).

Cavalía's press kit employs colonial rhetoric. When *Odyseo* refers to civilization, it addresses Western culture and by this gesture universalizes it. Colonial exploits are reframed as untroubled expansion of Western cultures. *Odyseo* further suggests that only through the horse could human civilization expand, develop, and blossom. But not all human cultures and civilizations are entangled with different existing horse cultures. For *Odyseo*, civilization is marked by access to the horse. In Ahmed's words, in *Odyesso*, the horse serves as an object towards which bodies orient themselves. To be oriented towards the horse is to be oriented towards civilization, that is, towards civility, law, nobility, refinement. The horse can serve as a powerful bridge, because its access marks which cultures can be part of civilization and can be integrated neatly into a progress driven account of history.

Additionally, orientation towards the horse is an orientation outwards, one which needs to expand, to increase, to proliferate. The horse culture "spreads" to follow colonial impetus in a thrust to fill the world. What Cavalía's heroic narrative conceals, however, is that the cultural encounter between humans and horses, and horse-people (those regarded to be civilized) and not horse-people (the not (yet) civilized) has rarely been a history of harmony and amicability. In colonial contexts, those encounters have routinely been marked by violence, displacement, subordination and extermination of indigenous peoples.³⁵ Cavalía's heroic narrative also conceals

³⁴ I capitalize Man in reference to Wynter's notion of genre of Man.

³⁵ Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence W. Gross names the intergenerational trauma in indigenous communities resulting from coloniality *Postapocalyptic Stress Syndrome* (PASS). However, even though Indigenous peoples have seen the end of their worlds, what has survived is their worldviews. Gross contends that returning towards the traditional worldview can heal Indigenous nations from PASS (Gross 2014: 33-51).

that the horse-human relationship has hardly been a consistently happy coexistence. It took countless working horses to haul the material needed to build bridges as part of colonial infrastructures while warhorses were sent into battle to expand Western civilization.

In *Odysseo*, the noble horse serves as a prosthesis for the white body. The horse, like other objects with orientation towards whiteness, is “incorporated into the body, extending the motility of the body, or extending what is within reach“ (Ahmed 2006: 131). Important for Ahmed is that these objects become habitual, a kind of second skin, perceived as part of the body itself (ibid.: 132). Therefore, *Odysseo* conjures a community of centaurs. This horse-human union is not associated with Plato’s black horse. Such association would produce a community of centaurs controlled by a wild, fierce, and savage kind of animality. Instead, *Cavalia* evokes a union with Plato’s white horse. By orienting themselves towards the noble horse, humans absorb its positive traits. An aristocratic, honorable, nearly divine notion of animality permeates this horse-human communion.

The relationship between the noble horse and the rider is a harmonious relationship by nature, with an innate understanding. The opening act of *Odysseo* is illuminating. The full grandeur of the stage is not yet revealed. Here, the audience experiences the first encounter between human and horse. A birthing scene of *Odysseo*’s horse people community is staged. To sounds of soft guitar chords, the darkness gives way to a clearance in a forest submerged in green-blue light. Mystique is enhanced through an immense see-through curtain that separates the audience from the horse performers on stage. While some audience members still search for their seats, one horse after another appears on stage, casually, as if the horses roam and graze on the stage, and this scene did not require any training or command to the horses from their handlers. Horses group with each other, only to break away shortly after and further explore the

clearing. Some horses, seemingly unaware of nearly two thousand pairs of eyes watching them, display their “natural” behaviors, which in *Odysseo*’s terms, means they wallow around on the stage sand and slowly trot. Soon the stage curtain is lifted, and human performers enter the stage clearing. Curiously, rather than appearing disturbed by human presence, *Odysseo*’s horses actively seek human companionship. Caresses, sweet words, and neighs are exchanged between horses and humans. At once, human and horse begin to gallop and run together in what is staged as a mutually joyful experience. Both charge, side by side, one following the other. The audience witnesses the first instantiation of a community of two species, partners it seems, on equal footing, destined to be together, bound by a mutual affection. One might even say love.

Thus, what is most important for the show in order to articulate a story of intimately intertwined community, is to avoid, as much as possible, any allusions of coercion, any techniques or instruments that gesture toward human domination over the horse.³⁶ This is a difficult task because bridles, saddles, and whips are inherent props in the equestrian disciplines *Odysseo* is eager to display. To counter these negative associations, Cavalia does the following: first, whenever it is possible, props of domination and discipline are concealed; second, the horse appears on stage, whenever possible unriden and untacked; third, the gigantic stage dimensions in conjunction with projections of ever-changing landscapes conjure a state of unbound nature even while situated in the confined space of *Odysseo*’s big top. Horses appear to roam freely, nearly as free as in their natural habitats. Being able to move free, they also freely move towards humans which they encounter and accept as being part of their herd. (The horses in *Odysseo* are all purebreds - a fact which Cavalia is very proud to point out. *Odysseo* repeats the discourse of

³⁶ Kim Batson, focusing on Cavalia’s first production, observes, in particular, the production of a kind of “naturalness” of the horse which is contrasted to equestrian performances in the hippodramas of the nineteenth century and traditional circuses. Cavalia’s horse performers are devoid of any decorations, embellishments, and accessories. The horses’ manes aren’t braided. Neither do horses wear feather adornments which have been a standard costume for equine performers in traditional circuses (Batson: 2016: 30-31).

good breeding). Roaming and moving freely, and hence the urge to expand, conveys a natural drive of the horse-human community. Motility is a key marker of the horse people. And motility is precisely what the horse provides. Hence, to turn towards the horse, is also to move towards motility³⁷

Ahmed suggests white bodies are shaped by motility, and they may even take shape of that motility (Ahmed 2006: 136). *Odysseo*'s horse-human dyad is the embodiment of a fantastic, persuasive motility. However, it is critical to note that not everybody in *Odysseo*'s community has equal access to the horse, because admission to the human-horse herd is segregated by the color line. *Odysseo*'s centaur-like apparition embodies a colonial attitude and the privilege of whiteness by displaying a fantasy of motility through traversing, conquering, and settling into a terra nullius. This depiction stands in stark contrast to how the black body is represented in the show. *Odysseo* employs eight acrobats from Guinea. These acrobats, even though they appear in some scenes alongside the horse-human union, are never seen to engage in an intimate relationship with the horse: they don't caress them, they don't run with them, they don't ride them. For them, the horse stays out of reach. The black body can't orient itself towards the horse. This aspect is important to reckon with. By coupling civilization with the horse, civilization is just in reach through the horse. In *Odysseo*, the black body is not hailed by the horse and hence into the horse-human community. Neither is the horse hailed by the black body. It is structured outside of an intimate horse entanglement, and hence also outside of civility. By implication then, black people are beyond civility, and therefore civilization.

³⁷ In that sense, the horse-human dyad can be understood as the embodiment that dance studies scholar André Lepecki following Peter Solterdijk calls "political ontology of modernity" (Lepecki 2006: 12). For Solterdijk "ontologically, modernity is a pure being-toward movement" (Solterdijk quoted in *ibid.*). In order to grapple with modernity one has to analyze and critique the fantasy that "the spectacle of modernity as movement happens in innocence" (*ibid.*: 14).

In regards to the colonial attitude that *Odysseo* displays, it comes as little surprise that the Guinean Acrobats performing in the show are very much staged in the tradition of the people shows of the nineteenth century in which selected groups of colonized peoples were “contractually obligated to present their dances, crafts song, and the like” (Rothfels 2002: 127) for a curious Western audience. Like the people shows, the performance of the Guinean acrobats reveals little about themselves but more about expectations and prejudices of their Western onlookers and therefore continues to fortify well-known stereotypes. In *Odysseo*'s case, the audience encounters Africans as being body painted, half-naked, barefoot, always cheerful, hyper-agile, and ready to swing their hips and jump and tumble as soon as the djembe drums are played. The African body is presented in its state of nature, in its essence, transported directly from an African village to the big top. The reinforcement of stereotypes is also directed towards the white body. However, its essence is performed differently. First, as already discussed, the horse in *Odysseo* is the animal-I of the rider. Both are noble in essence, and confirm each other in their nobility. Further, while the African's soundtrack is shaped by the rhythm of the djembe drums, the horse-human dyad is accompanied by string instruments and an opera voice in the quiet moments and by modern pop rock tunes in the more energetic instants. The riders always appear in full garment, which resembles a melange of attires taken from antiquity and medieval times. By evoking a knightly past, *Odysseo* simultaneously conjures a chivalrous, noble essence of their white riders juxtaposed to the “nature” of black bodies. *Odysseo* presents a modern day peoples show by displaying the inherent nobleness of white people.

Returning to the question of movement and how movement is racialized by the difference of the movement qualities carried out by horse-rider dyad and the black performers. On one hand the horse riders display an urge to motility. But this display happens in the form of extremely

choreographed and aestheticized ways. Every new landscape becomes a backdrop to perform classical equestrian disciplines such as dressage, haute école, liberty, Cossack and Roman riding. The motility of whiteness is one of control, a strict economy of movement. In contrast, blackness is characterized by excess movement, which appears uncoordinated, uncontrolled and random. In their tumbling feats, presenting a continuous chain of front and back flips, hands become feet and feet become hands, conjuring an apparition of some kind of four-leggedness, which outmatches even the agility of the horse performers in the show. For example, in one of the scenes, both horses and black acrobats jump over bars. However, it is the black performers who are able to integrate a somersault in their jump over obstacles. Paradoxically, their movements are both excessive and contained. In contrast to the choreographed horseman performances, it seems that the wildness of the black body can't be tamed. And their wildness is contained insofar as the black performers do not move beyond their natural habitat— the African savannah. It appears that only “there” a certain excess of movement is tolerated. Or put slightly differently; precisely because their movements are uncoordinated (hands and feet are confused about their real functions) black bodies are destined to stay put. What makes the white body move through space is not only access to the horse but being in synchrony with it, the ways how horse and human engage with each other. Movements are efficient, precise, and economized. If we see the horse-human body as belonging together in a centaur like apparition, then its parts know what their exact places are and what role they have to fulfill. Civilization is achieved when the body politic is in order, when the different elements move harmonious with each other.

The notion that the black body, while entertaining to look at, is inferior to the white body is further underscored by *Odyseo's* Appel d'Afrique, a scene where the Guinean acrobats perform high-level floor and partner acrobatics. The French verb appeler can be understood in

two ways. First, more positively, is as a call from Africa to be engaged in the performance itself. The Guinean acrobats invite the audience to join in the act by clapping to the rhythm of the music and singing along. In the context of the whole show, it is the only act in which the audience is invited to “party” with the performers. Each single acrobatic feat is enthusiastically celebrated. Here, a different mode of audience affirmation is permissible. During the horse-human feats and aerial acrobatics the audience contemplates the fine horse-human and aerial ballet. Clapping during those acts would be considered disturbing and regarded as rude. Hence, the audience answers Africa’s call by doing what is associated with Africa. They get loose, and dance—even if only in their seats, and chant along. Second, *appel* can be also understood as an appeal, or an urgent request, a *cri de coeur* addressed to the audience, and in extension to the Western, civilized world.

In both ways, Africa is evoked as an origin for the carnal, the visceral. It is on one hand a place of joy, but at the same time a place of aggressiveness, wretchedness, and bloodshed. These negative associations are indirectly and subtly expressed. During the end of the tumbling act, the audience members are encouraged to sing along with the refrain of the song “O Walu Guere Mufan” — which translates to “no more war on earth.”³⁸ Why is the association with war evoked in *Odyseeo*’s only act where solely black bodies display their feats? This contextual choice in the structure of *Odyseeo* suggests that war still rules in Africa, a continent which appears to be caught in a state of permanent warfare, because nobody has learned the subtle art of governance, which as I state above is in the Western context intrinsically connected to horsemanship.

But how can one learn governance if access to the horse is foreclosed? Is the song, then, somehow a call for no more war also a call for (the return of) Western rulership? Further, the

³⁸ During *Appel d’Afrique*, the Guinean *O Walu Guere Mufan* and the English translation of these words are projected on *Odyseeo*’s screen.

noble horse is a positive object, which orients the body towards whiteness. Can we say that Africa serves here also as an object, which orients the white body away by marking an outside? While the “here” is delineated by civility, refinement, and governance, the “there” is the *other*: primitive, forceful, and agile, but unrefined and uncivilized. The “here” is not marked by a specific geographical location, but rather by the omnipresence of the human-horse people in a geographical context. “There” is where civilization has not expanded yet.

Strikingly, the group of Guinean acrobats performing in the show is exclusively male. With their acrobatic feats they conjure a different form of masculinity than that of the male horse riders: a raw, even untamed excess of prowess, agility, flexibility, and sturdiness is performed. But this excess never seems to match the nobility of the riders, which is presented in controlled and aestheticized movements in conjunction with the horse. The black performers’ masculinity is paradoxically presented at a higher intensity but at the same time inferior to their white male counterparts. They cannot control their overabundance; they cannot master their drives. The horse serves as a transitional object, which makes it possible for the white riders to display a masculinity of a different, but refined, and higher degree.³⁹ Whiteness has overcome its animality through the engagement and control of the horse, which, it can be argued, is the animal within man. Bringing Plato’s Chariot allegory back into discussion, animality is not necessarily negative per se. Animality exists in two kinds: good expression, and bad. In *Odyseeo*, the riders have successfully tamed the negative components of animality, those which are controlled by instinctual impulses deemed inferior. At the same time the riders are in harmony and led by their noble and virtuous impulses. In *Odyesso* the nobility of the horse overshadows the other version. What is highlighted is the horse as a figure that stands in for a superior kind of animality, the ideal-I in horse form.

³⁹ All of the sixty-five horses employed in *Odyseeo* are male — stallions or geldings.

The subject of taming raises again the question of mastery and movement. In *Odysseo* only the horses and the black acrobats are constantly moving, whereas the white equestrians are distinguished by moving as little as possible. The rider lets the horse move. The master's task is to initiate, to control, and to surveil movement. Not moving, or moving sparingly, is the privilege of the white body in *Odysseo*. But not moving is also the privilege of a predominately white audience who comes to see the show, and who can afford to pay between fifty and two hundred forty US Dollars — before taxes – for a seat. This occurrence contrasts strongly with the local labor force (ushers, popcorn, and beverage vendors) who, in my observation, were mostly black. It is quite unsettling to realize how the hierarchical and racial difference on stage mirrors the economic difference in the tent. The website indeed.com, where employees can share their experience with their employer, Cavalia receives good reviews overall. Interestingly enough though, what is complained about most is that employees have to stand for long periods of time while working. The seated position is a position of privilege.

Additionally, the seated position is coupled with a distance to the ground. The white riders and the white acrobats are distanced from the stage floor. They tower from above, be it from the horse or from different circus apparatuses such as stilts, aerial hoops or silks. It is the black performer who is arrested to the ground. Ahmed suggests that whiteness is also about the incorporation of a vertical mobility that stretches upward. “It is no accident that discourses of social gain are always imagined in terms of ‘going up’ while social loss is imagined as a ‘downward turn’” (Ahmed 2006: 137). The division between upwards and downwards is re-inscribed in social movements. Some bodies can more easily access and navigate the vertical line of social success while other bodies remain low and move horizontally. In racial and

economic terms, white bodies are overrepresented in the vertical realm, while black bodies stay low, and move horizontally, from one precarious, underpaid job to the other.

The question of verticality and horizontality is also pervaded with the discourse on animality in the context of Judeochristianity as Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg demonstrates in her analysis on the Book of Genesis. Man is equipped with a power which is godlike. He is chosen to dominate and to rule the creatures of the world. “Man is conceived of as towering physically over all animal life” (1995: 8). Interestingly, all animal life is described as being close to the ground, to the earth, as crawling. The term for creaturely low life is *remess* (ibid.). Further, their quality of movement is unindividuated: they move in crowds and are irrational, “driven by instincts” (ibid.:8). Man, in order to obey God’s command to be fertile and increase, must do so by adhering to a horizontal pull and must “transform himself into a creature preoccupied with swarming, proliferation, incorporating the strength of the animal world” (ibid.: 10). At the same time Man must also display god-like features, which made him the ruler of all creaturely life; that is, Man must abide to a vertical pull. Similar to Plato’s charioteer, what is then important for Man is to dominate those forces which threatened to pull him down to the earth, but which are also part of him. If Man does not achieve this task, it won’t be him who dominates the animal world, but the animal world him (ibid.).

It seems that *Odysseo*’s horse people have found a solution to this conundrum of moving verticality while spreading horizontally. They adhere to the vertical pull, master their animality, and thrive upwards. They tower above and control their animality. At the same time they adhere to a horizontal pull, a pull, which is usually associated with animal-like qualities of the *remess*. But what makes them expand horizontally is not a lower form of animality (in *Odysseo* represented by blackness), but rather a superior kind of animality, which is refined and noble and

which expands its upward pull. *Odysseo* displays these different lines of motility without putting them in opposition to each other.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the noble horse can be utilized as such a powerful object and embodiment of those lines of motility. It facilitates reckoning with animality in affirmative ways by hierarchizing the strata of the *remess*. Not all creaturely life, human or nonhuman, are equal. Simultaneously, the black body is relegated to the *remess*. He always stays close to the ground, moves literally in the dirt and feces (where the stage is also scattered with horse feces). Movement qualities of black bodies are unindividuated. They move more swarm-like. Assembling and reassembling, in their acrobatic feats they come together to form an acrobatic partner figure only to break up immediately after. Being associated with the *remess* they are also animalized. Being animalized they must be controlled, dominated and ruled by western Man.

CODA

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that myth is a self-foundational enterprise. Community relates back to a mythic foundation, and through a mythic origin, it finds itself (Nancy 1991: 45). Differently put, Nancy seems to suggest that the main function of myth is to produce a communal origin, an essence, a structure of identification (ibid.). Nancy's term mythation might be understood as staging or maybe even as dramatic actualization of the myth for the members of the community. *Odysseo* does exactly that: It offers a staging of the myth of a specific vision of humanity, in which the white, male, heteronormative subject holds the reins in his hand.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Michael Lundblad distinguishes between white animality and black savagery. Savagery is a sort of perverse excess of animality. While animals kill to survive, out of a need, they don't take any pleasure doing it. Killing in the animal world is executed in a business-like fashion. Savagery on the other hand is a perversion of the innate instincts. Savages kill out of joy, take pleasure from the act of killing, by torturing and feasting on the victims. White animality adheres to the law of animality where everything is done out of necessity for one's own survival, but does not breach the line to savagery (Lundblad 2013: 145). While appreciative of Lundblad's scholarship, it was difficult to engage with his concepts directly in my scholarship because savagery stays somehow outside of animality; animality and savagery stay in stark opposition to each other. For me, the idea of good and bad animality allows me to think about both terms together, complicating the notion of animality further.

⁴¹The show displays numerous acts of heteronormative courting behavior between their male and female performers in kitschy and cheesy ways. In the chapter "Carousel," for example, a real sized horse carousel drops from the stage

Further, through the process of mythation, the community becomes one with the founding story of the communal myth. It becomes a communion. *Odysseo* is a staging of a myth that produces affective states that help the members of the community, and in proxy the predominately white middle-class audience that comes to see the show, to identify with their fictional origins. It is this affective labor which *Odysseo* masters perfectly, and which, I believe, explains its commercial success.⁴²

Further, for Nancy, myth and its actualization belong to the realm of *oeuvre*, which translates as work. Work here seems to be associated with the stratification of bodies, positions, and assignments. The French term *mise en oeuvre* (setting to work) correlates here with *mise en scène* (setting on stage). A myth set to work is the successful rendering of a certain discourse, a logos, into a community and by doing so founds its community. Importantly for Nancy, community that is produced through a myth set to work is a community as a work. He states: “Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects)” (ibid.: 31).

I suggest that *Odysseo* stages two things parallel: on one hand, it creates a communion which works by staging a harmonious union of human and horse, which carries a noble, chivalrous essence, an essence which all the members of the community, and by proxy its audience, share with each other. This community is propelled to urge towards ever new horizons

and four couples display their agility and dexterity. In this scene, *Odysseo* shifts suddenly to the present, communicated through the mechanical apparatus and through the casual, modern-day clothes of the performers. Unsurprisingly, gender roles uphold to norms: while men show off with their physical fitness, by flexing their muscles and by presenting different planks on the poles, women display their flexibility, which means, in this case, to do numerous versions of the same split.

⁴² It is obvious that Cavalia took inspiration for their show from Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey*, which describes the adventure of Odysseus on his way back to his homeland, Ithaca, which he longs for. In correspondence with *Odyssey*, *Odysseo* stages for its audience a symbolic, and at the same time nostalgic, homecoming. However, rather than centering on a single individual, *Odysseo* focuses on the homecoming of a whole community.

and executes a never-ending task in full-filling God's command to "be fertile and increase, fill the earth, master it and rule" (Genesis quoted in Zornberg 1995: 8). On the other hand, it also stages a space of otherness, which even though filled with an excess of movement, is stagnant, backward-oriented, and uncoordinated. Hence, it is an articulation of an inferior, less civilized community. The two contrasting instantiations are segregated by the color line.

Further, an intimate horse-human collaboration is employed to create a highly racialized community on stage. The horse-human assemblage in *Odysseo* takes part in what Weheliye terms "racialized assemblages" in which the liberal humanist figure of Man is taken as master-subject and in which the *Homo sapiens* species is hierarchically ordered in humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans (Weheliye 2014: 8). Curiously though, in *Odysseo*, the division between different categories of the human does not strictly follow the categorization of human, not-yet-human, nonhuman. Rather, the human here, the white, liberal, heteronormative subject, is established through the incorporation of the nonhuman other, that is the horse. The black body is animalized and regarded as a lesser form of the human ideal. But because in *Odysseo* whiteness is oriented around the horse as a point zero, two things happen simultaneously. First, the white body can control his instincts and drives and is master of his desires as much as his masters the horse. Second, because the noble horse is already a superior being too, the animal mirror image of Man, an incorporation of a noble animality reaffirms and intensifies white superiority. The black body, the not-quite-human, is trapped in limbo between the human and the nonhuman, because he can't turn towards the very nonhuman, which would make him fully human.

Chapter 2

Derrida, Limitrophy, Circus

Derrida's Condemnation

“The animal looks at us and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here,” writes Derrida in his last essay “The Animal Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (Derrida 2008: 29). Building from Emmanuel Levinas’s I-thou equation, Derrida rethinks a face-to-face encounter with his cat, which prompts a meditation on the anthropological difference, allowing him to question the self-given right of humans to subjugate animals on the basis of their relation to the logos. Contemplating violence and cruelty towards animals, Derrida conjures the specter of the circus as the emblematic site for human domination over the animal. In the circus, he asserts, the animal trainer dominates to the sounds of cracking whips and piercing shouts over his fellow animals. The handler has “his sad subjects, bent low, domesticated, broken in, trained, docile, disciplined and tamed” (ibid.: 39). Derrida can only imagine the circus as a place of animal misery, distress, and anguish. Indeed, his judgments about human-animal relationships echo today’s widespread disdain for animal acts in circuses, which have led to their decline in the Western circus world. Such disdain has ushered in an animal-free, new circus. Today, the only humane circus seems to be a human-only circus. This move to a human dominated circus as “more humane” is both ironic, and regressive because it undermines what may have been the most radical aspect of the circus, its ability to encounter the animal other on a face-to-face basis.

Derrida’s essay is both complex and suggestive, making it difficult to summarize it in its entirety. I would, however, like to highlight an important aspect of the text, namely Derrida's insistence that the cat he refers to is a, or his, real cat (ibid.: 9). The cat should not simply be comprehended as metaphor, a symbol, or a name. To the contrary, the cat exists in its realness; it

is an “unsubstitutable singularity.” (ibid.). Hence, Derrida’s cat is an “irreplaceable living being” and “refuses to be conceptualized” (ibid.). This is an important acknowledgement on Derrida’s part, and it underscores one of his main points of criticism. For him, the Western philosophical canon has reduced a “heterogeneous multiplicity of the living” (ibid.: 31) into a single, all-encompassing concept, that of *the Animal*. Indeed, the desire to produce a “unilinear and indivisible line having two edges, Man and the Animal in general” (ibid.) is a reflection of human hubris. . The clear delineation between animal and human is a “wrong [that] was committed long ago” (32). It has allowed us humans to cast the animal as inferior and ourselves as superior beings. This separation has led to the unquestioned domination of the human over the animal (16). Furthermore, the self-given right to subject the so-called animal to human demands has led to the “industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence” which has culminated in mass extinction (26).⁴³

The unquestioned superiority of the human animal is constituted through the interrelation between speech and response. Because nonhuman animals can’t speak (in representational language defined by humans), it is assumed they can’t communicate and can’t respond (ibid.: 31). It is without logos and therefore without discourse (ibid.: 27). Hence, the human, speaking to *itself*, separates itself from other animals as the rational, political, and speaking animal, as the *zōon logon echon* (ibid.). It is through the process of naming that the human asserts himself as God’s earthly proxy (16-17).⁴⁴ Naming, for Derrida, is a form of subjection. It denotes the first step in a long, never-ending assertion of authority over animals that includes practices associated with domestication, taming, and training (ibid.). Here, naming is not so much linked to the

⁴³ Derrida compares the industrial killing of animals in the food industry with genocide (Derrida 2008: 26).

⁴⁴ I am using the male pronoun to account for Derrida’s instance that the hierarchical division is also a gendered one (ibid: 16-17).

personalization of the animal that emphasizes its uniqueness or singularity. Instead, naming is an instrument to produce taxonomic divisions and hierarchies.

How, then, might it be possible to interrupt this vicious cycle generated by anthropocentrism? For Derrida, it is not enough to center on the human-animal continuum by focusing on traits that both humans and nonhuman animals share.⁴⁵ While it is important to expose our shared vulnerabilities, for example by acknowledging the capacity to suffer, Derrida remains suspicious towards a “biologicistic continuism” (ibid.:30). For Derrida, the solution to the animal question lies not in the simplistic dissolution of the limit between human and animal other, or at least not only. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of the limit, and requests putting our collective attention to “the edges of a limit that grows and multiplies” (ibid.: 31). Derrida, thereby, emphasizes the heterogeneity and difference over homogeneity and sameness.

Derrida is interested in border-crossings, in the spaces between what is widely understood as human and as animal. The notion of “limitrophy” describes the transgression of (conceptual) limits, thereby displaying the porosity, permeability, and arbitrariness of imposed borders and boundaries (ibid.: 29). Limitrophy can be understood as critical practice, a way to destabilize what has been taken for granted, e.g., the separation between the (superior) human and the (inferior) animal. The practice of limitrophy is kaleidoscopic. It is not about “effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply” (ibid.: 29). The notion of limitrophy produces an ontological crisis by pointing out that the self-definition of the human as superior rests on ambiguous, polysemic, diversified understandings that blur the human with the animal.

⁴⁵ Emphasizing the continuum between humans and animals is a major strategy of animal rights activists and scholars. This approach highlights that capabilities that are considered to be human are shared with other animals as well, e.g. the use of tools, self-recognition, and language.

Derrida's encounter with his cat offered an experience around this "abyssal limit, these edges, this plural, and repeatedly folded frontier" (30). Derrida's cat can't simply be reduced to a (domesticated) animal, a particular species, or breed. Derrida acknowledges an alterity that defies any simplistic, preconceived categories. The encounter arrests Derrida and he follows an invitation proposed by a singular being. Instead of continuing his morning routine, he stops in his tracks and answers the gaze of his feline companion. By so doing, he acknowledges that the cat has also a point of view towards him (ibid.: 10). This being is not reducible to an automata, a machine in flesh and bones. To the contrary, by having a point of view it (his cat) affirms a sense of agency. And as a singularity with its own desires and demands, his cat is not reducible to a *felis silvestris catus* (nor to a property in Derrida's possession). The encounter with this singular being creates its own singular event which makes the edges of the limit (between human and animal) grow and multiply.

Maybe, the bathroom's privacy is needed to spark such multilayered contemplation on the difference and alterity. The circus spectacle, vulgar and flamboyant, loud and brassy, appears to be unsuitable for deeper thoughts and reflections. What's more, for Derrida, the circus is a site of human domination, and therefore, denotes the enemy. Circus refuses limitrophy. It establishes a clear limit, by violently putting every animal and human performer into a particular symbolic place, leaving little to no room for agency, ambiguity, and deviancy. In the circus the human, the political animal, has established a tyranny against his fellow animal in a brutal sovereign regime which is filled with the noise of constant shouts, blows, and strikes. In this line of thought, the circus does not allow humans to let themselves be arrested by the encounter with the other, nor does it acknowledge a being-with with the animal. On the contrary, by insisting on a "single indivisible line" (31) between the sovereign power of the human and the "killable" existence of

the animal, the circus, according to Derrida's opinion, forsakes any potential of interspecies encounter.⁴⁶

Derrida's sentiment that the circus is a place of violence and exploitation reverberates with the historical scholarship on circus of the 19th and 20th century. The menageries and circuses of the 19th century were replete with animals from colonized regions. Animals like lions, tigers, and elephants were also victims of colonial violence, extracted from their natural habitats and put on display in zoos or forced to perform in circus. They "were caught up in an all pervasive conflict that underpinned land acquisition and cultural dominance and the enforcement of colonial rule" (Tait 2016: xx). These animal acts performed in the largely popular menageries and circuses staged violence, and they clearly "reinforced state authority" (ibid.: xvii). In the 20th century, animal trainers continued to stand in for the colonizer, often dressed in British Khaki drill uniforms, while the wild animals, trained to perform aggressive behavior on cue, metaphorically represented the colonized people, thus reaffirming hierarchical relations among humans, between civilized masters, and uncivilized subjects (Arrighi 2008: 613). While it employs animals, circus is an anthropocentric performance genre in essence, interested in promoting the Great Wall of human exceptionalism (Chaudhuri 2014: 2).

Such scholarship takes inspiration from the scholarly work done on freak shows (Thomson 1996 & 1997, Adams 2001). Like animal acts, freak shows were an intrinsic part of the circus experience during its golden era from 1870-1920. While animal acts belong to the main attractions performed under the big top, freak shows were staged in adjacent, but strict separate sites. Presented as the "missing link" between the human and the animal, the freak had a

⁴⁶ Here, I am following Foucault's understanding of the sovereign regime, in which the sovereign constitutes law. A criminal act is seen as a direct attack on the sovereign. The sovereign has the right "to take life or let live" (Foucault 1990: 138). The spectacle of elephant execution during the circus' golden age is an expression of such sovereign power.

double function, performing both as a taxonomic boundary object and as “evidence” of social Darwinist racism. The bodily differences of performers, who often originated from colonies, were used to differentiate Westerners from the rest of the world; but more importantly, the discourse of the freak was employed to stabilize the cultural and racial superiority of Europeans and their descendants. Circus studies scholars, like their predecessors in disability studies, have scrutinized how human/animal relations reinforced anthropological differences by simultaneously establishing the coupling of European superiority with human exceptionalism (Stoddart 2000: 5).

The question remains: is circus anti-limitrophical by essence, or are there aspects in the interspecies relationship which exceeds the enforced limit between human and animal? This question is not designed to neglect or deny the mistreatment of humans and animals that takes place in the servitude of an ideology, one that has divided the world into the category of bios and zoe. Such divisions continuously reproduce the image and operational definition of “man through the opposition of man/animal; human/inhuman” (Agamben 2004: 37). Rather, this question is counterintuitive, guided by Derrida’s impetus to follow the animal, not only in order to hunt it down or to subjugate it, but to address the possibility of a circopolis that attends to the possibilities of being-with the animal.

Training and Interspecies Relationality

Circus studies pioneer Paul Bouissac offers us a slightly different understanding of animal acts when he compares circus with the zoo. He argues that the zoo establishes a strict taxonomy while the circus creates taxonomic confusion (Bouissac 1976: 115).⁴⁷ The circus, therefore, produces a zone of bafflement and uncertainty. The animals are humanized, not only by being dressed

⁴⁷ Zoos, too, can become a site of taxonomic confusions. Smoking chimpanzees are examples of such boundary violations that might occur in zoos. Yet, performances that complicate species boundaries are exceptions.

up/disguised as humans, but rather by displaying “humanlike motivation, emotions, and reasoning” (ibid.: 118). While the zoo's “most basic feature is a strict separation between a privileged species (*homo sapiens*) and all others,” (ibid.) the circus provides a place where the clear distinction between the human and the animal is suspended. With this understanding, the animal is not simply reduced to its species-being (in the Marxist sense), it expresses elements that exceed it. The animal, therefore, scratches and chews on a presupposed indivisible line, thereby announcing its singularity and irreducibility.

Written in the 1970's, Bouissac's text falls short in its address of circus' problematic relation to dominant hegemonic beliefs and the existence of animal abuse and exploitations under the big top. In Bouissac's account the ontological confusion is one-sided. While circus animals can exceed their species-being by reproducing behaviors attributed to humans or other animals, Bouissac is careful to safeguard the human from this cross-species transformation.⁴⁸ The human thus never exceeds its species-being, instead it serves as a sort of aspirational entity. Despite the fact that Bouissac is rigidly anthropocentric, his account opens a critical space that allows us to understand interspecies performances in circus as a way to unsettle anthropological differences. The fact that the animal can defy the imposed line that differentiates between human and animal, culture and nature, marks a radical difference in how we understand the animal's relation to the human.

Highly critical of animal acts, Tait observes that “trainers recognised the individuality and subjectivity of wild animals well before such ideas were accepted” (2011: 3). Building from Bouissac, Tait indicates that circus trainers refer to each animal as an individual, acknowledging their different character-traits, distinguishing their different moods and dispositions (ibid.: 105).

⁴⁸ Examples include but are limited to bears riding motorized scooters, dogs pushing smaller animals in baby strollers, horses counting, dogs dressing up as lions.

It is precisely this intimate apprehension of the animal, the knowledge about its likings and leanings, that help to create an animal act. One might consider that the reverse is true as well: the animal might pick up emotional cues provided by its human counterpart. Returning to Derrida, it is possible to imagine that trainers recognize in the animal an unsubstitutable singularity. This is not to say that the relationship is non-hierarchical, or that asymmetrical forces are not at play. Rather, I would like to extend the same courtesy towards the circus that Derrida grants himself. That is to invite the possibility that circus animal trainers address the animals as irreplaceable living beings, and not only as generic objects whose behavior they learned to control.

Interspecies relationality has become a major concern in the interdisciplinary field of animal studies. Donna Haraway, for example, insists that the opposition of nature and culture is an anthropocentric phantasy. Instead, she provides us with the notion of “naturecultures,” a term which attends to the messiness of interspecies co-evolution (2003:12). Haraway’s approach is situated in many shared human-animal experiences such as pigeon keeping, dog training, and horse riding. In her work, she emphasizes companion species relationality as a prime method to think through the notion of naturecultures. Following Haraway’s demand to stay specific and address the situatedness of interspecies relationality, Despret cautions us about the idea that scientific discourse is all-knowing when it comes to animals. Scientists often discredit “knowledge of their rivals in matters of animal expertise, namely, those of amateurs, breeders, and trainers” as non-scientific and therefore unworthy of scrutiny (Despret 2012: 34). Yet, it is precisely these people who are attuned to the animal with whom they have an intimate relationship. And this attunement is reciprocal, “animals and people have succeeded in becoming attuned to what matters to the other, to act so that what matters to the other also matters to oneself” (ibid). Despret, therefore, proposes that we consider the possibility that “an animal takes

interest in what has been asked of it” (ibid.: 34). This understanding of interspecies relationships accounts for the fact that some animals take pleasure in being trained or in their relationship with specific humans who are in training with them.⁴⁹

Interspecies relationality is manifested through training. Interspecies satisfaction, even happiness “comes from striving, from fulfillment of possibility” (Haraway 2003: 52). This intimate relationship between human and animal can’t be reduced to the top down model of a master-slave relationship. Instead, it attends to the specificity of each being and the situatedness of each relationship. Hence training practices address “concrete beings, not (...) categorical abstractions” (ibid.). Animal training is therefore not per se ethically questionable; it offers us examples of interspecies possibilities towards being-with. Instead of simply reiterating human domination over the fellow animal, training provides an environment where animals and humans collaborate together, even realizing a sense of shared happiness (ibid.). While interspecies relationship does not mean equality (ibid.: 41), it nurtures the limit imposed by anthropocentrism. Training practices can, therefore, unsettle human exceptionalism.

If one follows this positive understanding of training, the question regarding animal acts becomes much more complex. While on the level of symbolic representation animal acts appear to promote human exceptionalism, the concrete practices of training and caring might actually unsettle this very assumption. The demand for a human-only circus, as Kari Weil points out, implies that the human continues to endure as sole noble, moral, and ethical being and stands over all other beings (ibid.: 132). With such demands, human superiority is never questioned. Instead the limit between the human and animal, between culture and nature is only fortified. The establishment of two separate human and animal worlds would foreclose any possibility of

⁴⁹ The aspect that animals take joy in being trained is highlighted by many animal trainers working in the circus.

meaningful human-animal relationships, denouncing an understanding that sees the human not separated but always deeply entangled with the nonhuman world (ibid.: 140).

A hasty rejection of animal performers in the circus risks overlooking the “animal’s agency and social complexities as well as their desire —for connection, affection, and bonding across species, something we see and accept when it comes to dogs or horses” (Weil 2012: 138). At the same time, animals living a life in captivity for the sole purpose of human entertainment pose substantial ethical concerns by reinforcing human exceptionalism and superiority. Certain exotic and wild animals such as primates, bears, particular felines, and elephants appear to have needs that can’t be met in the travelling circus context. At the same time, interspecies relations in circus have encompassed many more species such as dogs, horses, donkeys, pigs, felines, goats, cows, camels, geese, pigeons, parrots, corvids, snakes, to name a few. Some of them are clearly domesticated (e.g. goats). Others are, to the Western eye, exotic and domesticated (e.g. llama), while some can be considered wild (corvids). This dissertation is not focused on addressing the general question as to whether or not a circus is a suitable environment for animals. Answers to such questions are not only species, but context-specific; they are situated in the particularities of each interspecies relation. Instead, I reconsider circus as a place of naturecultures. Circus is not only a place of human domination over the fellow animal, it also provides examples of interspecies cohabitation, co-operation, and collaboration. In a sense we need to practice limitrophy when it comes to our understanding of circus. We should scrutinize its complicity in the propagation of human exceptionalism, while acknowledging the tendencies that subvert what it has propagated.

Bestias

With these considerations, I now turn to a Cie Baro d'Evel piece, *Bestias* (2015). Baro D'Evel, a French-Catalan circus, was founded by Camille Decourtye and Blai Matteu Trias. It belongs to the growing number of contemporary circuses that employ animal performers in their shows, thereby problematizing the idea that contemporary circus practices are animal free.⁵⁰ Because contemporary circus practices are driven by a critical self-reflexivity about circus and its socio-cultural importance as an art genre, the return towards the animal does not express a nostalgic desire for an animal-based circus of the past. Instead, it reflects the contemporary circus' move to expand the aesthetic, artistic, and poetic possibilities of circus and its elements. Baro D'Evel revisits the human-animal relationship, a main circus element, in order to find new ways of interspecies relation and storytelling. In contrast to traditional animal acts which often leave human superiority unquestioned, Baro D'Evel explicitly investigates the presumed hierarchy between human and animal in its performances.⁵¹ It does so, not only by humanizing the animal, as is the case in traditional circus acts, but rather by complicating the understanding of the human through the encounter with the animal. Hence, the contemporary impetus of Baro D'Evel consists in proposing the possibility of a circus that was unthinkable for Derrida: a circus that fosters limitrophy.

Here I take a closer look at human and nonhuman animal relationships revealed in circus practice by examining a personal experience of Baro D'Evel's performance, *Bestias*.

The long line of people queued up to enter Baro D'Evel's big top moves slowly. Every few minutes a group of fifteen to twenty spectators is admitted. Finally, after a wait of

⁵⁰ Cie Rasposo, Cie Z-Machine, Theatre de Centaure, and Cie Zingaro are examples of circus companies that employ animal performers.

⁵¹ The production *Lá* (2018) and *Falaise* (2019) are currently touring animal-based circus performances by Baro D'Evel.

approximately twenty minutes and growing anticipation, my group is ushered into the tent by a performer. The light in the big top is dim, producing a somber and solemn atmosphere. The performer holds a lantern in her hand. The light guides us through canvas tunnels and illuminates drawings on the side of the walls. These drawings are sketched in a clear line, seemingly drawing on iconic or commonly established images of horses, humans, and birds. Some of the drawings show humans riding a horse. Then, a depiction of a bird cage appears. In whispers my fellow spectators comment on the drawings, trying to decipher their meanings and judge their aesthetic appeal. Paleolithic cave drawings, one of the first visual testimonies of human-animal encounters, come to mind.

As we are ushered along, I lose my bearings and sense of time. The images are repetitive, and I am not sure if we revisit the same drawings, or if we are still encountering new ones. The tunnel set up has its disorienting effect. Have we entered a labyrinth? It's getting increasingly claustrophobic. At once, the performer escorts us into a different room. A cylindrical canvas structure fills the space. Illuminated from within, the cylinder emits neighs and rhythmic sounds of stomping hooves. Suddenly, a strange apparition pops up. A shadow fills the canvas for a moment, then disappears. I realize that the creature inside the cylinder is circling along the inside of the canvas, while we are circulating around it; two circles at different speeds. The second time the apparition manifests I can distinguish the shadow's form, its outline. It incorporates the illustrations from the tunnel. This chimeric figure has horse legs, a human body, and a bird head. Yet, there is little time to marvel, even less to analyze. We are escorted back into the dim tunnels and its drawings.

Finally, the guide shepherds us to the center of the labyrinth, the circus pitch, where we are left to our own devices to find a seat. While we wait for other groups to arrive, I reflect on

the depictions and the chimeric shadow-play, and how it reminds me of the fact that narratives of human origin have often been told in relation to animals, be it as enemies, as competitors for food and resources, as resources itself, and/or as companions for each other. Humans and animals have coevolved and adapted to each other; they have learned from and with each other.

The presence of a horse suddenly interrupts my thoughts. The horse however, appears indifferent to the presence of human onlookers. It crosses the stage with no signs of rush, slowly strolling back into the maze. Then, a corvid flies through, following the horse's path and puzzling the audience. While the horse's presence has received some reaction from a few spectators, the corvid's flight takes the breath away. The human performers who follow next, on the other hand, generate a timid laughter. In contrast to the presence of their animal co-performers, they appear banal, even trivial. They seem lost and disoriented. First, they cross the stage one by one, then pick up the cadence. Their paths criss-cross. Some of them stop, try to communicate with each other, but to little avail. Confusion dominates the scene. The horse appears again, this time with a woman who walks alongside it. Are they companions or just random acquaintances whose paths have crossed coincidentally? Another woman enters, carrying an empty bird cage. Is she after the bird? The corvid re-enters the stage not flying, but standing on the head of a human, who pretends to be unaware of the stowaway's presence. The opening scene concludes with the horse entering the stage once more, encircled by human performers. At once, the performers halt, impersonating the horse's movements and gestures. Their bodies transform, their breath changes, they become horse-like. A herd is materializing. Yet, the transformation is only momentary, and as abruptly as they transform collectively into a different being they transform back into their former human selves — confused, lost, dazzled disoriented.

The performance spurs interpretation as it relates to the dynamics and idiosyncrasies of human and animal relationships in circus. The presence of horse and corvid attest to the ongoing interspecies co-evolution and cohabitation in naturecultures. The domestication of the horse dates back to the copper age (Forrest 2016: 17), when the horse became a beast of burden employed in the agriculture and early industrial contexts. Their power was harnessed for drafting, ploughing, milling, mining (ibid.: 174). One of the first “technologies of speed,” the horse played a major role in territorial conquests, becoming a status symbol, and therefore an important agent in fostering national identities (Raulf 2017: 9). The unified figure of the horse and rider became a symbol of power and national pride (Raber and Tucker 2005: 25). Already in the industrial age, the horse was losing its central role in the making of Western societies. Now the horse is predominantly employed for sports, leisure, and performances, but its relation to the human, a proverbial “centurion pact” (Raulf 2017: 10), continues to fascinate, attract, and captivate our imaginations, conjuring various associations of prowess, freedom, and passion.

While the companion species interactions between horse and human were shaped though close, intimate encounters, often evolving forms of taming and training, that involved “breaking” the horses’ flight instinct, the corvid rarely experienced this particular (mis)fortune. Although never domesticated, the corvid-human relationship is no less complex. A depiction of a crow-headed man on the cave walls of Lascaux, France, expresses not only an early fascination towards this animal by hunters and gatherers—perhaps a dream of flying or becoming bird-like— but also signals an understanding of cohabitation. Corvids have been associated with diverse ideas such as death, fidelity, creation, and thievery. Those associations are still deeply lodged in our cultural memories (Marzluff 2012: 198). Marzluff suggests that one reason why

corvids take such significant roles in fables and myth is due to their capacity to bond with humans. Some are even so human-curious that they knock on doors or ring bells (202).

Corvids possess uncanny abilities that violate the way we construe anthropological difference from other species. They are able to manufacture and use tools. Their social life is extremely fluid and complex; it is marked by competition and cooperation with each other. They sustain relationships over years. Not only can they build yearlong partnerships, but they maintain connections with other individuals from their flock (Marzluff 2005; 156). Yet, while corvids can form flocks, especially during winter, they are also solitary beings. Their social life is nuanced and their social systems dynamic. Furthermore, corvids are able to transfer knowledge and tradition to their peers. Due to their ability for social learning and intergenerational transfer of knowledge ornithologists argue for the existence of corvid culture (ibid: 12). Crows have co-evolved with humans. They have followed agricultural and territorial expansion, feasting on crops and fruits as well as human and horse carcasses left on the battlefields. *Bestias* reminds us that the horse and the corvid are, and historically have been, an integral part of our human culture as much as we are part of theirs. These relations are evidenced in human fables, myths, and legends throughout the world.

The drawings and the mythical shadow figure that the audience encounters before being seated, allude to these complex even messy histories among horse, corvid and human in the complex web of relationality in naturecultures. *Bestias* does not, however, mourn a supposedly lost harmony between human, corvid, and horse, nor does it suggest that the human is superior as would be the case in many traditional circus acts. Instead of delivering a definitive answer or some simple understanding of these complex interspecies relations and cohabitation, *Bestias*

conjures scenes that are associative, nonlinear, and polysemic. By doing so, it facilitates a mythopoetic thinking about the human-animal relationships.

Mythopoetic practices offer more than one meaning alone. On the contrary they fracture, complicate, and suspend “institutional and conventional truth” (Ravetto 2017:18). Mythopoetic practices therefore trouble an easy signifying chain of myth-making practices. As I elaborate in chapter one, myth-making practices, instrumental to hegemony, reinscribe dominant cultural beliefs. Mythopoetic practices, on the other hand, point us towards the existence of different political possibilities of being-with. Haraway’s notion of naturecultures and Derrida’s limitrophy can therefore be seen as a mythopoetic exercise which aims to destabilize boundaries of the already given. While *Bestias* alludes to a mythic origin of human and animal relationships, it does not deliver a founding myth from which some notion of communion is born. Indeed, if we understand the tunnel drawings as a source of beginning, it is a fraud. While chimeric figures allude to the interspecies relationality and interdependence, the drawing of a cage addresses the long history of domestication, captivity and confinement of the animal. Yet, in this case, the cage is empty, and it stays empty throughout the performance. Our first impulse might be to consider the bird as the target of such confinement, but upon some reflection we understand that the cage might have been intended for the human and/or the horse. It is up to the spectator to interpret and to reflect just who is the captive in this scenario.

Derrida addresses the issue of capture with a pun on Descartes “*Je pense donc je suis*” (I think, therefore I am) by declaring “*L’animal donc je suis*” (The animal that therefore I am/ I follow). Derrida plays with the double meaning of the French words “*je suis*”, the simple present tense of both *être* (to be) and *suivre* (to follow). The meaning of *je suis* is, therefore, contextual as it can mean both “I am” and “I follow.” For Derrida, thinking is relational and not

self-produced. The encounter with the animal other dramatizes the notion that thinking is produced by an (abyssal) event that brings the autonomous Cartesian self into crisis.

Furthermore, following the animal addresses a temporal issue as well. Animals have been there before us humans in evolutionary and biblical terms. Hence, temporally speaking, we are after the animal. Yet, for Derrida, to be after the animal also includes tracking, stalking, subjugating, domesticating, and dominating it (Derrida 2008: 9). Similarly, if the human that follows assumes authority and superiority over the animal, the animal becomes the one that follows the human in hierarchical order. By being “after” the human, a certain circularity is evoked. Naturally, Derrida concludes: “For I no longer know who therefore I am (following) or who it is I am chasing, who is following me or hunting me. Who comes before and who is after whom?” (2008:10). One might then ask: who is the one being captured, and confined?

By stressing the slippage between being and following, Derrida creates an ontological crisis in the self-understanding of the human as a superior being, endowed with the right to subjugate the other. This crisis can’t, however, be answered by Western philosophy which has expelled the animal from consideration, but through poetics alone. “For thinking concerning the animal (...) derives from poetry. (...) it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking” (ibid.: 7). A mythopoetic practice follows the animal not in order to re-establish, but to suspend, the one-way top to bottom understanding of command and control.

To follow and to be followed are central aspects of Baro D’Evel’s mythopoetic performance, *Bestias*. The performance begins with humans following the horse and the corvid on stage. The performer holding a cage in her hand alludes to the human desire to capture the fellow animals in order to dominate them. Yet, this interspecies relationship is not the only one

that we see. Humans are also near and alongside their animal co-performers, thereby alluding to different “modes of being with” (ibid.: 10). The rapid succession of switching human-animal combinations and relations on the stage produces a sense of confusion evoked by a circularity in which we can’t distinguish anymore who is following whom. *Bestias* does not aim to verify the assumed philosophical knowledge which reduces the animal to an inferior position, a lesser being. Instead, ontological uncertainties, ambiguities, and confusion are evoked through interspecies interactions.

Becoming Animal, Being Bête

Throughout *Bestias* we witness different forms of transfiguration of the human. Some of them are figural. For example, the shadowy presence of the chimeric figure that the audience had seen while entering the performance, makes its entrance once again as a response to the growing disorientation among the human performers on stage. Unable to communicate with each other though shared speech, to convey any meaning though logos, the chimera of human, horse, and corvid seem to allude to possibilities of alternative ways of communicating, ones that do not rely on discourse, but can be found in expressions that are usually disregarded as *phôné*: sounds, breath, roars, gurgles, and gestures. In addition, *Bestias* provides us with corporeal ways of transformation. These can be approached with Deleuze & Guattari's notion of *becoming-animal*, the other with the notion of *bêtise*, a particular form of stupidity that is proper to the human animal alone. *Bestias* employs becoming-animal and being bête as two main strategies to evoke ontological uncertainty.

It is in the moments where human performers assume their animality that they appear to create a sense of heteroaffection, that is “the way that the self is touched or moved by another (Weil 2012: xvii). These moments are often evoked with becoming-animal of the human.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the term becoming-animal describes the possibility to break free from the confines of the human. The human, here, is less understood in species terms, and addresses more the subjectification of the human into the subject of the (nation) state and its prescribed norms (Deleuze & Guattari 2016: 248). Becoming-animal, therefore, addresses the possibility of creating a line of flight from the dominant mode of subjectification.⁵² Becoming-animal is a motion that takes flight by building alliances with other intensities. In doing so, new heterogeneous alliances are composed. Hence, becoming-animal is an articulation of previously excluded possibilities. Becoming animal is intersubjective, and perhaps most importantly, it initiates other becomings as well. It takes place on an affective register, and therefore cannot be contained in the realm of representation, symbols, and boundaries imposed by logos (ibid.: 259).

Bestias is full of moments, where human performers evoke nonhuman corporeality. It is these animal gestures and movements that elicit “-esqueness” that speak to Deleuze & Guattari’s becoming animal. -Esqueness describes a “performative excess over generic function” (Massumi 2014: 59). The -esqueness however should not be understood in anthropocentric terms; -esqueness expresses not only the surpassing of the already expressed, but it is contagious and crosses strict species boundaries. Hence, the horse-esqueness, corvid-esqueness, and even human-esqueness of performers in *Bestias* articulate an inquiry into creative expressivity that exceeds the taken for granted understanding of the horse, corvid, and human; it’s an expression of singularity evoked through the intimacy of a specific interspecies relationship.⁵³

⁵² Deleuze and Guattari develop a terminology that emphasizes how things connect and relate to each other. They address things not as fixed entities, but as assemblages of intensities. Yet, assemblages tend to ossify. A line of flight is a path of transformation and mutation. It is a force that connects an assemblage to other assemblages triggering new variations.

⁵³ I am not suggesting that all boundaries between human, horse, and corvid are dissolved, but rather, that these boundaries are compromised. I further speculate how through intimate interspecies-encounters it is necessary to “become the other” to a certain degree to foster cross-species communication and associations.

It is through interactions between human, horse, and corvid that a particular sense of being-with emerges. This being-with allows “difference to co-occur without coalescing, enactively fuse without being confused” (ibid.: 67). Hence, *Bestias* does not promote a naive interspecies continuum, nor a clear separation between species, but instead articulates the potential at the limit between what is considered the human and the animal, by evoking interest for an interspecies being-with.

The term “interest” is also at the heart of the political theory of Hannah Arendt. Arendt insists on Latin etymology. She writes: “interest constitutes (...) something which inter-est, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together” (Arendt 1998: 182). For Arendt, a sense of being-with materializes when humans take interest in each other. By doing so they also disclose their distinctiveness while acknowledging the uniqueness of the other (183). This reciprocal relationality is the foundation of her understanding of plurality. *Bestias* extends the notion of interest to the nonhuman. Becoming animal is not some narcissistic way that humans can escape subjectification, rather, in the case of *Bestias*, it articulates the interest in the animal other, in its alterity. It offers a way to approach and stay engaged in the abyssal encounter.

In addition, it is through ways of becoming-animal that humans manifest a sense of belonging and collectivity. Indeed, the strongest signs of estrangement are displayed whenever humans want to communicate with each other through the use of words alone. Rather than speaking with each other, they appear to speak alongside each other.⁵⁴ In *Bestias*, logos is an obstacle for interaction and engagement. In contrast, by becoming-animal, for example through horse-esque gestures, sound and motions, a different form of sociality is fostered.⁵⁵ The practice

⁵⁴ The speaking alongside and passing of each other is a recurring theme in *Bestias*. Whenever humans speak to each other, they appear not to understand each other, thereby leaving the human in a state of confusion and disorientation.

⁵⁵ The articulation of horse-esqueness, too, is a recurring theme. In some instances, the on stage encounter with a horse initiates horse-esqueness. In other instances the articulation is independent of the presence of a horse. Yet, all human performers have an intimate knowledge of horse-specific movement qualities which are developed during the rehearsal process through interspecies engagement.

of becoming-animal produces a sociality in which animality is an intrinsic element, allowing *Bestias* to challenge *logocentrism*, one of the basic foundations of human exceptionalism. Hence, animality is not an aspect of inferiority, but considered a site of potentiality. For example, halfway through the show, human performers transform into a herd. The upper bodies of the human performers are horizontal to the floor and covered with straw. The congregation of piles of straw with legs are reminiscent of ostriches without a neck and head. The movements are filled with horse-esque expressivity. While they assert their -esqueness, they transform back into human form, by shedding the straw attached to the body and moving to upright stature. Regaining the human form, however, does not mean losing the horse-eque expressivity. To the contrary, movements and gestures become more intense, accumulating in an animalistic expression of human togetherness and intimacy, resulting in moans and howls of orgasmic pleasure.

The scene of transformation is interrupted by a human intruder in a white suit. His face is painted in glaring red, yellow, and green, with stripes of coal black. Standing behind a table with a piece of paper and pencil, he commences to address the exhausted herd assembly. They, on the other hand, appear like a group of deer caught in headlights. Unsure what to make of this strange fellow, they just stare back in bewildered silence. The words that cascade out of his mouth seem to elude them. Yet, the intruder, unaware or indifferent to the fact that his words do not communicate, continues his “important” address that switches back and forth between French, English, and Catalan. The herd, unimpressed and fatigued by his bumptious speech, leaves the stage. Unbothered by the departure of his audience, the intruder turns toward the public, continuing what appears to be a contemplative address on the human condition (I can distinguish

words and phrases such as “human,” “ opportunity,” “all together,” “what now?”). In mid speech he is interrupted by a corvid that lands on the desk launching towards the pencil.

Demanding the speaker’s full attention, slapstick follows next between human and bird. Whenever the speaker tries to retrieve the pencil, the corvid somehow tricks him as if it can anticipate the movement of its antagonist. The speaker, however, offers the corvid treats in exchange for his pencil. Realizing that it was tricked, the corvid stops in its tracks and lets its head hang low. The human consoles the bird, by stroking his upper neck and assuring him that he, too, sometimes feels like he’s being duped. But the bird will not be consoled. Its head is still hanging low. The human becomes more assertive. He lifts the corvids neck with a stroke of the pencil. Now they look at each other. After establishing eye contact, the human conjures Bob Marley’s and Bobby McFerrin’s memorable line of optimism: “Everything is going to be alright” and “Don’t worry, be happy!” The corvid seems only to have waited for the human to put his guard down, and it snatches the piece of paper out of his hand. Once again, only a treat can persuade the corvid to return the paper to its owner. This time, the human follows the bird’s invitation. He balls the piece of paper and throws it in the air, the corvid catches mid air and returns it. The human sees the opportunity that this intelligent creature might offer him and suggests a deal. “Let’s do business together! Because I want to be like you, and perhaps you want to be like me!” Yet, the bird flies onto the arms of another performer, a woman, who has entered the opposite side of the stage. She croons. Her voice fills the room. The speaker, worried that he might lose a business opportunity, offers the bird a deal: 80% for me, 20% for the bird!”

The bird takes off, leaving man and woman behind. The man, insisting on the business idea, transforms into a bird himself. Words are cawed rather than spoken. His head begins to move abruptly, nearly staccato-like, which initiates the movement of the whole body. His legs are

further than shoulder width apart, the feet slightly inverted. His arms make wing-like motions. Flapping and prancing, he still holds on to the business idea, now extending it to the horse that entered the stage as well. “We can do business, too!” he croaks.

Instead of the energetic horse transformations witnessed by the audience earlier, this transformation is suffocating to watch. While entering into a new intensity, the performance of a human bird reveals a stifling, inhibiting force in the human. This human is a parrot, and only able to regurgitate platitudes. The words he uses are clichés, without meaning, thought, or consideration. When offered the opportunity to engage with another (nonhuman) being, the human could only relish in it for a short moment before all his attention was directed towards a business opportunity. The human appears to be trapped in a framework that does not allow him to think beyond transactions and profit. While he yearns for escape (“I want to be like you”), he can’t conceive of a relationship that is not based on a lucrative business deal.

Bêtise, a derivate from *bête*, the French word for beast, could be translated as asinine, stupidity, or foolishness. The term describes a form of animality which according to Deleuze and Derrida is specific to the human alone. For them, only humans can be *bête*; nonhuman animals can’t perform this particular stupidity (Deleuze 1994: 150; Derrida 2009: 41). *Bêtise* accounts for the foolishness to be able to obtain the phantasy that one can gain “absolute knowledge” (Derrida 2009: 218). *Bêtise* is not so much the stupidity of the low-class and uneducated. The contrary is true. *Bêtise* accounts for a form of stupidity displayed by those who regard themselves to be more intelligent than the general population. People, often scholars with a compulsion to know it all, who wish to fit worldly phenomena into tight and sealed up categories, demonstrate resistance when asked to trouble their preconceived beliefs. By not wanting to understand, albeit

being aware of errors, shortcomings, and inconsistencies in their thinking, by refusing to address what might jeopardize their theories and propositions, they display *bêtise* (Derrida 2008b:142).

The parrot human in *Bestias* is the emblem of all too human *bêtise*. He appears sophisticated in his white suit. A cosmopolitan, he is able to switch languages at will. The table, the paper, and the pencil are signs of his superiority. Yet, his speech does not reach us. Indeed, it is questionable whether he has something to say at all, something to share. He seems to be more interested in hearing himself talk, than in being heard or understood. His monologue is just babble and rumble. He performs as a knowledgeable man, but thinking, if we understand it as a capacity to foster a dialogue with oneself or others, eludes him. He appears only to be interested in power, prestige, and profit. Derrida, further, suggests that *bêtise* is a social phenomenon. One can't be *bête* alone but is always *bête* through others. One is *bête* in a "socius" (Derrida 2008: 158). Following Derrida's proposition, it would be a mistake to consider the tragic appearance of the parrot man as a misstep of an individual alone. The contrary is the case. He is a representative of the flock of parrot-people, an example of the mindless repetitions of taken for granted beliefs and values that privileges profit, consumption, and power over possibilities of being-with.

Conclusion

The human-animal encounters in *Bestias* generate and communicate various intensities, transformations, and experiences. The performance does not promote a particular understanding of the animal or the human. Neither does it produce coherence, stable identities, or a clear statement. Its mythopoetic force is generated by unsettling, fracturing, and problematizing the indivisible line that separates the human from the animal. While it addresses the existence of the human on an animal continuum through expressions of becoming-animal, it does not promote a

simplistic return to animal impulses in the human. Rather, affective states of becoming display the limitation of logos as the only way to generate meaningful communications and relations, thereby opening up new avenues towards interspecies being-with. At the same time, *Bestias* addresses the stupidity that is proper to the rational animal. *Bêtise*, of course, is the unwillingness to consider the animal, even if the animal looks back at us and demands a response. *Bestias* constantly points us towards the limit of anthropological difference and human exceptionalism.

Bestias, therefore, poses a particular challenge to Derrida's condemnation of the circus. It provides us with a quite different perspective on human-animal relationships. Instead of generating a fabulization, or myth-making that promotes the superiority of the human, the performance explores the limits of the human and the animal. The line that constitutes the limit is continuously divided, multiplied, folded, and thickened. *Bestias* is a limitrophical performance, precisely by insisting in the abyss that is evoked by the human-animal encounter. The ontological uncertainty, however, is aroused through an intimate, direct, human-animal relationship. It is generated through concrete interspecies interaction and affection.

It can be argued that the mythopoetic exploration of the indivisible line is a feature of contemporary circus practices, while the myth-making of the insistence of the separation between human and animal is at the heart of animal acts of the circus of the 19th and 20th century and of today's traditional circuses. But this notion is only partially true. Both, traditional circus acts and contemporary circus acts play with the assumed certainty of species-categories. Traditional circus acts tend to anthropomorphize the animal performer. Animal performers display human behaviors, action, or emotions, thereby blurring the boundary between the human and the animal. However, human exceptionalism is not consciously called into question, and

many of the narratives produced through human-animal interaction reassert human mastery over animals.

Bestias disrupts this circus convention, by emphasizing the animality of the human, thereby challenging its superiority. Animality fosters an investigation into human-animal co-evolution, interdependence, as well as cross-species communication and affection. Yet, it is never about animalizing the human, as with freak shows. Rather, interspecies relationality allows different ways to approach a particular animal (e.g through -esqueness) while pointing simultaneously to irreducible differences. Paradoxically, by insisting that the human has a limit, limits can be explored. Limitrophy is a practice that simultaneously builds and breaks, in order to create new modes of being-with, or becoming-with. In *Bestias*, becoming-with is an interspecies undertaking, it is a way to foster response-ability (Haraway 2016: 29).

Yet, while Baro D'Evel's artistic and political intentions appear to differ tremendously from animal acts in traditional circus, their performances undeniably build on long, albeit, vexed, interspecies relations in circus. *Bestias* provides a change in the narrative, in ways how humans and animals are represented on stage. But, can we say that about the lived interspecies relationship as well? I had the chance to witness one of the daily training sessions between horse Xarxa and human Camille Decourtye. What transpired during the session was interspecies affection and interspecies attunement, training as an exercise in relationality, a way to communicate across difference. By displaying the porosity and the permeability of the limit that divides the human and the animal, animal training can be seen as an exercise of limitrophy.

Contemporary circus has no patent on intimate interspecies interaction. Indeed, animal trainers of traditional circus stress that they relate to the animal as an individual with particular needs and

wishes which are irreducible to strict species categories and boundaries.⁵⁶ Therefore, animal-human relationship in the circus can't simply be reduced to symbols, metaphors, representations, and ideology (Haraway 2002: 17), nor can't it only be approached as a site of violence against the animal other.

It is in concrete individual interspecies relationships where the delimitation between traditional and contemporary circus breaks down. *Bestias* recuperates an interspecies relationship that is based on care, affection, and concern for “significant otherness” (Haraway 2002: 41). The circus is also a place of sympoiesis, in which humans and animals have created circus acts in collaboration with each other.⁵⁷ These collaborations often establish intimate relationships and possibilities of care and affection. The reputation of the circus with regard to animal relations is so severely damaged. And such thought seems not only provocative but unjustifiable considering a history filled with stories of animal abduction, abuse, and exploitation. Accounting for sympoiesis is nevertheless important if we don't want to fall back into anthropocentrism.

Haraway suggests that the term “sympoiesis” addresses “complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with” (Haraway 2016: 58). When it comes to circus, Derrida does not acknowledge the possibility of interspecies worlding-with. He approaches circus as “The Circus,” as homogenized unity produced and maintained through a violent separation between what is called the animal and the human. He does not leave room for possibilities of intimate, multifaceted, and complex relations between humans and animals under the big top nor an understanding that considers circus as a heterogeneous performance genre with

⁵⁶ Martin Lacey Jr. and Jochen Trager-Konzola, both accomplished, working animal trainers, assert that they relate to the animal in individual terms. Their animal training practices are based on the animal's desire for learning, playing, and connection.

⁵⁷ The issue of sympoiesis in animal acts is complex and nonlinear. For example, a particular trick might emerge through coincidence during rehearsal and training processes. An animal trainer might catch up on a particular proposition that the animal makes (e.g. the preference towards a particular prop or a movement pattern) and use the inclinations for further development.

different styles, approaches, and politics. *Bestias*, indeed, proves that no human is safe from bêtise.

Chapter Three

A Pie in the Face — Approaching Clown Politics

It is not an easy task to fully circumscribe the clown as a circus and performance figure.

Although the predominant associations with clowns are of a simple-minded, foolish, silly, incompetent, childlike, naive and vulgarly base-driven character, the clown figure is actually a complex phenomenon with a rich history, many influences, meanings and functions depending on the historical, social and cultural context in which it is performed. Thus, in an effort to avoid the oversimplification and generalization that would be necessary to study the entire arc of clown figures, in this chapter I will focus on the most common one of Western cultures: the red-nosed clown figure, also known as *August*. I find that Bataille's notion of formlessness and Kristeva's concept of abjection intriguingly relate to and describe aspects of the August clown. Further, drawing on Rancière's ideas about politics, I will disclose how the qualities of formlessness and abjection exemplified by the August clown can be employed by activists to express discontent with political and cultural authorities by throwing a pie into the face of the opponent, also referred to as pie-ing.

It is difficult to trace the birth of the August clowns as more legends than facts persist about their first appearance on the circus stage, and their ancestral line reaches back to the court fools and jesters. Scholars such as John H. Towson, Paul Bouissac, and Jon Davison agree that the August figure emerged as a clown type during the end of the 19th-century in the European circus setting (Towson 1976; Davison 2013; Bouissac 2015). That said, it is important to note that the August clown is not a homogeneous figure. Many variants of August exist, because each performer has the artistic task to develop a unique version of the August. While the August clown is historical, scholarship on clowns and clowning has so far engaged in finding an

ahistorical clown essence. Bouissac argues that the August gives testimony to the “resilience of ritualistic transgressive behavior in centuries of popular culture in Europe” (Bouissac 2015: 142). Similarly to Bouissac, Towsen suggests that Western clown culture shows traces of antecedent clown-societies. For Towsen, existing ceremonial clowns who are an intrinsic part of Native American rituals (such as in the Hopi Nation) serve to prove his point. Unfortunately, he reiterates a progress-driven account of history from primitive to civilized. Both Bouissac and Towsen suggest that today’s clowns are secularised residues of our primitive past (Towsen 1976 15-16; Bouissac 2015: 176). For both, the medieval, renaissance and modern clowns are hence successors of this “primitive” ritual clown, and even though they have developed from ceremonial to stage clowns, their transgressions still hold a social importance (ibid.: 15; ibid.: 180) Like Towsen, Davison gives an account of different historical clown types (such as the Shakespearean clown, the Elizabethan clown, different Pierrot and Harlequin types and acrobatic mimes). Davison, offering a somewhat more historiographical approach, argues that it is short sighted to think that any new clown type is an improvement on its antecedent. Rather, he proposes that “clowns occur in different moments in different societies, being shaped by those moments and societies” (Davison 2013: 19). While serving as an essential resource and providing many insights on different clown types, Davison’s book *Clown* does little to explain the complex historical conditions under which the August clown emerged as a prevailing performance figure. Davison merely follows French clown historian Tristian Rémy and stipulates that a more liberal-minded Third French Republic served as a breeding ground for this new emerging clown type (ibid.: 68-69).

While little serious historiographical work on the August clown has been done, legends of August’s origin are manifold. One particularly popular story describes a drunken fellow

(hence the red nose) named August, who was so enthralled by the stunts of the equestrians in a circus ring in Berlin that he joined the spectacle. He attempted to ascend the horse; whereupon he fell, tripped, tried again, confused the front and rear of the horse, and so forth. The acrobats and audience were so amused by the foolish August that they just let him carry on. The legend goes that August's scene was so beguiling that his spontaneous performance was adapted and developed into a recurring circus routine (Koller 1993: 135). Other accounts of August are similar, although some refer to a man named Tom Belling as the original August (Davison 2013: 66). Davison argues that Belling's performance was not accidental but planned. His drunken, inadequate appearance was meticulously rehearsed and, due to its success, recreated and duplicated by other August performers (ibid.: 68). Furthermore, Davison is suspicious of the fact that Belling invented the August clown. He suggests that Belling was most likely not the first to perform as a comic plant (a performer in disguise as an audience member). Instead, Belling had the privilege to be the first documented August clown (ibid.). Still, a common theme throughout the various speculations of August's origin is the reference to a socially underprivileged figure that, in a drunken, intoxicated state unabashedly revealed his incompetence in front of an audience.

As the August developed, so did the role of the white clown also known as whiteface. A whiteface or white clown serves as the talented and skilled counterpart to August, a "brotherly enemy (Fellini 1970). Davison describes the relationship between these two clown figures: "As well as being a parody of the ringmaster, the auguste is also one of us, one of the new circus audience, the masses.'Next to him, the white-faced clown seems like an aristocrat'" (Davison 2013: 70). The aristocratic quality of the white clown is underscored with a neat, tidy, often sequined and properly fitting costume, use of lofty language, and principled, righteous behavior

and mannerisms. Although developed around 1880, this duo still prevails nearly untransformed in the traditional circus arena as well as in modified versions across other realms, always maintaining the primary trait of status difference between the two contrasting characters. The antagonistic relationship between these two clown types has been taken up especially by film. Laurel and Hardy are a prime example of a typical August-white clown relationship. This said, more modern comedies such as the very successful mockumentary *The Office* (aired on NBC from 2005 to 2013) work through an elaborate antagonistic relationship between the different characters, which could easily be scrutinized as clown-types.

On the other hand, the August character and its variations – such as the tramp character of North America – represent marginalised character positions. August's marginalisation is accentuated in a similar fashion to the white clown's aristocracy: through costume choice. Albert Fratellini (1860-1961), regarded as the inventor of a more grotesque version of the August (the so-called counter-August), describes how he bought his costume from an overtly-impooverished person in a pub in London: "The man who spoke to me had bare feet in enormous shoes, full of holes where his toe stuck out. His trousers, too big for him, slumped down over his shoes. These trousers swung down around his waist" (Fratellini, quoted in Davison 2013: 96). Tramp clown Charlie Chaplin describes that he went to the wardrobe of the production studio to get "baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything in contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large" (Chaplin quoted in *ibid.*: 95). I am not so much interested in the truth-value of these accounts about how these famous clowns acquired their costumes. I am intrigued by the fact that the mismatched, and improvised composition of oddly fitting clothing alludes directly to the social status of the clown character.

Furthermore, this marginalised status is indicated in the origins of the word clown. While the Latin word *colonus* means a farmer or peasant and refers more to social status, the Scandinavian word *klunn* refers more to behavioural qualities – a clumsy, boorish fellow or a foolish person (OED 2000). However, the *Oxford Dictionary* favors the Scandinavian over the Latin origin. Rather than an “either ... or” I like to think of an “and.” I propose that the term clown is compromised by both lineages. Thus, in the title of clown, a particular quality of behavior and social status are intrinsically evoked which is often enhanced through make-up and costume choice.

Consider the unusually large shoes of an August clown as reminiscent of what Bataille describes as the “most human part of the human body” (Bataille 1985: 20): the big toe and, by extension, the foot. Bataille argues that the human big toe and foot are no longer employed to climb trees, as is the case with other primates. The foot now serves to ground humans onto the earth allowing us to stand erect. He suggests that while other primates are tree-dwellers, humans have become somewhat tree-like thanks to the big toe and foot that bind us to the ground. These body parts are likened to the roots of a tree, which dig into and are exposed to the earth; they are the foundation for human’s erectness. However, while humans are proud of their erectness, they curiously disavow the very body part, which facilitates their upright gait. The base is, so to speak, base. The big toe and foot are associated with filth, dirt and ugliness. While, for Bataille, humans see themselves as pinnacles of evolution, feet and big toes prevent the human from soaring too high because they elicit an “ignominy explicable by the mud in which feet are found” (ibid.:22).

In contrast to the foot, which represents baseness, the head stands for virtue, morality and reasoning. For Bataille, there is a counter-movement intrinsic to the human condition: our head

reaches toward the sky, toward “light”, or a perfectly pure “heaven”, while our foot is rooted in “mud and darkness” (ibid.: 20). According to Bataille, the opposition between foot and head resembles the division of the universe into that which moves upwards and that which moves downwards. In a Western worldview, the division is additionally marked by a moral judgement. That which moves upwards is associated with good (the higher order) and that which tends to move downward is bad (the lower order). This tension elicits anger and wrath towards the parts seen as ignoble. Bataille states: “Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from the refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to the refuse – a rage that is easily directed against an organ as *base* as the foot” (ibid.: 20-21) Further, Bataille argues that feet and toes are antithetic to their counterpart hands and fingers; fingers signify “useful action and firm character,” while toes signify “the stupor and base idiocy” (ibid.: 21).⁵⁸⁵⁹

I found that Bataille’s musing on the socio-cultural status of the foot and the big toe strongly reverberates with the August clown and its standing as a performance figure. Stupor and base idiocy seem to quintessentially describe the August. Moreover, analogous with Bataille’s comprehension of feet, August’s unwieldy big shoes confirm the particular place in which they dwell: dirt and (saw)dust. If the foot is an uncomfortable reminder of humans’ closeness to a base materiality of life (which, for Bataille, is ultimately connected to death) from which humans try to distance themselves, then August’s oversized shoes might be considered as a sort of anchor

⁵⁸ As it is the case with August, many variants occur when it comes to the whiteface or white clown. Some exhibit more Pierrot-like qualities while others go towards inhabiting a grotesque form of power and sovereignty. Donald Trump has been compared to a clown. With his grotesque hunger to perform stature, authority, and law, he appears to show much more affinity to a white clown than to an August.

⁵⁹ Bataille’s emphasis on the foot is a response to Friedrich Engels unfinished essay “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man.” In this text, Engels entrusts the hand with constituting the decisive role in human development. Bataille destabilizes the Marxist’s idealization of the hand as both organ and product of labor. His eulogy on the foot and toe is an example of base materialism which focuses on the importance of the often debased base matter.

which counters human hubris. Following Bataille, the August clown serves as a figure that reminds us of a shared fragility, vulnerability and fugacity.

In contrast to the August, the white clown usually wears nice, tightly-fitting shoes or slippers that seem to melt into their costume, and a cone-shaped hat which is often white, acting as an extension of the head. It is also worth noting that white clowns often play virtuous wind instruments, such as saxophone, clarinet and cross flute. In keeping with Bataille's distinction between toes and fingers, it is salient to note that the white clown – who occupies a character position of stature, authority, knowledge and law – accentuates these qualities via the dexterous utilization of hands and fingers. It comes as little surprise that in a classical clown entrée, the white clown's coordinated movements are often juxtaposed with the maladroit being of the August. I suggest that Augusts, with their big feet and crude movements are, at least symbolically, close to the mud, the dirt, the filth. Their big shoes oblige them to walk in a clumsy fashion; each time they lift a leg, their shoe seems to stick to the floor. But rather than being ashamed or leading a sort of vendetta against the lower order, August clowns tend to embrace their position. Indeed, as I will show later, August's positionality as a creature of the mud generates a particularly performative force.⁶⁰

As a performance figure the August clown is the “refuse of the ideal,” by refuting Enlightenment's prioritization of reason which has produced a hierarchical division between orders and beings.⁶¹ Nothing seems to be enlightened about the August. Indeed, the refusal of enlightenment ideals is the quality that engenders an on-going fascination for the August clown.

⁶⁰ The reference to Donna J. Haraway is intended here. She writes: “I am a creature of the mud, not the sky” (Haraway 2008: 2).

⁶¹ I connect Bataille's critique of an “ideal” to a critique on human exceptionalism which is informed by a notion of subjectivity embraced and cultivated by the Enlightenment. Here, reason and intellect are held in highest regards and serve to establish not only a human divide but also a hierarchy within the human itself, coded by factors such as race, gender, sex and ability. This vision of humanity focuses on a self-contained individual that is the sole author/agent of individual fate/fortune. The over-emphasis on rationality is also connected to representational thinking which is predominant in the Western traditions of thought.

Further, caution is in order when it comes to romanticizing the clown as employing a higher mode of humanness, as Lecoq suggests. According to him the clown reveals “the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see” (2002: 143). I propose that August entertains a mode of play in a zone that is somewhat expelled, or abjected from what is regarded to be the higher order of things. Augusts are outside of ordinary rules of conduct, utility of language and codes of expression. Although contemporary August clowns might not readily evoke a reading of homelessness, poverty or social rejection (as their ancestors did), I suggest that qualities of the reject, abjection and filth, are ever stuck on the soles of their shoes. August inherently dwells on margins and, likewise, in a condition of formlessness. It is worthwhile to quote Bataille in full here:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their task. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no right in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All philosophy has no other goal; it is a matter of giving a frock coat what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or a spit.
(Bataille 1985: 31)

August clowns transgress fixed rules, systems and orders; they establish new rules for themselves, creating their own worlds with their own inner-logic and thereupon evoke Bataille’s notion of formlessness.⁶² August’s counterpart, the white clown, can be understood in

⁶² August clowns play with the order of things, follow the flows of desire, and exist in/through a mode of experimentation. Gregor Wollny (1978-2019), was an extraordinarily gifted clown with whom I had the distinct honor to work with. His work speaks to the ways in which clowns engage with day-to-day objects, transforming and metamorphosing them. In Wollny’s hands the same folding ruler transforms into an umbrella, giraffe, swing, sword, cross, sledge hammer, picture frame, and finally a leashed dog that confuses Wollny’s leg with a tree trunk. In clown play, objects can acquire a life of their own; they behave unruly, are often anthropomorphised and detached from the law of regular meaning making. The French contemporary clown Ludor Citrik in his show *Qui sommes-je? (Who are me?)* (2012) encounters his alter ego in the mirror. Of course, this evokes the association of the Lacan’s mirror stage. However, he does not recognise an ideal-I. He does not even recognise

juxtaposition as representational of form, for the order of things. The white clown's role is therefore dependent upon Augusts maintaining their position of formlessness. Fortunately for white clowns, Augusts are not focused toward transgressing their formlessness. They do not make sense, are not articulate, are predictably disorderly and often get squashed by the sensibility of the white clown. Accordingly, from the perspective of white clowns and the social authority they uphold, August is not much more than an earthworm or spider.

“I tried all I could to teach him some manners. By hitting him in the head, stepping on his feet, slapping the back of his head” (Fellini 1970) laments the white clown during the topsy-turvy funeral of the August clown in Fellini's classic movie *Clowns*. Social order does not tolerate or see value in deviance. Yet, in keeping with Bataille's analysis, formlessness is the base matter from which form takes shape. As Bataille describes, form is merely formlessness enwrapped in a mathematical frock coat. The world has been categorized and abstracted, neatly systemized. But there are things that cannot be accounted for by a given order and therefore disrupt a given classification. Formlessness speaks to this excess. But what cannot be categorized, what does not make sense within a certain paradigm, might also pose a danger to the established system itself. Hence, this sort of unidentifiable excess is regarded as unruly and despicable. It is considered to be dirt and, in its extreme, even a threat. Spiders and earthworms speak to creaturely lives, which are intimate with dirt and mud. Those vermin crawl into tiny fissures and cracks and are not easily containable; they also outnumber so-called higher forms of life. It is a reasonable leap to jump from this sort of excess to the performative excess of August.

himself in the mirror. He cries out: “A clown!” but he does not realise that it is his own mirror image that he sees. He then tries to engage with the Other in the mirror. To his horror he discovers that the clown is trapped in the mirror. After this discovery, Ludor Citrik tries to free the Other from his confinement. Ludor Citrik starts to peel at the frame, but his efforts are in vain. Returning back to the imprisoned clown, he also notices the reflection of the audience. “You too are imprisoned?! he asks, bewildered. He leaves the mirror to get tools in order to free the captives, but only to forget about them as soon as his attention shifts to a different thing. In this example of clown play, the metaphor is taken literally, and thereby conjures up a scene which serves as a profound critique of the process of subjectification.

August dwells in an abject place as a “refusal of the ideal,” an ideal, which dissociates itself from the base material it is made from. Sawdust and dirt swirl about as Augusts clumsily make their way in and out of the circus pit. Perhaps the clownish situation arises when the spiders and earthworms of the dirt and dust make their way onto the frock coat, revealing its latent formlessness; when the excess which could not be accounted for, which is often explained away as something with less value, asserts itself. Thus, I propose that the August clown is a figure whose fundamental task is to invoke formlessness.

The notion of formlessness can be put into a fruitful conversation with abjection, another compelling lens through which the August clown can be approached. Abjection is a crucial concept in Kristeva’s understanding of subject formation. She writes: “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I claim to establish *myself*.’” (Kristeva 1982:3) According to Kristeva, the I transforms itself into an “I” through a process of abjection, through abnegating everything that one does not want to be part of “I.” At first an infant does not recognize itself as an autonomous self; it is in a state Kristeva refers to as *chora* – Greek for receptacle. In the *chora* state, after the infant has left the mother’s womb, it does not yet differentiate between self and other, between subject and object. It is in a pre-symbolic and pre-subjective (and pre-objective) state.⁶³ This state in which language has not been apprehended is affect-driven; the infant has not yet entered the symbolic order. For Kristeva, the infant begins the process of defining a self, recognizing itself as autonomous through a violent “no.”⁶⁴ Things that were inextricable from the infant in the realm of *chora* are

⁶³ From this point of view it makes sense that the August clown has often been thought of as acting a regression.

⁶⁴ While Kristeva is influenced and informed by psychoanalytic thinking, particularly the work of Jacques Lacan, she maintains a different understanding of concepts like “the other,” “the one” and notions of self. In order to be consistent with her work, I have not capitalized any of these terms. For example, her usage of the term “other” does not refer to the Symbolic dimensions as the term “Other” does in Lacanian theory. Similarly, the term “One”, developed by Luce Irigaray, speaks to the male imaginary, implying an idealized unity, stability, and fixed form over heterogeneity, plurality and difference, but such an understanding does not map onto Kristeva’s work. Lastly, in the English translation of Kristeva’s text *Power of Horrors*, the self is not capitalized.

rejected, such as food, feces and/or the embrace of the caretaker. However, abjection is not just a phase of infant or childhood development, because abjection is always in process, never ceasing within the subject, as it is the “no-that’s-not-me” that the self is made of.

Kristeva’s notion of abject is also provocative because what is abject is not an object – something a subject can be wholly distanced from. The abject is ever-lurking in the fringes of the subject’s identity, as an “*alter ego*” (1982:9). Furthermore, try as the subject might, s/he can never totally get rid of the abject; it is always poised ready to attack the self. The self-that-becomes through the process of abjection is aware of what has been abjected and whenever it presses back upon the self a visceral reaction is provoked. For example, for Kristeva, most humans are disgusted by their own or other’s emissions of feces, skin dermis and/or pus-filled wounds because they serve as reminders of one’s own decay, life as a living corpse, or process toward death. The subject wants to live, albeit living is simultaneously a perpetual process of dying. The abject is therefore a danger to the homogenous self because the abject permeates the borders that the self assiduously strives to maintain. The abject keeps popping up as a reminder of what the self would prefer to deny: a heterogeneous state of being. Building on her ideas about the formation of the self as an autonomous being, Kristeva’s vision also extends to the social and cultural level: “It is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (ibid.: 4).

Bataille’s frock coat becomes, in the Kristeva’s psychoanalytic grammar, the Symbolic, the Law (ibid.: 112). A heterogeneous being undergoes a “*series of separation* that are oral, corporeal, or even more generally material” (ibid.: 94). Subjectification is a tendency towards homogeneity by abiding more unconsciously than consciously to a given order and a system of

belief. However, similar to Bataille, that which has been separated has not been lost forever; it continuously threatens the Symbolic and the subject that identifies whole-heartily with it. The abject takes the place of the earthworm, spider and spit. For Kristeva, the abject finds its expression in the aesthetic realm, such as in poetry, literature, performance and visual arts. While it may be impossible to eliminate the abject, one might control it through sublimation (ibid.: 11).

Therefore, I suggest that we consider the August clown character as an executor of formlessness, while applying the above explanation of abjection to the circus setting in which August typically appears. However, even though I have painted a positive notion of the abject, the abject has often been channeled towards the maintenance of conservative values. A short detour into circus history provides insight here. The circus is not only a place where acrobats present extraordinary physical capacities of their skills –as is becoming more and more common in contemporary circus settings. Until the 1940s, circus was also an assembly of another kind of extraordinariness: the body of the freak. In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson draws the conclusion that the freak body was important in generating the normative American citizen; she states that the “freak show defined and exhibited the ‘abnormal’” (Thomson 1997: 58). In seeing the abnormal the audience could define what is normal. Freak shows provided “an opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what was not” (ibid.: 59). Thus, the boundaries of the normative citizen body were established by the abjection of what was ambiguous and confused strict categorical distinctions. For example, bearded women transgressed the border of a clear distinction between man and woman; conjoined twins played a trick on one’s imagination of a singular self as an autonomous being incorporated in the confines of their body; people with exceptional hair

growth all over their bodies were framed in such a way that the hairiness blurred the distinction between human and animal, etc.

One might speculate how the transgressions of the August clown have served as a sort of release valve for the audience. Louise Peacock suggests that the audience obtains great pleasures by witnessing the shenanigans of the August clown because the August behaves in ways the audience would love to behave themselves, but are restricted from doing so by socio-cultural rules to which they conform (Peacock 2009: 27). However, at the same time, the August clown is a vivid example of a person that is unable to function in the parameters of a society. Even though this sort of gestalt of an anti-I (the object) is sublimated through the aesthetic figure of the August clown – and hence accepted if encountered in a particular performance setting (circus, theatre, street-performances) – the August still serves as a vivid example of who counts as stupid, idiotic, abnormal, and what sorts of behaviors are regarded to be unruly, transgressive and deviant. While a detailed historiography would exceed the limits of this chapter, it might be fruitful to analyse the historical conditions from which the August emerged.

Foucault, for example, observes that the emergence of the bio-political regime introduced a process of normalisation to an unknown degree in the 18th- and 19th-centuries. For Foucault, the compulsory desire for normalisation produced variations of abnormality such as the homosexual, the pervert, the pathological criminal (Foucault 2003: 25). While the August's transgression might elicit a sort of jouissance for the audience, we might also consider that, with their deviant behavior, Augusts have also participated in the construction of the normative citizen by showing how the good, obedient citizen should not behave, designating the behavior of a fool. "A lazy-ass, a drunk, a trouble maker, a good-for-nothing, he cheated at games, was unfaithful to his friends, a pain in the neck of his landlord and for the electric company" (Fellini Clowns). It thus

also makes sense that the August clown is usually in the company of a white clown; audiences are granted the immediacy of narrators who comment on Augusts' poor behavior and are capable of policing them should they deviate too far from the norm. I stipulate that the August circus clown occupies a field of *mild abjection*, because although they transgress social rules, their transgressions are never really dangerous to the public. The materials employed in August's acts are only representations of abject material. For example, instead of urine Augusts use water, instead of farting they employ a device which reproduces a fart sound, and so forth.

Further, the interplay between being attracted to, and repulsed by, August's aberrant behavior on stage is reminiscent of the pleasure experienced in reading abject literature and poetry in which the abject is sublimated. As mentioned above, Kristeva states that the abject that is expelled out of the normative discourse cannot be completely repressed. It finds its way through aesthetic practices. The August clown can be understood as a sort of poet as well. In the process of mixing up meaning, order, and playing with sense and non-sense the clown engages in interplay of the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic is expressed in the meaning of words, while the semiotic expresses affect. The symbolic realm points to the Law of the Father, hegemonic order, and homogeneity. In contrast, the semiotic refers to the *chora* where the I and the other were perceived as indistinguishable. Noëlle McAfee offers the following reading of Kristeva's use of semiotic: "The semiotic is the more archaic, unconsciously driven, one might say even ravenous mode of signifying. When it seeps out in signification, as it does in avant-garde poetry, it disrupts the more orderly, symbolic efforts of communication (McAfee: 2004: 29)

August clowns hardly speak. They express themselves through a physical vocabulary. However, even when August clowns speak, their use of language is accompanied with a

pronounced physicality. Here again, the August clown stands in contrast to the white clown who both knows how to speak and uses language eloquently. August clowns' poor apprehension of language further relegates them to an abject realm, as well as a mode of formlessness, as they are unable to participate in explicit meaning making – that is, putting on a mathematical frock coat.

In addition to August clowns' withdrawal from the utility of language they also seem to withdraw themselves from the use of props that would allow them to participate in any regular order of things. To Augusts, things exceed their prescribed function and are often repurposed. The August has the license to play with things that are inappropriate and allude to dirt or defilement. Mary Douglas argues that dirt is a socio-cultural phenomenon. Something becomes dirt, or is dirt when it somehow breaches or trespasses its assigned place. For example, shoes are not dirt when put on a shoe rack but become dirt when put on a dinner table (even if the shoes are clean). Hence, Douglas's famous definition of dirt as "matter out of place" (Douglas 2005: 44). Douglas's notion of dirt as matter out of place resonates with Kristeva's notion of abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and which disrespects "borders, positions, rules (Kristeva 1982: 4). I suggest that in the moment a clown transgresses the order of things, an impending and exciting danger of defilement occurs.⁶⁵ This mechanism of transgression affords a political power to the clown that has a particular quality as it is in the case of pie-ing – throwing a pie in somebody's face. By pie-ing, the abject can, at least momentarily, violently destabilize normative order or boundaries; through transgression, the August clown can temporarily turn a victim of any social status into a clown.

Pie-ing is an example of an act in which a clown transgresses social propriety at the expense of an audience or cast member. In the circus ring, anybody who gets pied by the August

⁶⁵ Examples for such defilement are scatological jokes which can be found in abundance in the August repertoire.

clown – whether they are the statured white clown, an acrobat, or audience member – is violently, albeit temporarily, deprived of their status in the symbolic order. The witnesses of the act of pie-ing might derive pleasure from this social interruption. The higher the status of the one who is pied, the funnier and more enjoyable it is for those witnesses.⁶⁶ Now, in departure from the circus ring and August clown, I explore how this quintessential intervention of clowning – pie-ing – is expressed in other realms, highlighting how formlessness and abjection can be contagious.

In the *Battle of the Century* (1927),⁶⁷ starring Laurel and Hardy, the protagonists start a pie fight, which escalates. The pie fight begins quite banally when a pie vendor slips on a banana peel in the street. Rightly accusing Hardy of purposefully having rigged the banana peel, the pie vendor gets revenge by pie-ing Hardy in the face. Hardy then attempts to pie Laurel, and accidentally lands the pie on a bystander, who then seeks pie revenge through pie-ing yet another person. This pattern is repeated domino style every time somebody gets pied. The scene suggests that it is difficult to resist one's appetite for sweet revenge. Social propriety vaporizes immediately, and anybody struck by a pie is folded into the indistinguishable mass of pied faces. One's individual features vanish in pie, as do social class distinctions. It is a mode of pure affect, in which people seem to dissolve into one and another, with the pies serving as a binding agent unifying the bodies into one. The separation, between social codes and classes, disappears and

⁶⁶ The German literature theorist Bernard Greiner distinguishes between “Komik der Herabsetzung” (humor of degrading, *my translation*) and “Komik der Heraufsetzung” (humor of upgrading, *my translation*). On the first sight, pie-ing and other clown exploits could be understood as belonging to the former. In this mode the subject who is inferior displays a momentary superiority over somebody who is usually superior; e.g. a child outsmarts an adult. Greiner argues that thinkers such as Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, and Bergson theorize this mode of humor. However, I suggest that the August clown exists rather in the comic space of Heraufsetzung. This mode relates to the affirmation of ways of existence, which are repressed in the normative sociocultural realm. Greiner calls this die “Bejahung der Kreatürlichkeit” (affirmation of the creaturely, 89 *my translation*). It is a mode that embraces the body, the grotesque, difference, and heterogeneity (Greiner 2006: 100). Thinkers associated with his mode are Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Bataille, and Bakhtin.

⁶⁷ Bruckman, Clyde. 1927. *Battle of the Century*. Culver City: Hal Roach Studios.

blurs the line between self and other. As each pied person looks the same, one can therefore also be the other. Hierarchies have dissolved, and in the end, the police officer is even pied as well.⁶⁸ No one is spared from the equalizing effect of being pied. Thus, everyone becomes formless.⁶⁹

Perhaps it is the texture of pie that makes it such an effective vehicle of formlessness. Mary Douglas suggests that there are specific forms of matter that defy a strict classification, that are ambiguous, neither solid nor liquid (e.g. treacle and honey). The stickiness of viscous matter “is like a trap, it clings like a leech, it attacks the boundaries between myself and it” (Douglas 2005: 47). Likely, the pied person experiences a similar sensation; the pie goo sticks to the skin on one’s face, morphing its features, gets in one’s hair, nose, mouth and eyes. If the self is constructed through a constant process of abjection, the pied person is startlingly delivered into a different self-perception, one that is ambiguous, even heterogeneous. This change in self-perception might be a reason why a pied person is so eager to remove the goopy matter from all over the face. Douglas further states that the ambiguous experience is not always unpleasant: “There is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion and shock belong at different points and identities” (ibid.: 47). Beyond the pie matter that sticks to the pied’s face, there is also a character image that sticks to the pied via the act of pie-ing. Anybody who is pied is transformed into a clown, a silly, low-status figure, an object of laughter and ridicule.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Unfortunately the footage has been lost.

⁶⁹ It seems to me that La Tomanita functions in a similar way. During this event, held every year in Buñol, a town close to Valencia, participants excessively throw tomatoes at each other. La Tomanita has initiated other tomato throwing festivals around the world (e.g. in the USA, Columbia, China).

⁷⁰ While pie-ing has been well established in slapstick and August clown entrées, pie-ing as an expression of political discontent emerged in the 1970s. Yippie and founder of *High Times Magazine* Thomas King Forçade has been the first documented pie-activist. Otto Larsen, the chairman of the President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, was his victim in a pie-attack in 1970. While one can consider egging, colour-bombing, and tomato-throwing as belonging to the same family of actions of discontent, pie-ing is quite particular. First, the pie-er must get close to his/her victim to ensure a successful attack. Second, the pie-er attacks the face. The aim is to erase the facial feature of the victim. Lastly, with a sense of irony, pie-ers often put a lot of effort in producing a perfect pie for the victim in question. Pie-ers pride themselves for their baking skills.

Bill Gates was famously pied by the Belgian artist and activist, Noël Godin, the *entarteur*, when he visited the European Union officials in Belgium in 1998. Other targets of Noël Godin's pie-ing were French politician Nicolas Sarkozy, French philosopher Bernard Henri Lévy, and director Jean Luc Godard. Even though Godin is usually referenced as the pie-er, he typically has accomplices working closely with him. Because witnesses are crucial for the success of the action of pie-ing, with the goal being to ridicule and humiliate the target publicly, Godin and accomplices usually choose a well-mediated event for their endeavor. Although it would distract from the goal of this chapter to comprehensively list all of the activist groups who have employed pie-ing, the following three are some of the better known that deserve special mention: the *Biotic Baking Brigade* of San Francisco, *Les Entartiste* of Montreal and ex-yippie Aron Kay, aka the *pieman*. However, more than engaging a dialogue about each group individually, I am interested in a political question that arises from the act of pie-ing, which I draw from my reading of Jacques Rancière's notion of politics.

I propose that the activist who throws pies is an heir of the August clown, while the pied is an heir of the white clown figure. The former dwells in a space of abjection, while the latter represents symbolic order, law and power. Significantly, the activists are not making any directly discursive political claim – they do not want to change their own status – but seek to trivialize the target with the hope of changing the official public perception of the victim. Rancière's ideas on politics elucidate the significance of this type of activism. He writes: “At the heart of politics lies a double wrong, a fundamental conflict, never conducted as such, over the capacity of the speaking being who is without qualification and political capacities” (Rancière 1999: 22).

For Rancière, disagreement resides at the core of politics. Those who are in power, and shape the rules of social order, overlook and further diminish the voice of populations who are

impoverished and excluded from access to fundamental rights and resources. In contrast, these populations of “wronged,” excluded people are viewed by those in power as doing wrong to the order of things, established society, and the distribution of the sensible, by claiming their right to partake in what they are excluded from. For Rancière, politics take place when those without count – those who are excluded from logos, who are not allowed to speak – make themselves recognized and therefore have to be recognized as speaking beings. This temporal rupture of policed order, when those in power are forced to recognize that they are face to face with a being of equal capacity and faculties, is called politics.

For Rancière the political being is intrinsically intertwined with the speaking being. Although humans are capable of speaking a priori not everybody is assigned to positions of speech. For Rancière, the police regulate the order of the distribution of assigned positions and occupations, who is allowed to do what, who is excluded from occupations even though they share (as all humans do) the same capacity to think, feel, see and speak. Therefore, in Rancière’s understanding, the force of the police has less to do with disciplining, but rather is about “the law, generally implicit, that defines a party’s share or lack of it” (ibid.: 29). The police press on every single individual being in a society.

Rancière proposes that there must be a claim by the part without a part, the excluded, to take part by being recognised as a speaking being. Here, he is drawing from the categorisation of Aristotle, declaring that only humans are in possession of the logos – the capacity to speak and demonstrate just and unjust – while animals are only in possession of *phôné* – only able to demonstrate feelings of pleasure and displeasure (Rancière 2010: 37).⁷¹ Those who are assigned speakable positions do not want to recognise the other (the excluded) as an also-speakable being

⁷¹ To assign somebody into a place of *phôné* is connected to the process of animalization. It could be understood as a function of what Giorgio Agamben termed “the anthropological machine” in *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford 2004.

with logos, because that would require admitting that a fundamental injustice has been done. The solution for those in speakable positions is only to hear *phôné*, to police the other into a position outside of logos. As Rancière writes: “If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as a bearer of signs of policy, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues [come] from his mouth as discourse“ (ibid: 38).

Rancière’s notion of politics recalls Kristeva’s notion of abjection. The self abjects parts of itself to become a homogeneous self, but the alter ego is still there, pressing on the boundary of the self. I stipulate that the abjection process also occurs in the formation of contemporary Western societies to form a solid identity in a social order. The “not-us” have to be violently excluded, to keep “us” stable. For example, this phenomenon stands out in the current border politics of both the United States and the European Union. Certain immigrants are not allowed to cross the border because they threaten what is highly valued as a proper citizen-self. Within a nation, parts of the population are swept to the margins because they do not fit within the normative concept of what constitutes an acceptable citizen and therefore cannot (or are not allowed to) be easily assimilated into the confines of the status quo. Nonetheless, these “abject” people continue to cross both visible and invisible borders, constituting an indelible threat to a society’s established distribution of who has a share and what evaluable qualities constitute who has a share.

For Kristeva, the abject never ceases, cannot be gotten rid of, is ever-present and threatens the illusion of the homogeneous self. The self needs the abject as a “safeguard,” as “the primers of the culture (Kristeva 1982: 2). I argue that politics, in Rancièrian terms, refers to the moment when the primers of culture are redefined. The political moment is when the abject attacks the borders of the self that has abjected it so violently that the illusory homogenous self

can no longer repel it and has to negotiate with the abject. The self comprehends the abject as alter ego. Such an encounter might lead to the formation of another, more inclusive, modified self, but does not always. Politics, for Rancière, does not require a change as the outcome. Although change might occur, each configuration of self – each order – excludes certain parts of the whole; some are granted visibility and some are not. It bears certain risks to translate one concept through the other, as they were conceived independently from each other. However, I find that these notions of abjection and politics resonate with one another, making way for a fruitful dialogue between them.

Furthermore, I find that Bataille's concept of formlessness also resonates with Rancière's ideas. In the short paragraph he wrote on formlessness, Bataille proposes that academic men and philosophy shape the world, meaning that they order, categorize, and police it. Such academic men celebrate their humanly-bestowed logos. Who and what exists outside of form is relegated formless, without logos. Bataille points out that some modes of being are violently excluded, and have to be excluded from ordered form. The frock coat can only fit the academic man, so to speak; the universe takes shape via the interpretive translation of logos. As I previously suggested, formlessness is reserved for earthworms, dirt, mud and spiders – the lower order of things, the lower social classes, the impoverished, the excluded, the uncounted, to that which only possess *phôné*.

The person who performs the August clown is policed to execute certain qualities that define their character. August performs in a circus pit; wears colorful, odd-fitting clothing, a red nose, and gigantic shoes. Although I have attempted to give an account of this figure as an example of heterogeneous being, I may have actually further policed August, by assigning the role to a position of abjection and formlessness. That said, what makes August clowns complex,

is that they do not make a discursive claim. August clowns embody a “refusal of any ideal,” as they do not seek to change their abject position.⁷² They remain outside of understandable speech. When they open their mouth only sound is heard. They do not possess logos; they only possess *phôné*. So then, one asks, how can August clowns take part in politics if their position in discourse requires them to remain formless, abject and ill-inclined to pursue assertion of logos? How can August execute “a set of practices driven by assumptions of equality and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality” (Rancière 1999: 30). I propose that clown-politics somehow twist Rancière’s notion of politics by emphasizing the political potential of *phôné* rather than logos. I offer two short examples of how.

Bernard Henri Lévy is a well-known, controversial contemporary French philosopher. He calls for more patriotism in Europe and pokes reactionary politicians with the fear of an Islamization of Europe. Lévy was also a fierce supporter of the French intervention that brought down the Gaddafi regime in 2011. Over the past three decades he has been pied several times by Godin and others. In a video, which can be found on YouTube, Lévy is accompanied by cameras and reporters. Suddenly Godin appears in the frame pushing a pie into Lévy’s face. What happens next is significant: Godin, seemingly brought down by a security person, lies on the floor and Lévy threatens him with the following words: “Get up fast, or I will smash your face with a heel punch!” (Denisot 2015, *my translation*). This aggressive reaction is triggered by a simple pie in the face; Lévy is not otherwise hurt or physically harmed. Having been pied in the face, Lévy reveals another side of himself that until then had been excluded from public view.⁷³ Godin refuses to have a well-mannered discussion with Lévy, hence he is not performing

⁷² I am not suggesting that an entity in a *phôné* position cannot assert a claim; that would be absurd. What I am suggesting is that a *phôné* claim can be easily dismissed as not being a claim, because it is rendered as unintelligible by a dominant discourse.

⁷³ Lévy parades a gentleman machismo in his public appearances. However, the violent outburst against Godin suverts his own self-styled performances of masculinity, as Godin is clearly of lower status, physically weaker and already in a position of defeat as he is being held down by security guards.

in logos-key to make his arguments heard. In this temporal rupture, Lévy becomes a clown himself, a fool; the tightly-fitted frock coat opens and spiders and earth-worms crawl out of it. Lévy transforms from a well-mannered philosopher into a raging person. He loses control over the situation and himself. He is dominated by pure negative affect rather than by his conscious, rational philosopher-self that he otherwise perfectly parades in his public appearances. I suggest that those parts of him, that he had abjected from himself, the “no that’s not me,” violently pressed back in on him; his alter ego was exposed.

A similar understanding can be applied to the pie-ing of Bill Gates. Here too, the activist protagonists did not confront Gates through rational argumentations on their differing political opinions. They chose instead to expose Gates to ridicule and humiliation. As a symbol of the free market and neoliberalism he was attacked with cream pie delivered onto his face. His facial features were obscured – Gates was no longer recognizable – and it appeared that with the loss of his facial features he lost his capacity to speak as well. If the Symbolic constitutes the Law of the Father, and if Bill Gates can be seen as a symbol of power, money, wealth and profit that violently excludes those who have no part of their share, then it was this symbolism that was attacked by Godin and his fellow activists. To ridicule Gates meant to ridicule capitalism. It made a clown of someone that fundamentally does not want to be seen as a clown. Pie-ing wrongs the subject who has wronged the other by establishing a social order which privileges the wealthy and their quest for what appears to be an insatiable search for profit. The pie activist seems to cry out: “I refuse to speak in an order that has never allowed me to speak. Instead, I will turn you into what you see me as: a clown, powerless, dirt, an earthworm, formless”.

In both of the above cases, the pie activist clowns twisted Rancière’s notion of politics. Rather than choosing to enter into a hegemonic discourse, departing from the nature and position

of abjection (the position of the excluded), they chose to bring the target into the realm of formlessness and abject. In these ruptures, no strata were disarmed or collapsed, and no widespread social change took place. From a Rancièrian perspective, politics do not necessarily need to effect radical change. Still, drawing upon the premise that politics are a set of practices driven by assumptions of equality, I propose that the activists postulated equality in their exploits. A pie to the face brings people down, humbles philosophers, politicians, and billionaires; these people holding positions of power are momentarily dethroned. They are reminded of their vulnerability, that they can be touched, attacked, reduced, they can be laughed at, they can be seen as dirt. In a pie-fight everybody becomes equal.⁷⁴

I also propose that one can see pie-ing as an artistic practice, which, in Rancièrian terms refers to “ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (Rancièrè 2004: 13). The Platonic point of view is that each citizen has its proper place in a given social order. Plato divides a society into three primary parts: rulers, auxiliaries and craftsmen. In his writing, Rancièrè critiques Plato’s myth of the metals, in which God puts gold into the rulers, silver into the ruler’s auxiliaries, and iron into the artisan body (Rancièrè 2006: 3-4). Metals bind each individual to a specific order that is innate. Each individual is policed into their occupation and is not permitted to transcend it. Rancièrè elaborates on Plato’s disdain for theatre and suggests that “from the Platonic point of view, the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and exhibition space for ‘fantasies’ disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities and spaces” (Rancièrè 2004: 13). The theatre stage is subversive because it expresses the possibility to occupy more than one position in society. In the realm of fiction, an actor can change roles, can be a king and an artisan simultaneously. The stage offers a place

⁷⁴ In a certain sense, pie-ing “humanizes” the victim. Hence, the loss of inviolability might also elicit sympathy.

where a redistribution of the sensible can occur, a redistribution of who is assigned to positions of hearing, seeing, speaking and feeling in a particular way and who is excluded from such positions.

Crucially for Rancière, it follows that what can occur on stage can also be executed in society. As the myth of the metal suggests, it is just a myth. In the circus pit, for example, an audience member, no matter his or her occupation in “real” life, can become a clown in an instant when brought on stage. The stage – this place of fiction that is non-fiction – is the place where politics occur. Thus, politics are a staging of a different reality. Politics occur when a different fiction becomes, even if just for a moment, reality (therefore, we can say that any reality is a political fiction). On the other hand, policing order has no interest in any confusion of the given order of things. For Rancière, this is the reason that police on the street order people to “Move along! There is nothing to see here!” (Rancière 2015: 37) Here, the street is a designated place of circulation not for a spectacle. This analysis can be applied to place in general; each place has its purpose in the distribution of the sensible, and exploits modes of exclusion. Therefore, the activist/artists I have described are redistributing the sensible by reconfiguring the place of their performed action as an ambiguous one. Distinctions are no longer clear: Is one still on the red carpet? Has it become a site of (artistic) crime and harassment? Or a circus arena?

If the potentialities open up, the place can be more than one thing. A similar case can be made for targets. The emergence of an opening, albeit produced by force, can be brought in relation to the targets. Lévy and Gates were forced into a sensorial realm that they are typically not assigned to occupy in the general order of things. Clear partition of identities, activities and spaces is what artistic practices try to defy.⁷⁵ They propose instead a heterogeneous and

⁷⁵ Rancière distinguishes between the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art. Here, I am referring to the aesthetic regime of art. See J. Rancière: *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

ambiguous place, where “the normal form of experience” (Ranciere 2015: 173) is broken up in favor of experiencing new modes of being in the distribution of the sensible.

In conclusion, I suggest that Augusts do not just dwell in a circus pit to amuse children and adults alike. Instead, I convey a figure that lingers in an abject place and executes formlessness as a vital task. The August is an ambiguous figure. Granted, Augusts’ deviant behavior can be incorporated by the hegemonic normative narrative by showing how one should not behave and what is not appropriate for a good citizen. Still, Augusts employ a specific mode of politics, able to turn anybody into a clown and anything into matter out of place by engaging with it. The deviance of August clowns is contagious. They do not leave their abject position, but, violently destabilize hegemonic orders, if only momentarily, by exerting formlessness upon the other. I propose to call this practice Clown Politics.

Clown Politics do not seek to be recognised by the other as a speaking being and to change the abject position by executing logos. They aim to bring the other into a *phôné* realm instead. Therefore, Clown Politics twist Rancière’s notion of politics. However, Clown Politics do maintain what is most fundamental in Rancière’s ideas: a disagreement between parties involved, a double wrong at play. Through political action, a fundamental equality is expressed and thereupon, a re-distribution of the sensible can occur. The August figure and its politics are employed by political activists and artists to expose authorities to ridicule and humiliation for purposes of humbling those authorities. Pie-ing displays how Clown Politics can be executed outside of the circus setting. Even though pie-ing activists do not wear oddly fitting clothes, a red clown nose, and oversized shoes, they are heirs of the August figure. They draw on August’s capacity to turn anyone into a clown, spider or dirt. Clown Politics offer the possibility to rupture

the order of things, and to open a space in a tightly fitted frock coat – at least for a precious moment.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Aspects of clown politics developed in this chapter resonate with recent writing on subversive, disruptive, and imaginative attributes of the clown as an activist figure. For example, Margaret Irving, Delphine Cézard, and Jacqueline Russell bring clown figures in dialogue with feminist discourse (Irvin 2013; Cézard 2020; Russell 2020). “[T]he feminist clown engages in a practice that articulates different ways of viewing the world as both clown and critic” (Russell 2020b: 7). Further, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) which has a reputation for staging festive and gleeful havoc during anti-capitalist demonstrations, is another instance of clowns engaging in direct action, thereby subverting the authority of the state. The writings of Majken Jul Sørensen and Lawrence Bogad focus on the ways that humor “can challenge the prevailing order and transcend established power relations” (Sorensen 2013: 69). For Bogad, CIRCA’s subversive demeanor is an example of what he calls “tactical carnival” (Bogad 2010: 547). These different accounts share the notion that clown exploits provide a powerful critique on the bourgeois subject.

Chapter Four

A Sense of Depth and Partners in Danger: Re-Imagining Wire Walking as a Relational Endeavor

In the emerging field of circus studies, the high wire walker occupies a central role, exemplifying the wide held assumption that circus performances articulate what could be called an acrobatic disposition towards freedom. According to Peta Tait, the high wire walker's exceptional feat provides "a spectacle of lightness with its lone figure against the world" (Tait 2006: 9). The emphasis on the distinctly masculine individuality of the high wire walker's exploit, re-echoes the 19th century symbolic role of star aerialists whose jaw dropping acts evoked "ideas of freedom from constraints of everyday movement" (Tait 2005: 9). In such an account, the high wire walker quest for heights is glorified while *terra firma* is understood as a place of restriction, curtailment, and limitations. Freedom, it seems, can only be attained far away from social engagement and interactions. The high wire walker's withdrawal from worldly affairs is not seen as loss, but as a necessity in a pursuit of freedom.

By distancing himself from the shackles of worldly relations, the high wire walker is elevated to the status of a superman. The notion of superman has entered circus studies and circus vernacular though the engagement with the high wire scene in the prologue of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Using the misleading translation of superman the wire walker is understood as the incarnation of Nietzsche's life-affirming concept of *Übermensch*. Nietzsche's fictional wire walker serves as a "reminder of life's risk" (Tait 2006: 7) and as a metaphor for overcoming "physical limitations of humanness" (Tait 2005: 9) also displaying "individual liberty" (Tait 2006: 8). By affiliation, real-life wire walkers symbolize the overcoming of social

restriction and curtailments. They offer the viewer an awe-provoking example of spectacular individualism. In contrast to ordinary humans, the wire walker does not shy away from risk. Instead, risk is welcomed. It is precisely the affirming attitude towards risk that is heard of the acrobatic disposition towards freedom, so much so that risk is considered to be circus' ontology (Goudard 2010: 40).⁷⁷

Risk is not restricted to circus, however. To the contrary, according to Ullrich Beck, risk has become ubiquitous and is at heart of neoliberal subjectivity and governmentality. “[B]eing at risk is the way of being and ruling in the world of modernity; being at global risk is the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Beck 2006: 330). For Beck, risk exposure does not provide freedom; instead risk society continues to augment economic, ecological, and social disparities. In the paradigm of risk it is up to the individual alone to manage the uncertainties and unpredictabilities of a globalized world and to cope with resulting financial, psychological, and social burdens. In risk society “people are thrown back onto themselves” (ibid.:336). Beck further suggests that increased alienation and isolation have resulted in the phenomenon of “tragic individualization.”

Beck's analysis reverberates with Wendy Brown's critique of neoliberalism. For Brown, the *homo oeconomicus* has substituted the *homo politicus*. The latter “understood as self-sovereign through collective sovereignty—must literally subdue the creature of self-interest and self-absorption” (Brown 2015: 95). The *homo oeconomicus*, on the other hand, describes a model of subjectivity that is guided primarily by economic interest.⁷⁸ Brown suggests that in neoliberalism all spheres of life are subjected to economization. Here, the “subject is at once in

⁷⁷ The notion of risk is ubiquitous in contemporary circus discourse, yet theoretically underdeveloped. Generic understandings of risk permeate the artistic and academic field. To my knowledge, Peta Tait provides the most elaborate discussion of the relation between circus and risk, situating her analysis in the socio-historical context of risk society.

⁷⁸ Paradoxically, the *homo oeconomicus* does not necessarily have self interests at his heart. Indeed, the subject appears to sacrifice itself too willingly for macro-economic growth (Brown 2015: 85).

charge of itself, responsible for itself, and yet a potentially dispensable element of the whole” (Brown 2015: 110). Furthermore, neoliberalism displaces freedom from the social and political to the economic sphere. Market freedom is the order of the day; investments in public life and public good are subordinated to “capital’s drive for accumulation and the imperative of national economic growth” (ibid.: 108). The *homo oeconomicus* accepts neoliberal reason just as subjecthood is modeled upon a modern corporation. Neoliberal subjects “comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value” (ibid.: 22). Consequently, risk is embraced as an expression of an entrepreneurial mindset. Yet, only a fine line separates the risk embracing *homo oeconomicus* from the tragic individual of risk society. A wrong (business) move and the economic and social fall is inevitable. For both, Beck and Brown, neoliberal dramatization of the individual has led to retreat from the political sphere. They suggest that a (re)new(ed) political consciousness and imagination are needed to respond to neoliberalism's alienating and isolating forces (Beck 2006: 338; Brown 2015: 220-220).⁷⁹

Peta Tait appears to have found in the circus artist a model of such new political imagination. She argues that the global success of contemporary circus is intrinsically linked with the emergence of risk society (Tait 2016: 528). In circus performances, subjects whose liberties are curtailed by risk society’s intensification of security measures find an aesthetic and affective release valve. She idealizes circus artists as individuals who refuse to accept the restriction of their personal freedoms. Instead of being hampered by risk, circus artists welcome

⁷⁹ In Beck’s framework the political consciousness is approached as the cosmopolitan moment of world risk society. For Brown, the left has to insist that a world beyond neoliberal reason is possible. It is hence more a question of political imagination than political consciousness.

it wholeheartedly. Risk, therefore, provides the nurturing ground for circus' creativity and expressivity. According to Tait, circus is political by expressing a rebellious attitude towards risk, thereby offering an engaging alternative to risk society's curtailments and restrictions (ibid.: 542). In her appraisal of contemporary circus, however, Tait overlooks that risk society is an effect of neoliberalism and that risk provides the continuation of social and economic inequalities. Beck himself makes that clear when he suggests that "[r]isk exposure is replacing class as the principle inequality (...) enabl[ing] powerful actors to maximize risks for 'others' and minimize risks for 'themselves'" (Beck 2006: 333). Hence, in the context of risk society, the possibility to occupy a playful relation with risk is not so much a sign of resistance or subversion but a sign of privilege and access.

This chapter questions Tait's suggestion that the wire walker, and in extension circus artists, provide a counter model to risk society simply by engaging in risky, acrobatic feats. Her model substitutes the tragic individual with a heroic one. The wire walker turns into risk society's superman. In such a narrative, the wire walker embraces risk akin to a venture capitalist. Risk is not understood as a source of restraints and restrictions, but as a source of inspiration, opportunity, and motivation. Risk becomes an intrinsic part of a spectacular performance of self-reliance, - affirmation, and -investment. Instead of problematizing predicaments produced by risk society and neoliberalism, the wire walker act reaffirms neoliberal individuality that "normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life" (Brown 2005b: 42).⁸⁰ Hence, the circus artist is not outside of normative understandings of neoliberal subjecthood, but an intrinsic part of it. The wire walker, understood as the lone figure against the world, is therefore not a viable political

⁸⁰ The circus subject's embrace of constant risk as a source of creativity, speaks to Bojana Kunst's analysis of the virtuoso worker (Kunst 2014: 31).

option. On the contrary, such an image speaks to the increase of depoliticization under neoliberalism. In a neoliberal paradigm, we are all in danger of becoming lone figures against the world, believing the ruse that freedom is an individual pursuit and can only be attained by taking, embracing, and overcoming risk.

Yet, while the lone figure casts a long shadow, it is not all encompassing. A growing number of contemporary wire practitioners question their complicity in the representational matrix which cast them as supermen. Wire practitioners have started to engage in practices and performances that emphasize collective endeavours over individual feats. They unsettle the dominant perception of wire walking as an inherently individual exploit. By developing new scores, practices, and performances which decenter the individual in favor of relational forms of engagement, these practitioners allow us to revisit and rethink the wire walker's relationship with the questions surrounding the political sphere, freedom and collectivity beyond the confinement of neoliberal reason.

Exploring collective and participatory ways of being on the wire is a common key feature of contemporary wire research. Instead of promoting a figure against the world, these practices and performances convey a figure that is situated within the world. By doing so, these practices and performances withstand the easy co-option of the wire walker into neoliberal and risk society's concentration on the individual. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's political theory, I illustrate that the wire walkers' reorientation to the world is profoundly political, offering new ways of approaching the figure of the wire walker in terms of depth and relationality, instead of heights and detachment. This chapter draws on two case studies. *Centipede*, a collective score of unknown origin, provides an example of a relational practice score among wire walkers, while Basinga's piece *Traversée* explores the possibilities of interaction between wire walker Tatiana

Bogonga and her audience. Both examples reimagine the figure of the wire walker in terms of relationality and allow us to articulate political openings that can't be easily subsumed under paradigms of risk, neoliberal freedom, or a hierarchical understanding of superman.

Before turning to *Travrsée* and *Centipede* respectively, I revisit Nietzsche's fictional wire walker and the events that accompanied his crossing with the intention to clarify some misunderstandings connected to the notion of superman. This wire scene discloses a particular political dimension that brings fruitful conversation to aspects of Arendt's political theory. Rather than serving as a powerful allegory for radical individuality, and, therefore, as a theoretical grounding for an individual understanding of freedom, I contend that Nietzsche's wire scene gestures towards a collectivity that resonates with emerging wire practices in salient ways. The political dimension is constituted by Nietzsche's use of the word danger and its derivatives. Not by overcoming risk, but by facing up to danger, a sociality might emerge that provides us alternatives to the lone figure of neoliberal individuality.

The Human as a Rope

To appreciate Nietzsche's high wire scene, it is important to apprehend it as a series of unfolding events. Zarathustra, after spending a decade ruminating in solitude, decides to share the fruits of his musing. Shortly after he descends from his secluded mountain top residence, he arrives in a town where people gather in anticipation of a high wire performance. Zarathustra seizes the opportunity and begins to lecture the crowd on the ways of the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche's concept for the life-affirming, generative, transformative forces in each human which have been curtailed and demonized by Christian morality. The audience, antsy for the upcoming performance, however, wrongly assumes that Zarathustra's speech introduces the wire walker. Hence, it is not Zarathustra, but the audience that concludes that the *Übermensch* is a stand-in for the wire

walker. Zarathustra, however, still hopeful that he can somehow win over the crowd, follows their lead. He appropriates the connection made by the audience, yet, with a crucial difference. Zarathustra addresses the still empty wire, and not the wire walker. It is at this moment that Nietzsche delivers one of the most memorable phrases in the canon of Continental philosophy:

The human is a rope, tied between animal and *Übermensch*. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and pausing. What is great with respect to the human, is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in respect to the human is that he is a crossing and a down-going (ASZ 2013: 19, *my translation*).

The high wire cable of Nietzsche's wire walker is set up horizontally. This detail is significant. The human should, therefore, not be understood as a being on some higher developmental plane than the animal, nor is the *Übermensch* measured by some other vertical interpretation. Instead, the human is understood as a rope that stretches between the anchor points animal and *Übermensch*. These two poles produce a horizontal tension, and it is in this tension that humans overcome their stifling, self-deprecating, self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing aspects of human being. It is the human capacity to cross, that is the capability to intersect, connect, indeed bridge, that evokes Zarathustra's affection for the human. Further, the notion of down-going describes a movement towards the world. For Nietzsche, human hubris can only be overcome by re-centering the corporeal, the aspect that is rejected and seen as a cause for doom (down-going) by Christian mortality.⁸¹ However, by stepping out of the comfort zone of conformity and opening oneself to the forces of transformation becoming becomes possible. Transformation requires work. This work is dangerous because it is painful, uncomfortable, unsettling, and ultimately uncertain.

⁸¹ Down-going in the sense of descent is the literal translation of *Untergang*. However, the notion of doom and downfall are also connected with *Untergang*. In accordance with Nietzsche's philosophical project, the openness of down-going is more adequate as it implies a rising or birth of something new.

The notion of *Übermensch* functions as a sort of sign post. *Übermensch* articulates the potentiality of humans to overcome the order of the last human, that is the desire to subjugate, control, and dominate as well as the desire of being subjugated, controlled, dominated. Rather than describing a telos, *Übermensch* is the faculty to surpass the given. This faculty resides in each human, including the last human. Hannah Arendt evokes a similar faculty with the notion of natality. It is in the possibility to start anew that we find a similar transformative faculty, which is an intrinsic part of the human condition. Natality attends to “the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action that they are capable of by virtue of being born.” (Arendt 1998: 247). Witnessing the rise of the murderous fascist regime in her native Germany, the notion of natality, understood as a political rebirth, is however more than a faculty, it is the “miracle that saves the world” (ibid.: 247). While *Übermensch* and natality do not amount to the same meaning, both notions account for potentiality in the human condition. Crucially, for both thinkers, the human should never be understood as a goal, nor misused as a means to an end. Neither Arendt’s political theory nor Nietzsche’s life-affirming philosophy pursue a fixed telos, but are distinguished by the openness towards transformation, change, and renewal.

It is therefore worrisome to see how Nietzsche’s rope allegory has been reduced to a simplistic equation of wire walker to superman. For example, circus historian, Pascal Jacob, claims that Nietzsche “identifies the superman as a high wire walker” (Jacob 2021, *my translation*). Tait adds a particular hierarchical component to it, when she suggests that “it is the rope-walker who Nietzsche makes into his Superman...[T]he rope-walker [becomes] emblematic of his hope for a future superior species” (Tait 2006: 6). Both scholars may be prompted by a flawed translation of *Übermensch* to superman. While the German word “über” carries the meaning of “over” or “super” as in being above, it also designates “across” and “trans”

which have more of a horizontal, relational, connecting qualities. Further, in contrast to “man,” the German “Mensch” is gender-neutral. The all too common mistranslation of *Übermensch* into superman easily lends itself to misuse, exposing Nietzsche to the danger of being utilized (again) as an authoritative figure to normalize social, cultural and racial hierarchies.⁸² Thus, while not intentional, such hierarchical use of superman shows much more affinity to Silvia Wynter’s notion of Overrepresentation of Man than it does to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*.⁸³

Nietzsche’s Political Imperative: Partners in Danger

While the notion *Übermensch* articulates an impulse towards transformation, becoming, and change, Nietzsche’s political imperative unfolds during the wire crossing and in its direct aftermath. Half-way through his crossing, the wire walker gets unwanted company. A jester appears and mounts the wire as well. Yet, this jester is not so much a figure of transgression, a representative of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Instead, he resembles the jesters of European court society who were considered to be the ruler’s protective talisman, able to detect treachery and treason (Erdmann 2003: 23). As social order henchman, the jester exclaims with indignation: “What are you doing between the towers? You belong in the tower; you should be locked up; to a better than you, you are blocking the path! (Nietzsche 2013: 26, *my translation*). For the jester, who takes on the role of the choreoplice (Lepecki 2013), the wire walkers' unsanctioned

⁸² Alfred Baeumler is a key figure in the Nazi regime’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Under his guidance, the Social Darwinist interpretation of Nietzsche text glorified the hierarchical understanding of *Übermensch* in racial terms, transforming it into political goals, justifying all dehumanizing, murderous, and genocidal means.

⁸³ Overrepresentation of Man points to the discourse of whiteness that espouses that only the white, male, Christian European colonizer can be considered as the generic human (2003: 266-267) Furthermore, the understanding of a superior form of humans typified by white Europeans has to be upheld by a whole apparatus of truth (ibid.: 291). For Wynter, the intolerability of a possibility of a different, albeit equally valid truth in Western thought is based on a monotheistic conception of the world. In this respect, it seems that Nietzsche follows a program that tries to shatter a preconceived notion of the (one) truth which he connects to life-inhibiting forces. Nietzsche’s philosophy addresses the danger in taking ideological beliefs for god-given demands. God’s death opens up the possibility for different meanings and different worlds to emerge, ones that will change the a priori explanations of the world, and thereby offering new or alternative epistemic regimes.

movements on the wire are criminal and should be penalized.⁸⁴ To make a point, the jester lets out a nasty shriek and jumps over the wire walker. The wire walker, completely bewildered and irritated by his rival's actions, falls and lands next to Zarathustra.

Zarathustra, then, consoles the dying artist with the following words: “You have made danger your calling. There is no contempt in this. Now, you perish due to your calling” (27, *my translation*). In his last words of comfort to a stranger, Zarathustra recognizes the attempt to escape the order of the last human. By making danger his calling, the tight wire walker displays a life lived as a bridge, as a becoming. The wire walker’s affirmation of life stays, therefore, in stark contrast to the society of stagnation, stifled by the herd mentality. This affirmation, however, does not mean that Nietzsche promotes a reckless or suicidal path of life, a sort of becoming, no matter the consequences. The fall of the wire walker is still a tragic one, provoked by the jester’s wrath of anything and anyone that challenges the status quo.

To make danger a calling can be understood as the inclination or willingness to intervene in the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004). It is an act of dissensus. Zarathustra admires the wire walker for the same reasons that the jester despises him. By choosing a different occupation, a different location, that is a position in the social order that was not assigned to him, the wire walker acts politically. For the jester, who takes on the role of the police, however, any challenge to the social order must be ridiculed, scoffed at, and ultimately, punished. This said, it is important to emphasize that in Nietzsche’s wire scene, we encounter not just one, but two wire walkers. The jester is not only a wire walker but he is the better walker of the two. This important detail has been entirely overlooked by circus studies scholars. The fact that the

⁸⁴ André Lepecki’s notion of choreopolitics addresses the commitment to intersubjective actions aiming to experience and practice freedom. Choreopolitics is contrasted with choreopoliice. Choreopoliice is related to the arrangement and conduct of movements that endorse, uphold, and reify the hegemonic order, that is the neoliberal and neocolonial capitalist condition (Lepecki 2013: 14-16).

antagonist and the protagonists are both wire walkers is significant, because it shows that, for Nietzsche, it is not about walking or not walking the wire, but ultimately about one's relation to danger.

Still, by focusing on the self-overcoming and self-affirming aspects of the high wire walker, Nietzsche's wire walker arguably promotes an understanding of freedom that is fundamentally rooted in individuality. However, Zarathustra's relationship with the wire walker does not end here, but exceeds his death. While this relationship will not endure for long, the attentive reader of the German original will observe the continuation of the term danger as a sort of latent leitmotiv. Now, Zarathustra calls the dead wire walker his "*Gefährte*" which can translate to companion. Yet, while the *Gefährte* might very well break bread with her companion (com= together; pane = bread), their relationship is constituted by danger (*Gefahr*). Etymologically, *Gefährten* are people who partner up to face danger together. The exposure to danger demands to reach out to the other, to build alliances, solidarity, indeed community. *Gefährten* are partners in danger.

For Nietzsche, the relationship between *Gefährten* is one of reciprocity and equality. These traits, however, are lacking in the relationship between Zarathustra and the dead wirewalker, prompting a revelation in Zarathustra: "*Gefährten* I need and living ones, not dead *Gefährten* and corpses, whom I carry with me wherever I want" (Nietzsche 2013: 32, *my translation*). The dead wire walker is unsuitable to be a *Gefährte*, because as a corpse he is subjected to Zarathustra's inclinations, he has become a mere object of Zarathustra's will. Zarathustara, not unaware of this set back, concludes: "I need living *Gefährten*, who follow me, *because they want to follow themselves (...)*, Zarathustra does not talk to the crowd, but to *Gefährten!*" (32, *my emphasis and translation*). In this particular moment, Zarathustra disavows

a hierarchical relationship between him and his fellow humans. *Gefährten*'s relationship to each other has a significant similarity to Arendt's understanding of freedom, the *raison être* of the political sphere. "Politics (..) is therefore centered around freedom, whereby freedom is understood as negatively as not being ruled or ruling, and positively as space which can be created only by men and in which each man moves among his peers. Without those who are my equals there is no freedom" (Arendt 2005: 117). The political sphere is a coming together of and being-with *Gefährten*.

This chapter invites the reader to approach Nietzsche's wire scene from this particular political angle. Rather than glorifying the high wire walker as superman, Nietzsche himself gestures to the shortcomings of radical individuality that the wire walker displays. Further, the notion of *Gefährte* allows us to articulate a particular critique to the risk society's emphasis on individual responsibility. It is especially illuminating to consider the distinction between risk and danger in Beck's framework. Risk is both constructivist and real, between "social staging" and "real physical threats" (Sørensen 2016: 8). While risk needs mediation, danger is felt and experienced immediately. Hence, risk is encountered as a second hand non experience (ibid.: 10) Danger, on the other hand, can be understood as first-hand experience. Danger is accompanied with a sense of urgency, a demand to act, to do something about the thing that causes danger. Hence, the relation to danger stems from a lived experience; the encounter that propels (re)assessment, revision, modification, change, transformation, and alternatives.

One particular danger emanating from neoliberalism is that we have all become lone figures against the world, who strive to liberate ourselves from the confines of worldly relations. What's more, we confuse the withdrawal from the world as an expression of freedom. However, freedom makes no sense in and of itself and can only be experienced in the realm of human

togetherness. For Arendt, freedom should not be confused with “inner freedom.” Inner freedom is a place of estrangement from the world in which worldly experiences are transformed into experiences within one’s self (Arendt 1968:146). Freedom can only be experienced in the interactions with others, that is in the political sphere. Yet, the prioritization of inner freedom led to the assumption that “freedom begins where politics ends” (ibid.:149). At best, politics, understood as a form of governmentality, protects inner freedom. At worst, it is best to discard politics altogether, as politics constitute an obstacle to inner freedom. For Arendt, this sentiment is the ultimate danger of our times, as it creates the condition for the disappearance of the political (Arendt 2005: 13). Crucially, freedom has nothing to do with the notion of sovereignty or the faculty of free will. Freedom is not the freedom to decide between one or the other, nor to command one’s self or others. Freedom is a generative force; it calls “something into being which did not exist before“ (Arendt 1968: 151).

This chapter suggests that contemporary wire walkers have begun answering to the danger surrounding wire performances as a representation of inner freedom. Such practices and performances create conditions which allow for re-imagining the wire walker not so much as a lone figure against the world, but as a figure that is world oriented. Contemporary wire walkers have started to see themselves as being enmeshed and entangled with worldly affairs. A major characteristic of these new wire performances and practices is their emphasis on relationality. The emphasis is not so much on the exceptional individual, but the being-with of *Gefährten* is highlighted. By fostering a space for co-creation and collaboration, new wire practices unsettle taken for granted understanding which sees the wire walker as a representation of radical individuality.

The Centipede

We mount the wire, one by one. My hand clutches the wire walker in front of me, I set foot on the cable. We quiver. Now, on the wire, my free hand extends the invitation. Somebody clutches onto it. I feel the weight transfer through the wire. It gives in. We breathe, adjust, and proceed - shaky, yet determined. The chain of wire walkers grows slowly, but steadily. I sense the expansion. It affects how the wire moves, how I move, how my partners move. We adjust our balance in accordance to what is needed to stay on the wire - together. The composition of our balancing bodies, in constant negotiation with each other, create a centipede in becoming. This body, however, never feels congruent, stable, or fixed. To the contrary, it is a precarious assembly. The centipede has not a single nervous system, it breathes with many lungs, it beats breakbeats. It falls apart and reconfigures itself, constantly. Slowly crawling around the wire, this peculiar animal is moved by curiosity, by interest, by the desire for collective experimentation, becoming.

(Journal Entry, 2018)

The *Centipede* score is of unknown origin. I encountered it first during my education as a wire walker in the circus schools of Berlin and Brussels in early 2000. Primarily trained as solo artists, wire walkers are required to train jumps, turns, and step combinations. Professional circus schools usually admit one student specializing in wire walking per cohort. The emphasis on solo skills and the cap on enrollment makes a group elaboration extremely difficult in an institutional setting. Furthermore, collective endeavours and experimentations are not encouraged, and often considered to sidetrack one's development as a tight wire artist. Group scores are not part of the wire curriculum. If at all, they are practiced occasionally during leisure hours and/or during changeovers between training sessions, and, due to the small numbers of wire walkers, only in modest sized groups of between two and to five walkers.

While professional circus schools continue to approach wire walking and dancing as primarily soloist disciplines, a transformation of attitude is occurring outside educational institutions. Wire walkers have begun to explore collective and collaborative ways of walking on the wire. Furthermore, the interest in collective exploits have fostered the emergence of an active and growing wire walker community over the last decade. An example of community building

efforts is the biennial Convention International du Fil (CDiF). Organized by eminent wire walkers Agathe Olivier, Antoine Rigot, and Oliver Roustain, the CDiF takes place at the Pôle National des Cirque *La Cascade* in Ardèche, France. Spanning over five days, the CDiF attracts wire walkers with different skill levels, technical emphases, and artistic experiences. CDiF cultivates a collaborative environment and offers participant-lead workshops and discussion groups during the day. While day-time practices are more concerned with technical aspects of wire walking, the evening is reserved for improvisational scores in which all participants are encouraged to participate. In CDiF's 2018 edition, the *Centipede*-score served as the event's closing ritual. Each of the fifty wire walkers reached out their hands to their fellow walker and mounted the cables that crisscrossed the studio space. The *Centipede* captures the desire for collective ways of inhabiting the wire. It displays the possibility of liberating oneself from the dominant key of practicing and performing wire as predominantly soloist circus discipline.

The *Centipede* score radically challenges the wire walkers' understanding of balance. Balance is now negotiated between different participants and must, therefore, be approached in relational ways. Techniques that helped a solo wire dancer, do not necessarily apply on a wire that is collectively shared. Besides being focused on one's own balance, each wire walker must in addition attune to other wire walkers. Collective exploration poses a particular provocation for the solo wire walker. As a participant in the *Centipede* score, I experienced that in collaboration balance habits must be re-considered, sometimes in counter-intuitive ways. For example, as a solo artist, I am trained to move my arms to help to reposition my center of gravity over the wire. However, holding on to persons in front and behind me an in-appropriate arm move might have the negative effect, leading not only to my own fall but to the fall of the people next to me as well. At the same time, holding on to each other allows a particular form of transient stability

and conjures a feeling of safety and care. Furthermore, one can only move while considering the other. If a wire walker struggles, adjacent wire walkers have to assist the struggling walker, by absorbing the faux pas. Hence, the *Centipede* score demands constant negotiation and alertness, both towards oneself and the other. The score invites an intersubjective exploration around balance, one that addresses possibilities, difficulties, and pleasures of moving with-each-other.

Being part of the chain of wire walkers that precariously made its way around the wire installation, I experienced a mode of being on the wire that isn't so much concerned with an aesthetic judgment nor with the delivery of impressive tricks, but rather with the care for the other. In order to create the *Centipede*, individuals need to create a sense for the other. In this score, we wire walkers become partners in danger. Wire walkers are obliged to find collective responses to the danger of falling. Falling is no longer the result of an individual misstep, but a consequence of a chain of collective reactions. By the same token, falling is prevented by collective adjustments and modifications. Participants move, struggle, and venture together as a collective body.

The *Centipede* score provides an alternative comprehension of wire walking. Here, the wire walker does not project the image of a lone figure against the world. To the contrary, it counters this prevailing image by offering a practice of mutual struggle and care on the wire. The score requires attunement to oneself and to others. It requires an understanding of balance that is plural, interconnected and relational. The score, thereby, answers to the danger associated with the emphasis on individualization stimulated by risk society and neoliberal reason.

Contemporary wire walkers display that re-imagining towards more collective forms of engagement and collaboration are not only possible, but desirable. The re-orientation towards

relational practices opens new forms of experiences and understandings. The *Centipede*-score is a practice that fosters the development of *Tiefsinn*, the German word for sense of depth.

For Arendt, *Tiefsinn*, is synonymous with the political sense. In her opinion, the political is underdeveloped in the Western philosophical tradition; the political has been approached only superficially. In her discontent she proclaims that Western philosophy lacks *Tiefsinn*, elaborating that “[t]he missing *Tiefsinn* is nothing more than a missing sense for depth, that is anchored in politics...[which] is about being together and being-with-each other of differences” (Arendt 1993.: 9 *my translation*). *Tiefsinn* must be, therefore, understood as a political sense necessary to facilitate a world-making endeavour. By enunciating a sense of sharing, creating, and generating, *Tiefsinn* fosters appearance. The political sphere provides a place for the other to appear, to be seen, to act, and be heard. At the same time the political sphere is created through appearance, through interactions in a shared world. Hence, the world is doing too; the world must be understood as worlding. The lack of *Tiefsinn*, is the foreclosure of the space of appearance, discounting and disallowing participation, involvement, and agency, conditions which foster world-making. The dire reality of world alienation, epitomized by the lone figure against the world, is rooted in our disdain for the political, not comprehending that allowing the political sphere to appear amounts to creating worlds.

The political space is not predetermined but constituted; it is processual generated through interactions and relationality. Hence, the political sphere constitutes a reality generated by a web of relationships which possess an “intangible quality” (1998: 183). It is precisely this intangible quality of politics understood as being-together and with-each-other in difference to which the *Centipede* speaks. The *Centipede* is a doing that generates an alternative corporeality, that counters the dominant modes of wire practices and performances that sees the wire walkers

as an embodiment of radical individuality. The score brings a heightened attentiveness towards the sensorial. Balance is constituted by a constant process of kinetic adjustments on the micro-, nearly infinitesimal, level. Attentiveness is no news for trained wire walkers. New is that balance is approached in relational terms. This different mode of balancing has to be experienced, practiced, and rehearsed. *Tiefsinn*, therefore, expresses the encounter of sensual modes that have not-yet been felt, not yet been experienced before. This new sensation might be the reason why the *Centipede* score conjures excitement among many wire walkers; it opens up to a different modality on a wire, a modality to which wire walkers are typically deprived. Instead of reproducing the image of a detached superman functioning with finesse in vertiginous heights or the exceptional individual who put one's life at risk in the pursuit of freedom, the *Centipede* re-images wire walking as a practice of being with each other (in danger). It creates a felt sense of a relational world in the making.

Cavalettis

In Arendt's spatial understanding of the political, *Tiefe* (depth) stands in opposition to *Höhe* (heights). For Arendt, a major characteristic of the modern condition is the compulsion to constantly pursue higher heights, thereby producing a subject that wishes to "put distance between him and his surroundings" (Arendt 1998: 251). Most importantly, the desire for distance has an alienating effect on social relations. For her, the danger produced by modernity's desire to leave a shared world is epitomized with the fascination and pursuit of space travel activities. Opposed to the technophilic boosterism of her contemporaries, Arendt apprehends the desire to leave the world, that is the shared space of words and deeds, as a symptom of increased depoliticization, corresponding to the increase of technocratic governmentalities. Decisions that concern a shared world are being made by professionals, instead of collective engagement and

public debate. As she sees it, the compulsion to escape the confinements of the world is analog to the preoccupation with the self, the retreat from the world into the private sphere, resulting in world-alienation (ibid.: 6). In her analysis, Arendt anticipates the neoliberal emphasis on the individual and its disparaging effects on social relations as discussed by Beck and Brown.

Arendt's distinction between depth and heights provides a generative provocation for high wire performances. Instead of glorifying the place of heights as a place of freedom, height represents the danger of de-politicization. The modern condition has produced a state of loneliness, "the everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century" (1964: 478). Arendt's German word for loneliness is *Verlassenheit*, which can be translated as abandon-ness. From an Arendtian perspective, the lone figure against the world is a figure that has abandoned the realm of togetherness. From the position of distanced heights, intersubjective interactions, which are at the heart of the political sphere, become impossible. The notion of *Tiefsinn* emphasizes depth over heights and responds to the danger produced by abandon-ness by requesting to re-orient oneself towards a shared world. Therefore, the task of the wire walker consists in generating possibilities that foster forms of relationality, plurality, and togetherness. The wire walker's political obligation is to find ways to attend to depth while walking in heights. Importantly, the danger of abandon-ness can never be answered by oneself alone, but only through interactions between *Gefährten*, that is, in relational terms.

Cie Basinga's performance *Traversée* displays how high wire walker performance can explore ideas of depth, understood as explorations into forms of relationality. *Traversée* unfolds during the span of two-weeks. This time period encompasses a creation and rehearsal process, and concludes with a performance by Cie Basinga and participating community members. To facilitate collaborative encounters, Cie Basinga situates itself into a neighborhood. A site in close

proximity to apartment complexes is chosen. These sites might be a parking lot, a park, or an unused piece of land. Training wires on different heights are installed. The transformation of the public site attracts curiosity in interest, especially by neighborhood youth. Cie Basinga informs people of the upcoming performance, and invites them to participate. Not only youth but also their parents and other adults are encouraged to get involved in the many aspects of *Traversée*'s production. Involvement in the performance include but are not limited to learning to walk the wire, designing costumes for oneself and others, rehearsing and playing with the band, or being part of the high wire installation itself. The many possibilities of engagement allow participants flexibility in their commitments in sync with personal comfort levels. The range of possibilities in participation affects the numbers of participants. According to Cie Basinga, up to 150 people can partake in *Traversée*.

The actual performance is divided into two parts. In the first part community youth display their newly learned wire skill. Dressed in yellow cloaks and clinched to the balancing pole, one after the other mounts the wire — around five feet in height and twenty feet in length. Accompanied by the band's rocking music and cheers from the audience, youth participants slowly and cautiously make it to the other end of the wire, emitting a sense of pride over personal achievement. In the second part of the performance, high wire walker Bongona presents a stunning high wire performance. This award-winning artist executes a chain of difficult exploits, such as splits, turns, and dance steps, all while being fifty feet or more above ground. Yet, what makes her walk distinct from other high wire performances, what turns it into a performance of depth, is the strategic use of cavalettis as a way to critique the radical individualism represented in the figure of the wire walker.

Cavalettis are an important element of any high wire installation. The walking cable, even while tightened to the utmost, has a tendency to sway. Cavalettis are installed more or less perpendicular to the wire at thirty foot intervals and reduce sway. Tightened by ratchets or pulleys that are fastened to fixed objects on the ground, cavalettis exert a vertical downward pressure on the walking cable. This pressure produces a tension that breaks the swing of the rope. By reducing the sway of the rope, cavalettis warrant a safer high wire crossing. Without cavalettis high wire crossings would simply be nonviable. Cavalettis literally ground the walking cable to the world.

Cie Basinga dramatizes the importance of the cavalettis by integrating participants in the installation process. In the case of *Traversée*, the cavalettis' pressure is generated by the body weight of community participants. To achieve this effect, bowlines are tied to the end of the cavaletti rope. The loops of the bowlines serve as seats for the volunteers. By leaning into the loop and pulling on the cavaletti, the participants stabilize the walking cable. Participants become, therefore, an integral part of the high wire installation. By stabilizing the wire, the participants make Bongonga's wire crossing possible. What's more, Bongonga's safety depends upon them. This technical aspect also has symbolic connotations. While Bongonga feels at home in heights, she is not alone, nor has she abandoned all worldly relations. The participants in charge of the cavalettis are a vivid reminder that she is accompanied by people who, over the span of the last two weeks, have become partners in danger.

It is impossible to attend to Bongonga without also attending to the participants beneath her that diligently make sure that she can conduct her crossing safely. *Traversée* re-orientes the attention towards a collective labor and care that enables Bongonga's high wire performance. The relation between participants and high wire walkers extends to the sensorial realm as well.

Volunteers holding onto the cavalettis can sense each of Bongonga's weight transfers. Subtle and miniscule changes are transmitted through the cavaletti-rope. Bogonga, too, can feel the participants' commitment and responsibility through the tension that the cavalettis produce on the walking cable. As with the *Centipede* score, Traversée displays the notion of *Tiefsinn* as more than a metaphor. *Tiefsinn* accounts for the willingness to find new ways of sensing and experiencing. Importantly, this sensing has a directionality towards a shared world in common, it produces a felt understanding of relationality and being-with, thereby counteracting the pervasiveness of abandon-ness produced by neoliberal reason and risk society. Bongonga's high wire feet can't be addressed in terms of the lone figure against the world. Instead, her wire crossing is facilitated through participation, engagement, and care, with others, in shared and collective endeavour.

Conclusion

Donna Haraway reminds us that "it matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds" (Haraway 2016: 35). For her, practices and concepts are performative, they can either confirm the given or initiate new ways of thinking, knowing, relating. In order to generate alternatives to neoliberal reason, practices have to be generated and established that emphasize relationality, interdependence, and collaboration over those which emphasize independence, detachment, and dissociation. A renewed political consciousness imagines alternative ways of being-with, cultivating responsibility for each other and the world in which we are inevitably entangled.

The tight wire walker is a compelling figure, and wire walking is an absorbing activity. Witnessing somebody balancing in heights, walking in mid-air while emitting a sense of

peacefulness provides a transfixing experience for audiences. Similarly, balancing in heights, feeling immersed in one's undertaking, the senses amplified, experiencing a one-ness with the wire and the surrounding environment is a powerful and transformative experience for the wire walker. It comes to little surprise then that the tight wire walker, emitting tranquility and composure in vertiginous height captivates our cultural imagination. Wire walkers and their crossings have acquired important symbolic currency, not only mirroring, but strongly informing Western understanding surrounding the issue of freedom.

Wire walker exploits in heights particularly lends itself to hyperbolize an individualized understanding of freedom that can be only acquired in solitude, by turning away from social relations and interaction. The tight wire walker dramatizes the risk embracing, self-reliant, and self-fashioning individual of neoliberal reason and risk society. A wire crossing is incorporated into a narrative that highlights individual persistence and determination. The lone figure against the world is approached as an aspirational entity, a guiding figure upon which to model our actions. Therefore, we too, are encouraged to become lone figures against the world, finding fulfillment by focusing on our individual goals, embracing risk to achieve those, while neglecting social relations and responsibilities. In these respects, the continuous cultural fascination with high wire walker Philippe Petit is emblematic. His extraordinary crossing between the twin towers of the World Trade Center in the summer of 1974 has been co-opted and reduced into the credo of American exceptionalism and heroic individualism (Shanks 2016:

56).⁸⁵

⁸⁵ The criminal nature of Petit's Twin Tower crossing has attracted favorable accounts in the academic context, most recently by Kaplana Seshardi and Steven Miller. For Seshardi, Petit's feat provides an emblematic example of exceptional movement's political potential. In contrast to sanctioned movement, exceptional movement does not affirm capitalist's means to an end logic (Seshardi: 221). While in competitive sport practices and commercial circus the inherent exuberancy of exceptional movements are commodified, pure exceptional movement resists commodification; it is the exposure of pure means. Because of the refusal of being co-opted by an ideological or commercial goal, exceptional movement exposes (political) potentiality. Yet, such a movement, because it endangers the capitalist paradigm, is always understood as a threat, bordering on what is considered criminal or illegal (ibid:

The wire walker, understood as an expression of heroic individualism, resonates with a shallow reading of Nietzsche's notion of *Übermensch*. Here, the wire walker is simply approached as the embodiment of superman. Such reading not only reduces Nietzsche's complex notion of *Übermensch*, but also reinforces the wire walker as an idealization of radical individuality. Nietzsche himself addresses the shortcoming of radical individuality. The expression of *Gefährten* points towards the importance of relationality and interaction. Nietzsche does not provide us with a model or figure of *Gefährten*. This absence, however, is not a shortcoming, but an invitation. It is up to practitioners to generate a wire practice that accentuates relationality and interconnection over individuality and detachment.

Contemporary wire practitioners' interest in addressing relational ways of wire walking allows us to revisit Nietzsche's wire passage in more political terms. By renouncing the wire walker as superman, practitioners invite us to forge a renewed correspondence with Nietzsche's philosophy. The Nietzsche wire scene offers more than the simplistic equation of high wire walker and superman. Conversely, wire walking, too, is open to inquiry and experimentation.

220). For Seshadri, Petit's crossing, therefore, constitutes a blatant offense against the state that aims to manage, restrict and commodify the movements of its subjects.

Steven Miller echoes Seshardi, asserting that often "high wire walking degenerates into a stunt or circus act, calculated to produce certain effects" (Miller 2017: 121). In resisting to comply with the demands of the state and market, Petit takes on a heroic role. Drawing on a psychoanalytic framework, Petit's act "openly defies the claims of the symbolic order to correspond without remainder to the social political order"(127). The criminality of Petit's act is constituted by an offense (i.e. man on wire) that, prior to the offense, was non-existent. Miller claims that the uncategorizable of Petit's crossing elicited attention from the police, making him a subject of law.

While the accounts of Seshadri and Miller are thought-provoking and illuminating in many ways, my contention is that the authors aggrandize Petit's crossing, overlooking the ways his display of nonconformity and criminality has been co-opted into the credo of American exceptionalism and heroic individualism. Petit's nonconformity conforms too easily into the individual triumph and neoliberal understanding of freedom. Sheshardi and Miller promote an individualistic comprehension of the political and of freedom, rather than a comprehension that is rooted in interactions between actors. In Sheshardi's understanding of the political, self-actualization is stressed over relationality, togetherness and being-with. Similarly, for Miller, Petit's act epitomizes the "art of solitude" (130). However, this chapter follows tight wire walkers who feel the need to break out from such individualistic understandings and attends to wire performances and practices which foster a sense of togetherness and being-with. Lastly, Sheshardi and Miller clearly denote the circus as enemy. For them, circus is a place of commodification, where the act is reduced to a feat (Miller) and where the potential for exceptional movement is restricted and curtailed (Sheshardi), thereby losing all political force. My dissertation is vehemently opposed to such understanding of the circus. To the contrary, it is invested in articulating circus as a site of the political.

The fixation on superman has diminished the wire walker's political potential, allowing it to be easily co-opted into neoliberal reason. It matters whether we consider wire walking as a practice that re-affirms the superman or as a practice that provides pathways for becoming partners in danger. It matters what practices practice practices.

I am particularly drawn to Nietzsche's concept of danger because it provides a way to trouble the notion of risk, a term that has become ubiquitous in circus studies. I associate the term danger with a sense of urgency and immediacy and identify a compelling need to (re-)act and change the conditions that produce the danger. By emphasizing danger, I approach contemporary wire practices from a place of urgency, a place that acknowledges current neoliberal conditions as detrimental to social relations by stimulating isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Emerging wire practices respond to the danger of neoliberal reason by imagining more relational ways of engaging, collaborating and interacting with each other.

Care becomes a central issue for partners in danger. Facing danger together demands solidarity and mutual support. One cares for the well-being of oneself and others. The accent on care "emphasizes interconnection and interdependence" (de la Bellacasa 2017: 4). By inviting collaborative explorations on and around the tight wire, issues of care are highlighted. Instead of reaffirming the image of the self-sufficient and self-reliant superman of risk society expressed by the lone figure against the world, contemporary wire performers understand their wire practice as a tool to foster togetherness. The *Centipede* score and *Traversée* demonstrate that attending to the other is an integral aspect of a wire practice rooted in relationality.

Relationality is at the heart of Arendt's understanding of the political sphere. For Arendt, the polis describes a web-of-relations, where actors interact with each other to create, shape, and care for the world together. The polis does not constitute a pre-existing space in which an actor

enters. The contrary is the case. It is created in relational terms through interactions. A society that focuses on individuals and not on relations between individuals is in danger of de-politicization, thereby creating an atmosphere of alienation and isolation. In such a state of abandon-ness individuals are thrown back onto themselves, and care is reduced to a parochial caricature of self-indulgence and self-care (ibid.: 9). Hence, the task is to develop *Tiefsinn*, sensual modes that have been neglected and devalued in a paradigm that has prioritized individuality over togetherness and relationality. Fostering and nurturing *Tiefsinn* is a response to the danger of depoliticization in neoliberalism.

Further, the notion of *Tiefsinn* complicates the dominant image of the wire walker as a conqueror of heights. Wire practices and performance that explore depth, explore the wire walker's relation to the world. Instead of a lone figure against the world, we might recognize a figure that creates relations and interactions, a figure that sees itself as a part and not apart from a shared world. While much of circus studies scholarship continues to idealize the wire walker as an expression of radical individualism and inner freedom, contemporary wire walkers have taken it upon themselves to re-image their practices as world oriented. These wire walkers create practices and performances that underscore entanglement and interconnections. Only here, in the depth of the complex web-of-relations might freedom be found.

Chapter 6

Johann Le Guillerm's *Attraction*: Circus, Alchemy, Polis

For over three decades, Johann Le Guillerm has been a significant French contemporary circus scene protagonist. As a member of the first student cohort educated at the prestigious Le Centre National des Arts du Cirque in Châlon-en Champagne, Le Guillerm was trained in tight wire walking and object manipulation. After graduating in 1988, he worked with cutting-edge circus companies such as Cirque Archaos, La Volière Dromesko, and Cirque O. In 1996, Le Guillerm founded Cirque Ici and toured with the solo piece *Où ca?* for five years. In 2001, he commenced pursuing the still ongoing research and performance project *Attraction*. From the premise that circus is not a grouping of particular disciplines such as acrobatics, equestrianism, and aerials, but a singular way of seeing, approaching, and creating worldly phenomena, *Attraction* has developed into a gesamtkunstwerk, encompassing a variety of performances, installations, and lectures.

This chapter explores Le Guillerm's distinct circus philosophy. According to him, circus is a minoritarian practice able to disturb the taken-for-granted perception of the world. Instead of upholding established positions and beliefs, he considers circus a site of viewpoints, suited to reshuffle the thinkable and the doable. This approach to circus reverberates with Rancière's understanding of politics as dissensus in the distribution of the sensible. Furthermore, Le Guillerm has frequently been described as an alchemist by several art critics, journalists, and colleagues — a title he wholeheartedly accepts. This chapter explores the alchemist figure and discusses Le Guillerm's circus practice and his sensibility to thing-power (Bennett). *Attraction* attends to an understanding of agency that expands to the nonhuman, troubling the modern

paradigm of the Great Divide that, according to Bruno Latour, separates the world into active (human) subjects and passive (nonhuman) objects.⁸⁶

In *Attraction*, human and nonhuman entities "attract" each other. Their interactions create a circopolis of human and nonhuman associations. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's insight on the political sphere, this chapter approaches circopolis as a space of appearance with openness from closure. *Attraction's* emphasis on open-endedness and experimentation reverberates with Hans Jörg Rheinberger's scholarship on experimental systems and epistemic things. Le Guillerm is not interested in turning *Attraction's* phenomena into technical objects with a fixed and stable meaning but insists on their heterogeneity.

Circus as a Minoritarian Practice and a Site of Viewpoints

I saw *Attraction* in Douai (France), where Tandem Theatre programmed it as part of its circus festival Les Multitude in 2016. The theatre's facilities showcased *Attraction's* installations, while a green circus tent, raised near the theatre, served as the site of *Attraction's* performance work *Secret (Temps 2)*. The theatre prompted the audiences to consider the installations before entering the big top. The installations were divided into four sections, *Les Imaginographes*, *Les Imperceptibles*, *L'Observatoire* and *la Motte*. While spectators can appreciate *Attraction's* exhibition independently from *Secret (Temps 2)*, the exhibition introduces Le Guillerm's particular approach to circus and functions as a preamble for the live performance by setting the tone for a highly unusual circus experience. Following the audience's trajectory, attending first to the exhibition and later to the performance, *Attraction's* installations are particularly helpful in discerning Le Guillerm's theoretical framework, which informs all of his work.

⁸⁶ For Latour, the catalyst of the Great Divide was the dispute between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes. The disagreement between the two led to the separation of nature and culture. The former is the domain of the unchangeable "law of nature," while the latter is of the domain of changeable "human affairs." The objects belong to the realm of nature, while subjects to the realm of culture (Latour 1993: 15-20).

Les Imaginographes consists of various mechanical devices, jars filled with undefinable entities, models resembling celestial systems, and folders filled with strange symbols. Metal and wood are the primary materials used to compose the objects. Incandescent bulbs generating dim exhibition light, provide a warm atmosphere. Visitors are encouraged to move around the objects and to interact with them. Not every visitor appreciates *Les Imaginographes* in the same way. Some seem rather unimpressed. Still, the interaction with the strange objects produces debate and remarks between audiences about their aesthetic appeal, function, and use-value.

One of *Les Imaginographes* exhibited objects is *Le Irréductible*, a mechanical device that facilitates spatial exploration of numbers.⁸⁷ By manipulating an elaborate system of levelers and wheels, the audience can follow a number's trajectory into its correlate. By pulling a leveler, for example, the number six is turned upside down and displays a nine. *L'Irréductible*, however, does not stop with this relatively common example. The number four, rotated by ninety degrees and flipped, turns into the number seven. The number three, when unfolded, appears as number eight. The number two, when inverted, becomes a five. Finally, the number zero turned simply on its side takes the shape of the number one. *L'Irréductible* does not provide the viewer with a radically new understanding of the number system. But it alters the perception of signs, which are so much a part of our daily customs that they appear immutable. *L'Irréductible* infuses a component of surprise and intrigue into the ordinary and the banal.

Judging from a first impression, *L'Irréductible* displays no characteristics that are commonly associated with circus. It is not meant for acrobatic use, nor is it a juggling or clown prop. It also does not appear as an object to be found in a sideshow exhibition. Neither does it

⁸⁷ *Les Imaginographes* evoke association with *Le Cinématographe*, a major attraction of the fairground, variety theatre and vaudeville of the early 20 century. Indeed, aspects of *Le Guillerm* work resonate with the aesthetic intervention and the "magical possibilities" (Gunning 1986: 65) of early cinema. In his seminal essay "Cinema of Attraction," Tom Gunning argues that the work of Lumière and Méliès approaches cinema "less as a way of telling a story than as a way of presenting a series of views to the audiences" (ibid.: 64). Furthermore, cinema of attraction does not regard the spectators as passive consumers, but aims to activate, even agitate, them.

emit the unique circus odor, a mixture of sawdust, animal stench, popcorn, candyfloss, sweat, and fragrances. *L'Irréductible* does not produce sounds like barrel organ. Neither does a jack in the box surprise the viewer nor does a confetti shower await at the end. Indeed, nothing in *L'Irréductible* (and, for that matter, in any objects exhibited as *Les Imaginographes*) strikes viewers as circus or somehow circus related. What then, makes *Les Imaginographes* a circus?

To answer this question, consider Le Guillerm's theoretical framework that strongly informs his circus practice. First, circus constitutes a "*practice minoritaire*" (minoritarian practice). Circus, understood as a minoritarian practice, does not necessarily mean that a minority group performs circus. Instead, Le Guillerm suggests that the performances and the exhibited phenomena are extremely rare, or better, new creations and inventions. Circus displays that which was never-seen, never thought of before. Displayed performances and objects attract attention because of their imaginativeness and novelty. For Le Guillerm, circus practices must adhere to the principle of originality and creativity. Significantly, a circus practice can quickly lose its minoritarian status if it becomes common practice. From this perspective, many circus skills, such as juggling and aerial arts, have become too popular to be considered circus. Le Guillerm's understanding of circus as a *practice minoritaire* has little to do with a particular skill set or technique (e.g. juggling, wire walking, acrobatics). Circus is associated with experimentation, inventiveness, creativity, and exploration. For Le Guillerm, circus is not the repetition of the old, but the creation of something rare, different, or new.

The second principle stipulates the circus as the site of "*les points du vue*" (viewpoints). Here, Le Guillerm takes inspiration from the circularity of the circus ring. Le Guillerm insists that the 360-degree feature of the circus allows the exploration of a phenomenon from different perspectives. Such a multi-perspectival approach attends to aspects of the phenomenon that

otherwise would remain hidden, obscured, or simply unnoticed. In contrast, the frontal view of the proscenium stage denies inquisitiveness and scrutiny. It provides only a diminished, premeditated relation to a displayed phenomenon by favoring one viewpoint only.

Le Guillerm explains three modes of viewpoints exploration. The first one is through conversation or exchange. Here, audience members can share their impressions with other members who have seen the same phenomenon from other viewpoints, thereby initiating debate and discussion. The second mode is relocation. The spectator accesses a different viewpoint by changing their position in space, for example, by walking around the phenomenon. Turning, the third mode, considers the possibility of the phenomenon to move and to be moved. Many of *Attraction's* installation pieces give access to all three viewpoints modes.

In *L'Irréductible*, the "never-seen" and "never thought of" that characterizes circus as minoritarian practice are intrinsically linked with Le Guillerm's viewpoints approach. Spatial arrangement accommodates up to four observers to comfortably gather around the object and manipulate the different levers. In addition, people can gather around and watch how people engage with the object. Visitors are also invited to move around *L'Irréductible* and operate the levers themselves. Lastly, the levers move a number three-dimensionally. While the audience is not in complete control of a given number's trajectory, *L'Irréductible* still provides an alternate viewpoint of habitual numbers by moving them three-dimensionally through space. While all three viewpoint modes are at play, *L'Irréductible* highlights the third mode. Notably, the movement of a number through space allows the spectator to conceive the number's correlate. Here, the "never-seen" or "never thought of" that characterizes circus as a minoritarian practice is directly connected to the comprehension that circus constitutes a site of viewpoints exploration.

In *Attraction*, every single installation and performance piece approaches the circus from those two principles (circus as a site of viewpoints and as minoritarian practice). Often, as in the case of *L'Irréductible*, a particular viewpoint generates the minoritarian practice. The objects exhibited as *Les Imaginographes* are particularly provocative in providing new perspectives to ordinary everyday objects. The reorienting viewpoints approach defamiliarizes them to such an extent that they become minoritarian.

Le Guillerm's two principles speak to debates about the endemic characteristics of circus. Gillian Arrighi scrutinizes the notion that the modern circus was a place of novelty and innovation in her research on circus relation with modernity. She argues that the spectacle of the newer and the newest "operate[ed] as a metonym for the modernizing processes that were steadily transforming Western culture" (Arrighi 2016: 399). Circus was an important cultural site that celebrated the expansion of the limits of human possibility, linking extraordinary human feats with technical innovations. These breathtaking displays were congruent with the "capitalist market drives and narrative of innovation" (ibid.: 391).⁸⁸ For her, circus acts premised on "the newest" and "the never-seen" are entrenched with dominant cultural logics. Many new circuses still stress the novelty aspects of their shows, particularly when it comes to the interaction between acrobatics and stage design. Cirque du Soleil's resident shows are prime examples of how the "never-seen" discourse as a form of celebratory spectacle has been carried in today's circus practices.

Circus' 360-degree structure has been an aspect of academic concerns and debates among circus studies scholars and circus practitioners. For Antony Hippisley Coxe, the all-around perspective does not allow the circus artist to pretend or fake. Hiding in the circus ring is

⁸⁸ Essays in *Circus, Science, and Technology — Dramatizing Innovation* (edited by Anna-Sophie Jürgens) scrutinize modern circus' intertwinement with technology, engineering, and natural science.

impossible. Due to the acrobat's absolute exposure to the audience's gaze, Coxe hyperbolizes the circus as a site of truthfulness and authenticity. Circus feats are imbued with "actuality" (Coxe 1951: 25). Other scholars assert that the circus ring possesses intrinsically democratic qualities. The circularity of the circus stage provides egalitarian access to the performance. Further, the circular structure promotes affective states that generate a sense of communal belonging (Bouissac 2012: 23-27; Purovaara 2012: 80-81). However, the comprehension that circularity prevents deceit or trickery or that it is innately democratic is open for scrutiny. Deception is not foreign to circus. Circus artists often fake mistakes to dramatize the difficulty of their skills. Furthermore, scholars have emphasized the separation of circus audiences by markers such as class and race, thereby perpetuating exciting social hierarchies (Davis 2002: 32).

Le Guillerm's principles, however, provide us with different outlooks of circus' relation to questions such as originality and circularity. Circus' democratic impetus does not stem from a presupposed understanding that the circular structure is non-hierarchical. Instead, the democratic aspect is initiated by providing multiple viewpoints, which foster an agoral spirit of debate, discussion, and open interpretation. The democratic spirit, therefore, is expressed by insisting on the importance of different perspectives that the 360-degree structure facilitates. Further, the viewpoints framework also undermines the notion that circus is a place of truth and authenticity. Instead of providing one ultimate or objective truth (Coxe's model), Le Guillerm's comprehension of circus insists on the co-existence of multiple truths and meanings.

In contrast to the dominant mainstream circus, *Attraction* de-spectacularizes the notion of novelty. As in the case of *L'Irréductible*, the "never-seen" has little to do with display of sensational innovations. Instead, novelty in the context of the minoritarian practice is understood to disturb taken-for-granted understandings. *Attraction's* phenomena are novel, new, and original

by offering playful and suggestive ways of recomposing and repurposing established forms and arrangements. What's more, novelties in the mainstream circus are crowd pullers, performed in front of millions of people over the years and, in some cases, decades. For Le Guillerm, such a form of overexposure and overuse would inevitably eliminate the minoritarian quality of any phenomenon.

Le Guillerm is aware of circus history of specularization of the "never-seen" and some of *Attraction's* phenomena play a pun on dominant circus' compulsion to approach novelty in terms of bigger, faster, and better. For example, *Les Imperceptibles*' displays mechanical devices which progress so slowly that their perpetual movements can't be discerned through human senses alone. *Le Tractoche*, a locomotive powered by the fermentation of chickpeas, moves in centimeters per day instead of kilometers per hour. The device evokes the circus' intrinsic co-evolution of the steam engine that transported the traveling city from town to town to deliver the paying audiences the "never-seen." *Les Imperceptibles* provides a "never-seen," however, that can't be easily commercialized or sensationalized. Here the "never-seen" is, indeed, never seen. *Les Imperceptibles* invites viewers to contemplate the relation of time, movement, and speed.

Les Imperceptibles and *Les Imaginographes* are not only inventions, but also interventions. They stage dissensus with the dominant understanding of circus and provoke viewers to alter their perceptions and challenge preconceived understandings. The disruption of habitual modes of seeing and perceiving is at the core of Le Guillerm's circus practice. While *Attraction* does not convey a political message in the form of a clear statement, it can be considered political by virtue of its propositions. Jacques Rancière suggests that "[p]olitics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable" (Rancière 2010: 37). By intervening, by questioning the given order, political action reveals what could not be seen or

what could not be said before. Political actions alter the social fabric by introducing excluded perspectives, different viewpoints, and oppressed voices. Rancière transposes the emphasis on perception into the realm of aesthetic practices. "[P]olitics of aesthetics (...) lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of the sensory experience" (2010: 148).

Hence, art practices which offer different modes and new accesses to sensual experiences are political. A political message in the form of a demand, claim, or statement is not needed. Art practices are inherently political by proposing ways of perceiving worldly phenomena and unlocking alternatives to representational forms.⁸⁹ These art practices provide modes that are minoritarian by virtue of their exclusion from the pre-established arrangement of how things are supposed to be perceived. *Attraction* is such a site where the fabric of the sensory experiences is reconfigured. *Attraction* also challenges our understanding of circus as a simplistic entertainment genre. It repurposes its form (circularity) and compulsion for spectacular novelty and extraordinary feats to create practices that dispute the given "distribution of the sensible."

The distribution of the sensible describes a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancière 2004:12). In the context of the dominant circus, a self-evident fact is, for example, the understanding that circus is a site where presentations of sensational feats entertain audiences. In such a context, questions around innovation and novelty are put purely into service for financial gain. Spectators take on

⁸⁹ Rancière differentiates between three regimes of art. *The ethical regime of images* is concerned with creating and promoting a communal ethos. *The representative regime of art* inserts a clear delimitation into the distribution of the sensible by producing the realm of art and non-art. It also summons a hierarchical division within the arts and their appropriate tools and topics of expression. *The aesthetic regimes of art* problematizes and unsettles the hierarchical divisions and delimitations that are characteristic of the representative regime of art. This chapter refers to the aesthetic regime of art (Rancière 2004: 20-21).

the role of passive consumers and admirers of a spectacle that reaffirms human exceptionalism (Lievens 2015).

Attraction disrupts such dominant comprehension of circus. *Attraction* decouples the issue of "novelty" from the solely market-driven circus aspects; its primary purpose is not to serve the circus' spectacular elements. Instead, circus as a minoritarian practice disrupts the self-evident facts of pre-described sense perception. It invites new modes of perceiving. Such an understanding directly impacts the delimitation of the parts and positions in the system.

Attraction's phenomena do not simply produce stunning effects but agitate deliberation and debate. Such a different attitude to circus reconfigures the role of the spectators as well. Instead of promoting a passive viewer, *Attraction* demands an active one.

The issue of activity connects with Le Guillerm' s viewpoints principle. For him, circus exposes its spectators to different perspectives, recalibrating preconceived understandings and consolidated beliefs. Instead of subduing, the encounter with *Attraction's* phenomena activates critical faculties. Le Guillerm's approach to the audience resembles that of Rancière's emancipated spectator. Le Guillerm refuses to explain his work. *Attraction* creates an atmosphere in which a spectator "composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her" (Rancière 2011: 13). For him, each viewpoint articulates a unique access, prompting engagement and opening further interpretative possibilities.

Le Guillerm's unique approach to circus is particularly noticeable in the reception of his work. While deeply situated in the French circus context, he is rarely labeled as circus artist. Instead, journalists, colleagues, and audiences choose descriptors such as mad scientist, bricoleur, village fool, druid, philosopher, and alchemist to attend to his distinctive approach to circus. The fact that other words are needed to describe Le Guillerm and his artistic project

reverberates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's distinction between a minoritarian practice and majoritarian convention. The latter describes a fixed, constant, and homogenous system; the former designates a "potential, creative and created, becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 106). Minoritarian practices are considered to be practices of transformation and change, subverting the assumed stability of the accepted and expected. Minoritarian mode produces diverging expressions, contents, and variations, while the majoritarian mode "consists in extracting constants" (106).

Minoritarian practices introduce different intensities and new variations, allowing for creativity and expressivity beyond the dictates of majoritarian modes. Approached from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, *Attraction* is a minoritarian circus because it introduces tendencies of deterritorialization, generating alterations, changes, and shifts into conventional circus performances and practices. Minoritarian practices, therefore, speak to Rancière's notion of the political as elaborated above. They provide alternatives to dominant modes. Minoritarian practices reshuffle the distribution of the sensible.

Deleuze and Guattari provide their readers with the notion of anomalous, an evocative term that reverberates with minoritarian practices. The word *anomal*, designates the "unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 244). The *anomalous* describes an agential force which fosters new relations between different entities, thereby generating hybrid ones. Instead of reproducing the already expressed, the *anomalous* describes a factor that produces transformation by incorporating unfamiliar aspects into exciting relationships. The *anomalous* invites change in the dominant perception or understanding of a phenomenon by introducing unfamiliar components to established relations. Further, Deleuze

and Guattari insist that the anomalous is a "bordering phenomen[on]" (ibid: 245).⁹⁰ Its association expands the knowledge, practices, and conventions of a particular field by infusing elements of another one. The anomalous inhabits the borderlands between fields of practices, knowledge, and understandings. In introducing unfamiliar components to existing and established relations, an anomalous unsettles and troubles majoritarian modes and prompts "unnatural participation" (ibid.: 240).

An anomalous introduces processes of deterritorialization into an established, predetermined set of relations. Hence, the anomalous position is allied with minoritarian practices as they both trouble majoritarian conventions. I contend that the need for descriptors such as alchemist, mad scientist, and village fool, indicates Le Guillerm's anomalous position in the context of circus. The frequent use of the descriptor alchemist is particularly evocative. The term takes into consideration Le Guillerm's interest in the processes of transformation and change. The introduction of the notion of alchemy also alters the concept of circus. Instead of a site where astonishing feats are displayed and celebrated, circus is conceived as laboratory, a place for research and experimentation. Furthermore, Le Guillerm restates the idea that alchemy is antagonistic to scientific inquiry. Le Guillerm is particularly skeptical of scientists, whom he contemptuously calls scienti-fils (son of science).⁹¹ Yet, there might be more commonalities between alchemy and science than Le Guillerm likes to admit. In what follows, I stage a dialogue between science, alchemy, and circus to address *Attraction's* experimental attitude.

Alchemy

⁹⁰ Aspects of the anomalous understood as a bordering figure resonates with Derrida's notion of limitrophy. See Chapter Two.

⁹¹ *Scientifique* is the French word for scientist. The suffix *fils* denotes both singular and plural.

At the center of alchemy is the issue of transmutation, the process of transforming one metal into another. The search for the philosopher's stone, the substance that can transmute silver into precious gold, designates one of its prime inquiries. From today's perspective, the belief of such possibility seems laughable and appears to be promises of charlatans. Yet, alchemists' constant inquiry into transmutation produced some results. Through chemical processes, silver can take on the appearance of the more valued gold (Lawrence M. Principe 2013: 10-11). While the transmutation is only superficial, it is understandable that the alteration on the material's surface has provoked alchemists to believe in the possibility of more substantial material change.

Inquiry of transmutation, however, did not sit well with authorities. Lawrence M. Principe suggests that much of alchemy's bad reputation arose from the craft's particular research interest in metals' change and its potential use towards counterfeit purposes. "If the gold was false, it could debase and pollute the gold supply, and if true, it would lower the value of gold by increasing the amount available" (Principe 2013: 61). In both cases, alchemy posed a threat to the wealth of elites. Consequently, alchemical practices, especially those connected with transmutation, were suppressed, leading to increased secrecy and obscurity of alchemist knowledge transmission. The fear of persecution prompted the extensive use of codewords that make much alchemist writing appear like a stream of consciousness. Yet, for the initiated, the obscured content offered instructions and formulas of highly effective chemical processes.

The terms alchemy and chemistry derive from the Greek word *chimeai* meaning to melt and to fuse (24) and denote the same practice in pre-modern times, often referred to as *chymistry*.⁹² The split of alchemy and chemistry into two separate spheres resulted from the rise of the scientific method and rationalization in the 17th century (ibid.: 85-86). To become worthy of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Paris, chemistry had to be dissociated from the inquiry into

⁹² The term alchemy is an arabized version of *Chymist*. "Al" denotes the definite article in Arabic language.

transmutation. "Everything within the ambit of chymistry that was most easily subjected to criticism — for example, the Philosopher's stone, metallic transmutation, and so forth — was split off and increasingly labeled as alchemy" (ibid.: 87). Importantly, the theoretical impossibility of transmutation was not the reason for its renunciation; it was because of association with the fraudulent. Many alchemist practices were incorporated into the eligible science of chemistry. While chemistry and other scientific disciplines became a descriptor of modern, beneficial, and productive research undertakings, alchemy and alchemist became designators for "archaic, empty, fraudulent, even irrational persons and activities" (ibid.: 87). When the split occurred, the basis of alchemy's discredit was its object (metallic transmutation) rather than the method of study (experimentation).

Alchemy and chemistry have grown so distant from each other that the former is connected with witchcraft and superstition while the latter is linked to the rational and methodological world of scientific knowledge production. Yet, at the moment of the break in the 17th century, alchemy was not simply an anti-science, but denoted a forbidden form of knowledge and practice in chemistry. Indeed, many chemists continue to employ chemical practices now considered belonging to alchemy (ibid.: 89-92). The disdain towards alchemy grew steadily in the Enlightenment period. That said, the contempt towards practices now deemed archaic and irrational also had its critics. A renowned chemist of his time, Andreas Ruff, expressed scorn not only about his discipline but about science at large which "ridicules whatever cannot be readily understood to prevent people from investigating the unusual and hidden" (ibid.: 92). Alchemical research fascination with the obscure and the mysterious did not reflect a "new ethos of utility" which replaced the admiration of nature's wonders with the investigation into nature's law (Daston and Park 2001: 354).

The most significant difference between alchemy and the new science of chemistry was methodological. Principle stresses that alchemy is both a practical and theoretical endeavor, linking hands-on knowledge with theoretical understandings and metaphysical postulations. Aspects from theology, arts, medicine, philosophy, and literature play an essential role in alchemical stipulations (Principle 2013: 137). Hence, its interdisciplinary character and intersections with multiple knowledge fields differentiate alchemy from the relatively confined and narrow scope of scientific inquiry (ibid.: 209).

Considering alchemy's distinctive characteristics, its focus on material change and transformation, an inherent interdisciplinary methodology, and the interest in nature's wonders and secrets instead of nature's law, it is understandable that Le Guillerm embraces the figure of the alchemist, because alchemy speaks to attending the rare and the unusual. Indeed, much of his artistic research expands the strict disciplinary boundaries of the circus toward practices that would belong to the visual arts and sciences. What's more, Le Guillerm follows his theoretical framework that outlines a unique understanding of circus. At the same time, his research is deeply invested in physical processes and the nature of the material he explores. Le Guillerm's inquiries are alchemical as they are "both theoretical and practical, textual and experimental" (Principle: 207).

Le Guillerm's rejection of science is not simply the rejection of scientific knowledge production per se. Many of the phenomena presented in *Attraction* could function as physics experiments in a classroom setting, helping to visualize the working of physical forces. Rather, Le Guillerm directs his criticism towards the *scienti-fils*, the son of science, not towards science. The son of science is the heir of scientific discourse that prevents exploring the unusual and hidden. Under the daimon of aperspectival objectivity (Daston 1999: 10), other ways of seeing,

relating, comprehending, and attending the world have been neglected and discredited. For Le Guillerm, science practiced by *scienti-fils* is a majoritarian convention, only suitable for comprehension of what can be readily understood.⁹³

Alchemy is a productive enterprise embracing the creations of new phenomena. While Le Guillerm is not interested in metallic transmutation, his work nevertheless epitomizes transformation and change. Alchemist processes transmute the ordinary into something rare, precious, and unique. Le Guillerm is not interested in revealing abstract laws by which all natural phenomena must abide. Instead, he is interested in that which is not reducible to laws and rules. He investigates the hidden, the obscure, the unusual, which emerges when attended from a different perspective. Le Guillerm is an alchemist in the sense of its original greek word *chimeai*; he combines, fuses, and intermixes different materials with each other. Phenomena created by such unnatural participations are chimeric entities that border between the animate and the inanimate. They are phenomena which resist easy categorization and classification, obtaining a life on their own.

Attraction's performance piece, *Secret (Temps 2)*, particularly speaks to an alchemical approach to circus. Even Le Guillerm's performance persona appears to have sprung from a medieval fiction novel. His hair is braided into two long plaits. Though bare-chested, he does not appear naked as his beige trousers reach to his chest. Le Guillerm wears tampered boots, resembling the pointed footwear of a harlequin. During some acts, he wears a heavy cloak; the collar pulled up, which further accentuates his mystique. On the stage, he moves unhurried and collected, concentrating solely on the task before him.

⁹³ Lorraine Daston argues that the notion of aperspectival objectivity entered science through aesthetic and moral philosophy in the 18th century with normalization and standardization of science. (Daston 1999: 117).

Secret (Temps 2) is composed of a chain of different acts. In each act, Le Guillerm produces a phenomenon. The audience witnesses the construction and the transformation of the elements. The end results are unexpected, as he offers few hints over what kind of phenomenon will materialize from his starting components. While Le Guillerm does not employ traditional circus disciplines, many acts evoke circus figures, such as trapeze artists, wire walkers, and animal trainers. *Secret (Temps 2)*'s playful allusion to the formal and figurative aspects of circus (e.g., tent show, circus ring, circus figures, act structure) differentiate it from the installations that focus primarily on Le Guillerm's conceptual aspects of circus (principles one and two).

Le Guillerm evokes the strong man when he bends a 20 feet long steel rod. Even though the activity highlights Le Guillerm's muscular composure, the act goes beyond sheer presentation of strength. Far more interesting is Le Guillerm's diligence in contorting the rod into a three-dimensional spiral. His absorption into the making and shaping of the material provides its own dramaturgy. The longer he spends on each bend, the bigger the audience's anticipation grows. After several minutes of shaping, bending, and reassessing, Le Guillerm releases the transfigured metal rod from his grip. It rotates in itself and just stops short of falling off the edge of the stage. After a moment of stillness, it suddenly flips back towards the other end of the stage. Guillerm observes its movements and makes way by contorting his body into a far-reaching backbend. Initiated only by his slight touch, the spiral repeats a similar pendular movement pattern a few more times. Le Guillerm twists and moves around the transformed rod, which appears to be imbued with liveliness.

At the beginning of another act, Le Guillerm positions himself center stage, holding one hand in front of his mouth and the other hand behind his back. Both hands are clenched to a fist. His gaze transfixed to a point in the ceiling, Le Guillerm suddenly shrieks. With the squeal, he

opens his hands fully; his fingers splay. He repeats the gesture several times. With each repetition, he moves a quarter turn around his axis. At last, his call is answered. A piece of white A4 paper slowly sinks toward the stage. Le Guillerm picks the paper up. With no sign of rushing, he diligently folds the paper into a bird, then throws the creature into the air. Reminiscent of a bird of prey who returns to the outstretched arms of a falconer, the bird circles several times in the air before landing safely on the backside of Le Guillerm's hand.

Tornados are a fact of life in the Midwestern states of the United States, but they are unseen under a big top. Le Guillerm recreates such a rotating column by using industrial fans and stage smoke. By positioning himself between the fans and the smoke, he creates a wind shadow, allowing him to manipulate the direction of the moving column. The tornado bends towards him to the point that Le Guillerm appears in danger of being swallowed. Yet, like a snake charmer, he keeps the moving serpent in check. Here, too, the distinction between active subject and passive object dissolves in a pas de deux where both lead and follow.

Creating phenomena by transforming the material is a noticeable leitmotif of each act. Le Guillerm uses ordinary objects and transforms them into entities that evoke liveliness and agency. The spiral, the paper bird, and the tornado all appear alive and in intimate relation with Le Guillerm. The spiral dances around him, the bird listens to his requests, and the smoke column appears so lively that we fear Le Guillerm could get consumed by it. Le Guillerm's circus transmutes the banal into something singular. The audience witnesses the transformation, which is itself a captivating experience. Especially in the last moment of the act, when the transmutation concludes, clear distinctions between the active (human) subject and passive (nonhuman) object are blurred. *Secret (Temps 2)*'s phenomena, thereby, trespasses the Great

Divide boundaries that usually separate the world in binary terms such as human/nonhuman, culture/nature, subject/object (Latour 1993: 39).

The phenomena that emerge from unnatural participation in the borderlands between circus and laboratory are chimerical.⁹⁴ These chimeric figures cross the chasm of the Great Divide; they evoke heterogeneity and polysemy. While they can evoke specific images, they are irreducible to a particular entity, a fixed category. Furthermore, *Attraction's* phenomena are minoritarian because they complicate the dominant assumption that only humans possess agency. In *Attraction*, Le Guillerm's anomalous position, expressed in the denominator alchemist, consists in attending to propositions offered by nonhuman entities. It is this sensitivity and openness in the creation process that differentiates his method from conventional circus practitioners. Indeed, the majority of circus practitioners correspond to *scienti-fils* of science. They simply reaffirm rather than question the given and the expected; their aesthetic visions are uniform and their feats predictable. Le Guillerm induces a sense of alchemical inquiry into the narrow disciplinary field of circus. Circus, approached as a laboratory, is a site of experimentation and transformation, fusing theory and practice into performances that recalibrates circus as a site for posthumanist inquiries instead of human exceptionalism.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ I take much inspiration from Jacques Derrida's comprehension of a chimera which is "neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, [but] it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, (...) a sort of monstrous hybrid (Derrida 2008: 41). Chimera resonates with Derrida's neologism *animot*, a discursive intervention into the term animal. The term sounds phonetically identical with the French plural for animals, *animaux*. The suffix *mot*, the singular of word, stays in tension with the phonetic plural of *animot/animaux*. For Derrida, the articulation of the tension is significant as humans tend to homogenize multiplicities into singular and stable concepts. Second, the suffix *mot* emphasizes the word as "the unique and indivisible limit held to separate human from animal" (ibid.). Yet, *animal/animot's* lack of language doesn't serve to affirm humans' superiority over animals. On the contrary, the notion *animot* invites us to think of the absence of the language not in terms of deprivation but of possibilities. Further, *animot* includes fictional and performative animals. For Derrida, to think beyond the human-animal divide is a chimerical endeavor.

⁹⁵ Posthumanism challenges humanism's priority on disembodied and autonomous subjecthood, emphasizing "embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world" (Wolfe 2010: xv). Posthumanism is a project that troubles anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism by extending agency to the nonhuman sphere. Posthumanism does not describe a teleological orientation of the posthuman by envisioning a being that supersedes the human. Furthermore, posthumanism calls into question the ontological certainty of the human, examining the practices through which these differential boundaries [between human and nonhuman] are stabilized and destabilized" (Barad 2003: 808)

Experimentation

Le Guillerm's *Attraction* is a circus of experimentation and exploration. Particularly in the notion of experimentation, the distinctions between science and alchemy appear most porous and fluid. Science studies scholar Hans-Jörg Rheinberger argues that science only gives the impression of a purely theory-driven enterprise. Scientists value theory (hypothesis) over practice (experiments). The latter acquires its value only in its supporting function to the former. Rheinberger argues, however, that such a comprehension provides a reductive account of the dynamics between theory and practice in science. Instead of simply verifying a particular hypothesis, experiments are a set of "arrangements that are designed to produce knowledge that is not yet answered" (Rheinberger 1997: 27). Experiments are much more than purely verification devices; they produce theory, for example, by displaying the inadequacy of a hypothesis. Science is not merely theory-driven but a field of knowledge production wherein practical and theoretical aspects are intrinsically interwoven with each other in a recursive process. Therefore, science shares with alchemy the intertwinement of practice and theory.

The feedback situation between theory and practice also undermines the notion of mastery and control over the experimental situation. Instead of an image of the scientist in absolute control of the experiment, the scientist is seen as a facilitator initiating a system that creates its own life; "the experiment becomes independent of the researcher's wishes" (ibid.: 24). The more elaborate and complex the experiment, the less in control researchers are of its outcomes. Uncertainties and surprises are an intrinsic part of scientific inquiry. Scientific experiments are not linear or straightforward, as they often appear to be. On the contrary, experiments are "genuinely polysemic procedure[s] defined by ambiguity" (ibid.: 28).

Ambivalence, however, is not a shortcoming but the generative basis of an experimental system. Therefore, experimental systems are structures for emerging questions that scientists haven't considered before, during, and after conducting experiments.

At the center of any experimental system is an epistemic thing. An epistemic thing is the elusive yet central aspect of any experiment, describing the thing that is not yet detected. It is of unknown or uncertain identity. Only when a standardized knowledge about the epistemic thing (for example, a physical structure, a chemical reaction, a biological function) is generated, the epistemic thing turns into a technical object (ibid.: 29). Notably, the experimental system must be open-ended, precisely because one looks for something that is still ambiguous. However, rather than acknowledging the aspects of uncertainty, unknowability, and ambiguity as an intrinsic part of their research, scientists tend to present a linear narrative of experimental progress, reinforcing the conviction that an experiment simply proves an existing hypothesis.

Le Guillerm's work reverberates with Rheinberger's notion of the experimental system and its workings. In contrast to scientific researchers, however, Le Guillerm maintains an “openness from closure” (Wolfe 2010: xxi), insisting on the polysemic qualities of objects. He refuses to stabilize epistemic things into technical objects. Circus, as a site of viewpoints, demands that other meanings and readings are still possible. It is not that Le Guillerm lacks an intimate understanding of the inner workings of the objects which he interacts with. Instead, Le Guillerm maintains more openness towards unexpected possibilities than is often found in scientists. Hence, *Attraction* can be approached as an assembly of polysemic objects, as phenomena that are not fully known and still endowed with secrets and wonder.

Le Guillerm's viewpoints approach resonates with feminist scientist scholars who challenge the assumed impartiality of scientific knowledge production. For these scholars,

notions such as impartial scientific truth and aperspectival objectivity conceal Western culture's presumed superiority and biases towards other modes of knowledge production. A feminist approach to science recognizes its situatedness and reflects its limitations and assumptions (Haraway 1988: 581). Circus considered as a site of viewpoints speaks to the importance of acknowledging the situatedness of a given position while taking other perspectives into account. Hence, such a viewpoints approach disavows the god-trick, the "view from above, from nowhere" (589) that renders other perspectives invaluable. For Le Guillerm, aperspectival objectivity is the domain of the *scienti-fils*, the son of science.

The son of science favors certainty over ambiguity, technical objects over polysemic ones. The son of science needs a closure, a meaning, a category. For Le Guillerm, such a way of doing science is not open to new, unexpected, unthought-of, and surprising forms of knowledge production. Because of *scienti-fils'* impoverished approach towards worldly phenomena, Le Guillerm turns towards the alchemist figure. For him, alchemy is more open-ended and attentive to unorthodox inquiries. It is a practice that values experimentation as *modus vivendi*, accepting ambiguity and heterogeneity.

Bruno Latour, too, looks behind the curtain of science. As the leading theorist of actor-network theory, Latour criticizes a top-down model of scientific knowledge production which assumes knowing the ontological status of its objects of study. Latour proposes to disband the separation between active human subjects and passive (nonhuman) objects, acknowledging nonhumans as agents in a network of associations (Latour 2005: 7). In such a model, action does not presuppose an intentional subject but the ability to "modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (ibid.: 71). Action is liberated from the deliberate and conscious will and is understood not as doing but as *fait-faire* (making-do) (Latour 2000: 288). Hence, interaction is

generated in an association of human and nonhuman actors; action is "felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies" (Latour 2005: 44).

Latour further distinguishes between mediators and intermediaries. An anthropocentric understanding of agency considers objects as passive intermediaries; they "transport meaning or force without transformation" (ibid.: 39). Mediators, on the other hand provide different levels of uncertainty, they "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (ibid.: 39). Hence, instead of few active (human) mediators in control over many intermediaries, Latour proposes that events are produced by associations of multiple human and nonhuman mediators.

An experiment is a multi-agential endeavour that exceeds the full control of human actors. By default, mediators are an essential part of an experimental system. A system composed only of human and nonhuman intermediaries would not foster an experimental situation, because they can only produce what is already known. The epistemic thing possesses an agency that allows the experiment to interact with other mediators and intermediaries so that unforeseen responses can emerge.

Attraction is the term that Le Guillerm uses to account for human and nonhuman agency. Attractors can be understood as mediators, as agents that *fait-faire*. By becoming attractors, things are approached as active mediators and not dismissed as passive intermediaries. According to Le Guillerm, attractors possess vitality. He attunes to their vitality and observes how objects attract each other into new constellations. Le Guillerm stresses that attunement to things is at the heart of creative encounter during the research and creation process. Only if the attraction between the mediators is strong enough, does Le Guillerm continue the creation process. Furthermore, the term attraction speaks to the importance that phenomena maintain

aspects of unknowability and uncertainty. Only then, will they continue to attract curiosity, excitement, and attention.

In Le Guillerm's circus, things make a proposition; they prompt the audience to reconsider a preconceived understanding of a world divided into passive objects and active subjects. By encouraging openness to new ways of perceiving the world, technical objects turn into polysemic ones. Encounters with polysemic objects invite us to consider the world as being constructed through associations of human and nonhuman actors. Phenomena are not created by human intention alone but produced by nonlinear and complex maneuvers between human and nonhuman entities.

Le Guillerm's use of the term attraction speaks to Jane Bennett's notion of *thing-power*. Thing-power is "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2010: 6); each thing is endowed with an "energetic vitality" (ibid.: 5). Objects are not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them into, nor are they altogether exhausted by meaning (ibid.). Re-echoing Rheinberger's differentiation of epistemic things and technical objects, Bennett understands a thing as that which exceeds objecthood. Thing-power, hence, describes a force emerging from the object that makes it a participant in a shared network of relations (ibid.: 13). Bennett admits that conceiving thing-power might be strange in an anthropocentric paradigm. She, therefore, suggests developing a capacity for naiveté by which we humans develop openness towards the existence of thing-power.

Le Guillerm is in possession of such naiveté. He is attracted by thing-power that ordinary objects emanate. His colleague, the technical coordinator, Didier André, gives testimony to Guillerm's naiveté that finds its expression in the form of a sensibility towards the mundane and

the ordinary. Objects, otherwise unnoticed or dismissed, attract his attention. Le Guillerm does not approach objects as passive entities but as attractors able to become mediators in *Attraction*. Le Guillerm possesses a naiveté that assists him in noticing such thing-power. The descriptor alchemist speaks to “ambitious naiveté” (ibid.:19). Here, the animate and the inanimate, the technical and the biological, the human and the nonhuman are intricately interwoven and open to change and reconfiguration.

Naiveté echoes August clowns' affinity towards formlessness elaborated in Chapter Three of this dissertation. August clowns invite disorder into an established system of order, often by repurposing daily objects. In clown play, the objects acquire a polysemic value. By introducing ambiguity, August clowns destabilize existing structures and preconceived understandings. Bennett, too, stresses the importance of playfulness and the need to expose the cloaking mechanism of an established system. In her musing about naiveté, she evokes the clown figure, suggesting that playing the clown allows accessing "denied possibilities, in the invisible field that surrounds and infuses the world with objects" (Bennett: 15). Here, naiveté is less associated with being gullible, inexperienced, or easily deceivable. Instead, naiveté articulates an openness from closure of meaning. Simultaneously, such an understanding of naiveté constitutes an exercise in imagination and creativity, qualities necessary for reimagining alternative, more just, worlds.

Circopolis

Let me play the clown, by offering the integration of the nonhuman into Hannah Arendt's explicit anthropocentric understanding of the political. For Arendt, the political sphere is comprised of human actors whose interactions create, shape and change the shared world. The political realm is constituted through the "plurality of unique [human] beings" (1998: 176). Arendt's

comprehension of the political sphere presupposes human actors only. Yet, despite her anthropocentric view of political agency, I maintain that aspects of her framework can be extended to the nonhuman realm. Her definition of action as "set[ting] something into motion" (ibid.: 177) resonates with Latours notion of actions as *fait-faire*. Such expansive understanding of action might indeed be naive. Yet, in the spirit of Bennett, such naiveté might allow us to reconsider and appreciate the world as populated by political actors, both human and nonhuman. Such understanding complicates Arendt's notion of "man-made world" (ibid.: 172) and invites an account of a world in which nonhuman actors are agential contributors and co-creators.

Arendt insists that the political sphere is determined by its indeterminacy. Political interactions are not reducible to teleological goals, they are permeated by a sense of unpredictability. For Arendt, unpredictability is not a shortcoming but provides proof that action is process-driven and shared; "the strength of the action process is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply" (ibid.: 233). Actions are always interactions; they create snowball effects and do not belong to one human or a particular group of humans alone. Arendt suggests further that "he who acts never quite knows what he is doing" (ibid.). This remark is interesting as it indicates that political interaction exceeds clear intentions. Event outcome can't be controlled. The realm of politics is unforeseeable precisely because a plurality of actors creates it. Notably, despite its unknowability, political interaction always fosters change, transformation, and new beginnings.

The polis is the name for the space of undetermined relational interaction between actors. It is not simply a fixed physical space, but it is constituted through relationality. Again, for Arendt, only humans can be part of the polis, "it is an organization of the people" (ibid.: 198). Yet, suppose we replace the term people with the term actors. In that case, the polis becomes

broader in scope and articulates a network of multiple interactions and relations that are inherently generative and productive. Indeed, each association that is processual and indeterminate might be approached as a form of the polis. In a polis, actors are mediators in a system that resists closure, that is open-ended and unpredictable. Such an understanding of polis resonates with Rheinberger's experimental system.

However, the expansion of the term polis does not aim to dehumanize the human, to make it a thing, among other things. Instead, it considers the human as always entangled in an association with other nonhuman actors. Such a posthumanist perspective approaches the human as a "prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'not-human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is" (Wolfe 2010: xxv). Because such a perspective sees the human as always already in sympoietic relationships with nonhuman entities, it decenters humans as the sole bearer of agency. Humans are actors among many nonhuman actors who play a part in "relentless historical relational contingency" (Haraway 2016: 15). The human is not simply a "self-making man" (ibid.: 47) but always already in a co-constitutive relationship with nonhuman entities. This realization demands renewed practices of responsibilities towards a shared world.

The Greek tragedy serves Arendt as a prime model for her anthropocentric vision of the political sphere. She declares that "the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is his relationship to others" (188). Is theatre the principal art genre that speaks to the political sphere? Can we consider other practices equally equipped to tell us stories of relationality, plurality, and interactions? Are other practices better suited to provide models of a

political sphere that expands towards the nonhuman? Why shouldn't we account for the possibility that circus can constitute such a political art form on equal footing with theatre?

This chapter considers Le Guillerm's *Attraction* as a model for the polis. Circus as a site of viewpoints acknowledges that the polis is constituted through the interaction of multiple perspectives and propositions. The polis does not neglect the distinct propositions of their actors, but understands them as potential initiators of transformative processes. These processes are open-ended and generative and resist closure by insisting on heterogeneity and ambiguity. Further, *Attraction* invites us to reconsider the circus as a polis of human and nonhuman actors. *Attraction* is not the circus of human exceptionalism but of the extraordinary sensitivity of Le Guillerm towards thing-power. *Attraction* is a circopolis where mediators prevail over intermediaries, where not all epistemic things are turned into technical objects. *Attraction* articulates the possibility of a different circus practice, one that is open towards experimentation and research. As a practice, concerned with the emergence of unknown possibilities, combinations, and associations, *Attractions* provides a model for the political sphere.

CODA

The notion of circopolis attends to circus as a space of interaction between actors creating, shaping, and caring for a shared world. Chapter Four attends to the relational qualities in this space of togetherness. By re-imagining the tightwire practice as a practice of being-with, contemporary tight wire walkers trouble an idealized understanding of the wire-walker as superman that permeates circus studies and circus vernacular. Instead of a figure of radical individuality detached from worldly concerns, contemporary wire walkers have begun to develop performances and practices that reconfigure wire walkers as entangled in the world. Wire

walking is approached as practice that generates being-with and fosters care for oneself and the other.

The term Circopolis describes a renewed relationship between human and nonhuman actors and considers circus as a place of unnatural participation, allowing the emergence of a political sphere beyond the human. Chapter Two draws on the long, albeit vexed, histories of human-animal relations and addresses possibilities that emerge from human-animal collaboration in the context of contemporary circus. Rather than simply being a principal site of animal cruelty and exploitation, circus can provide examples of human-animal cohabitation and collaboration. Baro D'Evel's piece *Bestias* displays how intimate interspecies interactions create performances that directly scrutinize human superiority. By investigating Johann Le Guillerm's work *Attraction*, Chapter Six decenters anthropocentrism even further. Here, agential forces expand to things and objects.

Yet, not all human-nonhuman interactions challenge dominant ideologies. Chapter One scrutinizes how Cavalia's *Odyseo* instrumentalizes intimate human-horse relations to reify a superior understanding of whiteness. By reorientating themselves to the noble horse, *Odyseo's* white performers absorb a sense of nobility, civility, and refinement. The horse is out of reach for Black performers, excluding them from the agent that produces the fully human. While Cavalia might allow us to consider circus as a site of nonhuman agency, it is a circus that resonates with Plato's vision of a polis as body politic. Cavalia's body politic propagates white superiority while upholding the belief that black people are inferior. Here, the polis is understood as work; it acquires a fixed shape with a fixed origin and a particular telos while establishing a clear outside.

Circus practices and performances with processual and experimental qualities "unwork" circus' hierarchical bodypolitic and initiate a circopolis. Expressions of circopolis are political as

they intervene in the distribution of the sensible. Instead of reiterating the already expressed, they attend towards emerging relations, combinations, and associations. Circopolis is not confined to the circus space but expands to practices of dissent to existing power structures. Chapter Three investigates how clown techniques, particularly pie-ing, are utilized to assert political agency.

Circopolis' productive and critical endeavor is expressed through notions such as Arendt's *Tiefsinn*, Bataille's *formlessness*, Bennett's *thing-power*, Deleuze and Guattari's *becoming-animal and anomalous*, Derrida's limitrophy, Kristeva's *abjection*, Latour's *mediator*, Nietzsche's *Übermensch and Gefährte*, and Ravetto's *mythopoetics*. In this dissertation, these notions assist in addressing performances and practices that complicate, challenge, and dispute the given or the already expressed. These notions are in service to delineate an idea of circopolis that possesses an openness from closure.

Circopolis addresses circus not as a unity, as *the* circus, but as a heterogeneous multiplicity, an assemblage of actors generating singular experiences, fostering new and alternative understandings of a shared world. The plurality of circopolis' actors corresponds with the plurality of its expressions.

Ultimately, circopolis is the name given to circus practices and performances that are political, in terms that they a) stage dissensus and intervene in the distribution of the sensible, and b) describe a relational field of interactions between human and nonhuman actors. Circopolis does not promote stable forms, majoritarian conventions, nor a single understanding of circus. Instead, the term circopolis approaches circus as a practice that can assist in destabilizing, critiquing, and subverting dominant ideological beliefs.

Is it naive to put so much faith in circus practices and performances? Maybe. But, as addressed earlier, naiveté is not an expression of gullibility and immaturity. It calls for an

exercise in imagination and creativity. I am more than happy to share my naiveté with contemporary circus practitioners who insist on circus' political power. Circus can be much more than an apolitical entertainment spectacle for the masses. Circus provides practices and performance to engage, think, and be with. The belief in the circus as an expression of the political is not a manifestation of some kind of (dis)illusion. On the contrary, the question of the political is at the heart of many contemporary circus performances and practices.

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